

PHILIP GIBBS

ORDEAL
IN ENGLAND

(ENGLAND SPEAKS AGAIN)



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VI. THE DARK SHADOW

I

The Sense of Doom

IT is in the minds of the English people—this dark shadow. It creeps into English gardens where there is beauty, and should be, if anywhere, a sense of peace. It sits like a spectre at dinner tables where there is good company, and if one listens, as I do, one is conscious, very soon, of this ghost which haunts the minds of men and women who have been talking amusingly and light-heartedly until, inevitably—at least in the company I keep—the talk drifts, or lurches suddenly, into an argument which begins with fear and ends sometimes with a laugh in which despair is lurking.

I do not exaggerate or over-dramatise. This dark shadow is caused by the dreadful apprehension that by some inescapable doom we are all marching, against our will, towards another war more frightful than the last—not the war to end war this time but the war to end civilisation. That shadow lies brooding over our English scene and darkening all our hopes.

What is the use of this “prosperity” proclaimed

triumphantly by the Government and by the Press (ignoring the distressed areas and other less pleasant aspects of English life) if it is going to be ended, rather soon perhaps (if one can believe the same newspapers) by hostile air raids from some enemy unnamed, unless Germany is named, smashing up our densely populated centres and spreading panic and death by poison gas and incendiary bombs? What is the good of this great scheme of physical training—the outcome of King George's Jubilee Fund—if youth is only to be made fit for the next shambles? What is the good of that Ten Years' Plan for Childhood advocated by Lady Astor and friends if in one year, or two, or three—1940 is generally named as the fatal year by the prophets of woe—these children will be vomiting in gas masks, and huddling in cellars which are by no means bomb-proof?

"I want to frighten people," said Mr. Duff Cooper, Minister for War, anxious to speed up recruiting.

Well, he has been doing his best, but it was hardly necessary. Mr. Winston Churchill had done rather well in that direction by speeches and articles revealing the rapid and vast rearming of Germany, especially in the air. The Government had not exactly proclaimed a cheery confidence in peace when they launched a tremendous plan for the expansion of our own armaments, by land, sea, and air, and in February of last year announced their decision to raise a loan of £400,000,000 to cover expenses

estimated at £1,500,000,000 for armaments during the next five years.

Up in Sheffield—I was told—the workers on munition factories were convinced that war was not far off. Otherwise, they asked, why all this hurry?

"Why are we working on day and night shifts? Somebody seems to know something. It don't look good, apart from work and wages."

2

Ways of Escape

One Sunday afternoon in the spring of this year I went into two old country houses where pleasant people live, typical, perhaps, of English life at its best. One belonged to a young doctor who had been hard driven by the influenza epidemic and does not get much rest, anyhow, in a practice which extends to many villages. He looked tired, I thought, but was amusing in his conversation as he stood six inches below the old black beams which go across his ceiling. But presently, when we drifted into a talk about psychology, he asked me a curious question.

"Do you think young people ought to escape from this lunatic asylum called Europe if they have a chance of getting out in time before war comes along?"

"Where would they go to find a sanctuary?" I answered by another question.

"What about Rio? That might be a good spot, fairly aloof from trouble?"

He was worrying about that "next war," perhaps on account of his young wife, perhaps as a theoretical question nagging at him as he made his rounds, helping new life into the world, attending to children and young people who might be caught by the fire of Moloch.

It was strange that in the second house I went to that afternoon there were two women who started talking to me about this fear in their minds. One of them was the hostess of a tea party to which a group of young, or youngish, people had come. We talked at the end of the room for a few minutes and presently she asked me a question, very seriously.

"Do you think that it might be wise for anyone to get out of this country while the going is good—that is, before another war comes? I've almost given up hope of peace. I'm sorry for the young people—this little crowd, for instance."

It was the same question that the young doctor had put to me. Behind it was the same sense of impending conflict. They were both looking for a way of escape while there might still be time. It was rather startling. It was tragic as evidence of a state of mind creeping into English thought, as a deepening shadow. All over Europe and into millions of minds looking

out on life, that shadow lay behind sunlight and the hope of youth.

