

PHILIP GIBBS

ORDEAL
IN ENGLAND

(ENGLAND SPEAKS AGAIN)



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XIII. THE SPIRIT OF ENGLAND

I

The Anxious Days

IN this year of grace of which I write England has had many anxieties. It came after a year of ordeal, following the death of King George V, whose Jubilee called out for a time, partly because of sun-soaked days and warm darkness, a touch of the Elizabethan spirit—the merriment of Shakespeare's pageant of life—when youth danced to the tune of piano-organs or any kind of music in the glamorous nights of London streets, and beacons were lit on a thousand hills, and flags fluttered in every village. There was an unusual lack of self-repression in the crowds. There was an illusion of happiness among the common folk who, as a rule, take their pleasures sadly, or at least without exuberance of spirits.

This was repeated at the Coronation of George VI in spite of dreary weather. The English people love pageantry, and they love the tradition of their Crown. The abdication of Edward VIII seemed to inspire them with greater loyalty to the brother who accepted the burden with all its pledges.

This year has brought new bewilderments and a growing sense of fear that the horrors of war may be near at hand, and that poison gas may be creeping through the streets of crowded cities while incendiary bombs are smashing little houses bought on the hire system—and all the rest of it. Otherwise why this colossal programme of rearmament? Otherwise why these Home Office instructions for anti-gas defence? Why these speeches by Cabinet Ministers to make the people's flesh creep? The newspapers keep the nerves of their readers constantly on edge by recording the threats of convulsion in Europe, the savagery of Civil War in Spain, and "incidents" which keep breaking out in the volcanic state of this world of seething passions and blind forces.

The nation is confused, divided in ideas, uncertain of its future. The idealists have lost faith in their own hopes and dreams. They believed in the League of Nations as an institution upholding justice, protecting law, preparing the way for the elimination of armed conflict by ways of reason and conciliation. The League of Nations is sick unto death. The tragedy and crime of Abyssinia was an almost mortal blow to its prestige. Its impotence was revealed. "Sanctions" failed. Law was not upheld. There was no justice. So that hope has gone—for a while.

The Spanish Civil War has not been out of English thoughts since it first began. Like a blinding light thrown on to an arena in which men are fighting like

beasts to the death, the daily news from Spain revealed how little man has advanced from primitive savagery, how merciless though he fights in the name of Christ, how diabolical though he fights in the name of humanity.

The Spanish Civil War has not been an alien affair which leaves untouched the English mind watching it from afar. It has had grave and dangerous effects upon our own mentality, and later on it may have grave and dangerous effects upon our actions. The aid given to General Franco by the dictatorships of Germany and Italy has exasperated and inflamed the anger of the Left minds in England, who see in this another cause for hatred against Fascism, and another challenge to Democracy and Liberty in which they profess to believe, and in which some of them believe. The aid given to Caballero and his Communists, Anarchists, Syndicalists, and Socialists, by volunteers, and arms from France, Russia, Czechoslovakia, Houndsditch and Hoxton, seem to minds on the Right and to many Catholics and Christians, a clear revelation of Anti-Christ, working to overthrow religion, order, and civilisation, by the massacre of priests and nuns, the burning of churches, and assassination of innocent folk by murder gangs. They see the hand of Russia reaching out to stir up the flames of revolt against all Christian and civilised ideals. They see the advance of Communism, not only in this Spanish conflict but in France and all countries who have given aid to the

Spanish "comrades" under the banner of Bolshevism.

The British Labour Party have been greatly agitated by the Spanish struggle, and have accepted the Government's policy of non-intervention with only grudging consent. Newspapers formerly in the Liberal tradition have taken open sides with the Spanish Communists, and, day after day, have accused the Government of cowardice in not stopping German and Italian reinforcements of Franco's army. They would have supported direct intervention on the side of the Spanish "Loyalists" even at the risk of a general European war. They are propagandists of religious fanaticism based upon hatred of the Fascist creed, and upon faith in something they call Democracy, though Communism, as well they know, is a denial of liberty and democratic rule.

