RETURN HOME

SHOEMAKERS REMEMBERED

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Illustrated by David Knight

THE years I am trying to remember are those between 1908, when I first went to school at the age of three, an episode I remember vividly, and the beginning of the First World War: years when I woke every weekday morning to the same urgent sound of feet on the streets outside, the feet of men and women hurrying, sometimes running—the good expressive Midland word is scratting—to work in boot factories, all of them hurrying in fear that they might be late and therefore locked out, to lose the first quarter of an hour in wages, at half-past seven.

It will give some further idea of the nature of this workday

urgency if I say that the wages of shoemakers at that time were something like thirty shillings a week—I rather fancy my father had earned only twenty-five shillings in the years immediately before I was born—and that the working day was nine and a half or even ten hours long, thus making a week of some fifty-three or fifty-five hours. I do not think it would make sense to modern minds if I did the necessary arithmetic to show exactly what a quarter of an hour meant in pence, ha'pence or even farthings, and I am not sure that I could believe the result myself if I did. I find it easier to believe in the sound of feet.

The streets of the boot-manufacturing towns of the Midlands are mostly of red brick, occasionally of stone with corner facings of that deep beer-brown ironstone which lies near the surface of the Nene and Welland valleys, and sometimes in the years of my boyhood you would find grape-vines in these older, softer houses of local stone. But the street in which I was born was wholly of brick, not all red but ranging from plain white at the southern, more respectable end, to a shade of dreary, dreadful puce-blue at the other. In it were two boot factories, and next to one of them I was born. In the street running in at right angles almost opposite to my parents' house stood the factory where my father worked, and immediately over the roof of the pork butcher's opposite us I could see, on winter evenings, the gas-lights of another factory shining greasy-yellow until six o'clock. The geography of the town might indeed have been laid out by some shoemaking dictator who had insisted that for every hundred yards of dwelling-houses there should be thirty or forty of factory sandwiched between and then had added the humanitarian proviso that a bakehouse and a chapel or two should somehow be tucked in among them.

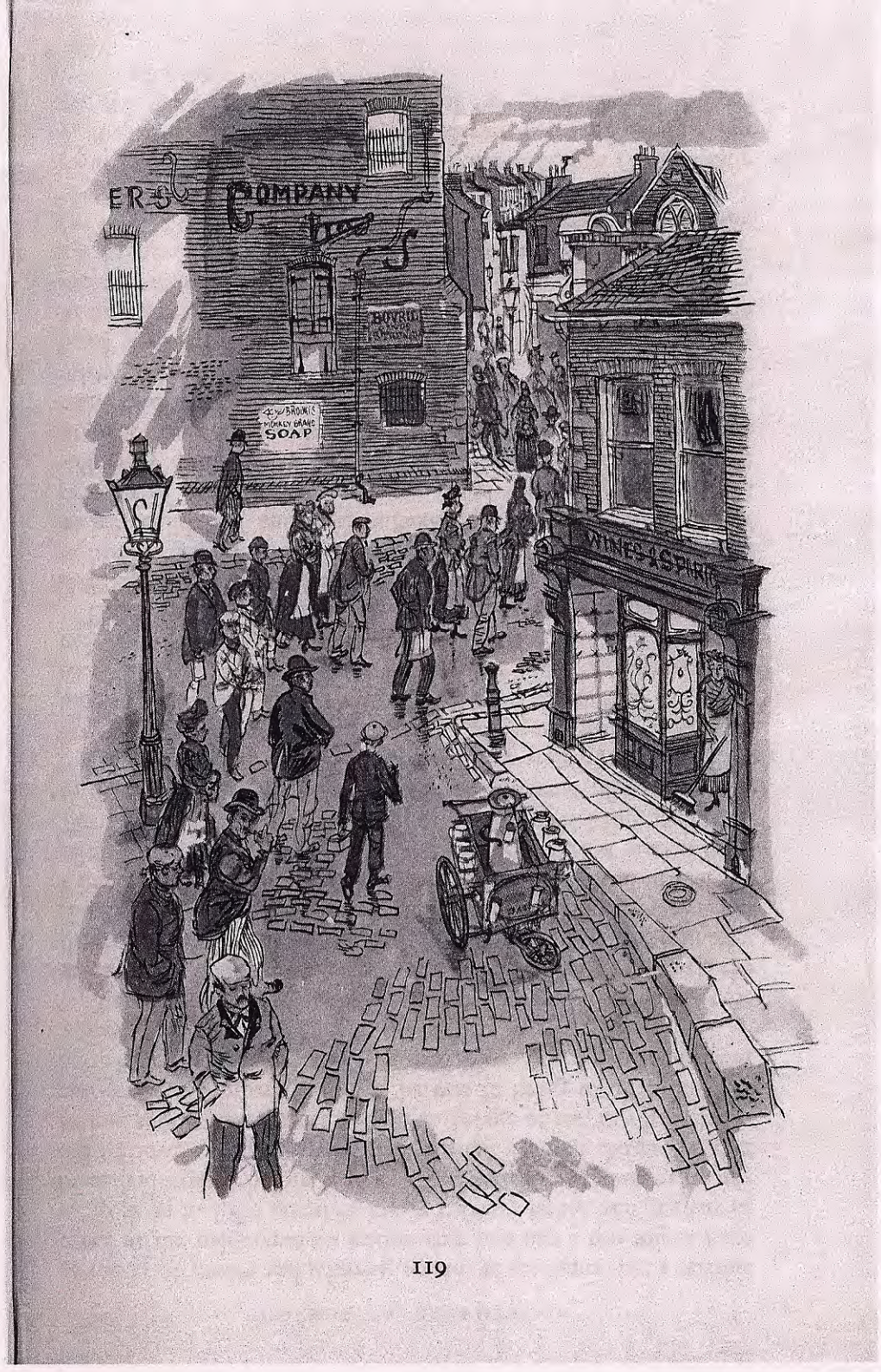
Immediately opposite us there were indeed two bakehouses, both absolutely identical. At the far end of the street was another, with a fourth fifty yards beyond. A fifth, again next door to a factory, and in this case an outdoor beer-house as well as a bakery, stood at the far end of the street where my father worked. Here, too, within a distance of a few hundred yards, were three chapels; and this pattern of house, factory, bakehouse and chapel, with here and there little front-room sweet-shops, continued all over the town.

