ROBERT GRAVES

THAMES-SIDE REVERIE

(Written while I was living in a converted Thames barge moored at Hammersmith.)

A SUDDEN HOARSE shouting woke me. I looked out of the window beside my bed. Nearly full tide on the river and no wind; a tug was neatly casting off one of its train of barges at the wharf next door. A consignment of glassware in crates. The early morning greetings of tugmaster and wharfman were of their usual mock-abusive friendliness. After all this hubbub there followed half an hour of calm, in which I half slept and half watched a pair of dabchicks bobbing about only a few yards from the window. The water was pink and grey in the dawn, the towpath on the opposite bank was deserted and there was no river traffic. The stage was well set for the five swans that floated up with the tide and swam about under my window for some time. They expected bread; they should have known that it was too early. I could distinguish the plebeian swans, with their nicked beaks, the property of the Vintners' and Dyers' Companies, from the royal swans with unnicked beaks which owe immediate allegiance to the Crown. But I could distinguish them only by their nicks, not by their carriage. They went off sulkily after a while.

The next event was the drifting past of a brown-paper parcel, accompanied by a flock of about twenty gulls. They screamed and wheeled and dived and tore at it; and fluttered and squabbled and grew very excited. Though it passed slowly, I could not make out what it contained. I was glad when it had gone, because I was still sleepy. The amount of things that drift by! Especially at high tide, when there has been heavy rain two days previously up the Thames Valley. Baskets, cabbages, chairs, fruit, hats, vegetables, bottles, tins, heaps of rushes or straw, dead things. Not so many dead things now as in the summer. Far fewer dogs. That is because in the winter they don't go in so much after sticks and get carried away by the current or murderously held under water by the swans, who are jealous of their river.

Twelve lemons have just gone past. Now there are several more. They look sound enough. An accident to a barrow? One learns to distinguish accidental flotsam from intentional flotsam. That hat over there, for instance, was accidental, blown off at Westminster or Kew, by the look of it; the one that went by a few minutes ago was surely intentional -- a discard from Brentford or Rotherhithe?

The amount of driftwood is extraordinary. I wonder that someone does not farm it for profit. But perhaps someone does. I do not count the old woman who walks along the narrow foreshore at low tide and puts a few pieces into a muddy sack; I mean somebody who collects it by the ton, dries it in front of huge furnaces, and sells it in

bundles for firewood. Perhaps the supply would give out sooner than I suppose. A lot of the variety is repetitious. After all, certain pieces that I recognize when I see them again (for instance, that bit of 'Diving Girl' apple box) go up and down with the tide for a week or more before I lose sight of them.

Human corpses are rare. If one can catch a corpse and pull it out, one is paid seven shillings and sixpence. I wouldn't do it for that. And I suppose one also would have to give evidence at the inquest. No, I would leave the corpse for someone else to earn money with. There go the river police in their motor launch. They are watching suspiciously in case I throw my apple core out of the window. It is a prosecutable offence. I will wait until they have gone. Here comes the Mary Blake. I am getting to know the tugs well. I can distinguish the Mary Blake, the Vixen or the Elsa at half a mile. But every day something new of one sort or another goes by. One early morning last year was sensational. There went by an opera hat, a submarine, and a seal. Today I am content with the dabchicks and the lemons. At low tide I expect the old woman with the sack and the old man who pokes about under the stones and puts what he finds into jam jars. He would puzzle you, but I have been at this window long enough to find out what he is after. He is an anthology poem by William Wordsworth, 'The Leech Gatherer'. Plenty of leeches on these beaches. The demand, I hear, is steady. Whether from extremely old-fashioned doctors or from extremely modern ones I do not know. Or care much at the moment. I am busy being pleased with the river, which is now as still as a lake, at the exact balance of the tide. A child's ball floats motionless under the window. I am tempted to get up and rescue it. But it looks as though it mightn't bounce. I'll stay in bed a little longer.