Another lady in the same room spoke to me in a quiet voice. She had a little scheme in which, she thought, I might be interested. Her idea was that a village like the one in which she lived, and many others not enormously far from London, might adopt a number of school children in the great city and bring them down to a holiday camp once a year. They would be given a good time, but the purpose of it would be to organise a plan of evacuation from London in case of aerial bombardment.

That fear again! That dreadful apprehension of a coming war.

I spoke quietly as she had done, so that no one could hear in a room where there was a cheerful murmur of general conversation and occasional laughter. It was a good old house which for many generations had belonged to farming folk, but now was filled with a company who skim the latest books, and listen to the "wireless," and are in touch with London sophistication.

"I refuse to believe that war is coming," I said sturdily. "It seems to me a kind of acceptance of its certainty if one arranges plans for air raids and gas masks for children. That is a surrender of all hope.. It's putting emphasis on to preparation and not on to prevention. War mustn't happen."

She was the mother of young children, though

young-looking herself and beautiful. Reynolds and Romney painted women like her. She looked, I thought, very eighteenth century in a long low room with old-fashioned furniture.

"Besides," I said, "there are nine million people in London. Imagine what would happen in an aerial bombardment frightful enough to create panic. The railways would be used for troops and transport. The roads would be choked. Its horror is unimaginable."

"It might be worth while saving some of the children," she answered.

Somehow, I thought, we must kill this fear lurking in so many minds. How tragic, how farcical, how damnable, that with all our massed intelligence, all our science, all our victories of civilisation, the minds of women should be haunted by this spectre of approaching horror for the children they have brought into the world! Gas masks for babies? The very Devil wouldn't think of such abomination.

3

The Failure of the League

It was the breakdown of the League of Nations over Abyssinia, and the abandonment of the Disarmament Conference which disconcerted the peace-lovers and left them rather hopeless, and turned some of them into militarists.

They had pinned their faith to the principles of "Collective Security." When Mussolini broke all his pledges to the League, refused arbitration, and massed his troops for attack against the Ethiopians, it looked, for a little while, as though the League would exert its authority, and put into combined action its clauses of restraint against a nation judged to be guilty of flagrant aggression against any member nation of the League. By Article 16 of the Covenant "Sanctions" were to be imposed on Italy. Fifty-eight nations agreed to impose them by cutting off Italy from all economic aid, with the screw gradually tightening, until the stranglehold would be complete.

Mr. Anthony Eden, that elegant young man representing the British Government, rapped on the table of the League Council. He took a strong line, supported by his Government at home. When Mussolini sent troops to Libya and money to stir up trouble in Egypt and Palestine the British Lion suddenly sat up and roared. The British Fleet steamed into the Mediterranean. It was a great surprise to the world. Many nations had regarded the British Lion as a mangy old beast who had turned pacifist. When it roared and banged its tail angrily it made the world jump. It made Mussolini angry. It seemed to him a very unfriendly act.

There was one day when I felt forked lightning in the air—an oppressive atmosphere. Other people were aware of it.

It was a day when we were within an hour of two of war with Italy, our old friend and ally. Soothing words sent to him by Sir Samuel Hoare prevented that tragedy. In any case Mussolini held a trump card which made war unnecessary so long as the Suez Canal were open to him. This Collective Security urged by Anthony Eden on behalf of the League had broken down before it was tried out. The Prime Minister of France, M. Laval—that smiling man—had established a very close understanding with Italy. He had made a secret agreement with Mr. Mussolini to turn a blind eye on any adventure in Abyssinia. To please Great Britain he was willing, and obliged, to support the “sanctions” up to a point, but not as far as oil, not as far as moving a ship or a gun against the Italian expedition.

Collective Security had a wide-open gap. Only military and naval force—that is War—could stop the Italian army on its voyage to Abyssinia. No nation was willing to go as far as that, not even as far as stopping oil supplies while France under Laval was resolute against it. Any armed action would have to be done by the British Navy. That would not be Collective Security. It would be a straight fight between Great Britain and Italy. By a strange paradox only the pacifists were in favour of that kind of war. They believed that if Mussolini cut the throat of Abyssinia the League would be mortally hurt and international law would no longer exist.

