Two Thousand Million Man-Power

Gertrude Eileen Trevelyan

Introduction by Rachel Hore
Afterword by Brad Bigelow

RECOVERED BOOKS
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Who was Gertrude Eileen Trevelyan? In basic category terms, she was a distinctive experimental English writer who demonstrated an acute sociological and political awareness and was prepared to take imaginative risks with subject and style. She was also prolific and well-regarded in her day: her eight novels were published by prestigious imprints such as Secker and Gollancz and favourably reviewed in places that mattered by critics whose opinions were important. But she...
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died young in 1941 and by the 1950s her work had all but disappeared from public view.

Trevelyan’s trail winds back to Edwardian Bath. Born in 1903, she was the only surviving child of Edward Trevelyan, a man styling himself as of ‘private means’, and his wife Eleanor. She attended Princess Helena College in Ealing, was confirmed at the parish church there, and went up to Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, in 1923. Later, recalling her undergraduate life, she wrote that she kept ‘a position of total obscurity’, because she ‘did not: play hockey, act, row, take part in debates, political or literary, contribute to the Isis or attend cocoa parties, herein failing to conform to the social standards commonly required of women students.’ She did, however, shoot to fame by becoming the first woman to win the renowned Newdigate Prize, awarded to a final year undergraduate for a 250-line poem on a set topic. Trevelyan’s ‘Julia, daughter of Claudius’ was subsequently published by Basil Blackwell. She earned a second-class degree.

A context in which to situate Trevelyan and her work can be found in Virginia Woolf’s declaration that a woman determined to succeed as a writer requires a room of her own and financial independence. That is exactly what Trevelyan achieved with the help of a small inheritance, living initially in a women’s hostel in Bermondsey and later in a series of lodgings in Kensington. In 1932 her first novel was published by Secker. Appius and Virginia concerns a scientific experiment devised by English spinster Virginia Hutton, to raise a baby orangutang, which she names Appius, as a human. The narrative is relayed from the points of view of each party, both expressing confusion and failure to understand one another. It was rapturously received, the Spectator lauding it as ‘a brilliant debut’. The distinguished Compton Mackenzie praised
the author’s second novel, *Hot-House*, in the *Daily Mail* as ‘extremely well done’. It follows the experiences and relationships of Mina Cook, an undergraduate at a fictional college modelled on Lady Margaret Hall. Trevelyan switched subject once more in *As It Was in the Beginning*, a novel that takes place entirely in the head of a woman dying in a care home. This *The Times Literary Supplement* described as ‘a book which is almost unreadable in its intensity, but which compels one to go on reading in spite of almost physical discomfort, by the admiration one feels for the author’s ingenuity and her uncanny insight into human beings.’ Less warm was the reception to *A War Without a Hero*, the last of Trevelyan’s novels to be published by Secker, with the *Manchester Guardian* castigating her stylistic tic of presenting unspoken thoughts in ‘machine gun sentences generally beginning with the verb’. Happily, her fifth book represented a return to form.

*Two Thousand Million Man-Power*, issued by Victor Gollancz in their distinctive yellow livery in 1937, is a tour-de-force, the supple prose, fluidity and shrewd insight of a mature writer on display. A masterly piece of social realism that traces the developing relationship of a highbrow but penniless young London couple against an interbellum background of rapid technological, ideological and political change, it also satirizes contemporary bourgeois life and its fashionable belief in endless progress. Robert Thomas and Katherine Bott’s story unfolds initially in bedsit land, a country Trevelyan knew well, brilliantly pinpointing her characters’ precise position in the social hierarchy. Infiltrated with dark humour, it is no touching love story. Robert is the more likeable of the pair, a research chemist at Cupid Cosmetics who spends lonely evenings trying to concoct a mathematical formula for the nature of time (another interwar obsession).
Katherine, a London County Council school teacher who despises her pupils and holds their attention by fear, is the more ideological, sometimes to comic effect. Her short-lived disdain for the institution of marriage means that for a long time the lovers have to creep about in a ridiculous fashion to avoid Robert’s conventional landlady. Later, after they are safely wed and have enjoyed a period of relative affluence, their story turns darker. The novel dramatizes the devastating experience of long-term unemployment with a power that easily matches George Orwell’s in *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Imaginatively, though she may have noticed the technique in John Dos Passos’ *USA Trilogy*, Trevelyan weaves into her tale snippets of world news which are taken from real-life headlines, wireless bulletins and newsreels. This conveys the ironic effect that the hapless pair are ultimately unimportant, simply fodder to a vast, pitiless machine that will crush them to oblivion. Sometimes she uses a telescoping technique which offers a wonderful sense of widening out: ‘he lit the gas over the uncleared supper table, but put it out again and went to bed. Outside, beyond a blank sheet of brick and a cross-section of beds and wash-stands, the street lamps in Ladbroke Grove were shivering frostily above empty pavements... Up in Oxford Street the last buses were leaving for the suburbs... out in Surrey... down in the farms and manors of the West Country...’ All this appealed to the *Spectator* reviewer: ‘Miss Trevelyan is an artist ...her novels... have always the fascination of a brilliant technique.’

