

## I

## Prologue: The Point of Departure

WE all know the sensation of walking in darkness or in mist along a familiar road. Our narrow field of vision seems like an island of safety, and we scrutinise the insignificant details of hedge or housefront, which are included in it, with close attention, although we may have passed them unseeing a hundred times a day. For, from these details, no sooner seen than lost, our imaginations recreate a picture of the familiar, unromantic road, and we walk by the aid of that vision, only stumbling when memory fails to chart a tussock or a kerb. Sometimes, under such circumstances, my memory has not only provided a vivid picture of the normal path for my guidance, but has gone further, until, while my feet groped and stumbled, my mind slipped away from damp and cold and darkness to stand beside

A pumice isle in Baiae's bay  
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers  
Quivering within the waves' intenser day  
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers  
So sweet the sense faints picturing them.

Now, our whole lives have narrowed, and the details of our monotonous existence take on a grim fatefulness from the dark background of war. One day, for some of us, the common daylight will return, but while we are still in the fog we must keep some mental image of normal things to be the haven of our imaginations. We must draw upon the stored-up happiness and beauty which the past has given us, so that we may not stumble too badly on this path.

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## 2 The Point of Departure

I have been very happy in my seeing, and when I wish to escape into a world of memories many sun-lit roads lie open before me, each with a wealth of beauty and interest at its end. I have decided to write down these journeys for two reasons: one altruistic, for I hope that my remembered pleasures may revive those of my readers who have travelled the same roads, or stir the anticipations of those who have not. The second reason is that I may enjoy handling with my mind the other great heritage of our race, and pour the wealth of our language through my thoughts like a miser draining guineas through his hands.

The greatest beauties of England were shaped during periods of stress; when the Black Death had decimated the population, the survivors covered the land with churches of amazing beauty, and the full glory of Elizabethan English first glowed against the shadow of the Armada.

Even if we cannot equal our forefathers in the creation of beauty, we can fortify our minds against the sapping ugliness of war by the recollection of things made in darker times than ours, and which survived to rejoice men's hearts when peace and sanity at last prevailed.

## 2

### The Dole of Courage

A FEW days after the Munich agreement had been signed my husband and I drove out of London without any preconceived ideas of where we were going. We

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both felt the need to interpose some fresh memory of beauty between our thoughts and those days and nights spent in fitting gas-masks, the long hours of heat and smells, haunted by the need for haste and the crying of frightened children. A mutual inclination made us turn to the West and, as the suburbs fell away behind the car, I began to remember that, in the far-away days before the Crisis, I had been studying the career of the mason, William of Winford, the “ghost” on whose achievements William of Wykeham’s reputation as an architect has largely been based. So we headed for Abingdon and spent the night there. We visited the remains of the Abbey, noting the resemblance of its great gateway with that of the College of Winchester, and, as we looked, we speculated as to how the great mason had supervised its erection. His visits must have been fleeting: he may have come riding from Westminster or Windsor Castle or from Dorset, whither he was sent to buy plaster for the King’s works with power to arrest all “rebels and contrariants”; or even from Wells where he held the post of master mason to the Dean and Chapter. At Abingdon he would have found a rich robe (it had cost the Treasurer 18s. with 2s. 10d. extra for the fur) and a reliable lieutenant “Stevenus” who could be trusted to see that the plans decided upon during these visits were carried out in his master’s absence. As the buildings rose and the critical phase of their designing was passed, Winford’s visits grew less and less frequent, and finally the raised wages of “Stevenus” show that he was left in sole command.

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The beauty of the Abingdon gateway is proof of Winford's power of detachment, for his mind must have been racked with private and public anxieties whilst his fingers traced out its elevation. The nation's fortunes were at a low ebb; successive expeditions against France had ended in hopeless failure, and by the naval defeat of La Rochelle, England had lost command of the sea. The Black Prince was dead and the unrest among the people which culminated in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was beginning to make itself felt. More nearly affecting the mason was the disgrace of his patron, William of Wykeham, who had been impeached in 1377, through the enmity of John of Gaunt, and charged with being responsible for every national calamity which had occurred while he was Chancellor. He was sentenced to pay a crippling fine and never again to come within twenty miles of the King. Too often the fate of a patron was shared by a protégé, and though actually Winford's fortunes were not eclipsed with those of his patron, in 1376 he must have contemplated his prospects with more dread than confidence. The Prior of Abingdon must also have been anxious, for the anti-clerical feeling which had led to the dismissal of all churchmen from state offices in 1361 boded ill for the temporal power of the monasteries. Employer and architect must have brought heavy hearts to the discussion of the new buildings, wondering if events would allow them to put their plans into execution, but they went forward in hope as well as in fear; and the grey gateway still stands, although the abbey passed away with the dissolution of the monasteries.

