

COMMENT

THE great Dictator was growing old: for thirty years he had enforced his will on England, welding his people into as many shapes as a ship's steward can fold napkins. They had bled in wars, they had perished from overwork, they had performed like a well-drilled guard of honour, but in spite of their inexhaustible servility, their boundless capacity for suffering, they were not really happy; the birth rate went steadily down. Boredom suffused the mind of the great Dictator like a galloping dermatitis. On such days there was only one man whom he could bear to see, Lord Cavalcade, his *maître des plaisirs*.

The vizir entered in the uniform of an Admiral of the Blue. 'Noel, I gottem again.' 'Oh bad luck, sir!' 'It's the British people. — them! What can I do with 'em now?' Sir Noel also was a prey at times to ennui. I'll risk it, he thought. 'There is one experiment you have never made, sir. War, pestilence, famine, the eighty-hour week—all that's old stuff. Have you ever thought of Beauty?' 'Wodgermean?' 'This island once had a reputation for being beautiful—unspoilt scenery, eighteenth-century towns, lovely villages, Elizabethan manors—the clean fresh England of the Georgian aquatints.' 'Aquatints?' Sir Noel showed him one. 'Righto,' said the Dictator. 'I'll try anything once. Go ahead. What'll you need?' 'A handful of artists and absolute power for a year.' 'You have it Karblonsh.' The Dictator reflected. 'Arfamo, what about the International aspice? Will the Empire mind?' 'The Empire now consists of Libya, Abyssinia, the Beach-head, and, somewhere in the Indian Ocean, Rodd Island; I think we can take their consent for granted.' 'And the Great Powers?' 'They won't interfere. Too busy with the Tunnel.' The Tunnel, begun simultaneously from Duluth (Iowa) and Krasnoyarsk, was to provide a rocket route from North America to Siberia, through the centre of the earth itself, and so lessen the congestion in the air. 'A triumph of global engineering which will put the Tundra in direct communication with the Dust-Bowl,' said Sir Noel with his famous dead pan. But the Dictator was already napping.

Sir Noel at once got to work. He combed the mines and labour camps for a few surviving artists and men of taste; advisers and civil servants in the ill-starred governments of Butlin and Beveridge. With great secrecy in spite of cynical comment from the envious Chief of Police some Betjemanites were let out; long-haired, red-

eyed intractable prisoners who remembered Grigson and had marched with Piper. When the conditions of their release were explained to them a look of incredulous fanaticism filled their eyes. 'He' would be revenged at last!

That night the wireless gave out the terrible announcement: 'Are guilty: every house built since 1840, and all those who live in them. Commissioners will examine as from today any doubtful cases and all such houses will be destroyed within one calendar month. This order applies as well to all towns built since 1840, and only houses with proven æsthetic qualities, airports, and factories connected with essential services are exempt.' The television screen threw up the picture of a wild-eyed screaming announcer which the listeners, though it was a breach of regulations, were quick to eliminate. That week the Regional Commissioners began their work. Scarborough was spared because of its associations with the Sitwells, Wigan with Orwell, but the Commissioner for Southern England was an extreme Betjemanite who remembered the master's curse on Slough, the closing down of the Barnstaple-Lynmouth light railway, and other sacrileges. He refused to spare Reading for the sake of Wilde and Rimbaud, Bournemouth for Verlaine, or even Westward Ho for the sake of Kipling and Tarka the Otter. Middle-aged veterans of the Fourth Great War were called up from their second-hand businesses and preparatory schools; joyfully they saw their 'kites' again and briefing officers for the Southern Zone showed them their 'piece of cake,' 'Bournemouth! What a target!' Swindon—Woking—Southampton—Brighton—'Except for the Front'—and that slab of grimy South Wales smeared on the edge of Exmoor—sunny Ilfracombe! 'Wizard' they shouted, 'for England, Home and Beauty.'

In spite of such threats the British were unexpectedly stubborn and only a few obeyed the order to leave their homes and take up temporary quarters in luxury liners, mystery cruisers, and pre-1840 gaols and mental institutions in 'safe' areas like Bath, Clovelly, Burford and King's Lynn. The Corporation of Bournemouth made a pathetic appeal for their city 'so fond of music—so careful of the Chines'. Macaulay's praises saved a large part of Torquay, and London received a special privilege of keeping its buildings up to 1860. In the Tudor hotels, pubs and road-houses, half-timbered resorts for the half-plastered, false optimism

reigned. 'They won't do anything to us—besides the warming-pans are genuine.' A month later the Commissioners acted. Bombs fell day and night on Bournemouth and Brighton, Southampton and Slough, Reading and Woking, Ilfracombe, Paignton, Weston-super-Mare; avenue by avenue, terrace by terrace, grove by grove. The Dictator panted into the microphone: 'If you bastards aren't beautiful we're going to bomb you until you bloody well are.' The American papers almost forgot the Tunnel. 'Merry England gets a facial,' they screamed, and then fell to speculating, as before, on how the immense energy below the earth's crust could best be employed.

