

The Water Room

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I

A CHANGE IN THE WEATHER

Arthur Bryant looked out over London and remembered.

Fierce sunlight swathed Tower Bridge beyond the rockeries of smouldering bomb-sites. A Thames sailing barge was arriving in the Pool of London with a cargo of palm kernels. Its dusty red sails sagged in the afternoon heat as it drifted past Broadway Dock at Limehouse, like a felucca on the Nile. Dairy horses trotted along the deserted Embankment, empty milk cans chiming behind them. Children swam from the wharves below St Paul's, while carping mothers fanned away stale air from the river steps. He could smell horse dung and tobacco, meadow grass, the river. The world had once moved forward in single paces.

The vision wavered and vanished, displaced by sun-flares from the sealed glass corridors of the new city.

The old man in the unravelling sepia scarf waited for the rest of the party to gather around him. It was a Saturday afternoon at the start of October, and London's thirteenweek heatwave was about to end with a vengeance. Already, the wind had changed direction, stippling the surface of the river with grey goose pimples. Above the spire of St Paul's, patulous white clouds deepened to a shade reminiscent of overwashed socks. The enervating swelter was giving way to a cool breeze, sharp in the shadows. The change had undermined his group's stamina, reducing their numbers to a handful, although four polite but puzzled Japanese boys had joined thinking they were on the Jack the Ripper tour. Once everyone had settled, the elderly guide began the last section of his talk.

'Ladies and gentlemen . . .' He gave them the benefit of the doubt. 'If you would care to gather a little closer.' Arthur Bryant raised his voice as a red wall of buses rumbled past. 'We are now standing on Blackfriars - formerly Pitt - Bridge.' Remember to use the hands, he told himself. Keep their

interest. 'Bridges are causeways across great divides, in this case the rich city on the north side - ' hand usage to indicate north - 'and the more impoverished south side. Does anyone have a Euro note in their pocket? Take it out and you'll find a bridge, the universal symbol for something that unites and strengthens.' He paused, less for effect than to catch his breath. Bryant really had no need to freelance as a city tour guide. His detective duties at the London Peculiar Crimes Unit would have kept a man half his age working late. But he enjoyed contact with the innocent public; most of the civilians he met in his day job were under criminal suspicion. Explaining the city to strangers calmed him down, even helped him to understand himself.

He pulled his ancient scarf tighter and abandoned his set text. What the hell, they were the last group of the season, and had proven pretty unresponsive. 'According to Disraeli,' he announced, ' "London is a nation, not a city." "That great cesspool into which all the loungers of the Empire are irresistibly drained," said Conan Doyle. "No duller spectacle on earth than London on a rainy Sunday afternoon," according to De Quincey, so take your pick. One of the planet's great crossing-points, it has more languages, religions and newspapers than any other place on earth. We divide into tribes according to age, wealth, class, race, religion, taste and personality, and this diversity breeds respect.' Two members of the group nodded and repeated the word 'diversity', like an Oxford Street language class. God, this lot's hard work, thought Bryant. I'm gasping for a cup of tea.

'London's main characteristic is an absence of form. Its thirty-three boroughs have busy districts running through them like veins, with no visible hierarchy, and neighbourhood ties remain inexplicably close. Because Londoners have a strongly pronounced sense of home, where you live counts more than who you are.' Bryant mostly lived inside his head. Remember the facts, he told himself, they like facts.

'We have six royal parks, 160 theatres, 8,600 restaurants, 300 museums and around 30,000 shops. Over 3,500 criminal offences are reported every day. Poverty and wealth exist side by side, often in the same street. Bombings caused slum clearance and social housing, rupturing centuriesold barriers of class, turning the concept into something mysterious and ever-shifting. London is truly unknowable.'

Bryant looked past his under-dressed audience to the swirling brown river. The Japanese boys were bored and cold, and had started taking pictures of litter bins. One of them was listening to music. 'A city of cruelty and kindness, stupidity and excess, extremes and paradoxes,' he told them,

raising his voice. 'Almost half of all journeys through the metropolis are made on foot. A city of glass, steel, water and flesh that no longer smells of beer and brick, but piss and engines.'

He lifted his silver-capped walking stick to the sky. 'The arches of London's Palladian architecture lift and curve in secular harmonies. Walls of glass reflect wet pavements in euphonious cascades of rain.' He was no longer addressing the group, but voicing his thoughts. 'We're heading for winter, when a caul of sluggishness deepens into thanatomimesis, the state of being mistaken for death. But the city never dies; it just lies low. Its breath grows shallow in the cold river air while housebound tenants, flu-ridden and fractious with the perpetual motion of indoor activity, recover and grow strong once more. London and its people are parasites trapped in an ever-evolving symbiosis. At night the residents lose their carapace of gentility, bragging and brawling through the streets. The old London emerges, dancing drunk skeletons leaving graveyard suburbs to terrify the faint of heart.'

Now even the hardest listeners looked confused. They spoke to each other in whispers and shook their heads. Their guide seemed to be straying from his topic: 'A Historic Thameside Walk'. The Japanese boys gave up and wandered off. Someone said, rather loudly, 'This tour was much better last time. There was a café.'

Bryant carried on, regardless.