The Left-minded people, hating Fascism, were all for war.

The British Lion had roared and everybody was much impressed. Then it began to curl its whiskers and wag its tail. British prestige had been high. Germany had watched with astonishment and admiration. But something seemed to slip when Sir Samuel Hoare drew up a peace plan which would have given great slices of Ethiopia to the aggressor before his victory, which seemed to many minds at that time difficult and remote. Sanctions, they thought, would prove effective in the long run if the Ethiopians could only hold out.

There was an outburst of passion in England.

"It is not Abyssinia which has been betrayed," wrote one of the correspondents to *The Times*, which was filled with such correspondence. "It is we who have been betrayed."

Mr. Baldwin came running into Downing Street. He pledged the Government anew to a strong and faithful allegiance to the League Covenant. Mr. Anthony Eden, that resolute young man, became Foreign Secretary in the place of Sir Samuel Hoare, who wept when he made his *apologia* to the House of Commons.

It was all very dramatic. The voice of England had spoken. But as a friend of mine wrote to me from the United States: "England speaks the wrong words."

"You needn't pay any attention to these alleged

Italian victories," I was told by an Air-Commodore in his drawing-room one day.

He had just flown over Abyssinia, and had seen its jagged mountain ranges.

"The Italians make a little advance and then have to draw back. It will take them years to penetrate that country where black tigers lie behind the rocks."

"The Italian claims to victory are all bluff," said a young American in the same room. He had just spent six months in Abyssinia as a newspaper correspondent. "The rains churn up their roads. Transport is in a frightful mess. If the Ethiopians keep to guerilla warfare they will hold out for years."

Less than two months afterwards the Italian army entered Addis Ababa, and Haile Selassie fled from his country. Poison gas and air-bombs had broken the spirit of the Ethiopians. They had fled in black terror. They had died in heaps.

It was a "glorious victory" for Italy. What price Glory? It was the utter defeat of the League and all its supporters. Collective Security had failed. There was no law in Europe. The smaller nations knew now that the League would be impotent to save them if one of the big bullies got after them. It was, for a time, the end of all dreams of international law based on justice and supported by "sanctions."

It was one cause of that shadow which had long been in the minds of European peoples—the shadow

of fear over many frontiers, which now deepened and darkened. It reached England.

4

Hitler's Germany

This Italian adventure gave a shock to Mr. Stanley Baldwin, not easily shocked into any galvanic activity until something "really must be done"—and to his advisers in the Admiralty, War Office, and Foreign Office. The Government was beggared now of all slogans for the public soul. It was no use talking any more about their faith in the League. The League had been badly battered, and had gone into dry dock for repairs, if possible. The Disarmament Conference had dragged along its weary way to death. No use reviving that, they thought, wrongly as I venture to think.

Another menace, which seemed to them more dangerous than Italy, more powerful, filled them with alarm. Germany, under the Führer, was breaking the clauses of the Versailles Treaty. One by one they were being repudiated with a violence of unilateral action by the strange, inexplicable man who had attained a power in Germany greater than any of its Kings, and had almost assumed divine authority over the German tribes. He was the author of *Mein Kampf*,

a book which does not exactly breathe out the spirit of peace. He was a hater of Communists, Socialists, Pacifists, and Jews. His Nazi régime, his Brown Shirts and Black Shirts, expressed to the outside world the bully creed. His concentration camps for Communists, Socialists, Pacifists, and Jews were not places of conversion by loving-kindness. His friends, occupying the highest offices in the State, did not inspire confidence in the other nations as men of high morality or high intelligence.

Some of the new leaders in Germany under allegiance to Hitler, to whom they rendered almost divine honours, were obsessed by fantastic ideas which seemed to non-German minds mad and false, and very dangerous to European civilisation. All their talk about the "Aryan Race" was mad and false. Some of them wanted to revive a faith in the old German gods and the pagan spirit.