Three more novels followed, the last, *Trance by Appointment*, published by Harrap, but then in October 1940 disaster struck. The flat in Notting Hill where she lived was damaged in the Blitz and she was gravely injured. In February 1941 she died in a care home in Bath. As well as her injuries, her
death certificate mentions that she suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis.

Why has Trevelyan not survived when so many of her female contemporaries have returned to the bookshop shelves long years after their death? In large part her personal isolation must be to blame. After her ‘position of total obscurity' at university, she hid her gender behind her initials. Her private income was a boon, but also a disadvantage, for although it enabled her to focus on her fiction it meant she did not need to teach, review or otherwise take part in public life. Whether her illness or a natural introversion encouraged this isolation is difficult to tell. She had a small circle of friends, but no cache of letters or diaries survived the bomb. There was no one to keep her flame burning. But now there is. *Two Thousand Million Man-Power* is a twentieth century literary classic and there are more out there waiting to be recovered.

Norwich, 2022
Two Thousand Million Man-Power

by Gertrude Eileen Trevelyan
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Chapter I

While at eleven-fifty-five P.M. on December 31st bells throughout London were ringing out, and well-away, the year 1919 and ringing in who knew what, every press in Fleet Street —pounding out New Year Messages by the hundred — was throbbing to one of two burdens: the Bolshevik Peril — "which may yet threaten the very existence of the Western World" — or the imminent ratification of the Peace Treaty, sole ground for self-congratulation in that uneasy age. At that time, on that night, Ireland was in process of being ravaged by Sinn Fein activities, Austria by famine, Russia by civil war, and the United States, Spain and Germany by varying degrees of internal unrest; Bill Jones was sorting mail at the G.P.O., Ted Smith was driving a lorry from Hammersmith to Bristol, Tom Robinson was bringing up the night express from Exeter, Robert Thomas, alone in his room near Ladbroke Grove Underground station, was
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feeling a mild but nagging anxiety as to the results of his final examination, six months distant, in the Honours School of Chemistry and Mathematics at London University.

The bells stopped; Robert reached for a book and edged his chair under the gas jet. Along in Fleet Street, soon after, the throbbing of the presses died down, vans backed, clattering, up side streets, were loaded and driven off, night staffs came out yawning and lit pipes and dispersed by late buses or early tubes; throughout the country limbs were stretched in grey bedrooms and bacon smells began to seep up staircases: England awoke, without undue enthusiasm, to 1920, the year of peace.

During January of that year the British Press was able to congratulate itself on the belated report of a Bolshevist defeat near Pskoff, English governesses escaped from Russia, relief work was pushed forward in Vienna, Jean Dubois obtained a post as ticket collector with the P.L.M., preparations were set afoot for the first meeting of the League of Nations “in order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security,” Robert Thomas contracted eye-strain from a too feverish copying of diagrams from the blackboard, post-offices were raided in Ireland. The Belgian Minister for the Colonies outlined a project for the creation of a Congo Cotton Company, a loan of five million dollars was allotted by the American War Finance Corporation for locomotives for Poland and three million for electrical machinery in France and Belgium, across the Atlantic four thousand five hundred Radicals were rounded up “from California to New York” with “a complete gathering in of the editorial staffs of the communist newspapers throughout the country,” police were shot in Ireland, a “Save-a-Minute” club was instituted in a large works in the north of England,
factories in Petrograd closed down owing to the dearth of technical experts and raw materials, Ivan Pavlovitch took to raking in Moscow dustbins after dark, an air mail service was inaugurated between Bombay and Karachi, in Central Africa plans were under consideration for the construction of a railway line to join the Congo with the Ituri and Upper Welle, a committee of experts visited Brazil to study an eclipse of the sun with a view to investigating Einstein’s Third Critical Test for the Theory of Relativity, the House of the Masses was raided in Detroit and two hundred and eighty Radicals arrested, Robert Thomas packed his notebooks together and went out to lunch at an A.B.C.¹

Negotiations were now at a deadlock between employers and the N.U.R.², Poles and Letts captured Dvinsk from the Soviets, in India the Hunter Commission was sitting on the shootings at Amritsar, Giovanni Rossi, clerk in the municipal offices at Genoa, became worried about his wife, a witchcraft trial was in progress at Bordeaux, the Peace Treaty was ratified in Paris, Robert Thomas walked from Gower Street to Oxford Circus and caught a 15 bus for Ladbroke Grove, farm tractor trials were held at Lincoln, Tom Smith lost his job in a blacking factory at Edmonton, Charlie Jones took to selling papers in Piccadilly, Robert caught a bus for Oxford Circus and walked to Gower Street, Independent Socialists and Communists tried to rush the Reichstag, terrorists were arrested in Madrid, and the first meeting of the executive council of the League of Nations took place in Paris.

