LITTLE ENGLANDERS

ALSO BY ALWYN TURNER

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LITTLE ENGLANDERS

Britain in the Edwardian Era

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This book is dedicated to Sam Harrison,
with all the usual thanks.

In each century since the beginning of the world wonderful things have been discovered. In the last century more amazing things were found out than in any century before. In this new century hundreds of things still more astounding will be brought to light.

Frances Burnett, *The Secret Garden*, 1911

It was a land where it seemed as if it must be always summer and generally afternoon, a land where bees hummed among the wild thyme and in the flower beds of cottage gardens, where the harvest-mice rustled amid the corn and nettles, and the mill-race flowed cool and silent through water-weeds and dark tunnelled sluices, and made soft droning music with the wooden mill-wheel. And the music carried with it the wording of old undying rhymes.

Saki, *When William Came*, 1913

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NOTE ON CURRENCY AND INCOME

The UK's pre-decimal currency was a little convoluted. There were twelve pennies to a shilling, and twenty shillings to the pound, so a pound was the equivalent of 240 pence. Prices tended to be written in the form £2 12*s* 6*d*, representing two pounds, twelve shillings and sixpence. To confuse matters, there were also standard units of a crown (five shillings) and half a crown (two shillings and sixpence). And some payments were made not in pounds but in guineas, with a guinea being one pound and one shilling.

The average annual income of a household in this period was around £100. This would sustain, say, a working father and older son, along with a non-working mother, two other children and perhaps an elderly relative. An annual household income of £50 meant absolute poverty. This did not, though, apply to domestic servants, who were provided with food and board in addition to wages; servants' pay ranged from £100 per annum for a butler down to £8 for an in-between maid. The division between the working and middle classes – the gentility line, as it's sometimes known – can be seen as an annual income of £160, which was the threshold for paying income tax. Five and a half million people lived in households above that level, including 1.4 million with an income of over £700 a year.[1]

Prologue

TWO DEATHS

We seem to be standing at the end of one era, and our hearts are filled with wonder what shall come next.

The Reverend R. G. Matthew, Rector of Wigan, 1901[1]

'Fact one: News is not news unless confirmed by the papers. Fact two: Print is necessary to national thought.'

Edgar Wallace, *Private Selby*, 1912[2]

King Edward VII (1841–1910), who succeeded his mother Queen Victoria on her death in 1901, pictured by cartoonist Spy in *Vanity Fair* magazine.

The room occupied by sebastian melmoth was on the first floor of a run-down hotel in a poor quarter of Paris, the small windows looking out on to a claustrophobic, unswept courtyard. The furniture was sparse and soiled, the bed too short for his six-foot frame. By his own account, the place was dirty, depressing and devoid of hope, a squalid setting for a man whose life had been devoted to the pursuit of beauty and amusement. 'I used to live entirely for pleasure,' he wrote. 'I shunned suffering and sorrow of every kind.'[3] Now, riddled with debt and disease, seldom rising from bed until the afternoon, he was drinking heavily – champagne in the daytime, absinthe and brandy in the evening – and receiving injections of morphine, until even that proved insufficient to ease his pain and was replaced by opium and chloral. He had lost an alarming amount of weight and his skin was covered in angry red blotches. It was November 1900 and he was just forty-six years old.

In his day, not long ago, he had been the literary sensation of London. He was still known as Oscar Wilde back then, when his play *An Ideal Husband* opened at the Haymarket Theatre in January 1895, its immediate and sensational success eclipsed only by the premiere of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the St James's the following month. After fifteen years of writing poetry and plays, stories, essays and journalism, he had finally found the true expression of his talent, the artistic and commercial triumphs justifying at last all the promise he'd shown and all the promises he'd made. In particular, *Earnest* was a masterpiece, a social comedy so perfect that the only question was what he could possibly do to top it.

The opportunity never arose. By the end of May 1895, he was utterly disgraced and beginning a sentence of two years' hard labour, having been convicted of gross indecency with young working-class men. When he emerged from prison, his health broken, he had fled into exile in France, assuming the identity of Melmoth from the doomed hero of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a Gothic novel written by his great-uncle Charles Maturin.

'When my plays were on, I drew a hundred pounds a week,' he reflected, though even then he'd lived beyond his means.[4] Now he was trying, and failing, to live on a £150 annual allowance from his estranged wife, together with what he could beg from friends and from friends of friends. Most ignored his pleas for money, for though some remained loyal, more did not. The British tourists and residents he encountered in his exile – as well as many locals he met – snubbed him, and he was constantly at risk of being refused service by restaurateurs, bar keepers and shop owners.

Wilde dealt with those last years of poverty-blighted misery by embracing the shame. His work, beneath the layers of wit, had always been rooted in a simplicity of structure and morality, having something in common with fable and something with cheap periodicals. And since he had always seen himself as his finest creation, he painted his decline in similarly bold colours, the parable of a giant brought low. 'I have been a king, and now I want to be a beggar,' he declared.[5] This was to be his last great role, emulating the defeated Napoleon Bonaparte after Waterloo, exiled on a remote island in the South Atlantic: 'St Helena was the greatest theme of all – for an artist, the most completely significant in the whole of modern history.'[6]

It was a hard pose to maintain, though, and he knew he couldn't keep it up for long. 'I will never outlive the century,' he told friends in the autumn of 1900. 'The English people would not stand for it.'[7] And on 30 November he duly died.*

The British papers covered his demise, but not always in great depth. One press report read, in its entirety, 'An eccentric career, sadly beclouded of late years, ended in Paris yesterday with the death of Oscar Wilde.'[8] Others ran along the same lines in varying shades of condemnation: 'one of the most brilliant and one of the most notorious men of our time';[9] 'no career was ever more absurdly ruined';[10] 'a life of wretchedness and unavailing regret'.[11]

* In those more Christian, more literal times, the new century was deemed to start on 1 January 1901 rather than 1900.

His sins were unforgiven and, said London's *Evening News*, 'the most charitable thing that one can hope for is that he should be forgotten'.[12]

For the first few years of the new century, he was indeed shut out of the public memory, his creed of art for art's sake having become deeply unfashionable. Not that it had really taken hold in the first place, for modern Britain did not pride itself on its cultural appreciation. The ideal picture for the wall of a decent middle-class house, according to the playwright J. M. Barrie, was something 'of which you may say "Jolly thing that," without losing caste as knowing too much'.[13] The writer Max Beerbohm – a former friend of Wilde – once met in Florence an Englishman he knew, standing in front of Botticelli's *Primavera* and looking bored. 'Have you no sense of beauty?' Max demanded, to which the man replied simply, 'No,' and walked away.[14]

The fall of Wilde amplified that attitude; so toxic was his name that he was felt to have contaminated art itself. This was to be a great era for writers who sought social reform – George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy* – but one in which non-utilitarian culture was viewed with some suspicion. The publisher John Lane said in 1905 that it had been almost impossible to sell poetry since Wilde's arrest,[15] and A. E. Housman resorted to self-financing his book of verse, *A Shropshire Lad* (1896). Novelist George Meredith was thoroughly respectable by the time he died in 1909 – he was a member of the Order of Merit and president of the Society of Authors – but memories of his scandalous first novel, *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, all of fifty years earlier, meant that, though there was a memorial service in Westminster Abbey, the dean refused permission for him to be buried there. Thus was the page turned on the disreputable, decadent excesses of the old century.

* Beerbohm said of Galsworthy: 'He has sold his literary birthright for a pot of message.'

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A bigger break with the past was to come a few weeks later, when the celebrations for the new century were immediately followed by the death on 22 January 1901 of Queen Victoria. This truly was the end of an era, and everyone was conscious of the fact. Her reign had been so long – more than six decades – that generations had been born, grown up and died. The population of England, Scotland and Wales had doubled during those years, to stand at 36 million people.* Of these multitudes, few could remember a time before Victoria: only one in twenty had even been alive in 1837 when she ascended to the throne. If no one had actually expected her to live forever, still it had been hard to envisage her absence. She was, said the newspapers, 'the Mother Queen of a people who have grown up under her rule of gentleness and love'.[16] So of course it felt like a major turning point. 'The end of a great epoch has come upon us,' said future prime minister Arthur Balfour in the House of Commons.[17]

Over those years the look and feel of the country had been completely transformed. Victoria's reign had seen the arrival of photographs, gramophone records and motion pictures; telegraphs, telephones and typewriters; the penny post, paperback novels and mass-circulation newspapers; bicycles, motor cars, underground railways and electric trams; the Manchester Ship Canal, the Great Western Railway, the London sewerage system. Abroad, the Empire had grown wider still and wider, with the acquisition of vast swathes of Africa, stretching from Cairo to the Cape. Intellectually, Charles Darwin had revolutionised humanity's view of itself to a degree unmatched by any other individual in history. And through all the decades of frenetic activity – industrial, scientific and financial, though seldom military – the queen empress had been the one fixed point. Now she was gone, and the new century looked less reassuring as a result.

