

O TO BE IN ENGLAND.

STANDS England where she did? Not 'arf! She still has her hostelries. This is one—a relic of the coaching days, a sacred relic.

“Feather beds are saft, pentit rooms are bonny,” says the old song. The feather beds are here, beds the yeomen of England slept on; and the *pentit* rooms are here too. Granted, the *pent* is not as fresh as when it was applied about the time the first Reform Bill was passed, but it is here.

Last night we were huddled into a small writing room. By we, I mean about a dozen commercials and myself. Two of them spent an hour washing down anti-Government sentiments with draughts of beer. We are, it appears, all going straight to the demnition bow-wows. Another was holding some half-dozen of his fellows in thrall by a fanatical discourse on some sort of new-old religion called “Mazdaism.” One man was sleeping vociferously. It was at this stage that the boots entered, book in hand.

“Calls, gentlemen!” he said. He was a nice lad. He wrote to dictation slowly and carefully—“7.30, hot water and tea;” “7.45, no tea but 'ot water; 'ot mind—this morning there was a skin of ice on it as you could slide on;” and so on. “Eight o'clock,” I told him. “Yessir,” he said, noting down the eight in two perfectly spherical blobs, one on top of the other. “And so to bed” as our old friend used to say.

It was some hours later that the door of my room breenged open. Every door here breenges. If you try to open a door gently, it simply puts its back up and remains shut. I tried it on one or two, even going the length of addressing them by name like this: "Come on, Dorothy!" Might as well speak to a Patagonian. Well, as I was saying, the door breenged open. A young lady with very unkempt hair, and wearing a pale black apron over a rather ill-fitting print gown stood in the room. She looked towards the ceiling, but her speech was addressed to me. It was loud and abrupt, and it followed the breenge without a moment's intermission: "Are you the gentleman as wanted called at six, sir?" she said. I assured her, with a politeness of which I did not think I was capable, that I was not the gentleman. I was going to suggest that she might go on calling up every guest in the house until she struck the right one, but she cut me short by breenging out of the room and slamming the door.

I heard her sweet voice in the next room, and I heard one word in reply. It was uttered gruffly. I cannot repeat the word here; it was topographical, but not of this world. The occupant was obviously *not* the gentleman. And so, along that corridor, she travelled, her voice becoming fainter and fainter; but the doors, true to tradition, refused to join in the diminuendo.

Being awake for good, I thought I might call for a bath. I pressed the bell. Silence! I kept pressing it. No response of any kind! And then I remembered something which made me glad there was one silent member in the household. I had forgotten about the plumbing. It was a masterpiece. No tap in the house but insists on working night and day. Screw them

tight till the blood leaves your fingers; they keep dripping—the water taps, of course.

And the cisterns! They are shy at first and refuse to do anything but gurgle. Once you get to know them, however, they meet you more than halfway; they roar and hiss and do all sorts of vocal pyrotechnics. Even when their force is spent they have a back kick and a heeze—bad-tempered little brats! One can always slam the door on them anyway. I had hitherto regarded the allusion to plumbers indulged in by comedians as rather below the belt. I have changed my mind. I now see that we have simply been throwing away that Nobel Peace Prize. It ought to have been given years ago to the plumber capable of inventing a pacifist cistern. The wretched things (cisterns I mean) have always terrified men, and I am certain they do more than anything else to keep the militarist spirit alive. That, of course, may not be an opinion generally held, but it is mine.

There is one thing about this hotel—the staff is very friendly. In the coffee room the waitress hovers over you long after you have given your order. When she does go you hear her repeating the order to some satellite in the kitchen next door. You wait. You read long leading articles in the papers. The satellite appears: "You're the gentleman as ordered the fish, sir?" she says. I assure her I am not the gentleman "as ordered the fish"; my order was a glass of milk and egg and bacon—one egg. She disappears. She re-appears, sometime later, laden with a plate bearing two eggs. I succumb. "Was it tea or coffee you ordered, sir?" she enquires. "Neither," I reply "it was morphia."

For some time past I have been exercised in mind as to what we are going to do, in these days of disarmament, with retired Indian colonels. To put them on the dole would be manifestly insulting. This hotel business has given me an idea. Mobilise them. See that their livers are in condition. Give them a fluency test, if they require it. Then send them out, one to each hotel. A week would do it, a nice hectic week in which, if bells refused to ring, voices would make up the defect. To allow these fine fellows to loll about West-end clubs is a sheer waste of dynamic energy. Imagine that six o'clock girl! What the gent said to her in the next room is a benediction in comparison with what a par-boiled Indian Colonel could say. And the cisterns! I can see them being torn from their eminences and hurled into limbo. No, we are trifling with this unemployment problem. Here is work of supreme National importance. Here are the men for the work. I pass the hint along. I ask nothing for it. After all, I am a citizen with, I hope, a sense of public duty. In this way we might begin to build "Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." As it is, I often find myself wondering if William Blake was *all there*, and if Browning would not have been well advised to alter his "Home Thoughts" to read:—

"O to be in Scotland, now that England's here."

Only, I will be told, there are hotels in Scotland, and cisterns too. Yes, yes, I remember. And I remember monosyllabic maids who said "whit?" ("t" glottic as in "butter") and I find myself wondering whether the English breed which tells you its family history and forgets your order is not, on the whole, to be preferred.