In February a record time of rather less than four hours

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1 Aerated Bread Company café.
2 National Union of Railwaymen, a trade union of railway workers
was set up on the London — Paris air service, German stu-
dents boycotted Einstein’s lectures, food riots broke out
in Austria, the Whites abandoned Archangel, the O’Grady
British Mission returned to London, Robert Thomas in the
lecture hall of University College, listening with strained
attention to Eddington’s lecture on the Relativity Theory,
was filled with a painful ambition to devote the rest of his life
to the study of pure mathematics, the Council of the League
of Nations resolved that the League should convene an Inter-
national Conference “to study the financial crisis and look
for the means of remedying it and of mitigating the danger-
ous consequences arising from it.”

It is now rumoured that a Bolshevist army will march
westward in the spring “to annul the Treaty of Versailles and
release the German people from the fetters which are stran-
gling them”; Mr. F. Handley Page prophesies small, privately
owned planes within a year or so; Maudie Brown gets a job
in a cinema box-office at Barking; Gladys Smith is working
for Matric. at Tooting Bec; “the government and the indus-
tries of the country are becoming more and more alive to the
need of making appointments for chemists more attractive
to the best qualified”; Robert Thomas, leaning against a let-
ter-box in Ladbroke Grove, licks the flap of an envelope and
posts home to the parsonage in Wales his proposal to spend
a year or so on research after taking his degree.

A landlord is shot dead in Galway, Norway and Sweden
join the League, Russia makes an agreement with England
for resumption of mail service, demobilised men riot in
Milan, a Christian Counter-Bolshevist Crusade is launched
in London. Round again. Murder of first Republican Lord
Mayor of Cork, revolution in Germany, Red advance in the
Caucasus, Turkish atrocities in Armenia, daylight murder
in Dublin. And round. Machine guns in Charlottenburg, three hundred casualties in Berlin, Poland Russia Armenia Hungary Austria “five million infant victims of disease and starvation,” crisis in the Ruhr. Round and round. “Miners’ nystagmus is said to cause a loss to the country of at least a million pounds a year”; Rumanian Consolidated Oilfields Ltd. claim a million and a quarter compensation for destruction to oilwells under German invasion; and Robert, jingling two half-crowns in his pocket, a bit nervous, goes to Paddington to meet his father.

“The clergy,” asserts the Central Church Fund Appeal, “are suffering greater privations than any other class of the population.” “There are people carrying on research work,” complains a deputation to the Prime Minister from the British Medical Association and British Science Guild, “who receive less money than unskilled workmen in the service of the Corporation.” “Intelligence is in danger,” runs the manifesto of Les Compagnons de l’Intelligence, “because the middle classes are threatened on the one hand by the power of money, and on the other by the power of numbers.” “No, no, my boy,” mutters Robert Thomas senior, clambering into a third-class compartment at Paddington with his umbrella knocking behind him on the step. “Things aren’t what they were. Learned professions crowded out.”

“But,” says Robert.

“No, no,” he says, “no, my boy,” taking off his flat parson’s hat and wiping with a very old silk handkerchief around the headband. “No, no, stick to commerce, safety in commerce, fine thing commerce, nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But...”

Robert strolls up disconsolately into Praed Street jingling the two half-crowns in his pocket. He wonders whether to
go home to his rooms or on to Gower Street for a lecture, remembers he is billed to speak in a college debate at eight o’clock, decides for the lecture and takes a run at a moving bus. On top he cheers up, with the wind lifting his hair: spare time, he thinks, the romance of commerce even; and out at six every day, earlier with luck. He slips in at the back of the crowded lecture room and sits swinging a notebook absently between his knees, with a half grin on his face and the Big Idea hovering, pleasantly vague, at the back of his mind. When the hour is over he crams the unused book into his pocket, gets a snack before the debate, speaks for more than half an hour in support of the League of Nations, catches a bus back to Ladbroke Grove. And in the morning — most mornings — he buys a paper and catches a bus to Gower Street. If the principle of Nationalisation were accepted, the paper assures him, your War Bonds, your War Loan Stock, your War Savings Certificates would be so much waste paper. Ghastly tragedy of Europe’s Children, it cries, Save the Children. Necessitous ex-officers: they fought for You. Your gas bill will be more, your electric current bill will be higher, every article of food carried from overseas will rise in price. And are you, it asks him, contributing all you can to the work of the Church to-day? And Armenia: Christianity v. Barbarism, “so long as Barbarism sees us indifferent the peril continues to grow.” You will pay more for your clothes — there is no end to the list of commodities the price of which will show an advance. How Will You Help? Honour Your Bond! Nationalisation, the Consumer Pays! Britons! Be Quick! The Turk is Massacring!