After a year's hard bombing all the post-1840 towns had disappeared from the map. Aldershot and Camberley were open heath, Southampton a small winter resort; the New Forest ponies grazed over Bournemouth, Slough was a haunt of the great crested grebe, Woking a sandy birch-forest, and the sea coast an unspoilt wilderness. The red deer roamed over Ilfracombe and the scholar-gypsy was seen again in Oxford. Country houses had now been deprived of their Victorian additions, and the landscape of England was revealed in all its planned untidiness as if it were an eighteenth-century nobleman's deer-park. 'I wonder if we shouldn't have gone back to Rufus,' said the Dictator. 'Why?' asked Lord Cavalcade. 'This is authentic enough. Except for the planes, the telegraph poles, the war memorials, the pylons, the arterial roads, the airports and the essential factories, we are back in Ackermann's England: this is our country as it was meant to be.' He was circling slowly round in the Dictator's helicopter. 'Look at that wide curving street with the pale green and cream Georgian houses and the fields beyond—that is a country town—it used to be 'town country' a year ago. And that village there with its warm church tower, and its golden manor—breath-taking! and those downs without a house on them—what a skyline!—and over there where those two old mussel-gatherers are walking—that used to be the Palace Pier! This is the country that Blake and Jane Austen loved, where Constable and Samuel Palmer painted, where Cobbett rode and Dr. Syntax ambled, an agricultural island with a few local industries—there is the lace factory at Tiverton. It's as lovely in this long May sunset as it has ever been.' 'All the same,' grumbled the Dictator, 'there's something wrong. It's the people.'

— them.' 'Yes, you're right: it's the people.' The Chief of Police, the third occupant of the plane, was speaking. 'You forgot about them. What made Regency England, 1840 England, so beautiful: I will tell you. Its architecture represented its beliefs. It believed in itself and in its harmonious relation to nature: the population was neither large nor small, the ecology was correct. Our Georgian architecture, so graceful, so classical, so airy, was the last vision of humanism. And the nation was young: its beauty was in its power, in its hope, in its prospects, in its magnificent rôle as arbiter of the nineteenth century which lay ahead. What prospects have these people got? More than half of them are over fifty: in the casualties (though reduced of course to a minimum by precision bombing) another three million have perished. Those who survive believe in nothing except nicotine and alcohol. Of what use to them are town halls and churches? The architecture of a culture is the outward expression of its spiritual health.' 'You talk like a Betjemanite,' said the Dictator. 'Come down a little lower then.' The helicopter descended over the blistered ruins of Brighton. Crowds were bustling about like ants. Tiny posters could be seen: 'Acacia Avenue.' 'Ready soon.' 'Desirable residence.' 'Old Tudor Teas.' 'Nell Gwynne's cottage.' 'Balmoral.' 'Kosy Kar-wash Kafé.' 'Madame Desdemona, clairvoyante.' Mysterious bubbling noises came from the centre of the crowd. 'My God,' cried Cavalcade. 'They've got hold of a concrete-mixer.' A new hoarding faced them: 'Buy now'. 'Site for Bungalow Town.'

The Dictator was speechless. The helicopter returned to Downing Street. 'Blast the whole bloody lot.' Cavalcade felt for certain that his last moment had come. 'Still it was fun while it lasted,' he ventured. '— you,' replied his master. 'Three million lives—we can ill afford them,' remarked the Police Chief. 'Eddication—that's what them bastards need. Why in hell didn't you think of it, Admiral,' roared the Dictator, his face mottled with anger. 'You'd better go back to jug with the Betjemanites.' But a message was handed in. 'Terrible explosion of natural gas. Tunnel wrecked. Twelve million workers buried.' The Dictator smiled again. 'Never mind, Noel,' he grunted. 'It seems we all make mistakes.'

Lord Cavalcade backed out. Once safely in the passage he put on his cocked hat, took a quick look at himself in the glass, straightened up to his reflection, and saluted. His sword clattered as he marched briskly down the ceremonial stairs.

JOHN MACKWOOD
SOME REFLECTIONS ON
'OBSCENITY'

WHAT is 'obscenity'? In common parlance it is generally held to imply something which arouses sexual desires together with a feeling of disgust. It would add to the usefulness of any definition to include the term sensual, since this would permit the inclusion of all prepubertal erotic phenomena together with the skin and internal organ-feeling tone that is essentially sensual as opposed to sensuous.

Naturally any mixed state of consciousness of attraction and repulsion involves conflict; and such a conflict may be present in the agent, the observer, or in both. But the account so far given is not an explanation and does not get us very far. Still less is it a definition; and it is noteworthy that there are no practical definitions of obscenity, so that English Statutory Law even fails to provide one, offenders being charged with 'indictable misdemeanour', without any clear explanation of what that implies. The generally accepted test in the Courts is based on that laid down by Chief Justice Cockburn in 1868, who defined it as a tendency 'to deprave and corrupt those whose minds are open to such immoral influences'. Imagine the Gilbertian confusion that could arise in skilful argument between Counsel as to which individuals had this depraved tendency!

Havelock Ellis in an Essay on 'Obscenity' recalls how Sir Archibald Bodkin, for many years Director of Public Prosecutions and a zealous prosecutor of 'obscenity', appeared as the Representative of Great Britain at an International Conference, which met at Geneva to discuss 'The Suppression of the Circulation and Traffic in Obscene Publications'. A Greek delegate suggested the desirability of first defining the meaning of the word 'obscene'. Sir Archibald objected, on the score that there was no such definition in English Law, and it was unanimously resolved, before proceeding further, that 'no definition was possible' of the matter which the Conference was called together to discuss.