Perhaps, too, the Empire – of which Victoria had been the

* Though that of Ireland had halved, with over three million lost.

talisman, more fetish than figurehead – was now less secure. The scale of the imperial enterprise had been impressed upon the nation in June 1897 (a month after Oscar Wilde's release from Reading Gaol), when London had staged its greatest ever parade, to mark the queen's Diamond Jubilee. Delegations and deputations had come from all the colonies, dependencies and dominions to pay tribute, and the British people saw – for the first time in many cases – just what it was that had been accumulated so slowly, so haphazardly over the course of centuries. 'Not even Rome in her proudest days could ever show such an assemblage of Emperors, Kings, Princes and Potentates – European, Indian, African – as were included in that memorable procession,' marvelled the obituary writers as they looked back.[18] 'She has remade the Empire in her own image, and her virtues have breathed into it the breath of a noble life.'[19]

How would the imperial family fare without the guiding hand of its mother? Certainly, her eldest son, now Edward VII, was a very different proposition, a well upholstered yet less weighty figure, more cavalier and more public, like a latter-day Henry VIII, though with multiple mistresses rather than wives. 'Edward the Caresser' American novelist Henry James called him.[20] He could play the banjo, having been taught by the black Canadian James Bohee,* he'd invited music-hall stars to perform for him at Windsor and Sandringham, and there was a story that he owned a golf bag made from the skin of an elephant's penis, given to him by an Indian prince. In his world, 'Diamond Jubilee' tended to refer to a racehorse that he owned, winner of the Triple Crown in 1900, having been ridden to victory by nineteen-year-old Herbert Jones in the 2,000 Guineas, the Derby and the St Leger. If that augured well for the reign of a new merry monarch, it was also noted that the horse had a 'villainous temper' and a tendency to 'fractious behaviour at the post'; it had attacked its jockey and spectators, earning a reputation as a 'chicken-hearted coward'.[21]

* James and his younger brother George subsequently billed themselves as the 'Famous Royal Bohee Brothers, Banjoists to H.R.H. the Prince of Wales'.

The period to which Edward VII lent his name, the years between his mother's death and the outbreak of the Great War in the summer of 1914, was to be a less innovative time for Britain than the Victorian era, 'rather an empty patch',[22] as John Buchan later reflected. There were no technological inventions to rival those of the previous decades, and the most significant development – heavier-than-air powered flight – was pioneered in America.* The only major expansion of the Empire came with the protracted and painful annexation of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State in the Boer War. At home – and in the home – life was more stable than it had been. The birth rate had fallen by nearly a third in the last five decades, but the death rate was also down, and the result was an older population and smaller households; by 1914 families averaged 2.3 children, compared to 6.2 a half-century earlier.[23]

These developments were, of course, more marked among the wealthy than the poor, but there was a new determination that such social divisions should be, if not removed altogether, then at least softened. The hope in many quarters was that this would be an era of greater equality. The Conservative peer Lord George Hamilton, who chaired a royal commission on the Poor Laws, wrote, 'The object and incitement of the nineteenth century was to accumulate wealth, while the duty of the twentieth century is the far more difficult task of securing its better distribution.'[24] From the other side of politics, Henry Campbell-Bannerman, leader of the Liberal Party, said that his aim was to make Britain 'less of a pleasure ground for the rich and more of a treasure house for the nation'.[25]

This democratic impulse wasn't simply a question of the redistribution of wealth; it was also about recognising the demand that ordinary people be heard, not merely the great and the good. It could be seen in a new breed of politician. When Herbert Asquith

* What was potentially Britain's greatest invention was never developed. In the summer of 1914, Archibald Low unveiled TeleVista, 'his new telephone, which enables you to see the face of the person you are talking to'. The project was shelved with the outbreak of war, and Low turned his attention to inventing the drone.

became prime minister in 1908, he was the first premier not to have a country estate. The man he appointed chancellor of the exchequer, David Lloyd George, had risen from the humblest of origins, a fact which proved, said the *Tatler*, that 'nothing is impossible to anyone who has application, ability and a moderate amount of luck'.[26]

The same spirit could be seen in the spate of Boer War memorials. There had always been monuments in the aftermath of conflict, but there was a difference now, an emphasis on recording the names of the fallen of all ranks, not just those of commanders and generals. In the first years of the century, more than 600 memorials were unveiled across the country, listing the dead of regiments, of schools, of towns and cities – and all honoured the private soldier alongside the officer.

Above all, the new mood of democratic expression could be seen in the rise of the popular press. When a future historian 'comes to reckon up the new factors in British civilisation that have altered the whole constitution of life for this generation,' mused the *Bystander* magazine in 1903, 'he will put in the foremost place, above motor-cars, tariff reform, appendicitis, radium, George Edwardes and india-rubber heel-pads, that portentous thing that we call, with irreverent curtness, the *Mail*.'[27] Maybe that was overstating the case a little, but not by much; in the early twentieth century newspapers were indeed altering the whole constitution of public life, and the *Daily Mail* was in the vanguard of the change.

The newspaper was launched in 1896 by Alfred Harmsworth, a thirty-year-old entrepreneur who already had a couple of papers to his name – London's *Evening News* and the *Edinburgh Daily Record* – as well as a string of magazines, largely aimed at women and children. It was the *Mail* that counted, though. Priced at a halfpenny, half the standard price of a newspaper, it was an instant success, and reached a circulation of a million early in the new century.* Aimed at the newly literate white-collar classes, it had

* At the time of the *Mail*'s launch, the entire circulation of the national morning titles only amounted to a million.

sharper headlines and shorter stories than its rivals; it revelled in real crime – especially murders – and in tales of family life, particularly if they involved divorces, mothers and children. 'Life, passion, drama, the human heart. That is what makes a newspaper circulation,' wrote journalist Philip Gibbs in his novel *The Street of Adventure* (1909), and it was the *Daily Mail* that discovered the formula.

The *Mail* changed the nature of journalism. 'The old notion in regard to a newspaper was that it was a responsible adviser of the public,' observed a contemporary. 'Its first duty was to provide the news, uncoloured by any motive, private or public; its second to present a certain view of public policy which it believed to be for the good of the state and the community.'[28] Harmsworth was different. He was very definitely coloured by motive, and his concept of what was good for the community was never disinterested. His detractors alleged that he was irresponsible in his pursuit of sensation, that – in the words of H. G. Wells – he displayed 'an entire disregard of good taste, good value, educational influence, social consequences or political responsibility'.[29] But there was something more important than bad taste going on, a democratic drive that overturned previous assumptions.

Unlike existing titles, the *Daily Mail* had little interest in lengthy, detailed pieces about the wealthy and powerful. It wasn't concerned with the sober recording of official business; rather the emphasis was on articulating the concerns of its readers. Harmsworth was an idiosyncratic mess of contradictions – a pragmatic sentimentalist, a radical Conservative, a traditionalist obsessed with new technology – and his titles were made in his image. 'Most of the ordinary man's prejudices are my prejudices and are therefore the prejudices of my newspapers,' he explained. 'We don't direct the ordinary man's opinion. We reflect it.'[30] In the process, he changed the nature of democracy, making the press primarily a conduit for public opinion, articulating the concerns of a large swathe of the nation and shaping the debate to a degree that no other proprietor had managed.

Harmsworth's one big misstep was the decision to launch the *Daily Mirror* in 1903 as a penny paper not merely aimed at women, but written and edited by women as well. 'Feminine, but not effeminate,' was the slogan.[31] The experiment didn't work, largely because of a lack of sufficiently experienced female journalists, and was swiftly terminated. Undaunted, Harmsworth revamped the *Mirror* as an illustrated paper – the first of its kind – with a heavy emphasis on photographs, and dropped the price to a halfpenny; its circulation rose to become second only to that of the *Mail*. He then bought *The Times* in 1908, and although he didn't interfere too much with the existing style, it too became more popular, its price falling from threepence to a penny by early 1914. He now owned nearly half the daily newspaper circulation in the country.

Harmsworth's hands-on approach to ownership meant he exerted considerable social power and political influence, often to the distaste of politicians. Lord Salisbury, the veteran Conservative leader who was still prime minister as the new century dawned, sniffed that Harmsworth had 'invented a paper for those who could read but not think'.[32] But the *Mail* was too important to be ignored, and in 1905 Salisbury's successor, Arthur Balfour, raised Harmsworth to the peerage as Lord Northcliffe. While not quite the first press baron – Edward Levy-Lawson of the *Daily Telegraph*, Lord Burnham, had got there two years earlier – he was certainly the most successful and powerful there had ever been.

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In the weeks between the arrest of Oscar Wilde and the commencement of his trial, the newspapers had been almost uniformly hostile to him, and some feared that he would struggle to get a fair hearing. In desperation, his friend Frank Harris, a writer himself, visited the then-proprietor of *The Times*, Arthur Walter, asking that the paper might publish an article calling for judgement to be suspended and for due respect to be given to Wilde's stature and accomplishments as an artist.

Walter did not agree. 'A man who had written a great poem or a great play did not rank in his esteem with a man who had won a skirmish against a handful of unarmed savages, or one who had stolen a piece of land from some barbarians,' wrote Harris scornfully. 'In his heart he held the view of the English landed aristocracy, that the ordinary successful general or admiral or statesman was infinitely more important than a Shakespeare or a Browning.'

Harris was convinced that this was a mistaken assessment of who and what really mattered. Wilde would be remembered, he insisted, while 'the names of Gladstone, Disraeli, Wolseley, Roberts, and Wood, would diminish and fade from day to day till in a hundred years they would scarcely be known, even to the educated'.[33] He was wrong about the names of William Gladstone and Benjamin Disraeli, but he was surely right about that trio of field marshals. Garnet Wolseley, Frederick Roberts and Evelyn Wood have long since ceded top billing to the author of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

This book is more inclined to the view of Frank Harris than that of Arthur Walter. It is an attempt to take the temperature of the nation as it emerged from a century when it had dominated the world and was beginning – whether it knew it or not – a long process of decline. It draws heavily on popular literature, on the songs of the music hall and on the newspapers. Consequently, it might sometimes seem trivial: the administrators of Empire feature less than the headliners at the Empire, Leicester Square, and the politicians that appear are those who were embraced by the public. Trivial, but not insignificant, for these were the stories the country told itself at a time when it was re-evaluating what Britain meant, and the notes struck here were to echo through the whole of the twentieth century and beyond.