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A dinner culled almost exclusively from tins did not encourage us to dally in Abingdon, and so, next day, we followed the tracks of William of Winford to Winchester where he reshaped the cathedral and built the school for his famous patron. When we had finished admiring the courage and technical skill of the men who adapted the standing structure of a Norman cathedral to the Perpendicular style, and regretting that the change of taste had ever made them wish to do so, we decided to go to the Hospital of St Cross.

Leaving the car in the outer yard, we passed through a great arch and walked briskly towards the church with a passing glance of pleasure at the platts of flowers before the cottage windows of the bedesmen. We were merely interested tourists swiftly noting what we had come to see before passing on our way. But when we entered the church the massive symmetry of that great nave awed us to silence. The huge pillars seemed to defy even the bombs and tumults of our so-called civilisation, while the arches met above our heads with the inevitability of perfection. Our haunted minds were filled with a sense of security and confidence not easily to be found in the modern world, and our eyes drank in healing. It was therefore with a feeling of irritation that we heard a verger begin his praise of the fabric and only common courtesy prevented us from evading him; but as the old man passed from platitudes to history our imaginations began to work upon his words. We felt in our hearts the bravery of that great hospital founded in 1136 when England's fortunes were at their nadir, and civil war, famine and misery of every kind

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filled the land. Saint Cross was the first charitable institution in this country, and never through all the troubled centuries has the vision of its founders been allowed to fade. In 1447 Cardinal Beaufort rebuilt the greater part of the hospital and also made extra provision for a number of brothers who were gentlefolk. He built the Beaufort Tower and the Brethren's Hall in which thousands of hungry wayfarers have been fed. Anyone still may ask at the gateway of Saint Cross for the "wayfarer's dole": a slice of bread and a horn of ale.

"So shines a good deed in a naughty world", and so has it shone from the reign of Stephen to the present day. As we begged our dole we were glad that we had not come to Saint Cross till this time of threatening tragedy, for in happier days we might have eaten and drunk, like trippers, what we now took reverently as a sacrament of courage.

## 3

### The Royal Saints of England

STATUES of kings decorate many English cathedrals; they appear on the façades of Lincoln, Wells and Exeter, and on the choir-screens of Canterbury and York, and whether these figures were intended to represent the dynasty of David or the English Kings and Martyrs the carvers showed an equal indifference to archaeological verisimilitude. They made them all in the semblance of contemporary knights and sometimes endowed them

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with the features of the reigning King of England. Many of these statues are therefore impossible to identify, but occasionally they hold some characteristic attribute, such as the harp of David, which makes it possible to say with certainty whether the canonised king ruled in Israel or East Anglia. Considering the temptations which must beset an autocrat it is much to the credit of the royal houses of England that they have bred so many saints. True they were most plentiful in the seventh to the tenth centuries, when to be a Christian monarch, and influence your subjects to embrace the same faith, were qualifications enough for the title of saint, but even so they are a noble company, and it is a pity that the obscurity of their distinguishing attributes often prevents them from being recognised by visitors to the medieval churches in which they are represented. In this essay I will therefore

Tell sad stories of the death of kings

and more cheerful ones of the lives of princesses, which will explain the significance of some of these attributes.

Chronologically, the first royal saint claimed by England was St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, and, according to the early English chroniclers, a daughter of the famous “old King Cole”, who reigned at Colchester. There is not a shadow of evidence to support this account of her ancestry, but the story led to the foundation, in her honour, of a very fashionable Guild of St Helen in Colchester, about 1407. Its chapel was dedicated to the Holy Cross, the resting-place of which was said to have been revealed to St Helena in a

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vision. The Emperor Constantine was supposed to have been born in York, and no fewer than thirty-four churches in that county were dedicated to his mother. St Helens, in Lancashire, is named after her, and in the church, at Ashton-under-Lyne, in the same county, there is a fifteenth-century window on which are depicted eighteen scenes from her life.

