

A HANDBOOK FOR BEGINNERS AND ADVANCED PUPILS

PREFACE

I BELIEVE, without undue modesty, that I have certain qualifications to write on 'how to be an alien/ I am an alien myself. What is more, I have been an alien all my life. Only during the first twenty-six years of my life I was not aware of this plain fact. I was living in my own country, a country full of aliens, and I noticed nothing particular or irregular about myself; then I came to England, and you can imagine my painful surprise.

Like all great and important discoveries it was a matter of a few seconds. You probably all know from your schooldays how Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravitation. An apple fell on his head. This incident set him thinking for a minute or two, then he exclaimed joyfully: 'Of course! The gravitation constant is the acceleration per second that a mass of one gram causes at a distance of one centimeter.' You were also taught that James Watt one day went into the kitchen where cabbage was cooking and saw the lid of the saucepan rise and fall. *Now let me think/ he murmured -'let me think.' Then he struck his forehead and the steam engine was discovered. It was the same with me, although circumstances were rather different.

It was like this. Some years ago I spent a lot of time with a young lady who was very proud and conscious of being English. Once she asked me - to my great surprise - whether I would marry her. 'No,' I replied, 'I will not. My mother would never agree to my marrying a foreigner.' She looked at me a little surprised and irritated, and retorted: 'I, a foreigner? What a silly thing to say. I am English. You are the foreigner. And your mother, too.' I did not give in. 'In Budapest, too?' I asked her. 'Everywhere,' she declared with determination. 'Truth does not depend on geography. What is true in England is also true in Hungary and in North Borneo and Venezuela and everywhere.'

I saw that this theory was as irrefutable as it was simple. I was startled and upset. Mainly because of my mother whom I loved and respected. Now, I suddenly learned what she really was.

It was a shame and bad taste to be an alien, and it is no use pretending otherwise. There is no way out of it. A criminal may improve and become a decent member of society. A foreigner cannot improve. Once a foreigner, always a foreigner. There is no way out for him. 'He may become British; he can never become English.

So it is better to reconcile yourself to the sorrowful reality. There are some noble English people who might forgive you. There are some magnanimous souls who realize that it is not your fault, only your misfortune. They will treat you with condescension, understanding and sympathy. They will invite you to their homes. Just as they keep lap-dogs and other pets, they are quite prepared to keep a few foreigners.

The title of this book, How to be an Alien, consequently expresses more than it should. How to be an alien? One should not be an alien at all. There are certain rules, however, which have to be followed if you want to make yourself as acceptable and civilized as you possibly can.

Study these rules, and imitate the English. There can be only one result: if you don't succeed in imitating them you become ridiculous; if you do, you become even more ridiculous.

I. How to be a General Alien A WARNING TO BEGINNERS

IN ENGLAND * everything is the other way round.

On Sundays on the Continent even the poorest person puts on his best suit, tries to look respectable, and at the same time the life of the country becomes gay and cheerful; in England even the richest peer or motor-manufacturer dresses in some peculiar rags, does not shave, and the country becomes dull and dreary. On the Continent there is one topic which should be avoided - the weather; in England, if you do not repeat the phrase 'Lovely day, isn't it?' at least two hundred times a day, you are considered a bit dull. On the Continent Sunday papers appear on Monday; in England - a country of exotic oddities - they appear on Sunday. On the Continent people use a fork as though a fork were a shovel; in England they turn it upside down and push everything - including peas - on top of it.

On a continental bus approaching a request-stop the conductor rings the bell if he wants his bus to go on 20 without stopping; in England you ring the bell if you want the bus to stop. On the Continent stray cats are judged individually on their merit - some are loved, some are only respected; in England they are universally worshipped as in ancient Egypt. On the Continent people have good food; in England people have good table manners.

On the Continent public orators try to learn to speak fluently and smoothly; in England they take a special course in Oxonian stuttering. On the Continent learned persons love to quote Aristotle, Horace, Montaigne and show off their knowledge; in England only uneducated people show off their knowledge, nobody quotes Latin and Greek authors in the course of a conversation, unless he has never read them.

On the Continent almost every nation whether little or great has openly declared at one time or another that it is superior to all other nations; the English fight heroic wars to combat these dangerous ideas without ever mentioning which is *really* the most superior race in the world. Continental people are sensitive and touchy; the English take everything with an exquisite sense of humour - they are only offended if you tell them that they have no sense of humour. On the Continent the population consists of a small percentage of criminals, a small percentage of honest people and the rest are a vague transition between the two; in England you find a small percentage of criminals and the rest are honest people. On the other hand, people on the Continent either tell you the truth or lie; in England they hardly ever lie, but they would not dream of telling you the truth.

Many continentals think life is a game; the English think cricket is a game.

* When people say England, they sometimes mean Great Britain, sometimes the United Kingdom, sometimes the British Isles - but never England.

ON NOT KNOWING ANYTHING

ONE thing you must learn in England is that you must never really learn anything. You may hold *opinions* - as long as you are not too dogmatic about them - but it is just bad form to *know* something. You may *think* that two and two make four; you may 'rather suspect it'; but you must not go further than that. Yes and no are about the two rudest words in the language.