For despite the apparent tranquillity, serious changes were happening. The relationship between the state and the family was being recast. So too the nature of party politics, with splits in Conservative and Unionist ranks, the reinvention of the Liberals and the birth of the Labour Party. It was also a period of escalating

crisis. Increasingly violent disputes over the role of women, the rights of trade unions and the status of Ireland disrupted the political system, threatening to derail it entirely. And questions of Britain's trade and diplomatic relationship with the Empire and the wider world grew ever more pressing, while tensions in Europe became dangerously strained.

Through it all ran some sense of an ending, though none knew quite what was coming to a close. The death of the queen empress had seemed so definite a break in its own right, but over the ensuing decade or so, there was a rumbling unease, pre-tremors of a still greater rupture. There was much talk of anarchists and revolutionaries, of foreign invasions and enemies within, of ancient gods and future fears, of national decline and of complacency in the face of that decline. Surely an ending was in sight. In Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) the phrase '*fin de siêcle*' is mentioned, and Dorian sighs. 'I wish it were *fin du globe*,' he says. 'Life is a great disappointment.' It was a characteristically self-dramatising pose, but it was not out of tune with the new century.

Actual predictions of doomsday were largely confined to obscure cults such as the Israelites of the House of David – 'Lunatics from America', according to the press, though they were now ensconced on the Romford Road in east London[34] – or the Brighton-based Army of the Lord, whose leader King Solomon (born James Wood) announced in 1906 that the world would end 'any day in the next fortnight'.[35] But even in more mainstream society, the language of the Last Days was becoming commonplace. ARMAGEDDON! screamed one headline, as early as 1905 – the result 'if Britain and Germany Went to War'.[36] A few years later, a series of industrial disputes provoked similar horror: 'Ruin hangs, like a dark pall, over the nation itself. It threatens a cataclysm of disaster.'[37] And when J. L. Garvin, editor of the *Observer*,* surveyed the situation in Ulster, he compared it 'to a political apocalypse'.[38]

Where there had been confidence, now there was doubt. One

* Alfred Harmsworth bought the *Observer* in 1905.

of the coming men was Winston Churchill, a former cavalry officer who had already seen action on three continents by the time he was elected in 1900 as a Conservative MP. Many were to vest their hopes for the future in him, and he exuded optimism. Yet even he sometimes displayed gloom on a grand scale. The most memorable passage in his first – and only – novel, *Savrola* (1900), envisaged the slow death of the planet: 'The cooling process would continue; the perfect development of life would end in death; the whole solar system, the whole universe itself, would one day be cold and lifeless as a burned-out firework.'

1

MONEY AND MUSIC HALL

'Money, my dear Jessie, is the main thing. Money is, in fact, the hub of everything; only fools try to fight the world without it.'

Alice Maud Meadows, *A Million of Money*, 1903[1]

Why, if I was to try and sing highly moral songs, they would fire ginger beer bottles and beer mugs at me. They don't pay their sixpences and shillings at a music hall to hear the Salvation Army.

Marie Lloyd, 1897[2]

Singer Marie Lloyd (1870–1922), the Queen of the Music Halls, from a programme for the Oxford Music Hall, Oxford Street, London. Also on the bill that week was Dan Leno.

On a cold, moonlit night in January 1909, a car skidded on a dangerous curve at Penmaenmawr, on the coast of Caernarfonshire, crashing into the sea wall and throwing its driver, a young woman named Violet Charlesworth, through the windscreen to fall forty feet into the waters below. Happily, the other occupants of the car – her sister, Lilian, and their chauffeur, who she had persuaded to take a back seat while she drove – survived, but for Violet it was a tragically premature end to a life of great prospects. She was just short of her twenty-fifth birthday, when she would have come into an inheritance of £75,000, a legacy from her fiancé, who had died abroad.

In anticipation of this fortune, she and Lilian, together with their mother, had been living very well – hence the chauffeur-driven car – with a rented villa at St Asaph, thirty miles east of the fatal scene, as well as houses in Wiltshire and Ross-shire. It had been a spectacular rise for the daughter of a mechanic from Stafford, but she was unaffected by it all. 'The character of the simple village maiden became her admirably,' it was reported. 'She had a habit of dropping her eyelids and speaking, half shyly, in a low, gentle voice.'[3]

The police were satisfied with the account of the accident given by the survivors, but there were things that didn't quite add up. Most strikingly, there was no body, and it seemed unlikely that it could have been washed out to sea in the shallow waters at Penmaenmawr. Nor was there any blood at the scene, and the car was surprisingly undamaged from its encounter with the stone wall.

The press – attracted initially by the tragedy of the heiress and by the slightly exotic world of motoring – sniffed an even better story and swiftly discovered that the Charlesworths were heavily in debt to tradesmen, jewellers, landlords and motor dealers. There was thirty pounds in unpaid wages for the kennelman employed by Violet to look after her beloved St Bernard dogs and, at the other extreme, more than £10,000 owing to a London stockbroker. Then

came a report that a young woman in a crimson motoring-cloak had been spotted boarding an express train at Bangor, ten miles down the coast, on the night of the accident. Had the death been faked? asked the papers, and for two weeks their pages were full of pursuits and sightings of crimson-cloaked women, until finally a reporter ran Violet Charlesworth to ground in a small temperance hotel in Oban, Argyllshire.

The story that emerged was one of fraud, initiated by the mother and taken up with enthusiasm by Violet. There was, it transpired, no dead fiancé and no inheritance. It had all been a fiction, enabling the family to live on credit and to borrow substantial sums of money. The biggest victim was one Dr Edward Hughes Jones, who met Violet in Rhyl, proposed to her, and was fleeced for £4,000. Charged with obtaining money on false pretences, mother and daughter were sentenced to five years' penal servitude, though two days later the judge reduced their sentences to three years each.

It was all rather squalid – one of the fraud victims was an elderly neighbour who lost her lifetime savings – yet such was the public's fascination with getting rich quick that Charlesworth enjoyed a brief period as a celebrity.* She was a young, pretty scoundrel; in recognition of her fame, the curve in the road became known as Violet's Leap, while a nearby rock was named Violet's Thumb.

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The story of Violet Charlesworth was a short-lived sensation, a manifestation of the power of the popular press, both positively – the papers exposed the crime that the police had overlooked – and negatively: the glamorising of a fraudster. While it was entirely

* A newspaper editor in Edith Nesbit's novel *The Story of the Treasure Seekers* (1899) explained who were to be considered celebrities: 'The Queen and the Princes, and people with titles, and people who write, or sing, or act – or do something clever or wicked.'

typical of its time, it wasn't how Edwardian Britain wanted to see itself. For that, one might look to the readers of the magazine *Leisure Hour*, who were asked in 1901 to nominate the Greatest Living Englishman, the person who represented the best of the country. The people's verdict was split, a tie for first place between two soldiers, one secular, the other spiritual.[4]

There was Field Marshal Frederick Roberts, the sixty-nine-year-old commander-in-chief of the British Army. Bobs, as he was universally known, was a veteran of the Indian Mutiny, had seen active service in Abyssinia and Afghanistan, and had most recently led the imperial forces in the Boer War. And there was General William Booth, the teetotal, vegetarian co-founder – with his wife, Catherine – of the Salvation Army, which had grown in twenty-five years from a single evangelical mission in the East End of London to an international church working in nearly fifty countries. In its early days, Booth's crusading church had faced much opposition, from the intellectual scorn of scientist Thomas Henry Huxley – Darwin's Bulldog, as he was known – to the physical assaults of gangs of youths calling themselves the Skeleton Army. But it had persevered, and these days Booth was received with respect by the Governor General of Australia, the President of the United States, the Emperor of Japan, even by King Edward VII himself.

Together, Bobs and Booth presented a familiar self-image for the country: mighty in arms, committed to the Empire, devoted to service and duty, the exemplar of a practical and charitable Christianity. Perhaps, however, they also reflected the lowered aspirations of the times. Because the truth was that, in the pantheon of British military commanders, Earl Roberts was hardly on the level of Wellington or Marlborough, Nelson or Blake. And Booth, despite his mighty work in fighting alcohol and prostitution, didn't change the nation to the same degree as the social-reforming evangelicals who preceded him: John Wesley, William Wilberforce, the Earl of Shaftesbury. The country's contemporary heroes were still impressive, admirable men, of course, but they were somehow on

a smaller scale than the giants of the past. Maybe this was not to be an age fit for heroes. 'Life is too easy and mannered,' wrote John Buchan in 1900; 'the field for a man's courage is in petty and recondite things.'[5]

Some believed the same was true of the governing class, grown fat on peace and prosperity. The larger part of a century had passed since Napoleon had been defeated in 1815, and though there had been wars in that time, they were remote affairs; the country itself had not been threatened. The long, comfortable peace seemed to have changed Britain and, the frontier days of imperialism having passed, the leading actors in the national drama were more concerned with administration than adventure. 'Lords without anger or honour, who dare not carry their swords,' scoffed G. K. Chesterton. 'They fight by shuffling papers.'[6]

Similarly, the great leaps forward of the Industrial Revolution were long gone, replaced by the less productive, if more profitable, accumulation of money in the City of London. There was still room for an entrepreneur, as Alfred Harmsworth and others showed, but for the most part the man of enterprise was being supplanted by the managing director. Cecil Rhodes – described as 'the greatest Englishman of our time' by the *Globe*[7] – remarked that, in a hundred years' time, 'when I look down from the sky at this little planet, I shall find that it has passed into the hands of a Hebrew financier'. And veteran journalist W. T. Stead* largely agreed, though without the anti-Semitism: 'Money is the coming king, and the American dollar will be the emperor of the world.' He added, though, that such a development would not be welcomed. 'If the money king is to be the potentate of the future, he will not owe his elevation to supreme power to any intrinsic popularity which he enjoys with the public.'[8]

Perhaps. But it seemed that the rise of money provoked not so

* Stead's high point had come in 1885 with a sensationalist series of articles, 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', which exposed child prostitution, saw him sent to jail and helped raise the age of sexual consent from thirteen to sixteen.

much resentment as a wish to join in, as the case of Violet Charlesworth illustrated. At the respectable end of society, there was a growing number of shareholders – estimated at a million by 1911 – seeking to ride on the frock-coat-tails of the financiers. They were satirised in Hilaire Belloc's novel *Mr Clutterbuck's Election* (1908), the fable of a small-time City broker nursing the capital he inherited from his father until, in a slightly shady deal, he invests £750 in buying a million eggs that are destined for British forces in the Boer War. When the conflict ends, with the eggs unshipped, he fears that his money is lost, but the government has other ideas: it wouldn't want patriotic businessmen to be out of pocket, so it promises compensation. 'Within a week of the cessation of hostilities, offers had been made to all the owners at the rate, less carriage, of one shilling for each egg,' and Clutterbuck's £750 is instantly converted to £45,000. Within a decade he's doubled this, and then – thanks to an error by his clerk – he becomes a very rich man indeed, able 'to pass from ease to affluence'.