The Left-minded people in England are more fanatical than the Right. The Labour Party has become definitely militarist in its allegiance to that mystical phrase Collective Security which at the present time has no meaning or substance, and if Labour ever came into power it would be far more likely to plunge this country into war on behalf of this ideal than the Conservatives who are more realistic in their foreign policy, though not realistic enough to see that Germany and Great Britain should arrange the peace of Europe, with France and Italy in a Western pact, or with France without Italy if Mr. Mussolini is out for trouble.

The Middle of the Road

This ranging up of rival extremists is a departure from the historical attitude of England in her foreign policy, and a complete break with the traditional temper and character of the English people, who are essentially and instinctively neither Right nor Left, but in the Liberal centre. They still stay there, I am firmly convinced. Get away from London, get beyond the groups of intellectuals, theorists, and fanatics, and one finds everywhere in England the old mistrust of fanaticism, the old shrewdness of judgment between the clamour of rival factions, the old belief in temporising, and compromise, and give-and-take which has been the genius of the English people for a long period. They don't want to go to war for a theoretical ideal of which they are sceptical. They don't want to go to war for Russian Communists or Czechoslovaks. They don't want to be dragged to the shambles for a phrase called "Collective Security," or for that old man-trap the Balance of Power. "Self-interest" is the gibe flung at this attitude of mind by flaming idealists, who would have us fight single-handed on any front for their ideas of abstract justice. Self-interest certainly, but it involves national preservation—and the preservation of civilisation, the

beauty of life, liberty, to say nothing of babies in their cradles and the blood of our young manhood. Lose or win, another world war would for England be the end of everything, as it would be for France and Germany. We lost the fine flower of our race in the last war—a million of our best. Those who would have been our leaders now went down into the mud of Flanders and the Somme. We have not yet replaced them. Are we to complete our ruin by bloody adventures on behalf of Russia or Czechoslovakia? The answer, I believe, in the minds of the English people outside the range of the Left Book Club is very definitely: No! I am bound to say that, though I believe in Collective Security as the ultimate ideal if it is collective and secure—but not without Germany, Japan, Italy and the United States.

And yet they are conscious, these middle-minded people, of bewilderment and lack of any clear conviction. They were the people—eleven million of them—who voted in the Peace Ballot presented to them by Lord Cecil and others, and gave their approval to support the League of Nations Covenant, if necessary as far as imposing sanctions upon an aggressor nation. They believed, as I did, in Collective Security, and would do so still if it had had the united support of all the great powers. But they now have seen that there was no such unity of action against an aggressor nation as Italy was judged to be. France “ratted.” Germany was out of it. The United

States was out of it. Further action in regard to sanctions would have meant a straight fight between this country and Italy. How could that be called Collective Security? They have lost their faith in the League, and as yet they have found no other shrine at which to worship. They hope that this rearmament of Great Britain will give pause to bandit nations, but they hate the bill of costs, and wonder what use will be made of all these stocks of shells and ammunition now being piled up. To the average man in the tea-shop or the third-class carriage, with whom I talk now and again, rearmament is a temporary safeguard which, no doubt, is necessary, but which is not exactly reassuring in the hands of the present, or any other, Government.

"They may want to use those toys," says the man who remembered the last war.

"Nobody wanted the last war, but it happened. Some fool at the Foreign Office may walk into a trap. Then we shall be for it again, I suppose. It's all raving lunacy. If you call this civilisation, then civilisation ought to be blotted out! If I smell poison gas in High Street, Kensington, or the Brompton Road, I shall walk out and breathe deeply of it because the game will be up, as far as civilisation is concerned."

I have heard those words said. Many people are thinking the same thing. There is a dark pessimism in many English minds.

I went one night to a meeting at Londonderry House. It was on behalf of the Red Cross libraries for hospitals, and a number of dames and dowagers had assembled to hear a debate between an array of famous writers, under the chairmanship of Lord Esher. The subject was: "I find this world a good place to live in—or I don't."