In photographs of these Midland streets taken in the first years of the century it is sometimes possible to see what the shoemakers

of the day looked like. They were very often dressed in the sort of curly bowler now called Edwardian or in the flat almost peakless cap that is again, like the bowler, popular to-day. Their jackets were longish, black and cut away, often with those capacious pockets called poachers' pockets, and no man ever wore anything on his feet but boots, never shoes, or anything but a muffler round his neck, except of course on holidays and Sundays. I can just remember these men, not only hurrying to work in the morning but hurrying during the course of the day from factory or back-yard workshop to the sewing and stitching shops, either carrying armfuls of boot uppers or wheeling them in big three-wheel basket trucks.

But what I really remember most vividly about these men are their aprons and mufflers. My father wore a muffler, the ends of which he crossed, folded over and tucked into his armpits exactly in the style of all other working men. He also wore an apron. This was of white cotton, with a white tape band to go over the head and two others to tie at the waist. It was more or less possible to tell the craft of a man from the degree of dirtiness on his apron. Clickers, the men who begin the whole process of shoemaking by cutting out from skins of leather the uppers, toe-caps, tongues, facings and so on, could keep their aprons clean for a long time, but finishers, who give the soles of shoes their final blacking and polishing, could never be clean, either as to aprons or hands, and my impression is that sometimes they wore wholly black aprons. On Sundays I myself wore a little apron, white and cut exactly like my father's, in order that I should avoid spilling gravy and pudding down my blue serge waistcoat. I was not, of course, allowed to sit at table with my jacket on; nor did my father and nor indeed any other shoemaker or his son.

There were times when I took my father's tea to him at the factory in a blue enamel can with a cup balanced on the top. The plan of those old factories, all built just before the turn of the century, was very much the same: three storeys of brick, windows of thick opaque glass, heavy wooden front door, widish wooden staircase, and little matchwood office on the second floor where clerks dealt with wages, kept books and made use of the wall-fixture telephone. I used to go to this dark, ugly, dreary, noisome, thunderous bedlam of industry with a sense of dread: not dread, I think, of its sheer drabness, its stench of leather and gas-light or



its racket of presses and whining scream of machines, but a terrible dread at the half-conscious notion that one day I too might have to work in it. I did not then know that my father, the gentlest of men, had vowed before God that I never should work in it; nor did I know, until far beyond these earliest years of childhood, that he had begun in that same bedlam at the age of ten, as a half-timer, and that for another fifty years he was to bring to it the kind of hatred, deeply and wretchedly nursed, that only a gentle man can suffer.