Even for those without disposable income to invest, there was still the dream of unearned, unexpected money. The idea of coming into a substantial legacy, for example, was a recurrent subject in popular songs, from Bessie Wentworth's 'Good Old Uncle Brown' (1894) to Fred Lincoln's 'A Matrimonial Chase' (1904) and George Robey's 'Bang Went the Chance of a Lifetime' (1908); it was also parodied in Harry Champion's 'Any Old Iron' (1911), in which the inheritor of a gold watch and chain discovers that they're made of base metal. Popular literature was even more fascinated by fantasies of sudden, implausible riches. Alice Maud Meadows' *A Million of Money* (1903) hinges on a woman assuming a fake identity to secure a massive inheritance, while in Louis Tracy's *The King of Diamonds* (1904), a meteorite made of extraterrestrial diamonds lands in the backyard of an East End slum, bringing enormous wealth to the orphan boy who finds it.

This acquisitive tone was found in the unlikeliest of places. Sherlock Holmes, the biggest fictional hero of the early 1890s, had always prided himself on being uninterested in material gain. 'I

play the game for the game's own sake,' he insisted. And yet, as his career drew towards its close in the early years of Edward's reign, the great detective became ever more mercenary.* In 1901 he accepted a cheque for £6,000 from Lord Holdernesse – 'I am a poor man,' he shrugs – and the following year he took on an investigation into a woman's disappearance for pecuniary motives: 'The family are anxious, and as they are exceedingly wealthy no sum will be spared if we can clear the matter up,' he tells Dr Watson. Whether by coincidence or otherwise, this new-found interest in financial reward occurred at a time when Holmes's creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had become the highest-paid author in the world.† In 1893, having tired of the character, he'd documented Sherlock's death, killed in a struggle with his nemesis Professor Moriarty at the Reichenbach Falls. The reading public, however, were far from tired, and their clamour for more adventures became irresistible. A decade on from Holmes's supposed demise came the sensational revelation that he had survived after all, and magazines in America and Britain were so excited by the news that they were prepared to stump up $8,000 for each short story, with book royalties and licensing rights to be added. Money mattered, and Sherlock put behind him the Wildean 1990s, by this time no longer a 'man who loves art for its own sake'.

Even team sport – that great gift of English public schools to the world, on which manhood and Empire relied – was being corrupted by cash. Association football was long since lost; that had been evident when the Old Etonians were beaten in the 1883 FA Cup Final by Blackburn Olympic, the first professional (and the first northern) team to win the trophy. As money flowed into the game, players began to be sold from club to club, and in 1905

* The exact chronology of Holmes's career has been the subject of much Sherlockian debate, but the dates given here are generally agreed.

† He also inspired the name of comedy double act Conan and Doyle, who went in for eccentric dancing but never made the big time.

Middlesbrough FC bought England international Alf Common from Sunderland for a world-record price of £1,000.*

There was also the creation of the Northern Rugby Football Union in 1895, which split rugby into two codes, one amateur, the other professional, with similar fractures following in Australia and New Zealand. Cricket still maintained its dignified distinction between Gentlemen and Players, but the latter were becoming more numerous by the season, and anyway the rules could always be bent: the sport's most celebrated figure, W. G. Grace, was in the habit of over-claiming expenses to an extent that belied his amateur status.

The revived Olympic Games – staged at the Great Stadium in London's Shepherd's Bush in 1908† – jealously guarded their spirit of amateurism, yet there was leeway here. George Larner won two gold medals in the walking events that year, and testified in adverts that appeared immediately afterwards that his success was 'in no small measure due to my consistent training on Bovril'.[9] Meanwhile, Oxo was boasting that it had signed up 'sixty-eight of the competitors chosen to represent Great Britain'. Photographs of these were included in Oxo's own 'Games Souvenir', available free on written request.[10]

Thus was competition on the athletics field mirrored by commercial rivalry between meat products. That in itself was largely driven by an advertising industry enjoying a golden age, its rapid growth aided by literacy and by the popular press. Intellectual types read books such as *The Psychology of Advertising* (1908) by American psychologist Walter Dill Scott, who promised to bring scientific theory to the art of persuasion, but most advertisers settled for excessive puffery. 'Everybody who does a large advertised trade is selling something common on the strength of saying

* By 1914 this record had risen to £2,500.

† London lost out to Rome in the bidding process, but the need to repair the damage done by Mount Vesuvius erupting in 1906 meant Italy lacked the funds to build the infrastructure, and London got the games by default.

it's uncommon,' says a businessman dismissively in H. G. Wells's novel *Tono-Bungay* (1909). He himself is selling what is essentially coloured water as a supposed health tonic. And at this time that was fine, because the industry was virtually unregulated. A spate of treatments for sexually transmitted diseases had prompted the Indecent Advertisements Act 1889,* and the following year the various trade associations of billposters had come together to police their business, launching the Joint Censorship Committee. Beyond those minimal restrictions, though, advertising was a free-for-all with a lot of room for fanciful, sometimes startling copy.

'Why eat when you can live on Mal-Kah cigarettes?' demanded one 1906 advert.[11] It cited the example of Sacco the Fasting Champion, an Austrian endurance artist who was then touring the country with an act that saw him lying in a glass cabinet for up to fifty-two days without eating. He did, however, drink sparkling mineral water and, as Mal-Kah were proud to announce, he also smoked twenty-five of their cigarettes a day.† In 1912 the makers of Nestor went a stage further, with the boast that their product had been smoked by 'the late Mr Henry Labouchère'. The point was that, since the recently deceased MP and journalist had lived to the age of eighty, this proved that 'cigarette smoking is not prejudicial to longevity – if you smoke the best'. Still, it wasn't entirely reassuring to have a dead man proclaim the health benefits of smoking.[12] Those supposed benefits saw Grimault's Indian Cigarettes advertised as a cure for 'asthma, nervous coughs, catarrh, sleeplessness and oppression'.[13]

Cigarette smoking had been the preserve of the privileged,

* In 1977 this legislation would be used to prosecute (unsuccessfully) a record shop in Nottingham that had a window display featuring the album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*.

† In addition to suppressing his appetite, the cigarettes yielded ash that Sacco rubbed into his skin to give an appropriately gaunt pallor. (The fasting, incidentally, was not genuine; he smuggled food – concentrated meat paste – into the cabinet, sewn into his bedding.)

but it was now moving rapidly down the social scale, the market crowded with brands whose names created an aura of aspiration and a return to nature: Albany, Ariston and Lobby; Brave Saxon, Butterfly and Welsh Flower.* Which cigarettes you smoked could even proclaim your politics. Red Flag cigarettes, available from Lewis Lyons & Sons of Bethnal Green, London, were sold as being 'made by socialists for socialists, from pure tobacco, free from dust, under best working conditions', and cost just two shillings per hundred ('as cheap as the cheapest capitalist cigarettes').[14] Or there was Green Box, as advertised in the *Suffragette*: 'hand made by skilled women makers, who work in unusually favourable conditions'. They were more expensive, though, at three shillings for a hundred.[15]

Ever-present advertising helped to create a society that offered temptation at every turn, and the story of Violet Charlesworth was part of that world, which gave her a certain allure. There were limits, though. During the period between her arrest and her trial, Charlesworth was booked to appear at a London music hall, telling her story in an act entitled 'A Clever Woman'. She came on stage in her famous crimson cloak, but the winning manner that had enabled her to commit fraud was not matched by her stage presence; the audience was unimpressed, hissing and booing her off, and she lost the booking after just two days.[16] Perhaps that reception said more about public values than did the relish of the popular press in recounting her tale. For if one truly wanted to gauge the mood of the nation, a visit to a music hall, the most popular cultural expression of the time, was the best option.

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* Other Edwardian cigarette brands included: Black Cat, Call of the East, Country Life, Chairman, Columbine, Craven, Cropper, Crown Virginia, Donore Castle, Front Bench, Gold Bond, Gold Plate, Golden Dawn, Infant Plant, Isherwood's, Matinee, Mitcham Cricket Green, Myrtle Grove, Navy Cut, Nutcracker, Orbit, Park Drive, Perfectos, Pioneer, Pirate, Polo, Private, Quo Vadis, Regal Oval, Richmond Gem, Royal Navy, Savoy, State Express, Sweet Caporal, Tabs, Teofani's, Three Castles, Three Nuns, Tintern Abbey, Waverley.

iii

'Historians, when they come to deal with the opening years of the twentieth century, will probably call this the Music-Hall Age,' wrote P. G. Wodehouse in 1909.[17] But he was a young man then, and some with longer memories thought that the age of which he spoke had already passed. 'The music hall proper has been nigh obliterated, and its music is being snubbed out of existence,' complained a correspondent to the theatrical paper the *Era*.[18] Both perspectives were probably right.

