

Aldous Huxley

Los Angeles has long been a magnet for British visitors who often became residents; Hollywood's English colony constituted a subculture in its own right, and to this day Santa Monica is a plentiful source of marmite, Ovaltine, and afternoon tea. When Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) visited in 1925—recounted in “Los Angeles. A Rhapsody,” which appeared in *Jesting Pilate* (1926)—he was very much the outsider, registering the jangling, kaleidoscopic chaos of the “City of Dreadful Joy” with a mixture of fascination and disdain. (His impressions of the Los Angeles variety of mass hedonism almost certainly found their way into his dystopian 1932 novel *Brave New World*.) Whatever his misgivings, Huxley eventually succumbed to the pleasures of the place, and from 1937 was a permanent resident. He extended his satirical dissection of Southern California in *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan* (1939) and *Ape and Essence* (1948), while exploring more utopian possibilities in *Island* (1962) and in his accounts of his psychedelic experiments, *The Doors of Perception* (1954) and *Heaven and Hell* (1956).

LOS ANGELES. A RHAPSODY

FIRST MOVEMENT

Daylight had come to the common folk of Hollywood, the bright California daylight. But within the movie studio there shone no sun, only the lamps, whose intense and greenish yellow radiance gives to living men and women the appearance of jaundiced corpses. In a corner of one huge barn-like structure they were preparing to “shoot.” The camera stood ready, the corpse-lights were in full glare. Two or three cowboys and a couple of clowns lounged about, smoking. A man in evening dress was trusting to his moustache to make him look like an English villain. A young lady, so elegant, so perfectly and flawlessly good-looking that you knew her at once for the Star, was sitting in a corner, reading a book. The Director—it seemed a waste that such a profile should be *au-dessus de la mêlée* instead of in the pictures—gave her a courteous hail. Miss X looked up from her literature. “It's the scene where you see the

murder being committed," he explained. Miss X got up, put away the book and beckoned to her maid, who brought her a comb and a mirror. "My nose all right?" she asked, dabbing on powder. "Music!" shouted the Director. "Make it emotional." The band, whose duty it is in every studio to play the actors into an appropriate state of soul, struck up a waltz. The studio was filled with a sea of melodic treacle; our spirits rocked and wallowed on its sticky undulations. Miss X handed back her powder puff to the maid and walked up to the camera. "You hide behind that curtain and look out," the Director explained. Miss X retired behind the curtain. "Just the hand first of all," the Director went on. "Clutching. Then the face, gradually." "Yes, Mr. Z," came the quiet voice of the Star from behind the hanging plush. "Ready?" asked the Director. "Then go ahead." The camera began to purr, like a genteel variety of dentist's drill. The curtain slightly heaved. A white hand clutched at its edge. "Terror, Miss X," called the Director. The white hand tightened its clutch in a spasm of cinematographic fear. The Director nodded to the bandmaster. "Put some pep into it," he adjured. Pep was put in; the billows of treacle rose higher. "Now the face, Miss X. Slowly. Just one eye. That's good. Hold it. A little more terror." Miss X heart-rendingly registered her alarm. "That's good. That's very good. O.K." The camera stopped purring. Miss X came out from behind the curtain and walked back to her chair. Reopening her book, she went on quietly reading about Theosophy.

We moved on and, after halting for a few moments on our way to watch some more terror being registered (by a man this time and under a different Director), penetrated into the secret places of the studio. We pronounced passwords, quoted the Manager's permission, disclaimed connections with rival companies and were finally admitted. In one room they were concocting miracles and natural cataclysms—typhoons in bathtubs and miniature earthquakes, the Deluge, the Dividing of the Red Sea, the Great War in terms of toy tanks and Chinese fire crackers, ghosts and the Next World. In another they were modelling prehistoric animals and the architecture of the remote future. In cellars below ground, mysteriously lighted by red lamps and smelling of chemicals, a series of machines was engaged in developing and printing the films. Their output was

enormous. I forget how many thousands of feet of art and culture they could turn out each day. Quite a number of miles, in any case.

SECOND MOVEMENT

Emerging, I bought a newspaper. It was Saturday's; a whole page was filled with the announcements of rival religious sects, advertising the spiritual wares that they would give away, or sell on the Sabbath. "Dr. Leon Tucker with the Musical Messengers in a Great Bible Conference. 3 Meetings To-morrow. Organ Chimes, Giant Marimbaphone, Vibraphone, Violin, Piano, Accordeon, Banjo, Guitar and other Instruments. Wilshire Baptist Church." The Giant Marimbaphone was certainly tempting. But in the First Methodist Church (Figueroa at Twentieth) they were going to distribute "Mother's Day Flowers to all Worshippers." (On Mother's Day you must wear a red carnation if your mother is alive, a white one if she is dead. The florists are everywhere the most ardent of matriolaters.) Moreover they had booked the exclusive services of Dr. James H. Maclaren, Dramatic Orator, who was going to give his well-known stunt, "Impersonations of Lincoln and Roosevelt." "Dr. Maclaren," we were informed, "comes with a unique, original, eloquent, instructive and inspiring Message concerning two of our Great Presidents. Uplifting and inspiring. It will do your soul good. The wonderful Messages of these two Great Presidents will be brought home with new emphasis and you will feel that you have spent the evening in the company of great Spirits. Hear the great organ, Quartet of Artists and Vested Chorus." At the Hollywood Congregational Church there were to be moving pictures of Jackie Coogan in his crusade to the Near East; the prospect was a draw. But then so was the photograph of Miss Leila Castberg of the Church of Divine Power (Advanced Thought); her performance might not be very interesting—she was scheduled to preach at the Morosco Theatre on Divine Motherhood—but the face which looked out from her advertisement was decidedly pleasing. Less attractive, to the devout male at any rate, were the photos of Messrs. Clarke and Van Bruch; but the phrasing of their ad. was enough to counteract in the mind of the reader the effect produced