It was a kind of woolly Wagnerism applied to modern life. They exalted physical strength, instinct, force against intellectualism and all the code of European culture derived from the Christian faith and the Renaissance. The old tribal law of Germany, the old tribal worship of the Hero, and the Chief, was recalled and centred in the person of Adolf Hitler. The suppression of all minorities, the merging of all parties into a Totalitarian State under one ruler, one discipline, and one obedience, seemed an outrage to English and French minds who hold fast to the rights

of free criticism and free speech. That was *verboten* in Germany under Hitler's rule. A rigid censorship of the press, the radio, the cinema, the theatre, the publishing houses, and every form of education and expression, cut off the German people from communication of thought with other minds. The Swastika became a symbol of oppression, brutality, and intolerance to all Communists, Socialists, Liberals and Intellectuals in countries calling themselves democratic. The state of Germany before the coming of Hitler, desperately divided into armed camps and ripe for bloody revolution, was ignored.

The German people were being drilled intensively. They were being subjected to an intensive propaganda which blared into their ears, and into their minds, ceaselessly, under the direction of that human talking machine Herr Goebbels.

Worse still, to the outside world, German youth seemed to like it! They did not resist this discipline. They gloried in it.

Visitors to Germany were impressed by the physical splendour of German youth, by those endless parades of young men and boys under the banners of the Swastika. They were impressed—and frightened. What would happen if one day Hitler—that fanatic, that barn-stormer, that apostle of hatred against Jews and Communists and Pacifists and Intellectuals, touched a button on his desk and ordered the mobilisation of these young legions? They were ready

to die for him. They had sworn to do so if he called to them. They were, it seemed, in a state of exaltation, eager for self-sacrifice. Those were reasons why Germany under Hitler was regarded with fear by peoples beyond her frontiers. That fear grew into an obsession. It obsessed the French mind. It has taken possession of many English minds, especially on the Left of political thought. The New Germany has become the Big Bogey of Europe, to many minds in England and to nearly all its newspapers who find it very frightful and, morning after morning, make the flesh of their readers creep.

The intensive rearmament of Germany, especially in the air, was revealed most fully at a time when the League had broken down, and when international law had become a mockery even in the minds of those who had had most hope in its ultimate authority. Hitler was denounced as one of the law-breakers when he repudiated the Treaty of Versailles by rearming, and the Treaty of Locarno by sending his troops into the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland. European correspondents of the American Press—an able body of men—watched all this with pessimistic eyes and reported that war was imminent in Europe. For the past two years they have expected the explosion to happen. Some of them are surprised—not without cause—that it hasn't happened yet.

"When is this war going to break out?" asked American people of a friend of mine named Curtis

Brown a few months ago. They were staggered when he answered cheerfully: "There ain't going to be no war!"

The English Press does not share his optimism. Every day for the past two years many newspapers in this country have kept their readers' nerves on edge. Every crisis becomes to them a new threat of a world war. Every analysis of the world situation leads them to the conclusion that war is coming nearer. Their correspondents in many countries emphasise these constantly arriving dangers. Politicians repeat dolorously that the international situation is "deteriorating."

It deteriorated very intensively when the Spanish Civil War aroused passionate emotion on the Left and Right of all political groups. Spain became the Tom Tiddler's Ground into which half a dozen nations poured aeroplanes, tanks, all munitions of war, and volunteers, for a trial of strength between Democracy as it was called, and Fascism as it was called, though in that tragic arena of blood, and heroism, and murder, and mercilessness, on both sides—a disgrace to civilisation, an outrage against all Christian chivalry—there were many parties and many groups—on both sides—which were neither one nor the other.

Labour and the Communists and the Left Wing intellectuals clamoured for intervention on the side of the Madrid government, though it might have led to an European war. The French and British governments stood fast on non-intervention with that peril

in their minds. The Non-Intervention Committee was a pantomime which served this purpose.

Is it any wonder that in the early part of last year when England spoke behind closed doors, in old houses, in small flats, in college rooms, in little restaurants, in clubs, and in bed-sitting-rooms, there was a sense of fear that another war might happen and that we were drifting to a calamity which would be the death of civilisation and the ruin of the Western world? Since then there have been other alarms.

5

Who Wants War?

A man spoke to me on the stairs of a London club, and we stood there for twenty-five minutes, I should say, while other members passed and said "Hullo!" or "How d'you do?"