We sat uncomfortably on gilt-backed chairs in the great salon of this noble house. The famous writers had more comfortable seats facing their audience. They were Humbert Wolfe, Day Lewis, Margaret Kennedy, Rose Macaulay, Margaret Irwin and T. S. Eliot. I listened to their speeches. They were witty and amusing, with verbal fireworks. Humbert Wolfe, poet and orator, was in good form and raised a laugh at every sentence and played with ideas like a juggler with glittering balls, keeping them up with perfect ease. Miss Macaulay was called upon suddenly to take the place of a distinguished pacifist, down with asthma, and said some very good things. So did they all. But there was an underlying gloom in these speeches. They evaded the question of the debate by the most ingenious flippancies. They dared not look at the world around them. They could not find a good thing to say about it. They were jesters, with death knocking at the door. They laughed like Boccaccio's characters with the plague around them. Miss Margaret Irwin tried to cheer us up by saying that, however bad the world might be at present, it

was no worse than it had always been. Was not life always horrible? Why, then, should we complain about our present state? The only way to be happy, said Lord Esher, is to wear blinkers, and not see what is going on each side of us. There was no word of hope, of beauty, of laughter, or of happiness.

Mr. Day Lewis, speaking as a member of the Left Book Club, dropped the mask for a moment. "People like ourselves," he said, "who are writers and poets, look out of a window upon a crazy world. Sometimes we think we must be mad ourselves. Perhaps we are, but outside our window the world is even madder. To secure peace people are arming to the teeth and making bombs to blow other people to bits. In a world of plenty and over-production people are starving. It's a lunatic world!"

He regarded it with despair, but in his young soul there was a dream. Everything might be changed by Communism. Willingly would he surrender free speech and free thought that those now hungry should be fed. It did not occur to him that there is a hunger of the mind as well as of the body; and that denial of freedom does not produce more bread, even in Russia, where they are also arming to the teeth, and seem as mad as the rest of us, judged by recent trials.

One cause of this distress in our English minds is,

I think, the consciousness that we are on an island—not geographically but intellectually—surrounded by a sea of passion which threatens to swamp us, or, at least, makes an unpleasant noise in our ears. We are a civilised people and the world is becoming uncivilised. Most of us still believe in freedom of speech and thought within the framework of our social order. We still believe in tolerance of minorities. We hate cruelty and brutality, though that gentleness is not old in our tradition. In hundreds of thousands of homes in England there is the conversation of free minds, a decent level of culture, some homage to beauty, a love of gardens, flowers, birds, and the pleasant ways of life. As a people we do not flame out into political passion, and detest fanaticism of any kind. Instinctively we are law-abiding, free from any violence of revolt. No dark and deadly conspiracies lurk in the underworld. Even the inhabitants of the Distressed Areas are marvellously patient and untouched by revolutionary bitterness, though they have been given too little aid beyond the dole. Apart from those black areas of unemployment—not quite so bad now, and with a promise of rescue—our people have a fair standard of living with a margin for amusement and self-education, if they are out for that, as many are. The standard of intelligence is rising, despite the danger of mass-produced idiocies.

I am always impressed by the intelligence of the

average mind. Those young men and women who go walking on week-ends between one youth hostel and another read well, think well, and talk well. At least they talk with an appeal to reason, and with good nature for those who hold opposite ideas. They don't knife each other because they disagree. They don't have private bomb factories for blowing up railway lines or killing their politicians. In the rooms of undergraduates there is good talk between the inevitable absurdities of the younger mind, and anyhow a certain code of courtesy, and an unfailing sense of humour. Talk to a City clerk over a marble-topped table in a Lyons café, and you will find him polite, shrewd in judgment, awake to the world around him, interested in some harmless hobby, tolerant, kindly, and unembittered, however small his salary.