Music hall grew out of taverns in the mid-nineteenth century, with the Canterbury, opened by Charles Morton in Lambeth, south London, in 1852 generally seen as the first purpose-built hall. The format was simple: a succession of live acts appeared on stage over the course of an evening. A small admission fee was charged, with the real money coming from sales of drink and food. It was an essentially urban phenomenon, a product of the population explosion in British cities – London grew from one to six million inhabitants over the course of the nineteenth century – and of greater leisure time. As the radical economist J. A. Hobson wrote in 1901, music hall came from 'a gradual debasement of popular art attending the new industrial era of congested, ugly, manufacturing towns'. He didn't approve, but he did recognise the importance of the institution: 'a more potent educator than the church, the school, the political meeting or even the press'.[19]

The layout of music halls reflected their origins in public houses; seats weren't arranged in rows facing the front, but at tables placed at a right angle to the stage. As this layout suggested, these were places for eating, drinking and socialising as much as for performance. Consequently, audiences were rowdy, seldom sober, and not shy of expressing their opinion if an act failed to satisfy. In some of the rougher halls the orchestra pit was covered with an iron grille, so that the musicians might be spared the impact of any missiles thrown in disapproval. In some venues balconies overhung the stage, giving disgruntled members of the audience the opportunity to urinate from a great height on unfortunate performers.

The bar was at the rear of the hall, with waiters servicing the tables (sometimes with the bottles chained to their trays, to prevent them being used as weapons), and it was at the back that prostitutes tended to ply their trade. Their presence attracted a thrill-seeking type of upper-class young men,* but for the most part the music hall was a working-class world. It was also, in the audience, a very male world, though on stage it was a different matter, with near-parity between the sexes: the 1878 edition of the *Era*'s 'Almanack' listed 384 female comic singers and 357 male.[20]

This was not a milieu for subtlety of artistic expression. It required a performer to reach above and across the band into a fog of cigar and cigarette smoke, to engage with a drunken audience that, in the bigger halls, could be a couple of thousand strong. And then it might be on to the next engagement, for in London, where there were hundreds of halls, it was not unusual for a big name to play three or four, even five venues a night. In 1905 Sam Mayo, a deadpan comic known as the Immobile One, made a record fifty-eight appearances in just six days. It was an unforgiving environment that did little for artists' health, and many music-hall performers died prematurely, most of them through drink; the greatest of them all, Dan Leno, who invented modern stand-up comedy, was just forty-three when he died in 1904.

Yet the demands of music-hall performing also ensured that anyone who made it to the top of the bill was genuinely a popular favourite; these were not audiences easily seduced by hype, and the biggest stars were those who articulated best the imagination and the concerns of the crowd. In return they were well remunerated; male impersonator Vesta Tilley was said to be Britain's highest-paid woman in the last years of the nineteenth century.

* Max Beerbohm first visited a hall in 1891: 'I was filled with an awful, but pleasant, sense of audacity in venturing into such a place, so plebeian and unhallowed a den, as a music hall.'

The music-hall stage was one of the few places a working-class man or woman might make a fortune.*

As the format evolved, there was a growing demand for novelty and variety to fill bills that might, in the larger halls, consist of up to a couple of dozen acts. By the turn of the century, there were acrobats and jugglers, magicians and mind readers, sharpshooters, trick cyclists, ventriloquists and clog dancers. There were animal acts, the likes of Velanche and His Wonderful Football Dogs,† as well as performing seals, goats, monkeys and elephants, and – most famously – the boxing kangaroo at the London Aquarium, who was stuffed in 1894 after his death and displayed in a glass cabinet, still wearing his gloves.‡ There was a brief fad for one-legged dancers, and a strong vein of sensationalist acts: Charles Noissee, the Living Skeleton; Andrew Hull, the Man with the Iron Cranium; Antoine Menier, the Human Ostrich, who ate 'coal, candles, stones, broken glass, brass, wood, paper and bricks, washed down with train-oil, ink and methylated spirits';[21] and Unthan the Armless Wonder, 'who does everything with his feet that another man would with his hands, such as writing a letter, using a pocket handkerchief, peeling an orange, firing a pistol &c'.[22]

As the phrase implied, though, music hall was dominated by songs. They might be comic or melodramatic, sentimental or just silly, but they all tended to feature big choruses that encouraged the audience to join in. That was the easiest way of getting the crowd onside, and communal singing was intrinsic to the

* Or, in the case of women, where one might marry a fortune. Singer Belle Bilton married the 5th Earl of Clancarty in 1889; Connie Gilchrist, best known for a skipping-rope dance, married the 7th Earl of Orkney in 1892; and chorus girl Rosie Boote married the 4th Marquess of Headfort in 1901.

† Even more gimmicky, there was a troupe called the Football Girls, who used to play a game against male members of the audience.

‡ When the Aquarium was sold to the Methodist church in 1903 (the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster was built on the site), the fixtures and fittings were auctioned off; the stuffed kangaroo failed to meet its guide price of fifty pounds, going for just two guineas.

entertainment. 'It makes a lot of difference to a singer if she (or he) feels that the audience is with her,' said Bessie Bonehill, another of the male impersonators. 'It does one good to hear them joining in and singing with you.'[23]

A relatively small number of professional writers poured out thousands of songs every year, seeking to sell them to individual performers for their exclusive use. The vast majority of this material left little trace, but there were those that stayed the course; by the time he retired, singer George Chirgwin calculated that he'd performed his biggest hit, 'The Blind Boy' (1883), more than 20,000 times.[24] Some songs burned themselves so deep into the public consciousness that they would far outlive their performers: the likes of Lottie Collins's 'Ta-ra-ra Boom-de-ay' (1891), Katie Lawrence's 'Daisy Bell (Bicycle Made for Two)' (1892),* Florrie Forde's 'Down at the Old Bull and Bush' (1904),† Mark Sheridan's 'I Do Like to Be Beside the Seaside' (1909) and Jack Judge's 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary' (1912).

Songs were also the comedian's stock in trade – the transition to patter was only just emerging – and it was the comics who really drew the crowds; those with harsh lives tend to seek entertainment in laughter rather than lamentation. Many documented working-class life, but they wore the hardships lightly. Gus Elen, born in a Pimlico slum, adopted the look and persona of the costermongers who traded in the London streets, and his song 'The Coster's Mansion' (1899) praised with considerable irony the convenience of a family occupying a single room; if you want to see his dining room, parlour, office or bedroom: 'You've only got to stop just

* According to one international traveller in 1902, 'Daisy Bell' was an international hit, heard 'in the streets of France and Germany, Spain, Portugal and Italy' and 'equally popular among the natives of Madagascar, New Guinea and the islands of the South Sea.'

† The original version, in 1903, was an American advert for the Anheuser-Busch brewery in St Louis, Missouri: 'Come, come, drink some Budweis with me, under the Anheuser Bush.'

where you is.' The same theme was found in his best song, 'The Cockney's Garden' (1894). He's occupying a house this time, and the views from the backyard are tremendous:

> Wiv a ladder and some glasses
> You could see the 'Ackney Marshes,
> If it wasn't for the 'ouses in between.

There's no suggestion that these conditions might ever change. All one could do was accept the situation with fortitude, resignation and good humour. And, of course, with alcohol. One of Gus Elen's other songs, 'Arf a Pint of Ale' (1905), makes clear his dislike of tea, coffee and cocoa, and his attachment to beer: his drinking day starts with a half-pint at breakfast and culminates in a barrel and a half for supper. There were plenty of other tributes to alcohol. 'Kind friends, I do implore you all, teetotallers to be,' sang Sam Mayo. 'Don't touch the drink, oh, touch it not! Then there'll be more for me.'

Generally, food was less important, although Harry Champion, of 'Any Old Iron' fame, had a strong line in songs about fantasy feasts: 'Boiled Beef and Carrots', 'Good Old Yorkshire Pudden', 'Home-Made Sausages', 'Hot Meat Pies, Saveloys and Trotters', 'I Want Meat', 'A Little Bit of Cucumber', 'Oh! That Gorgonzola Cheese', 'Put a Bit of Treacle on My Pudden' Mary Ann'.* There was, of course, an element of double entendre in much of this. In her song 'Girls, Study Your Cookery Books' (1908) Florrie Forde advised that a 'man's appetite is the way to reach his heart', and urged women to 'give him the tender part'. Evidently, there was more than one appetite that needed satisfying: 'A nice rice pudding reminds him of the day that he was wed.'

The queen of innuendo, indeed 'the queen of our variety stage',

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* If the diet seems a little light on healthy foods, that only reflected the real world; when the first official index of the cost of living was drawn up in 1914, no one saw the need to include fresh fruit or green vegetables in the typical basket of goods.

as the *Music Hall and Theatre Review* called her,[25] was Marie Lloyd. Born Matilda Wood in 1870 in the East End of London, Lloyd didn't make her professional debut until she was fifteen,* but she found success almost immediately and by the start of the new century was the leading light of the London halls and an international star. Her enduring appeal lay in her ability to communicate pleasure: life was to be enjoyed, and human failings were inherently funny and forgivable. She exuded warmth, wisdom and tolerance. Above all, she celebrated sex. Her song titles gave the broad picture: 'Among my Knick-Knacks', 'Are You Looking for a Girl Like Me?', 'He Knows a Good Thing When He Sees It', 'Naughty, Naughty, Naughty', 'What's This For, Eh?'. All were delivered with a generous helping of winks and gestures to ensure that the meaning was not missed.