by their portraits. "IT'S ON, FOLKS, IT'S ON," so the announcement ran. "The tide is rising at an OLD-FASHIONED REVIVAL. Every night except Monday, 7.30 P.M. Soul-stirring sermons and songs. Special to-night! Hear 10 Evangelists—10. Van Bruch-Clarke Evangelistic Party."

Jazz it up, jazz it up. Keep moving. Step on the gas. Say it with dancing. The Charleston, the Baptists. Radios and Revivals. Uplift and Gilda Gray. The pipe organ, the nigger with the saxophone, the Giant Marimbaphone. Hymns and the movies and Irving Berlin. Petting Parties and the First Free United Episcopal Methodist Church. Jazz it up! "N. C. Beskin, the CONVERTED JEW, back from a successful tour, will conduct a tabernacle campaign in Glendale. "WHY I BECAME A CHRISTIAN?" Dressed in Jewish garb. Will exhibit interesting paraphernalia." Positively the last appearance. The celebrated Farmyard Imitations. 10 Evangelists—10. The finest troupe of Serio-Comic Cyclists ever. Onward Christian Soldiers. Abide with me. I'm gonna bring a watermelon to my girl to-night.

THIRD MOVEMENT

Mother's Day. (Mr. Herring of Indiana, "The Father of Mother's Day.") But why not Flapper's Day? It would be more representative, more democratic, so to speak. For in Joy City there are many more Flappers—married as well as unmarried—than Mothers.

Nunc vitiat uterum quae vult formosa videri,
Raraque in hoc aevo est quae velit esse parens.

Thousands and thousands of flappers, and almost all incredibly pretty. Plumply ravishing, they give, as T. S. Eliot has phrased it, a "promise of pneumatic bliss." Of pneumatic bliss, but of not much else, to judge by their faces. So curiously uniform, unindividual and blank. Hardly more expressive—to the foreign eye, at any rate—than any of the other parts of that well-contoured anatomy which they are at such pains to display.

On the beaches of the Pacific that display was indeed superb. Mack Sennett Bathing Beauties by the hundred. They gambolled all around us, as we walked up and down in the windy sunlight along the sands. Frisking temptations. But we were three St. Anthonies—

Charlie Chaplin and Robert Nichols and I—three grave theologians of art, too deeply absorbed in discussing the way of cinematographic salvation to be able to bestow more than the most casual attention on the Sirens, however plumply deserving.

FOURTH MOVEMENT

Cocktail time. (We've dealt with the same bootlegger for upwards of two years now. A most reliable man.) Ice rattles in the shaker—a dance of miniature skeletons—and the genuinely reliable liquor is poured out. *À boire, à boire!* Long live Pantagruel! This is dry America. We climbed into our host's car and drove, it seemed interminably, through the immense and sprawling city. Past movie palaces and theatres and dance halls. Past shining shops and apartments and enormous hotels. On every building the vertical lines of light went up like rockets into the dark sky. And the buildings themselves—they too had almost rocketed into existence. Thirty years ago Los Angeles was a one-horse—a half-horse—town. In 1940 or thereabouts it is scheduled to be as big as Paris. As big and as gay. The great Joy City of the West.

And what joy! The joy of rushing about, of always being busy, of having no time to think, of being too rich to doubt. The joy of shouting and bantering, of dancing and for ever dancing to the noise of a savage music, of lustily singing.

(Yes, sir, she's my Baby.
No, sir, don't say "Maybe."
Yes, sir, she's my Baby now.)

The joy of loudly laughing and talking at the top of the voice about nothing. (For thought is barred in this City of Dreadful Joy and conversation is unknown.) The joy of drinking prohibited whisky from enormous silver flasks, the joy of cuddling provocatively bold and pretty flappers, the joy of painting the cheeks, of rolling the eye and showing off the desirable calves and figure. The joy of going to the movies and the theatre, of sitting with one's fellows in luxurious and unexclusive clubs, of trooping out on summer evenings with fifty thousand others to listen to concerts in the open air, of being always in a crowd, never alone. The joy of going on Sundays to hear

a peppy sermon, of melting at the hymns, of repenting one's sins, of getting a kick out of uplift. The joy in a word, of having what is technically known as a Good Time.