We may claim to be civilised. In spite of all our weak points, our stupidities, and our growing menace of mass-produced minds, we are still, I believe, a credit to democracy, though not so good in intelligence or physique as the Scandinavian nations. But this democracy of ours is, we think, menaced by the dictatorships and the ideologies, and the rise of blind force, violence, political hatreds and murderous passions. We wish to live in peace but see ourselves dragged into conflict. We believe in tolerance, but find intolerance enthroned. We want to improve the security of life by appeal to reason, by a friendly method of conciliation, but find that reason does not

prevail at the council tables. We—being civilised—wish to escape from discipline, regimentation, and the spirit of militarism, but find that all other countries are arming, drilling, and parading with gas masks. Being civilised we have perhaps become a little slack and a little soft, preferring a patch of garden to a barrack square, and a lawn-mower to a machine-gun, and a book to a bomb, and a symphony concert over the wireless to the sound of bugles and the beat of drums. Thoughtful minds in England—the book-lovers and the beauty-lovers and the ramblers through Surrey woods—have a sense of uneasiness, a distress in their souls, because they are afraid that intelligence is in retreat before primitive instinct, and that their liberty, their ways, their little bit of civilisation, may be menaced by the coming of the Goths out of the primeval forests. They hear from afar the howling of wolves. Perhaps it will be necessary to obey the orders of a sergeant-major, and step up briskly to rasping commands in a barrack square. Horrid thought! What an interruption to civilised tranquillity!

Lack of Leadership

The English people dislike discipline. I have always hated it myself like poison. But a certain amount of it might be good for us. We have carried our individualism too far in resisting the community spirit and organised team work. There is much to be said for the German Labour Camps, in which every young man and woman must serve for a time, whatever their class or opportunity of work. There is nothing to be said—let us admit it—for the groups of young men propping themselves against the walls of Labour Exchanges or coming out like young wolves from their lairs at night to get free food on the Embankment, or under the Admiralty Arch. They should be rounded up, and put into Labour Camps, willy-nilly, for at least a year's service, instead of being allowed to drift into vice and demoralisation.

The blackest mark on our social record in the post-war years is the lack of any organised service for the unemployed, any kind of recruitment for service of some kind—preferably on that wasted land of ours which should grow more food for our people—a thought which occurs only to our great brains when they get funky of a new war. Much heart-break would have been avoided by some scheme of compulsory

labour for the generation of young manhood; much comradeship, and cheerfulness, and laughter, and improved physique, could have been gained if only the Labour Government, or the so-called National Government, had had the courage to enrol the unemployed in England in service battalions for work on the land when other work was short, with good leadership, mild discipline, physical exercises, and something of the spirit of those who once went singing "Pack up your troubles in your Old Kit Bag," without the same red fires at Journey's End. We let them drift, and hang about, and slouch around, getting bored—boredom, so many have told me, is their greatest curse—getting dejected, getting unemployable. If only we had had a leader of inspiration and courage to take this job in hand in the right spirit, with a call to comradeship, we should have brought rescue to derelict communities.

Where are our leaders with such vision and such courage? It is pitiful, and alarming, that we lack any inspiration of leadership, or any coming forward of young men with character and a touch of genius. A million went west in the war. We have not made up the loss. There is something lacking in the spirit of our young manhood to-day. Those crowds who watch football matches, and bet on them, are not playing games.

In the Universities there is contempt for the "hearties" who play rude games by those who prefer

the cinema or the Left Book Club. Even the intellectuals allow themselves to be weakened by the false mirage of Communism instead of getting to work on ideas of practical and immediate possibility.

Looking down on the House of Commons from the Strangers' Gallery one's heart sinks at the mediocrity of that assembly. There is nothing dynamic there. The two Front Benches are respectable and dull.

The Labour Party with a few exceptions is without quality. The Conservative Party has now a very strong leader in Mr. Neville Chamberlain, who has shown great courage and almost heroic obstinacy in his foreign policy. He has a gift of commonsense which cuts through all the shams of political argument. But is there any distinction or quality in the men behind him? Few of them show any signs thereof.