One evening recently I was dining with several people. Someone— a man called Trevor - suddenly paused in his remarks and asked in a reflective voice: 'Oh, I mean that large island off Africa... You know, near Tanganyika ... What is it called?'

Our hostess replied chattily:

'I'm afraid I have no idea. No good asking me, my dear.' She looked at one of her guests: 'I think Evelyn might Evelyn was born and brought up in Tanganyika but she shook her head firmly:

'I can't remember at the moment. Perhaps Sir Robert

Sir Robert was British Resident in Zanzibar - the place in question - for twenty-seven years but he, too, hook his head with grim determination:

'It escapes me too. These peculiar African names... know it is called something or other. It may come back to me presently.'

Mr Trevor, the original enquirer, was growing irritated.

'The wretched place is quite near Dar es Salaam. It's called ..Wait a minute..'

I saw the name-was on the tip of his tongue. I tried to be helpful.

'Isn't it called Zan... One or two murderous glances made me shut up. I meant to put it in, question form only but as that would have involved uttering the name sought for, it would not do. The word stuck in my throat. I went on in the same pensive tone:

'I mean . . . What I meant was, isn't it Czechoslovakia?'

The Vice-President of one of our geographical societies shook his head sadly.

'I don't think so ... I can't be sure, of course . . . But I shouldn't think so.' Mr Trevor was almost desperate. 'Just south of the equator. It sounds something like...'

But he could not produce the word. Then a benevolent looking elderly gentleman, with a white goatee beard smiled pleasantly at Trevor and told him in a confident, guttural voice:

'Ziss islant iss kolt Zsantsibar, yes?'

There was deadly, hostile silence in the room. Then a retired colonel on my left leaned forward and whispered into my ear: 'Once a German always a German.' The bishop on my right nodded grimly: And they're surprised if we're prejudiced against them.'

ON HOW NOT TO BE RESERVED

'THE trouble with the English,' a Cypriot restaurant owner in Islington told me, 'is that they are not reserved enough.' 'You mean that they are much too reserved,' I corrected him.

'That's what I thought for a long time, too. I concentrated all my energies on making them less reserved, less stiff. On making them relaxed; at least on one single occasion; at least in my own restaurant.'

'But you never succeeded,' said I.

'Alas, I did. On New Year's Eve this restaurant was chock full, I had to send clients away. The atmosphere, the ambiance was marvellous. People started talking to one another across the tables, even flirting with one another. At midnight glasses were raised, strange people drank champagne together, they embraced and kissed. They sang Auld Lang Syne in chorus and started dancing - everybody in the restaurant, not a single soul stayed at the tables. I never thought this was possible in to this country. I was really happy. And even that was not all. They marched round and round the tables, then it became much too hot and someone had the bright idea of leading the lot of them out and they danced round and round the square. I have never seen a happier and more hilarious crowd even in Nicosia than those dancers in the square.'

'Then what are you complaining about?'

'Only half of them came back.'

BANK HOLIDAYS

IT IS the sign of a poor society that it has too many holidays. A poor society is often a religious society: it has given up all hope that the government will improve its lot so it puts its hope in God. England used to have five holidays per annum and that was that. Then she added New Year's Day because of the prevailing 'absenteeism' on that day: nobody worked in any case. Soon there was talk in some places of making Wednesday afternoons holidays, too: everyone slipped away to watch football matches, so nobody worked in any case. Then England started messing about with substitute, supplementary and compensatory holidays. When Christmas Day and Boxing Day fell on Saturday and Sunday, the Government decided that the following Monday was Christmas Day and Tuesday Boxing Day. (Jesus was not born on December 25 in any case; and what has modern Christmas to do with Jesus?) When New Year's Day fell on a Saturday (as in 1977), Monday January 3 became a holiday, because what will the poor worker gain from being an absentee, whether official or not, on a day when he would have been absent anyway? There'd be no fun in it. In 1976-77 Christmas plus New Year lasted for two weeks, and this is only the dawn of the shape of things to come.

The world looks at Britain askance. Why don't they work? Why don't they, at least, pretend to work? The world, as usual, does not understand. We, the noble British, have three excellent reasons for acting as we do: because we are 1, realists; 2, moral; and 3, practical.

1. As we are a poor nation we behave like a poor nation. We are neither snobbish (not in that way) nor pretentious - so why act like a rich nation? Other poor nations have a lot of holidays, so we shall have lots and lots of holidays. We shall stop work as often as possible and become poorer still. We must be modest and give the Germans and other industrious blokes the chance of working hard, becoming richer and making the money we want to borrow from them.

2. We are moral. We hate absenteeism and the lies it involves. One way of curing theft is to make it legal. One way of decreasing the number of violent sexual crimes is to permit rape. One way of disposing of the nasty, dishonest habit of absenteeism is to let employees off altogether.

3. The final reason is purely practical and based on sound economic assessment. Whether we work or not makes hardly any difference. So it is only sensible to save electricity, coal, administration, fares and effort.