More authentically British, though less famous among saints, are the martyred kings of Northumbria and East Anglia. A Psalter in the British Museum, dating from c. 980, ends the Invocation of the Martyrs with the names of SS. Alban, Oswald, Kenelm, Edmund and Ethelbert. With the exception of St Alban all these were kings, and their statues appear among the saints on the west front of Wells cathedral. The figure of St Oswald is shown holding a shallow vessel; this represents the silver dish which he is said to have broken up and distributed among the beggars of Peterborough, thus causing St Aidan to declare that the hand which brake the dish should be blessed. The King's right hand was found to be incorrupt after his death and was preserved as a most holy relic at the Abbey of Peterborough. Under the feet of St Oswald's statue at Wells is a prostrate figure, probably representing Penda, the pagan King of Mercia, who overthrew him at the battle of Maserfield in 642. St Kenelm's statue stands upon the figure of a crowned woman crouching over an open book. He was poisoned by his sister, Queen Quendrida, in 819, and his legend tells that, at the time of his funeral, the murderess read the funeral service backwards. When she came to the words, "This is the work of them that defame me to the



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Lord, who speak evil against my soul”, her eyes burst out of her head. The chronicles of William of Malmesbury record that the bloodstains could still be seen in her Psalter against those very words.

The most famous of the East Anglian kings and martyrs is St Edmund, whose memory is perpetuated in the name of Bury St Edmunds. Pilgrims flocked to his shrine there, and no less than sixty-one dedications of churches to his honour are recorded. There are about a dozen wall-paintings of his martyrdom, and his figure appears on many painted rood-screens. Nor was his cult confined to England, for a window in the north transept of Amiens cathedral illustrates his life. In carvings he is less often represented, though the scene of his martyrdom is shown on a misericord at Norton, Suffolk, and scenes of his life appear on bosses in the cloister at Norwich. The legend of St Edmund tells that he was left the crown of East Anglia by King Offa, who stayed in his father's house when going on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. This story is probably without any basis of fact, but history and legend agree about the death of King Edmund after the defeat of his army by the invading Danes in 870. Legend amplifies the account of his martyrdom by adding that he was first shot with arrows (he is thus represented at Norton) and afterwards beheaded. The detail which appealed most to the carvers was the story that, after the King had been decapitated, his tame wolf kept faithful watch over his head, all through the night, allowing no Dane to come near it, but meekly giving up its charge when the King's own attendants came to give him burial next day. On one

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of the bosses in the Norwich cloister the whole scene of the finding of the head is shown, but, for the most part, the carvers preferred to represent the subject by a kind of pictorial shorthand, and King Edmund's wolf is shown holding a crowned head between his forepaws on bench-ends at Hadleigh and Stonham Aspal in Suffolk, and Walpole St Peter, Norfolk (Fig. 2), as well as on the façade of Moyses Hall, Bury St Edmunds, and on a stone seat in Ely cathedral. One of the statues on the west front at Wells has been identified as St Edmund, though it lacks the attributes of the arrows and the orb which identify the statue in King Henry VII's Chapel (Fig. 1). The East Anglian prince St Ethelbert was invited to the court of Offa as suitor to that monarch's daughter, but Queen Cynethryth persuaded her husband to murder his guest. At Wells his statue tramples upon that of the treacherous queen. He was buried at Hereford, where the cathedral is dedicated to his memory, and his cult is mostly centred in the west of England.

Other British kings and martyrs are represented upon the west front of Wells. King Edwin of Northumbria, husband of St Ethelburga, stands upon the contorted figure of a knight who plunges a dagger into his own throat. This is thought to represent Eumer who attempted to assassinate the King. The statue of St Edward, the son of Dunstan the Peaceful, who was murdered at Wareham in 978 at the instigation of his jealous stepmother, still holds the base of a goblet recalling that from which he drank the fatal stirrup-cup, and beneath his feet lies the evil queen. St Oswyn is also supposed