The impression I chiefly gain from the recollection of those shoemaking men is not exactly one of coarseness; they lack the sheer belted belching muscle and guts of what used to be known as labouring men; they do not exhibit the beery-spitting swagger I remember of navvies, bricklayers or those wild-eyed drovers of cattle I used to see, drunk and rosy-eyed, on Midland market days. Their roughness is of rather a different order, and I find it difficult to describe. If I used the word rude, in the sense of uncouth, the impression will be a shade too strong. Nor are they loud; nor, in Rupert Brooke's words, excessively "black of mouth". Nor are they as forthright or as blunt or as self-opinionated as Northern men. The impression I really get is as of a dry, droll, unshaven independence, and it is not at all an unlikeable quality.

This impression of unshaven men is a very real one and I think it springs largely from the fact that I saw these shoemakers so often in barbers' shops. There were two barbers' shops to which I went in my childhood and both inflicted on me so considerable an amount of torture that even now, nearly half a century later, I still really dislike having my hair cut. It was my penance to have to go to them on Saturdays, an ill-favoured day as far as boys were concerned, since both saloons would be crammed from eighty-thirty onwards with crowds of shag-smoking, snuff-taking, stubble-faced working men, mufflered and capped, most of them waiting to be shaved. The system by which customers would be taken in strict rotation was something that worked very well with men but broke down instantly it came to the turn of a boy. In consequence I used to sit for three or four hours in ever-increasing boredom and despair, exhausting one by one the tattered pink copies of *Chips* and the tattered white copies of *Comic Cuts*, turning in eventual desperation to the bewildering pages of *Sporting Life* or, as I grew older, to the terrors of the *Police Gazette*. All the

time, all about me, a lather boy would be ceaselessly brushing soap into three-day beards, and the barber himself—in one saloon a gossiping idiot of brainless nosiness, in the other a dapper little jockey-like man of sporty instinct—would be clipping, snipping and scraping away with scissors and cut-throats. The smell of shag, after two or three hours, had the power to move mountains, and in one corner there burned, like some semi-evil fire out of a picture of an opium den, the three-forked flames of a gas-geyser heating water. Many customers kept their own shaving mugs at the saloons and these stood about on shelves between advertisements for Navy-cut, Woodbines, plug, twist, and the beloved shag, and, most surprisingly, brands of cigars. And in odd corners there stood piles of umbrellas, that strange side-line of the provincial barbers' world, much like piles of battered old rooks, brought in for repair.

I would say that the average shoemaker of those days, whether self-shaven or shop-shaven, had the razor on his face no more than twice or three times a week. My father shaved a good deal more often, but then my father was not an average shoemaker; whereas my grandfather, a man of an older, more rural, more home-spun generation, shaved on Wednesdays and Saturdays unless some special mid-week evening took him out to political meetings or lectures, when he would again scrape off his beard and, in his own words, get himself titivated up. There were, of course, plenty of men who were great dandies in that generation—the moustache-waxers, the quiff-plasterers, the wearers of patent toe-caps—and they were exceptions to the two-shaves-a-week system, just as they were far removed from the habit of smoking shag in short nose-warming clay.

I do not wish to give the impression here that I am speaking of a generation composed entirely of uncouth louts; very much the contrary. The shoemakers of the Midlands have long been noted for their pride, political acumen, sturdy independence of mind and an ability to talk sense under conditions where others often signally fail. It is in fact from this same generation, so many of whom were to be wiped out in the holocaust of Somme and Passchendaele, that there sprang, to their abiding credit, an industrial arbitration system that has virtually kept the boot and shoe industry in England free from any kind of serious dispute or stoppage for fifty years. When dockers, miners, painters, railway-men and bus-drivers use what they so charmingly call the strike-weapon to back industrial

grievances, I become very proud of my shoemakers, the men who had the guts and sense to put an end to years of seemingly irremediable bitterness, hunger, lock-outs, strikes and sheer destitution by a system built on simple common sense, honour and a rejection of acrimony. These were my shag-smokers, the unshaven ones. They lived very largely on kippers, bloaters, tea, beer, cheese, potatoes and plenty of good bread from the coal-ovened bakehouses; and the lordly inevitable roast-beef on Sundays. They were the ones who ran to work in fear of losing farthings, waking me every morning in my waking years.

A few years earlier, just too far back for me to remember, at a time when the old hand shoemaker and his world were passing for ever, the life of these towns was very much a man's domain. There was much brawling, fighting, drinking and sheer squabbling squalor. There also existed two kinds of animosity which townships no longer know: that between street and street, when gangs of louts brawled in small possessive warfare, and that between township and township, when men out of crude bravado rolled from one town to another, beating up rival gangs, rough-housing outside ever-open pubs and inventing strange labels of contempt for rival towns. "Hock-and-Dough" was a term still commonly used by Wellingborough, the market town with the public school on the Nene, when I was a child, the name deriving from some kind of poor man's dish of trotter and pastry said to be much favoured in that town but which the men of Rushden, the Evensford of my novels, held to be food beneath contempt. The men of Raunds, a rough little, tough little town with a rare church, had the jeer of Hair-and-Teeth thrown at them, and replied by calling the men of Irthlingborough Yow-Yows.