Twenty-odd years ago this man, who now has grey hair and sad-looking eyes because he is disgusted with the state of the world, was a young officer in a Scottish regiment, and while he stood talking to me his mind went back to a day in 1914. That was after a melancholy remark he had made because of the dark shadow which was on his mind.

"We are all marching towards war," he said. "Who can doubt it? There's no ill-feeling against the

Germans. They have no ill-feeling against us. But we are being dragged into a state of things which can only lead to another conflict. Democracy has no power over its own fate, there is no such thing as Democracy. It's at the mercy of those on top."

It was then that his memory went back to a day in 1914, at Christmas time, when there was a truce between the lines, and his men and the Germans went out into No Man's Land to bury their dead, and started talking to each other. It lasted for three days, that truce.

"Do you want to go on fighting?" asked this Scottish officer to one of the German soldiers.

He answered with the title of an English song:
"Home, Sweet Home! That's all I want."

They all wanted that, on both sides. If it had been left to them, they would have stopped killing each other. They had no enmity at all. They hated the war. They could see no sense in it. It was the men on top who were going on with the war.

"This rearmament of ours," said my friend who used to be a Liberal M.P., "is a sign that we have surrendered the League of Nations ideal. Now the government is in the hands of the Armament firms, and Labour is supporting rearmament because it creates work and wages—until the slump comes, or the explosion. We missed the boat when there was a chance of getting a general limitation in arms. I sometimes think it would have been better if the

supporters of the League had not been non-party. All parties gave it lip-service as a beautiful ideal about which no one really bothered."

"Why not accept Hitler's offer of a Western Pact?" I asked. "Isn't that the first step to peace in Europe? With Germany in the League again——"

He didn't agree. He thought it would be playing Germany's game. Britain and France would be kept quiet while Germany made all plans to attack Russia.

"But what evidence have we," I asked, "that Germany intends to attack Russia? And why should Western Europe be laid in ruin because of our sensitive regard for the most sinister government on earth which is that of Stalin, and his executioners? Why not get on to friendly terms with Germany, and bring her back into the League, or, at least, as a good neighbour? We can influence the Germans much more by friendship than by hostility. After making a Western Pact we could do something about the Eastern frontier."

He hated Fascism. He had no faith in Hitler's sincerity. But he groaned over the bill of costs for British rearmament and its enormous folly, as he thought it.

"Think of what all that money would mean in social services and productive plans! We could create a paradise. Now I despair."

There were others like him in every part of England, and Scotland, and Wales.

One optimist took tea with me, a charming man whom I meet at the Council table of the Charing Cross Hospital.

"I wish you would write an article," he suggested, "about the point of view of the younger crowd in every country, showing that none of them want war. It would be a great service, and I am sure you could get a lot of material from different countries. It's only the Elder Statesmen who have got this war complex."

I made a few mental reservations. It was true that even the young Nazis of Germany don't want another war. But they would march with the exaltation of self-sacrifice if Hitler called them. What about the young Italians?

And yet I believe he is right—this distinguished little lawyer, Sir John Stewart-Wallace by name—whose heart flows with the milk of human kindness and whose eyes reveal a schoolboy humour, in spite of his dusty law books and his legal dryness. The young people of Europe are not panting for poison gas, or eagerly awaiting the signal for their own blinding, and maiming, and agony of death. It seems to them no cheerful prospect.

An Exhibition of Modern Culture

I dropped into an exhibition arranged for public edification by the municipal authorities of Kensington, where once I used to live.

Now, when I walk through Kensington Gardens, I think of those peaceful days of my young manhood when I used to play with a small boy on the coast of that Sea of Adventure—the Round Pond—where thousands of small boys have watched their craft go out on distant voyages from which, on days of dead calm, they never came back. Those small boys grew up just in time, some of them, for a world war in which they were wanted and, they too, so many of them, never came back.

Those ghost memories were in my head when I went through Kensington Gardens on the way to this exhibition at the Town Hall. It was an Anti-Gas exhibition to teach the people of Kensington what best to do in their homes if another war should come—its warnings seemed to suggest that there was considerable likelihood of its coming—when enemy aircraft would drop bombs filled with poisonous gases to blind, choke, and kill the population of London.