Then there were her railway songs, also laced with sexual subtexts. In 'Oh, Mr Porter' (1892) a woman on her way home from London finds herself going further than she intended. 'Oh, Mr Porter, what shall I do? I want to go to Birmingham and they're taking me on to Crewe,' she frets. Happily an 'old gentleman' in her carriage is there to sympathise – or at least to 'declare that it was hard'. And in 'What Did She Know About Railways?' (1897) a country girl gets the train to London, but is innocent of modern ways, even when it comes to the basics of travelling: 'The guards and porters came round her by the score, and she told them all she'd never had her ticket punched before.' Despite her naivety, however, our heroine is capable of looking after herself; as the men become more persistent, she resists their advances, and finds herself in court the next morning, facing 'twelve black-eyed porters'.

Lloyd's self-assertiveness was not confined to the songs. On her first visit to Sheffield, famous for its steel, she interrupted her act to harangue a hostile audience. 'You know what you can do with

* Many of the biggest stars were born into performing families and were on stage early: Vesta Tilley at three years, Dan Leno at four, Hetty King at five, while Vesta Victoria was just six weeks old when she first appeared.

your stainless knives and your scissors and your circular saws?' she challenged. 'You can stick 'em up your arse.' She stalked off, and the manager had to persuade her to go back out to an audience that had been won over: 'They'll do what you say with the knives and scissors, but can they be spared the circular saws?'[26] Her response when asked to sing for the other first-class passengers on a ship home from South Africa was similarly blunt; she felt that they'd snubbed her throughout the journey, so she declined. 'They wouldn't recognise me,' she said. 'I'm buggered if I'll recognise them.' She did, however, perform for those travelling in second class and steerage.[27]

Lloyd's refusal to compromise was a large part of her appeal. She earned a fortune but remained resolutely working class in her tastes, attitudes and culture, and she was adored for it. Anyway, her accumulation of money was more than matched by her open-handed generosity to friends, colleagues and strangers. She was Britain's biggest star in the Edwardian years. Serious critics, including George Bernard Shaw, Max Beerbohm and James Agate, paid tribute. 'She knew that the great English public will open its arms to vice, provided it is presented as a frolic,' wrote the latter.[28] Or, in the words of the world's most famous actress, Sarah Bernhardt: 'No other country in this world has got an artist equal to your Marie Lloyd'.[29]

iv

The coarseness of the music hall, the offensive material on stage, and the drinking and prostitution off it – these things had long been the target of moral reformers. The Salvation Army, in particular, was largely built on its battle against music hall in the East End, cheerfully appropriating the enemy's tricks to pull in the crowds. The melodies of popular songs were stolen, for example, but had new lyrics attached, so that George Leybourne's 'Champagne Charlie' (1866) became 'Bless His Name, He Sets Me Free'. 'I rather enjoy robbing the Devil of his choice tunes,' crowed General William Booth.[30]

Meanwhile the evangelical tradition of reformed sinners testifying to their deliverance through Jesus became more sensationalist, giving prominence to speakers who resembled music-hall acts. Fanny Burt of Chatteris, Cambridgeshire – a forty-year-old woman who stood forty inches tall and weighed just forty pounds – was billed as the Salvation Midget,* while at the other end of the scale was the Hallelujah Giant, who weighed thirty-two stone. 'People go to see the Hallelujah Giant,' noted one observer, 'with the same feeling that they go to see Tom Thumb and the Siamese Twins.'[31] Others included Emmerson Davison, the Hallelujah Wrestler, and Thomas Darkin of Colchester, the Hallelujah Darkie.

As the Salvation Army grew, it also began acquiring premises previously used for entertainment. By 1879, it was boasting that it had taken over a hundred 'music halls, penny gaffs, dancing rooms and the like' in the East End, turning these 'fortresses of Beelzebub' into 'places of divine service'.[32] Three years later came a great coup – converting the Eagle Tavern in Hoxton, the very place where Marie Lloyd had first made her name.† This symbolic transformation was celebrated in a new song, performed at the first Salvationist meeting there: 'The Devil's mad and we are glad, because he's lost this trap he had.' At the end of each chorus, the soloist leaped in the air, gyrating wildly, and General Booth apologised for his high spirits:[33] 'You must excuse him; he's a converted trapeze man, and some of his old notions cling to him.'‡

As with so much in society, however, the wild days were passing into history, and music hall was becoming more respectable. The London County Council (LCC) had been created in 1889, and

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* There were other Salvation Midgets, including a forty-year-old milliner named Miss Crabtree of Ravensthorpe, West Yorkshire, who was confined to a lunatic asylum in 1884 after attempting suicide.

† The pub was also mentioned in the nursery rhyme 'Pop Goes the Weasel': 'Up and down the City Road, in and out the Eagle'.

‡ The music hall retaliated with songs mocking the Salvation Army, including: Nellie L'Estrange's 'No Fear' (1887), Lizzie Fletcher's 'Sister Ria' (1895), and Rosie D'Alberg's 'Obadiah Walked Behind the Drum' (1897).

established a Theatres and Music Halls Committee to grant entertainment licences. The result, regretted humorist Barry Pain, was 'a County-Council-inspected music-hall, with both its eyes on its licence'.[34] Proprietors became much more careful, even censorious, when booking acts, for fear of the regulators.

And those proprietors were acquiring ever-greater power with the establishment of chains of halls. Most notably, at the end of the nineteenth century, the promoter Edward Moss joined forces with two others – Oswald Stoll and Richard Thornton – to form the Moss Empires group, building new venues constructed like conventional theatres, with rows of seats. They 'must not be confused with the old-time music halls', said the press,[35] with adverts emphasising that they were places for family entertainment. When the Shepherd's Bush Empire opened in 1903, it was sold as being 'scientifically ventilated', as having 'luxurious seats' and 'charming surroundings', and of allowing only inoffensive material on stage: 'the entertainment is refined and the audience always select'. Consequently, gentlemen were advised, 'there really is no excuse for not giving your wife or sister a pleasant evening'.[36] The Moss Empires became the biggest circuit of variety theatres in the country, with dozens of venues, and did much to clean up the reputation of music hall. 'The vicar goes – you may go,' promised the Chiswick Empire.[37] Edward Moss was knighted in 1905.

The changing tone was one of the features of the period and spread to other halls. 'All these places are nowadays family resorts to a vastly greater degree than of old,' read a 1909 report. 'The organisers, the performers, now consider what will suit the taste of the family circle rather than the more boisterous desires of an audience of men.'[38] In 1913 it was reported that a young woman was told off by a uniformed attendant for laughing loudly at a comedy troupe. 'Good gracious!' she said. 'Can't we laugh?' And he replied, 'Yes, but not so loud.'[39]

The suffocation of the old raucous spirit was regretted by some, for whom it was another manifestation of the commercialising, corrupting influence of money. The big chains were squeezing out

the independent proprietors, and there were fears that new talent was also being stifled by an over-reliance on proven old favourites who went down well across the entire national circuit. The industry was becoming monolithic, the entertainment sanitised; it was a homogenous business. 'The music hall is dominated by not more than five men,' complained the *Clarion* in 1902, and the managers employed by those men to run their venues were risk-averse pen-pushers: 'essentially "of good appearance", dependable accountants, competent to discipline clerks and janitors, civil to reporters, tactful in dealing with exuberant undergraduates'.[40]

One consequence was that there was a decline in complaints from Christian groups about the halls' baleful influence. Indeed, there were those, such as Liberal MP Samuel Smith, who saw the LCC's committee as a model for how the 'moral evils' of the legitimate theatre could be curbed.[41] There were still controversies, though. The appearance of Violet Charlesworth at the Canterbury music hall was unpopular not only with her inebriated audience, but with those who felt it was wrong for a criminal – even if she were not yet convicted – to appear on stage as entertainment. And Charlesworth was not an isolated case; she was just one of many freak turns, as they were known, celebrities booked for newsworthiness rather than talent, who were a growing presence in the halls. When the artist Robert Wood was acquitted of the murder of prostitute Emily Dimmock in 1907 (the Camden Town Murder, as it was known), he was offered a contract at a music hall in Woolwich, though in this case the Variety Artistes' Federation, a union with some 9,000 members, objected sufficiently strongly for the engagement to be cancelled.

One freak turn who did appear on stage, if only briefly, was Carrie Nation, a militant temperance campaigner from America who gained the nickname the Kansas Smasher by attacking bars with an axe, smashing up their stock and fittings in what she liked to call hatchetations. She was sixty-two by the time she came to Britain in 1908, axeless but still formidable. Booked into the Canterbury, she was received by a drunken crowd with a torrent of

abuse and missiles, hit in the face by a rotten egg, but she stood her ground and eventually had to be dragged off stage by the manager. Many found the spectacle deeply distasteful, a reminder that the sometimes cruel spirit of the old music hall was not entirely extinct. 'To see a woman standing in the limelight with a Bible in her hand before a mocking crowd, hardly accords with our insular notion of the fitness of things,' lamented one newspaper.[42]

Freak turns were provocative enough, but the greatest storm came over a different kind of act, the living statue. In 1906 Australian performer Pansy Montague, twenty-two years old and known professionally as La Milo, arrived on the London stage, dressed in a sheer, close-fitting body stocking, and striking a set of poses based on classical statuary. It was artistic, she said, but as the papers pointed out, she was 'so nearly naked that you can't tell the difference'.[43] She was 'the sensation of the London season', maybe even 'the most talked-of woman in the world',[44] and there was at least one documented case of a man committing suicide when she spurned his advances.* Rivals soon proliferated, including the Modern Venus and Galatea (born Maud Odell), and as the craze spread, it attracted the attention of the LCC's Theatres and Music Halls Committee.