In that world, meanwhile, women drudged, slaved, conceived, gave their children bread-and-scrat to eat and waited and wept. There was an extraordinary amount of tuberculosis in these valleys, both then and for many years later. Yellowish-blue faces, far gone in decline, peer at me through memory with haunting cadaverous thinness. The harrowing picture of Victorian industrial hunger has been too often painted for me to attempt it again, but there is no doubt that thousands of women of that masculine shoemaking world in the years just before and perhaps even after my birth waited in desolation, Saturday after Saturday, for fools, braggarts, wasters and almost every other kind of husband to bring home the

week's wages; and waited in vain. The Saturday drunken beat-up, when beer drowned every penny of a man's money, was as fixed a part of life as the Sunday morning parade to chapel and church; and women, dreading it, bled their hearts out.

If you care now to make a journey into this Midland shoemaking country I do not think that you will find, except for the factories themselves and the familiar brick street pattern, anything left of what I describe. A great number of the people of my native Evensford work, for example, in a factory designed by a recent President of the Royal Academy, Professor A. E. Richardson; and on Sundays enjoy music played in a bandstand, also designed by that eminent contemporary Georgian, standing in the park of the

great house described in *Love for Lydia*. Men no longer wear aprons and mufflers or, I believe, run to work. Most of the old bake-houses are closed, and I doubt very much if an old familiar cry, a great favourite of mine, the cry of the water-cress man, is ever heard on Sunday afternoons. Women please themselves what time they arrive in factory closing rooms, going in to work at nine or nine-thirty or two or two-thirty as they wish and leaving in the same way. Just before Christmas they festoon the workrooms with decorations and, unless my relatives in the boot and shoe towns misinform me, hold parties complete with wine. Every man is a collar-and-tie man now and the girls and women, always so handsome and conscious of their clothes, are among the prettiest and best-dressed in England—the daughters and granddaughters, many of them, of those same women who bled their hearts out at Victorian street corners and in summer gleaned the surrounding fields for a winter's bread.

Thinking over these things, I wish over and over again that my father and grandfather were alive. The one could tell me of his darkened childhood; the other of the rough, free eighties, when he, like his fellows, could make and sew a shoe with his own hands from the sole upwards, when men worked independently, in their own back shops, got roaring drunk on Saturdays and said to hell with everything on Mondays, and threw down their tools to go poaching, hunting, fishing or to see a prize fight. He would tell me of the sweaters, the little boys every shoemaker kept as runners, working God knows what hours, and the long weeks of lock-outs, with hunger marches, in the bad, bad days. I have heard it all before but I should like to hear it all again, just as I should like to see the barbers and the bakehouses, hear the long melancholy cry of the water-cress man on Sunday afternoon—"Water-creeceses!—water-creeceses! fresh water-creeceses!"—and hear the feet of men running to work in the morning darknesses.

"The innocent brightness of a new-born Day
Is lovely yet"

William Wordsworth

RETURN TO MANCHESTER

LOUIS GOLDING

With drawings by John Cooper

I WAS born in Manchester, and was a youth of eighteen when I left there, due to take up my Oxford scholarship. There was a year in Oxford, then that other war transported me from the Irwell to the Vardar in Macedonia.

When I returned to Manchester, it was as a visitor, though my roots were there. But the image was already overlain by the lineaments of another city, the "Doomington" of my novels, through *Forward from Babylon* to *Magnolia Street* and beyond. It is partly for that reason that my early memories of Manchester are so much more vivid to me than my adult memories of the complex city which has become Manchester-Doomington.

My first memories are of a house in Harris Street in Strangeways, which with its attendant streets borders the Stygian blackness of the River Irwell. And at once I recall an occasion on which all my world took time off from smearing rainproofs, blocking caps, studying abstruse commentaries on the Bible. It was the marriage of Sarah, my eldest sister. I was not yet breeched. I can see myself sitting high on a wooden chair, with two tiny maidens in yellow satin sitting stiffly on either side of me. There was a brisk traffic among my contemporaries in "stuffs", ragged remnants of bright cotton and silk, tiny hints and intimations of who knows what massive Lancashire fortunes to come. I gravely presented the maiden on my left with a blue "stuff", the maiden on my right with a pink "stuff". They graciously accepted them. With that act of high courtesy, I make my way forward into the world of conscious memories.