By taking the advice kindly provided by the Home office and passed on to the municipality of

Kensington it was suggested that precautions against this uncomfortable possibility should be taken in advance—to-day or to-morrow, if possible—and that by a few little gadgets, bits of stick, brown paper, glue-pots and the glazed paper on cigarette boxes, or chocolate boxes, Kensington families might avoid all disagreeable consequences of mustard gas or other varieties of poison vapour.

There was a little crowd in the exhibition including old gentlemen of Kensington who were very much interested in this show, and seemed to approve of its purpose thoroughly—"the nation wants waking up!" said one of them—and a number of ladies from Kensington Gore, Holland Street, and Campden Hill (I guessed) who seemed to accept this chamber of horrors as complacently as they would go round Harrods to see the latest fashions.

"Most interesting!" . . . "It seems to me very necessary." . . . "Now, isn't that a good idea?" . . . "So simple too! Really, I think we must do something about it."

There were rooms of small size, representing bathroom and bedrooms, converted into anti-gas chambers. Bits of stick had been tacked on to the doorways and round the windows. Wet blankets, or cloth of some fibrous stuff, made anti-gas curtains. The very latest types of gas mask suitable for Kensington ladies were exhibited on the tables. Lists of articles to be kept in a gas-proof chamber before an expected, or

unexpected, air raid were printed on big cards. They included domestic and sanitary utensils, a screen, drinking water, biscuits, toys for the children, playing cards for the grown-ups, and other items which might agreeably pass the time while the enemy was dropping bombs. It was really all very charming, to those whose minds work that way.

In charge of the exhibit were some young women in Red Cross uniforms. I ventured to speak to one.

"Don't you think it might be better to prevent a war rather than go in for this kind of thing?"

"Excellent idea!" she answered brightly. "How are you going to do it?"

"Doesn't this seem to you a surrender of reason?" I asked this good-looking girl with very steady eyes which looked frankly into mine.

"An acceptance of war, do you mean?" she asked.

"Yes. That's how it seems to me."

"There's only one kind of defence, really," she told me, looking over her shoulder as though she might be overheard, "that's by retaliation. I suppose if we're strong enough to retaliate we shan't be attacked. Isn't that the best hope?"

"What's the good of all this nonsense?" I asked.

"Do you honestly think it's any good at all?"

She was very honest.

"It might save a few. That's better than saving none."

I wanted to have further conversation with her.

She reminded me of a girl I had known before the war, and in the war, a very brave young woman named Dorothy Feilding who had helped the wounded lying on Belgian battlefields quite regardless of her own danger. This Red Cross girl would do the same kind of thing, I thought, in the streets of London if this horror came. She would try to save a few babies from being killed by poison gas, before her own body became mangled by high explosives which hostile aircraft would also drop. But I could see that she was getting bored with me, as she had every reason to be. She wasn't there to answer questions by a stern-looking inquisitor.

So this, I thought, as I wandered round alone, is what we are coming to! What a beautiful revelation of the civilisation we have reached in this year of grace! What a lovely introduction to life for young children who are to be instructed on the wearing of gas masks, instead of reading fairy tales, and who are to be told that in a year or two they may have to take their dolls into a blanketed room to escape from a poisonous breath creeping through the streets, while millions, who are unprepared, choke to death, or are burnt and blistered! There will be the crash of heavy bombs, destroying many houses, and burying their inhabitants under their ruins. There will be incendiary bombs, dear children, making bonfires in the sky and roasting thousands of people in their flames. You see, darling, the nasty Germans want their

colonies back, but if you are very good, and wear your gas masks nicely, and play in those comfy little rooms with their cracks pasted up, our dear Lord will look after you, and possibly let you remain alive and see the ruins afterwards. Won't that be nice?

Great God! I thought, going round that exhibition in Kensington. So this is the best that mankind is doing with its intelligence! This is the latest exhibition of our Brave New World! Without any poison gas, I felt poisoned.