When Captain George Swinton, the committee chairman,† went to see what all the excitement was about, he was sufficiently horrified to resolve that no one else should be exposed to such a spectacle as he'd had to endure. He recommended that music halls

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* In April 1907 Richard Lucas of Byfleet, Surrey, killed himself in the lavatory of Kingsway Tube station by inhaling prussic acid fumes through a complicated apparatus of his own making. A forty-six-year-old correspondent for the *Auto-Motor Journal*, who had a classics degree from Cambridge – and had once been involved in revolutionary Finnish politics, before becoming an ardent Spiritualist – he thought La Milo was 'the most perfect being upon earth' and developed what the papers called an 'extravagant and embarrassing interest in the artiste'. At the time of his death, he had a bushy red beard, which turned out to be fake, a disguise he'd adopted to follow her in the streets. 'He was a very good husband, and I cannot express my feelings and my love for him,' wept his wife at the inquest.

† George Swinton was the great-grandfather of actress Tilda Swinton.

be prohibited from featuring living statues because, he insisted, this really wasn't art – and he spoke from a position of authority: 'for three years he had drawn from the nude himself'.[45] A meeting of the full LCC saw sixty-six members vote for a ban, most of them Progressives, and forty-three against, all but two of whom were Moderates.* Councils in other cities – Manchester, Liverpool, Hull – followed suit, and the living statues were driven from the halls.

The fact that this was a Liberal, rather than Conservative, cause was revealing. Similarly, when La Milo was booked to appear as Lady Godiva in Coventry's annual street procession, it was women's rights campaigner Millicent Fawcett who spoke most loudly against it, saying La Milo would 'degrade the beautiful Godiva legend'.[46] There was a new line of attack emerging, one that was concerned for the mental, rather than the moral, well-being of audiences. Instead of Christian campaigners, it was now radicals and social reformers who most loudly denounced the halls, and the charge was not spiritual corruption but stupidity.

In 1900 the *Contemporary Review*, a liberal, intellectual journal, shuddered at 'the really mournful exhibitions of inanity to which the so-called "knockabout" comedians treat their patrons'.[47] W. T. Stead likewise despaired of the 'inane drivel' he saw on his first-ever visit to a hall in 1906. 'It was not the immorality of the thing that roused me so much as the imbecility of it all,' he wrote. 'It was difficult to realise that the well-dressed "ladies and gentlemen", who had paid four and five shillings to occupy these stalls, and who appreciatively applauded vulgarities which might have shamed a costermonger, were citizens of an Empire on which the sun never sets, arbiters of the destinies of a quarter of the human race.'[48] (He did make an exception for La Milo, however: 'it was a great pleasure to see her'.[49])

In response to such critics, eighty-year-old Charles Morton, the man who had started the music-hall business with the Canterbury

* In the early days of the LCC, Liberals went under the name of Progressives, while Conservatives were known as Moderates.

back in 1852, suggested that audience tastes hadn't really changed that much, whatever Edward Moss liked to think. 'There is no doubt that the public enjoy innuendos and double entendres,' he shrugged. 'However praiseworthy any attempts by managers at reform may be, they will have no effect. The people go out to be amused, not to be educated, and they won't be educated by managers or anyone else.'[50]

v

Music hall provided a stepping stone for some who would achieve fame in other fields. Richard Freeman was born in Greenwich, south London, in 1875. The illegitimate son of an actress, he was adopted by a Billingsgate fishmonger and his wife, who already had ten children of their own. Largely uneducated, he drifted through various jobs and casual work; at one point he was being paid a shilling a time by the Rotherhithe Liberal and Radical Association to disrupt Conservative Party meetings. Then he tried the merchant navy, before joining the army, signing on in the name that he would retain for the rest of his life: Edgar Wallace.

He had higher aspirations than this, though, fancying himself as a versifier; in 1896, while still in uniform, he scored his first success when the music-hall star Arthur Roberts bought a song from him, 'A Sort of a Kind of a —'. Wallace asked ten shillings for the song and (at least in Roberts' account) was instead paid ten pounds.[51] Stationed in Aldershot, he went AWOL for five days to watch it performed in a musical comedy, *Biarritz*, at the Prince of Wales Theatre in London's West End; in return, he got four days' detention with hard labour.

Posted to South Africa, where there were fewer opportunities for songwriters, he began writing verses that were heavily indebted to Rudyard Kipling's poems of military life in *Barrack-Room Ballads*:

> Out 'ere, they've got a notion that Tommy isn't class;
> 'E's a sort of brainless animal, or wuss!

Vicious cuss!
No, they don't expect intelligence from us.[52]

It wasn't particularly good poetry, but his work was published in the *Cape Times*, where it attracted the attention of the great man himself, then on a visit to the country.* 'Mr Kipling strongly advised him to stick to the army for the present – and also to his verse writing,' it was reported.[53] He did neither. He bought himself out of the army and then, when the Boer War started five months later, became a war correspondent.

Wallace began by filing copy for the Reuters news agency, before he stumbled into working for the *Daily Mail*. He compensated for his lack of conventional journalistic skills with a newly discovered gift for storytelling, and alongside accounts of British heroism, he happily spun tales of enemy war crimes. 'The Boers murder wounded men,' he told shocked readers in July 1901, sensationally claiming that British troops had been shot dead in the aftermath of an encounter at Vlakfontein.[54] Appearing at a sensitive time in negotiations, the report caused outrage at the War Office. There was an official denial, and the *Daily Mail* was banned from receiving official bulletins; further, warned St John Broderick, the war secretary, any agency supplying the paper would also be boycotted by the government. 'Never before has such a shameless, if clumsy, attempt been made to muzzle the British press in the interests of one minister,' thundered the *Mail*.[55] The standoff between government and press attracted enough attention to make Wallace a big name – and to obscure the original issue of whether the report was actually true.†

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* Kipling was himself inspired to write *Barrack-Room Ballads* (1892) by the material he heard amid 'the smoke, the roar and the good fellowship of relaxed humanity at Gatti's' Music Hall in Charing Cross, London. (*Something of Myself*)

† Lord Kitchener, who had succeeded Lord Roberts as commander-in-chief of Empire forces in South Africa, later confirmed that wounded British soldiers had indeed been shot at Vlakfontein, though others present that day denied it. The truth is unknown.

Returning home, Wallace became one of the *Daily Mail*'s star writers, still refusing to let the facts get in the way of a good story. He was convinced that he was destined for bigger things. 'We were the poor who were not satisfied with our poverty,' he wrote later,[56] and he lived beyond his means while constantly seeking the get-rich scheme that would pay the bills. Stumbling upon the eternal truth that publishers make more money than their authors, he self-published *Smithy* (1905), a collection of tales about a philosophical soldier. It sold 15,000 copies and made a decent profit, but not enough to clear his debts, let alone keep him in the profligate lifestyle to which he aspired. Thinking further on the subject, he concluded that the key to making money out of literature lay entirely in marketing. 'I shall be glad to have the book finished,' he wrote to his wife, as he worked on his first novel, 'for I am most anxious to get on with the advertising part of it. This latter is really the most important part.'[57]

The novel in question was *The Four Just Men* (1905), again self-published, and he spent huge sums on a promotional campaign that included posters on buses, Tube trains and 2,000 hoardings across London. The campaign featured wonderfully hyperbolic copy – 'The book stamps Mr Edgar Wallace as a master of the dramatic art,' he wrote of himself[58] – while a half-page advert in the *Daily Mirror* claimed it had gone through three print-runs of 5,000 copies each in its first three days.[59] To seal the deal, he offered, via the pages of the *Daily Mail*, a £250 top prize to anyone who could solve the locked-room mystery that he left incomplete at the end of the story – without specifying that there was just one top prize.

The book did well, selling 38,000 copies on publication, but the promotional costs meant that Wallace was still £1,400 down on his investment, and that was without allowing for the hordes of readers who correctly guessed the solution. Alfred Harmsworth was prevailed upon to compensate the disappointed winners – his papers having pushed the competition – and Wallace declared himself bankrupt, selling the rights to the novel to George Newnes

(publisher of the *Strand* magazine) for seventy-five pounds.*

Harmsworth grudgingly forgave Wallace, but worse was to come. When the *Mail*'s proprietor launched a crusade against the rising cost of soap (which, he believed, was the result of a cartel of manufacturers), Wallace was one of those charged with finding copy. He turned in a typically colourful account of a washerwoman driven into penury by rapacious capitalists, a story riddled with unchecked and exaggerated claims. It prompted legal action against the paper by soap manufacturers Lever Brothers and, represented by Edward Carson (the barrister whose dogged cross-examination had brought about Oscar Wilde's downfall), the company won £50,000 damages, the highest libel award yet handed down by a British court. This time Wallace was sacked from the *Mail*.

This was 1907, and the desperate state of his finances prompted Wallace to begin his writing career in earnest. Over the next six years, he wrote twelve books (published by others) and then increased his output further, turning himself from a celebrated journalist into the country's most popular writer of fiction.† Like Harmsworth, he discovered that his taste chimed with a large swathe of the public, even if it was sneered at in literary circles. 'I like actions, murderings, abductions,' he said, 'dark passages and secret trapdoors and the dull, slimy waters of the moat, pallid in the moonlight.'[60] So did his readers.

Edgar Wallace was entirely a product of his times, a man who rose from nothing by a combination of good luck, the ruthless exploitation of his talent and the indulgence of the popular press. All the while, he retained an affinity with the people he sprang from, sharing their fads and fantasies. He was seduced by the superstitious fringes, consulting palmists and practising bibliomancy. He was an extravagant gambler on both cards and horses.

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* It went on to sell over three million copies and spawned five sequels, two films and a television series.

† At the peak of his success, in the years before his death in 1932, it was calculated that one in every four books read in Britain was written by Edgar Wallace.