And oh, how strenuously, how whole-heartedly the people of Joy City devote themselves to having a Good Time! The Good Times of Rome and Babylon, of Byzantium and Alexandria were dull and dim and miserably restricted in comparison with the superlatively Good Time of modern California. The ancient world was relatively poor; and it had known catastrophe. The wealth of Joy City is unprecedentedly enormous. Its light-hearted people are unaware of War or pestilence or famine or revolution, have never in their safe and still half empty Eldorado known anything but prosperous peace, contentment, universal acceptance. The truest patriots, it may be, are those who pray for a national calamity.

On and on we drove, through the swarming streets of Joy City. (One automobile, sir, to every three and a quarter inhabitants.) The tall buildings impended, the lights whizzed up like rockets. On and on. Across an open space there suddenly loomed up a large white building, magically shining against the intensified blackness of the sky behind. (Just finished, sir, The Temple of the Elks.) From its summit the beams of half a dozen searchlights waved to heaven. They seemed the antennae of some vast animal, feeling and probing in the void—for what? For Truth, perhaps? Truth is not wanted in the City of Dreadful Joy. For Happiness? It is possessed. For God? But God had already been found; he was inside the shining Temple; he *was* the temple, the brand new, million-dollar Temple, in which at this moment the initiates of the venerable Order of Elks were congregated to worship, not the effete aristocratic Lady Poverty, but plain American Mrs. Wealth. Five or six hundred motor-cars stood parked outside the doors. What *could* those luminous antennae be probing for? Why, for nothing, of course, for nothing! If they waved so insistently, that was just for fun. Waving for waving's sake. Movement is a joy and this is the great Joy City of the West.

FIFTH MOVEMENT

The restaurant is immense. The waiters sprint about, carrying huge dishes of the richest food. What Gargantuan profusion! Great

ten pound chops, square feet of steak, fillets of whale, whole turkeys stewed in cream, mountains of butter. And the barbarous music throbs and caterwauls unceasingly. Between each juicy and satiating course, the flappers and the young men dance, clasped in an amorous wrestle. How Rabelais would have adored it! For a week, at any rate. After that, I am afraid, he would have begun to miss the conversation and the learning, which serve in his *Abbey of Thelema* as the accompaniment and justification of pleasure. This Western pleasure, meaty and raw, untempered by any mental sauce—would even Rabelais's unsqueamish stomach have been strong enough to digest it? I doubt it. In the City of Dreadful Joy Pantagruel would soon have died of fatigue and boredom. *Taedium laudamus*—so reads (at any rate for the inhabitants of Rabelais's continent) the triumphant canticle of Californian joy.

The restaurant is suddenly plunged into darkness. A great beam of light, like the Eye of God in an old engraving, stares down from somewhere near the ceiling, right across the room, squinting this way and that, searching—and at last finding what it had been looking for; a radiant figure in white, the singer of the evening. A good, though not superlatively good singer in the style of Ethel Levey or Jenny Golder.

You gotta feed a chicken corn,
You gotta feed a seal fish,
You gotta feed a man (significant pause and *œillade*) Love.

And so on. The enthusiasm which greets these rhymed lectures in elementary physiology is inordinate. Being enthusiastic is a joy. We are in Joy's metropolis.

There is a final burst of applause. The divine eyelid closes down over God's shining eye. The band strikes up again. The dancing re-begins. The Charleston, the fox-trot. "There is only one first-class civilisation in the world to-day. It is right here, in the United States and the Dominion of Canada." Monkeyville, Bryan, the Ku Klux Klan. "Europe's is hardly second-class, and Asia's is fourth to sixth class." Jazz it up; jazz it up! And what did late, great Ambassador Page have to say? "The whole continent (of Europe) is rotten, or tyrannical, or yellow dog. I wouldn't give Long Island or Moore County for the whole continent of Europe." And with Coney Island

added to Long Island and Los Angeles in the scale along with Moore County, he might have thrown in all Asia and the British Empire. Three cheers for Page! Yes, sir, "American idealism has made itself felt as a great contributory force to the advancement of mankind." Three cheers for George F. Babbitt and the Rotary Club! And three cheers for Professor Nixon Carver! "Prosperity," the Professor has said, "is coming to us precisely because our ideas are not materialistic. All these things (*e.g.*, the Elks' Temple, the jazz bands, the movie palaces, the muffins at breakfast) are added to us precisely because we are seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." Three cheers more—thrice three! The Prof. deserves them.

It is almost midnight. A few minutes and it will be the Sabbath. A few hours and the Giant Marimbaphone will be proclaiming the glory of the new billion dollar God. At the Ambassador Hotel (alas, too expensive for me to stay at) Dr. Ernest Holmes will be preaching on "The Science of Jesus." It is time to go home. Farewell, farewell. Parting is such sweet sorrow. Did Tosti raise his bowler hat when he said "Good-bye"?