And a few days later I read a report about these Home Office recommendations for air-raid precautions. It was by a number of scientists at Cambridge and was published in a small book entitled *Protection of the Public from Aerial Attack*, published by Gollancz.

The experimenters, who included two women, converted four rooms—shop basement, villa dining-room, council house sitting-room, modern bathroom,—into gas-proof rooms according to the official handbook.

They found that gas penetrated bricks and plaster, cracks covered with brown paper and mashed paper, blocked-in fireplaces and sealed doors.

In one room gas, which outside would kill in two and a half minutes, would kill inside within ten.

Into the bathroom—with steel-framed windows, tiled walls, concrete floor—gas would penetrate and kill within four hours.

Then they tested incendiary bombs—classified as a

greater danger than gas or high explosives—and found that the sand-spreading advised was useless.

Welding thermit, a comparatively mild incendiary compound, defied all such efforts, burned under water, through metal, through sand, through floors.

"If we take a specimen raid of nine bombers, each carrying a thousand small bombs, nine thousand could be dropped on an area of two square miles.

"Allowing that in an urban area only a fifth of these cause fires, that means 1,800 fires. The danger of fires spreading over several blocks of buildings, making the centre of the conflagration quite unapproachable by fire brigades, is obvious.

"On hearing the warning people will rush to their gas-proof rooms, and then when incendiary bombs set fire to the upper parts of their dwellings they will either run out and be caught by the gas or stay inside and be roasted alive.

"This is how they would act if they follow the instructions of the Home Office."

Gas masks tested were found useless against mustard gas and "lewisite."

Protection for tiny children is shown to be impossible, and the report pictures children sealed up in containers screaming themselves into fits, with the mother trying to pump air to several at once.

Would fathers and mothers protect themselves and watch their children suffocate? they ask.

The full absurdity of all this is shown by a criticism

of the Home Office advice: "Set aside a room in your house."

In England and Wales, say the scientists, 1,910,000 people are living already under overcrowded conditions. Another 6,759,000 would be overcrowded if they attempted to carry out the advice.

So 8,669,000 would find a gas-proof room impossible.

As for evacuating big cities by train—a few bombs on the termini would stop traffic for days.

We had better concentrate on stopping that next war if possible, for if it comes retaliation is no protection.

VII. THOSE WHO WEAR WINGS

I

One of Our Air Pilots

I WENT to tea at a house in London where I am always sure of a friendly welcome and pleasant people round about the table.

It is like a country mansion with big rooms and big open fireplaces where, in winter, logs are burning. In summer the sun—if there is any sun—streams through the casement windows, and there is a garden behind the house with a lawn smooth and large enough for croquet, which the mistress of the house is pleased to play with her friends. Birds sing in the bushes. Once, I swear, I heard a nightingale, though if one has listening ears one hears very faintly the murmur of London traffic. It is fifteen minutes by taxi from Oxford Circus.

At that tea-table round which we sat in a homely way—there were some nice hot cakes thereon—I noticed two young men whom I had met before. They were, as I knew, “those who mount with wings as eagles.” That is to say, they were pilots in the Royal Air Force.

There were some women at the table and laughter touched our talk. It was all very pleasant and very comfortable. This, I thought, is what civilisation means at its best, a pleasant room, a cheerful company round a tea-table, conversation which is merry and open-minded. One would not have to put a guard upon one's tongue, as one has to in some countries nowadays, or be afraid to express one's ideas on any subject which comes into one's mind. This was Liberty Hall. England itself is still Liberty Hall where one's mind is free.

One of the flying men sitting on my right picked up some phrase of mine. I have forgotten what it was, but I have an idea it was something about a recent visit I had paid to Germany.

"I suppose you know we're living in a fool's paradise?" he asked, with a queer ironical smile. "This country is in considerable danger, and nobody seems to know, and nobody cares a damn!"

He said something like that and there was an intensity in his voice which startled me, and a look in his eyes which I could not misinterpret. It was the look of a man who has something desperate on his mind.

"Don't you pay the slightest attention to him," said my hostess. "He has been trying to frighten me. If I believed a word of it I shouldn't be able to sleep a wink."