Summer: the second reading of the Home Rule Bill is passed by a large majority; relations are discovered between Sinn Fein and Germany; Sweden makes a trade agreement
with Russia; the Non-Co-operation Movement begins in India; the League of Nations meets at San Remo; war breaks out in the Ruhr; at the Chemists’ Exhibition at Clerkenwell the wonders of modern manicure are on view, and sugar-coated pills of thyroid extract for cretinism, goitre and rejuvenation. “In view of a prejudice lingering in the public mind against the suggestion of simian relationship, this extract is obtained from sheep.”

The Surrender to Sinn Fein. Young man’s suicide in London taxi-cab: coroner, “It seems to me there are too many pistols about.” The War in Ireland.

Ultra-red rays prevent burns from radium, radio telephone stations are opened at Croydon and Lympne for the control of air traffic, Soviet troops muster on the outskirts of Warsaw, Allies and Germans meet at Spa to discuss reparations and armaments, the journey from Paris to London now takes barely two hours, a British trade pact is concluded with the Soviets, Robert Thomas comes down from the university with a half-formulated theory upon, and a glowing determination to examine, the nature of Pure Time, and takes up a post which has been found for him as research chemist to a cosmetics firm with a factory in the neighbourhood of Acton.
Robert pottered about his laboratory, most of the time, with one eye on the clock. He didn’t dislike his work but he hardly knew it was there. The laboratory was a converted army hut put down on a piece of meadow-land and along at the side, if he leant from the window, he could see two or three other huts and the one-storied brick main building of Cupid Cosmetics Co. Limited, where they made up great vats of face cream and powder from his formulas and packed them sparingly, with a lot of frilly paper to a box, into shiny cardboard boxes with little flying cupids all over the cover, tied with big, purple bows. A wide shelf ran down one side of the hut; here he had his retorts and burners and mortars, and test-tubes in a rack; he spent his day ranging up and down, with a half whistle, alongside the shelf, analysing samples of powder for the face or teeth or nails, or sticky daubs of cream; in search of recipes for a drier powder or a stickier cream or...
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more economical means of production.

Robert had a boy to run errands and clean the test-tubes and shovel coke into the stove behind the door. The boy was pale and fat, oversized for his age, and breathed loudly. He was called Rodney. Every now and then Rodney would breathe in with a note from the office or a sample for analysis and breathe out again and Robert would get to work with the mortar and retorts, but he had a good deal of time on hand to balance from heel to toe with a half whistle and stare out of the window at the broken-up meadow-land. The grass was long and trampled near the hut; the tarred wall under the window cut down into field and the grass fell back from it in a limp straggling curve like hair from an uncombed parting, leaving a dark line of shiny-smooth unhealthy soil. A good way off, hiding the view, there was a hedge; a board up on the right facing the cinder road said: Freehold Factory Land For Sale. Robert would stare for a time across the field without looking at it; a hand feeling mechanically in his pocket for a pencil and paper. He would lean the paper against the smooth knot in the stained wood wall and jot down a few figures, then go back to the shelf across the hut and begin to potter again. Besides the coke stove with an iron railing round it and a vent-pipe leading to the roof, there was no furniture in the hut except one chair and a small sink and a roller towel hanging on the door. When Robert had finished for the day he washed his hands at the sink and wiped them on the roller towel and pushed them back over his hair and went out, locking the door of the hut. On his way up the cinder road he leaned in at the door of the office and hung the key on a nail in a row of other keys and nodded good night to the clerk. The cinder track led up across the field to a high road, and on a little way, at the bend, he caught a bus.
for Ealing Broadway. If he were lucky he hadn’t long to wait for a train and as he got out at Westbourne Park and walked between high grey houses to his lodgings, his step brisked up. He began to jingle his latchkey against the coins in his pocket. He went up three dusty flights of stairs two steps at a time. His supper was on the table. He ate quickly, with appetite, undiscriminating. Turning his back on the meal he lit the gas over a small table near the window and felt in his pocket for the scrap of paper with the jotted figures. As the gas came up, the roofs outside the window turned dark grey. The drawer of the table stuck, half open. He banged it back and wrenched at it and found a wad of notes and pulled in his chair. The roofs outside turned black against the sky and then the sky blacked out.