Perhaps that is too harsh. I feel it is now that I have written the words. There must be on the back benches, here and there, young men of promise. But they don't get a chance. The Front Benches are utterly selfish in the length of their speeches and their allegiance to a machine which is crushing out the spirit of the Parliamentary arena, ironing out the individual point of view, denying the limelight to the young crowd. The French group system, not without objection—Heaven knows—is, to my mind, preferable to a Parliamentary system conducted by the pompositives of the Front Bench, controlled by The Cabinet, and disciplined by the Whips.

Something will have to be done about it, or the Parliamentary system, which, after all, is the safeguard of democracy in the English sense of that much abused word, will fall into decay and contempt.

The past twelve months have been an ordeal in England testing, and perhaps shaking, the nerve of that section of society—that small section—which is sensitive to the international situation, and to the perils and portents of our own state. That enormous rearmament programme sits heavily on the imagination of those who count the cost and look ahead to what may happen when it is completed. It is already disrupting the national industry by recruiting every class of labour for munitions, and commandeering all available material—steel, timber, every kind of metal—for purposes which have no productive value beyond the machinery of slaughter, and no selling power in the world's markets. Prices of these commodities are rocketing to fantastic heights. The Government buyers are in the hands of rings, monopolists, and profiteers who are becoming millionaires out of this great gamble in which the moneyed public is up to its neck. I hate to refer again to the Royal Commission Report on the Arms Industry, but if that had been adopted, these abuses would have been prevented and there would have been the chance of control, efficiency, and economy, instead of the present lack of authority, and complete surrender to the profit-making interests.

All that belongs to the dark side of our English scene to-day, and I have not put in the blacks too heavily, I think. But there is another side more pleasant to contemplate. The mass of the English people remain untouched by the despondency of the intellectuals, the fanatical theories of political extremists, the flesh-creeping forecasts of the prophets of doom, and all morbid dreadful and horrid dreams. They have their jobs to do, and not much time or use for that kind of thought. They have their little gardens—their little private parades. They are getting good wages, if they have work, as more have than at any other time in English history. Compared with twenty-five years ago their social state outside the distressed areas has been raised as though by a magic wand. They have got rid of the old squalor, the old penury, the old grinding drudgery of sweated labour. They have more ease, more leisure, more amusement, more interests reaching out to them by the B.B.C. and by the adventure of a little car which gives them a way of escape from narrow lives and mean streets.

England is not to be judged only by the monstrous ant-heap called London, or by the tabloid press which panders to the lowest common denominator of mob psychology. There is still the English countryside, where life goes on traditionally in old farmsteads and small villages. There are the cathedral cities where time stands still, and where there is tranquillity of

mind. In the old market towns the young farmers who come in with their sheep and cattle belong to Hardy's England, and their minds follow the same furrows. Their blood is the same. Their character has not been changed much by modern fretfulness and "nerves." The young craftsmen and labourers who ride away from their work on push-bikes or "motor-bikes" are, I find, exactly like the lads who joined up in 1914, when some of them thought it was going to be "good fun," not knowing the grisly humour they would find.

The shop-keeping mass in England, in every little town and village, as far as I know them, are cheerful and very sweet-mannered. Whatever the pessimists and the critics of English life may say, I am certain that our folk have a sanity, a steadiness, an incapability of passion and hatred, a good-natured tolerance, a kindly courtesy, a sense of humour, and a moral tradition which keep us free from the political turmoil and the ferocious vendettas which make such hell in many European countries. All foreigners think so when they come to visit us. I am sure they are right. We don't know our own luck in being free to think, to speak, to live without fear of spies, inquisitors, and murder gangs. We don't know our own luck in having a national mind which keeps very steadily to the middle of the road.

We face a new reign under a young King, to whom the Crown came unexpectedly and in a tragic way.

We face an uncertain future, not without danger, and certain to bring new ordeals to test the courage and the wisdom of the younger generation whose world it will be. Let me give them one word of hope, in which I believe. I dare to say that the expected war need not happen. Let us kill that bogey in our minds. It will not happen if we do not wish it to happen.

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