And, above all, he had one driving ambition: 'It's money I want,' he said. 'Lots of money.'[61]

vi

Edgar Wallace doesn't quite work, though, as the spirit of the age. For that there needs to be an element of the City of London, of the financial industries that were growing faster than manufacturing. And there is one person who fits the bill: the ebullient, excessive Horatio Bottomley, a man who was acclaimed by the masses and ridiculed by polite society. (Even his 'remarkable conjunction of names is quite enough to create mirth,' mocked one newspaper.[62])

Born in 1860, the only son of a tailor's cutter in Bethnal Green, London, Horatio Bottomley lost both parents before he was five, and was placed in a Birmingham orphanage, from which he ran away at the age of fourteen. A succession of casual and clerical jobs led to him becoming a shorthand writer in the law courts at the age of twenty, a three-year stint that furnished him with sufficient legal knowledge and self-confidence that in his future court cases – of which there were to be very, very many – he liked to defend himself. He tended to win these cases, for he turned out to be a persuasive advocate, charming and disarming, swinging between passionate outrage and jovial self-deprecation.

It was that same manner that enabled him to make his fortune in the frenzied speculation of the Australian goldrush in the last years of the nineteenth century. London was awash with investors in search of profits, and Bottomley reinvented himself as a financier, launching companies that were forever just about to strike gold but never quite did, and which in the meantime had no assets beyond the funds he raised. When his reserves ran low, largely untroubled by moral qualms, he went back to the same investors and convinced them to throw good money after bad. 'If I were asked to describe the square mile which constitutes the City,' he declared, 'I should say that it represents that portion of the earth

upon which are daily gathered together the worst types of the human race from a physical, moral and intellectual standpoint. It is the centralised and concentrated essence of primaeval man – and top hat.'[63] Generally, the City liked to emphasise top hat rather than primaeval nature, seeing itself as a place for civilised gentlemen. P. G. Wodehouse, who worked for the Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation for two years from 1900, said there was 'a distinct flavour of a school republic' about such institutions.[64] But Bottomley didn't care about such niceties; he revelled in being an outsider, living off his wits.

He raised tens of millions of pounds from investors who were as greedy and gullible as he was unscrupulous. 'People who invest under his magic wand and expert guidance are not such as would be content with 3 or 4 per cent,' noted the press; 'they want to become rich in a hurry, and they sometimes do so.'[65] Mostly, though, they didn't. But Bottomley did. Much of the money – an estimated £3 million in ten years – found its way into his pocket, and he was so brazen about his misappropriations that he got away with them. Challenged once at a shareholders' meeting about what had happened to £700,000 that had gone missing from the accounts, he came clean: 'I have not the faintest idea.' And he sat down to cheers.[66] Cartoonist H. M. Bateman caricatured him for the *Tatler* in 1906, wearing racing silks and flogging a panting nag that could barely carry his weight; the horse was labelled Shareholder, and the picture was captioned 'The Last Ounce'.[67]

In short, Bottomley was a 'barefaced swindler' who 'deliberately planned schemes to rob the public', as one contemporary put it (Bottomley sued for libel and won), or 'the cleverest thief in the Empire', as a prosecuting lawyer in yet another case suggested.[68] He was also a popular hero, seen by the non-investing classes as one of their own; he was the East End boy who'd made good, thoroughly relishing a life of champagne, racehorses and chorus girls. Bottomley lived on the scale that Edgar Wallace dreamed of, whether losing £40,000 on a musical comedy starring one of his mistresses or winning £70,000 when one of his horses won the

Stewards' Cup at Goodwood. He had style. When an office boy was caught stealing stamps, he shrugged: 'We've all got to start in a small way.'[69] He saw himself as 'England's Superman',[70] though the chorus girls called him Botty.

In keeping with the times, Bottomley used some of his wealth to launch himself as a newspaper proprietor, buying a London title, the *Sun*, in 1902. His big gimmick was to get celebrities to spend a week as guest editor, including music-hall star Dan Leno,* the dockers' leader Ben Tillett, and Sussex and England cricketer Prince Ranjitsinhji. Not all were a success. The Congregationalist minister Joseph Parker stipulated that there would be no betting, gambling or speculative finance on his editorial watch, and he replaced the paper's racing tips with scriptural texts; the result was a complete collapse in sales. 'If Joe's editorship had lasted another week, the *Sun* would have set in the west,' chuckled Bottomley.[71]

He also had political ambitions, and indeed relations. His maternal uncle was the leading radical George Holyoake,† and he claimed a connection with the Liberal MP and atheist Charles Bradlaugh. 'You know that Bradlaugh was my father,' Bottomley would say, right up to his own death,[72] though there was no evidence for this, save for a physical resemblance.‡ He himself was not really a radical, but he did have genuine sympathy for, as one paper noted, 'the despised, the rejected and the downtrodden';[73] that went a long way when he was adopted as Liberal candidate for slum-ridden Hackney South.

He nursed his constituency with a devotion that bordered on

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* Showing an admirable grasp of advertising and new technology, Bottomley had a promotional film made of the event: 'Mr Dan Leno, Assisted by Mr Herbert Campbell, Editing "The Sun"' (1902).

† Holyoake is the man credited with coining the word secularism.

‡ Not that that was necessarily much of a boast, as the music-hall star G. H. 'the Great' MacDermott had sung back in 1881, 'Young Bradlaugh who is clever (you'd not think so by his looks) . . .'

bribery, setting up soup kitchens, giving Christmas parties for hundreds of local children (naturally, he appeared as Santa Claus), and providing free entertainments: there was, for example, an excursion to White City for as many residents as could fit in the fifty carriages he'd hired. He was also said to be a ready source of racing tips. Consequently, in the 1906 general election he achieved a swing from the Conservatives of 16.7 per cent (the national average was 5.4 per cent) and secured the largest Liberal majority for a London constituency.

He had, however, received no support from the party leadership during the campaign, and he found no welcome in the Commons. His business reputation preceded him in Westminster, ensuring a frosty reception; other Liberal MPs 'tried to ignore Mr Bottomley by conversing in loud tones to one another while he was addressing the House'.[74] He responded by simply pretending that nothing untoward was happening. He 'is in the Liberal Party but not of it', marvelled one commentator; he 'outfaces the cold displeasure with which his interpositions are received with the most sublime effrontery'.[75] The self-assurance was unshakeable and, to compound his crimes, he was a good speaker, witty and engaging. Some were won over, but much of the hostility remained. Three years into his parliamentary career it was still being noted that 'the Liberal Party in the House are not very fond of him, for he is always attacking them; the Labour Party are still less fond of him, for, although politically a disciple of Bradlaugh, he has no reverence for the fustian jacket'.[76]

And that lack of self-righteousness, ultimately, was the key to his popularity in the world beyond Parliament. Though he was unencumbered by party allegiance (he 'is really a Bottomleyite', it was noted[77]), his political instincts were sound. He was generous to the ordinary folk he met, kind to children, courteous to women. He remembered not only people's names but those of their families. And unlike many who sought to improve the lives of the working class, he had not the faintest trace of puritanism about him. Many of his parliamentary colleagues were in favour

of temperance; he most emphatically was not.* He proposed abolishing the duty on ale and replacing it with a tax on 'ginger beer and other horrible gaseous liquids'.[78] When he ran the country, he said, the state would stay out of people's lives. 'Molesting and restrictive legislation will be kept for the nursery. What people eat, what they drink, and what they play at will be a matter entirely for themselves to determine.'[79] Like Marie Lloyd and Edgar Wallace, he knew how to enjoy himself, and people enjoyed him in return. It was probably not too much to say that he was loved.

Shortly after his election, Bottomley launched a weekly paper, *John Bull*, much of which he wrote himself. This was an entertaining mix of salacious gossip, investigative journalism, highly opinionated comment and shock exposés of 'the vilest habits of sexual depravity and degradation', such as massage dens where 'Lesbian and other vices are regularly indulged in'.[80] There were also some very dubious competitions. One asked readers to predict the scores of twenty football matches, an almost impossible task; there were, though, seventeen winners one week, a refutation of the laws of probability that only made sense when it emerged they were all employees of Bottomley, their names appearing only in order to lure in more entrants.

There was also a print equivalent of a protection racket: a company that was repeatedly targeted in the pages of *John Bull* would be told that the attacks would stop in return for a financial consideration. At one stage Bottomley was being paid a retainer by Harrods department store to investigate complaints by former staff – complaints for which he was the only source. By 1909, the year he published his memoirs under the cheerfully self-advertising

* The war against drink derived largely from the Nonconformist roots of the Liberal Party, where teetotalism was strong. In 1903 it was reported that 700 congregations in Scotland alone were using non-alcoholic wine for Holy Communion, though care had to be taken: worshippers at a Nonconformist church in Sunderland in 1906 had suspicions of the 'non-alcoholic wine' they'd been sold and sent it off for analysis – it turned out to be double the strength of a claret.

title of *Bottomley's Book*, the paper claimed to be selling 300,000 copies a week. It made money and kept him in the public eye.

Although he was never to be a significant actor in Westminster politics, Bottomley was one of the best-known figures in the country. Short and stocky, with a figure that was destined to run to fat, he had a large head and a soft, round face, his chin already starting to slide into his neck. He exuded a perpetual air of bonhomie and he partially inspired Toad of Toad Hall in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (1908), the boisterous, boastful, irresponsible Mr Toad, who shared Violet Charlesworth's love of motor cars and who was similarly sent to jail.[81] In Horatio Bottomley – financier, politician, press baron, crook – the old Victorian values of self-help were transmuted into a creed of helping yourself. Where Bobs and Booth represented an idealised vision of the nation, Bottomley was the real thing, the self-advertising, self-satisfied embodiment of Edwardian Britain, a music-hall turn posing as a man of importance. The title of his newspaper was almost right: he wasn't John Bull but he could have been a disreputable cousin.