The gas sizzled in its wall bracket over Robert’s head. Outside, under the dark roofs, sleepers were tossing in frowsy bedrooms; rain dripped from a plane-tree into a puddle of light on the pavement. Along the street and round the corner, in the Underground station, a late train was dropping three passengers on to an empty platform and moving off with a slow scraping groan; horse-vans were crawling up through Hammersmith on their way to Covent Garden, a wet taxi or two rattling in a hurry through the West End where the lights over the theatres were going out; night watchmen were nodding over their pipes; at the side of dark trains, on the long, empty platforms of the railway termini, were knots of activity where sleepy porters were bundling in the night mail; out in the country it was dark and quiet to the west and a red glare hung over the Midlands and North and a clang came up now and then when they stoked the furnaces, and on the North Sea the dark boats rowed quiet beside the nets. Over in Brussels, the representatives of thirty-nine states
called to the International Financial Conference slept in hotel bedrooms and their dull boots lay paired on corridor carpets under the turned-down lights. A small Buttons¹ in shirt-sleeves came whistling upstairs and collected the boots and brought them back clean and shiny and purposeful, daylight climbed up over the Channel, fishing boats steered for harbours on the East Coast, milk trains came rattling and smoking up through the suburbs, Robert’s arm in a dirty cuff reached and turned out the gas; in the half-light he stood up and turned round and pushed back against the bulging drawer. The drawer jammed and creaked and gave way suddenly; he caught his balance and ran his fingers through his hair and felt his way out of the room and across the dark landing, taking care to shut both doors quietly. His bedroom faced a blank wall, the room was grey near the window; without troubling to light the gas he tugged at his clothes and rolled into bed for a couple of hours.

It was cold in the mornings now. Robert opened the laboratory window to let out the smoke from the coke stove; shivered a bit. Outside, the grass was permanently damp and lying down, it was a broad, dark kind of grass. He put down the window and went across to the bench and began absently to rinse the test-tubes that Rodney had left unwashed. He looked over the day’s samples for analysis and set to work on them in a desultory way, whistling quietly to himself, jotting down his findings on a pad splashed yellow with chemical. Presently Rodney came in and stoked the stove so that the smoke came up in gusts. Robert thought of saying something about the test-tubes. He had one in his hand when he

¹ Hotel bellhop.
turned round. Look here, he meant to say, or How about, but he found he hadn’t said it. He was watching Rodney’s sulky behind, waiting for it to turn from the stove. He felt shy all at once and it seemed not worthwhile. “Don’t forget the door, old man,” he said awkwardly, instead. Rodney said nothing and slammed it.

Robert settled back, relieved, at his bench. He wiped the smoke from his spectacles and went on weighing and testing, jotting figures now and then on the curled leaves of the pad. The other part of his brain, the part that was working, put a message through from time to time and he stopped whistling and looked ahead. Sometimes he looked down again after a minute, sometimes he felt through his pockets for a scrap of paper and made a note before he went back to pottering over the retorts. As it grew colder he could feel the steel of his spectacles cutting his ears when he went out of the hot shed. At lunch time he would fill up the hour by stumping up and down the cinder way across the wet field to the road. Now and then he looked in at the doors of the sheds where they made the stuff, but it meant nothing to him. He was glad to get back to his bench, and often he was there before the whistles brought the workpeople crunching and chattering from the main road.

Autumn unfolded over Europe. Fresh rumours of famine came from Russia; D’Annunzio, defeated at Fiume, went into compulsory retirement on Lake Garda; at the Quai d’Orsay they were beating carpets and polishing inkstands for the Reparations Conference in January. Robert, back one night, upstairs three at a time, found a letter with his supper, propped against the butter dish. It wasn’t often he had a letter, he looked it up and down with interest. Oh well, only the League secretary, Old Collegiate branch. Wanting
subscription. Enclosing fixture card. Robert turned over the card and ran his fingers through his hair and thought vaguely but guiltily that he’d been letting things slide a bit. He stood the card in a prominent position on the mantelpiece and felt better about it. Next day, waiting for Rodney to come back out of a cloud of coke smoke, he wrinkled his nose nervously and responsibly against the bridge of his glasses. “Ever thought much about the League?” Quick and nervous. Rodney picked up the empty coke bucket and went to the door, made a gesture of spitting. “Give me cricket, any day. More of a game, if you ask me.”

Better go. One or two men he knew slightly were at the meeting. Afterwards somebody nodded to him across the crowd round the doorway; he nodded back absently and pushed on and out, no time to hang around talking. At the top of a side street he could see the lights of Tottenham Court Road and buses passing, with luck he’d be back and at work by eleven.

He turned away angrily. He’d been staring at a chemist’s window, by the bus stop, in Oxford Street: staring, for something to do and without knowing it, at a pyramid of purple Cupid boxes bristling with waxen bows. Filthy muck. He turned away and moved on, disgusted, hitting something with his back, and a woman glared at him. Her face was floury with cheap powder and her lipstick a bad red. Did his turn like that when they put it on? And what did they use the stuff for, anyhow. Women were everywhere, in twos and threes; from the top of the bus he couldn’t see their faces, only the hats pulled down like flower-pots rounded at the top and the foreshortened tubs of their bodies. Most of the lighted shops along the route were full of women’s clothes. As the streets got darker towards Paddington he began to think about his
thesis, but the wind skimming the bus-top made him sleepy; about Westbourne Grove he began to yawn. The gas was out on the stairs; he struck a match on each landing and felt his way by banister up the flights in be-tween. A suggestion of sleep, too strong for him, oozed stealthily from under the shut doors. When he got to the top he lit the gas over the uncleared supper table, but put it out again and went to bed.

Outside, beyond a blank sheet of brick and a cross-section of beds and wash-stands, the street lamps in Ladbroke Grove were shivering frostily above empty pavements, in converging lines dwindling into mist. Up in Oxford Street the last buses were leaving for the suburbs. In streets of crowded tall houses and in wider streets of lower houses and on broad high-roads with houses spaced out by gardens and out in Surrey where new red villas were dropped among the pines, and down in the farms and manors of the West Country, and up through the Midlands and North in sudden huddled stacks and unexpected farmsteads, and in the crofters’ cottages and tumbledown castles of the Highlands and in solid Lowland homes and in grey Yorkshire towns and moorland farms and in fishing colonies down the coast, and on the flats of Essex, and in the small new houses beginning to sprout on the extreme northern edge of London, and in the brick and stucco villas, behind tight curtains, and in streets of crowded tall houses, the greater number of the forty-seven million one hundred and thirty-three thousand inhabitants of the British Isles slept or listened to sounds of sleeping. The Reparations Conference had broken down in Paris: Allied proposals; over in Dublin police were potted at from doorways; civil war in Russia was practically over; Poland was making a defensive alliance with Rumania; in London the Reparations Conference was at it again: German
counter-proposals. In the early hours of the morning, down off Ladbroke Grove where a coster’s barrow here and there was on the move, Robert opened an eye and saw the room was still half dark and shut it again.

Presently he lay on his back and watched the window. Bricks were etched in now, yellow and black, on the wall across the yard; from brightening streaks along their surface he knew it was a fine day. He could hear a van go by and draw up once or twice in the road at the front of the house, and at intervals the higher notes of a street singer and a distant rumble of the Underground over the bridge by the station. The figures of a mathematical equation were lined up on the wall, on the black and yellow bricks. They ranged themselves in order, leisurely, while he watched with lazy interest. With the peculiar clarity of half-sleep he knew at once what it was: the missing part of the formula he had been puzzling out the day before. Queer thing, he thought, the way your mind works during sleep. It was all worked out for him, ready, over on the wall. He thought he would get up in a minute and copy it down. He stared at it, trying to memorise. The top lines were quite clear, as he had seen them on paper only yesterday, but he couldn’t be sure of the solution. He sat up sharply to get a better view and found he had been dozing; the noises were louder now in the road and the wall was quite yellow. He wondered whether to get up and work before he was called, but presently he heard the stairs creak and a can put down outside the door. A carpet sweeper squeaked once or twice, perfunctorily, in the sitting-room, and breakfast plates clattered. Out in the road, the plane-trees were coming into bud, and there was a green look about the back gardens edging the line down to Ealing. For a moment he had a ridiculous, elated sense of going into the country as the bus
loped along the main road between half-built plots and factory sites with stretches of misty green hedge left standing for a hundred yards or more at a time. It was still early summer and he found the laboratory shed full of smoke from the newly lit stove. He threw up the window to let out the smoke and noticed that the grass was greener and less lank, sprouting out stiffly from the tarred roots of the sheds. Across on the work-bench were some tubes and mortars unwashed. Robert fiddled for a time, sorting them, waiting for Rodney to come in. “See here, my lad,” he thought he’d say. But presently he needed one of the tubes and absent-mindedly washed it, and by the time Rodney came in it seemed hardly worthwhile to say anything.

There was a Sold notice on the next plot and during the summer they began to dig. From his window Robert could see the men at work on the pegged-out field and dark rectangles of earth lengthening in the high, trodden grass. The noise of picks and shovels disturbed him at first but he soon got used to it. Stacks of turf for carting were dumped near his shed, the bruised grass splayed back at their edge, and broken-down sorrel and ox-eye daisies.

In July he was given a fortnight’s holiday. He wrote to his father that it would cost too much to go home to Wales. He sat after breakfast at his table by the window and planned his treatise on Time and looked at the tiles of the house across the street. When the landlady had finished clearing the breakfast things behind him he got down on his forearms and wrote like mad. Sometimes on a hot evening he would go on top of a bus as far as Marble Arch and hang about with his hands in his pockets among the crowd on the lit corner of the park, feeling the air on his head and looking vaguely at the people. Now and then he would stop to hear part of a
speech on Disarmament or Home Rule, but the constant flux of the crowd prevented attention and if ever there was a point to a speech the wind carried it away. In the dark, up above the moving crowd, the lights would come out one by one in the block of flats on the corner of Oxford Street; a tall smooth-faced block, a challenge, dwarfing the dark, balconied Park Lane houses. He was generally glad to be back in the empty roads of North Kensington. There was little traffic at night, and as the lights went out in the rooms opposite he sat and wrote again under the gas-jet up against the dark window.

By the end of the fortnight he had covered scores of pages with notes; wads fell from the back of the stuck drawer when he had wrenched it straight and rammed it in. He thought that later on, in the winter, he might begin to put them together. He picked up the fallen wads and frowned at them, running his fingers through his hair. It worried him that he could see the thing philosophically — that is he thought he could but he couldn't be sure — but not mathematically. He knew the formula must exist, the precise mathematical formula for the nature of Time. That was what he was out after. He ruffled up the pages of notes and hypotheses with his red, thin fingers; he couldn't say whether this stuff was sound or not, it just came to him. He began to wish he'd taken philosophy at college. But the formula was what he was after. It went by him now and then when he was doing something else, fifty times he’d thought he was on it but it slipped by; when he turned over the wads of figures and signs they didn't mean very much, that he could see. He’d get it some time, he thought, it wouldn't get by him, he’d been on the track of it so often. He wondered whether these theories he’d jotted down were any use, he wished he knew. He thought he’d get hard at it and get the thing co-ordinated in the winter.
Back at the laboratory he found concrete flooring in slabs on the turned field, and walls half-up. From his window he could see a strip of flat dirty grass and at right angles to it the new pink bricks. He felt vaguely annoyed at first at having to lean from the window for a sight of sky and trees at the end of the field, but he soon got used to it, and after a time he didn’t trouble to lean. During hot evenings at the end of summer he took to going home all the way by bus and he kept to it as autumn came on: from little strips of public garden spaced beside the high-road, through Shepherd’s Bush and Chiswick and Hammersmith, dried leaves were sent whistling along empty stretches of pavement and into the feet of the crowd where the high-road became for a space a local High Street, with shops and station and borough importances and costers’ barrows. Not far from Chiswick there was a block of flats, a row of red brick three-storied houses with three brass bells one under another at each door. Modern ideas, reaching right out here. He got off at Hammersmith and took the Underground. As soon as he was back in his rooms and had lit the gas and had supper he got to work. When it grew colder he had a fire lit. Poppy sellers were prinking up for Armistice Day. Over in Ireland Cosgrave was fighting England for independence and De Valera was fighting England for independence. A bit later, Westminster was passing a treaty making the Irish Free State a self-governing dominion. Over in Ireland De Valera was fighting Cosgrave. Then early one morning, when Smithfield porters were at work by lamplight unloading beef, and Father Christmases who had to be on the beat in the West End by nine o’clock were yawning in Kentish Town or Peckham, and the fire was out, he thought he’d hit upon his formula at last. He thought he had but he couldn’t be sure. The sky was whitish under
the blind. He turned down the gas and rolled into bed for a couple of hours’ sleep, and when he got up there was barely time for breakfast; he rammed the pages of figures into his pocket to look at later in the day. He glanced at them in the train but couldn’t be sure: look it over quietly when he got there. There was a nip in the air when he hurried down the cinder track, he was almost glad to be in the smoky warm shed. He’d just hung his hat on the door and found his overalls and was beginning to see where he was, when Rodney shuffled in with a sample of nail powder for analysis.

He didn’t know what it was they were making in the new factory, but by the spring their engines were at work behind the pink bricks. It was some time before he could get used to the monotonous drone and bump, and the vibration was worse than the noise: it seemed as if the bench he worked at had been charged with electricity, full of potential movement. He never could trace that vibration at work on any definite object but it was there all the same, jangling his nerves. Or was it only the noise. Just an impression. He found it difficult now to concentrate while he pottered about the hut, doing jobs which filled a quarter of his time. He took to standing with his hands in his pockets in front of the window and balancing from heel to toe, thinking of nothing in particular, looking at the pink bricks and wondering whether they throbbed or whether he imagined it. The League met at Cannes and the World War Foreign Debt Commission at Washington and the League at Genoa. Robert got used to the machinery after a time but he was more than ever bored with his work in the laboratory. It was seldom now that he got an idea while he was pottering. He pottered and waited for the hooters to go. When they went — three or four nowadays from factories dotted along the road — he was out up
the cinder track and on the bus to the station almost before they'd finished. He had given up his leisurely bus ride all the way. He was glad a tube extension was coming down across the fields: from the top of the bus he could see its track cleared through hedges, and hillocks of turf and grit and an uprooted tree or two thrown back on the grass. When the new station was opened near the factory, next year, he would gain quite twenty minutes on the day: his day began when he was back up the steps, past the draggled laburnum tree, up the stairs and through supper and could wrench at the drawer to get it open. Outside, as the laburnum wilted and its leaves were trodden dirty brown on the wet steps, England and France were bickering over an attitude to the Soviets, the German mark in its fall reached nine thousand to the dollar and the Fascisti marched on Rome.

Robert bought a *Morning Post* at Paddington. He seldom read a paper nowadays, but he had an idea the elections would be coming on soon and it might be as well to keep an eye open. Polling To-day, Every Conservative Vote Needed, Premier’s Confidence in the Result. Near thing that, he thought, jerked a bit. He took a look through the rest of the paper to see what was going on: German Plea for Moratorium, Egypt’s Mischief Makers, Signor Mussolini as Dictator, Pilotless Flight, Melba Sings “Home Sweet Home” at Election Meeting. Robert folded the paper and left it on the seat, with an uneasy feeling that he ought to do a bit more about things. When he got back that night he went straight up Ladbroke Grove from the station to the Council Schools and recorded his vote before he had supper and got settled down to work.

It wasn’t long after that that he caught Rodney sneaking a length of copper wire from a drawer in the laboratory.
“What’s the big idea,” he snapped, sharp quite easily now, what with the noise and one thing and another. The smoke stung his eyes, and when the window was open the thumping of the machines was too loud. “Crystal set, what the deuce is that? Oh, wireless.” He handed back the wire, faintly surprised, now he came to think of it, that the youth could take enough interest in anything to work it up in his spare time. “Better cut it then, quick.”

He’d noticed there were more of the things about lately. Often now he had to shut the window after supper, against crackling noises and bursts of loud metallic song from across the street. He shut the window and drew the blinds, dirty yellow behind the gas-bracket, and clamped his elbows on the table and his hands over his ears and tried to think. Across the street, in number six, John Jones was struggling to eliminate atmospherics from his reception of London — 369 metres — on his crystal set. An aerial or two appeared daily now in back-yards along behind Paddington. Tenants on a North London Council Estate had been refused permission to install sets on account of the danger of fire. In gardens backing on to the line from Dover to Victoria, aerials were springing up as thick as clothes-props. The B.B.C. was gaining confidence. Jimmy Johns, next door at number three, was tuning in.

Robert jumped up in a rage. He knew there wasn’t a chance of their stopping before ten or eleven, and next door, where they had one of the big expensive sets and could even get Paris, later than that. He ran his hands through his hair and stared at himself in the dull square of mirror over the fireplace, because he found himself in front of it, and gave a short, nasty laugh. He felt like that. He picked up the January fixture card of the League of Nations Union, O.C. branch,
which had come a few days before and was the only thing on the mantelpiece besides the landlady’s ornaments and a pipe he smoked now and then when he thought of it or had that vague, nagging feeling of responsibility. Tucked into the fixture card was a leaflet announcing an open debate on the Ruhr, billed for that evening at the Central Hall, Westminster.

Robert looked at the leaflet. He wondered just what it was, exactly, about the Ruhr. He put the pipe in his mouth and pulled at it and felt through his pockets for some tobacco. A stolid cackle of dance music was coming through the closed window and the higher notes of an operatic soprano thinly pierced the wall to the left. It had been like this for weeks: all the time Mary MacSweeny was hunger-striking in Mountjoy Gaol and Lenin was developing the New Economic Policy and the Italian Fascisti were attacking the Soviet Trade Delegation and Russia was refusing Italian ships entry to Russian ports and the German mark was falling by thousands a week and America was holding protest meetings about Ireland.

There was nothing to smoke in the room, so Robert put the pipe in his pocket and unhooked a muffler from the back of a chair. In due course Mary MacSweeny was released, France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr, the German mark fell to forty-nine thousand to the dollar, and Robert strolled into the Central Hall for a League of Nations debate and met Katherine.