"No, no!" said the young airman, laughing good-naturedly, but a little uneasily, perhaps. "I'm not a

scaremonger. But I hate eyewash and a false sense of security."

"Have another toasted bun," said the lady.

He had another toasted bun. The conversation went round the table in a light-hearted way. But I knew that the boy on my right was seething with something he knew and didn't like.

After tea four of us—all men—went into another room where there was another fire. They were the two young flying men and my host and myself. Three of us lit cigarettes.

"Did you see anything of what they were doing in the air in Germany?" asked the young pilot who had been on my right at the tea-table and now was in a deep armchair with his legs outstretched.

I hadn't seen much of a technical kind. But I had spent a little time at the Flughaven near Berlin, where there was great activity in civil aviation. Big aeroplanes, holding many passengers, had come in from different countries, keeping to a time-table with the regularity of railway trains. I had been impressed by the German genius for organisation. They were getting ahead of us altogether in the civil side of flying. . . .

And I remembered a journey I had made through Germany when I had been startled by the tremendous propaganda which was being given to this development of aviation. At the entrance to small villages I had seen banners stretched across the roads.

*Lift Up Your Eyes.
Our Future is in the Air.
Help German Aviation.*

In Berlin and other cities young German aviators had shaken collection boxes under the noses of the crowds. It was a kind of good-natured blackmail. Everybody had to pay tribute, however small. I remembered talking to a German woman in the market place at Stuttgart. She had told me frankly that she was afraid sometimes of all this intensive effort to put machines into the sky.

The flying man threw away his cigarette and spoke quietly, but with a kind of restrained passion.

"Germany has developed her air force beyond all our calculations. She's doing it with an efficiency and organising power beyond the limited imagination of our people. Meanwhile our so-called statesmen and politicians hand out blather and eyewash to the nation. I don't know what you think about the international situation, but it seems to me——"

At that time it was distinctly unpleasant. We were still at cross-purposes with Signor Mussolini. Our prestige had fallen to a low ebb. Germany had repudiated the Locarno Treaty. The Labour Party was becoming militarist. No, the international situation was not agreeable.

The flying man thought it abominable. The League of Nations had proved itself impotent, he said, in a

major crisis. Collective security had failed in this Abyssinian affair which was its supreme test.

"I'm not an alarmist," he went on, "but I suppose you would agree that some damn silly accident might happen, some combination of bandits might make trouble, or war might be forced upon us to defend vital interests. Germany might be our enemy again. Do you agree to that possibility?"

I hated to think so. It would be the end of everything which we find good, or endurable.

"If war happened," said my flying friend, "it would come suddenly, perhaps without an ultimatum. German bombers would appear over London, flying high, at high speeds. Here before we knew they were coming!"

He looked me in the eyes and said something which made me feel rather cold, although the fire was still burning on the big hearth.

"We have no defence and no means of retaliation."

I couldn't believe that and told him so.

"What about our Expansion scheme? The White Paper! All this rearmament! Aren't we vastly increasing our fighting force in the air?"

The young airman laughed bitterly.

"Official dope! The Expansion scheme is mainly on paper. It's faked arithmetic, put out by the Air Ministry to keep the nation lulled to sleep and ignorant of its appalling dangers. The higher control of the Air Force are the cause of all this mess,

and their main preoccupation at the moment is to cover their past failures and deficiencies. Their concealment of these facts can only be done by going on with concealment. Men who have failed in the past—blind to the technical and tactical problems of air-fighting—go from important to more important posts, and this line of inefficiency continues without a break. Hopeless!"

He looked across at the other aviator.

"Am I exaggerating at all, do you think?"

The other man shook his head.

"The painful truth! Every experienced pilot knows it perfectly well."

The boy who wanted to get these things off his chest was silent for a little while and then sat forward in his chair.

"Germany has a pretty shrewd idea of what's going on," he said. "Do you think she won't exploit her advantage one day? Then where shall we be, say, in two years' time?"

He uttered another alarming sentence.

"Our Air Force can't strike a blow of any kind at Germany from England. We haven't a single bomber with the range that would carry it to Berlin and back working under war conditions. Somebody ought to tell the truth about all this. How can one sit tight and say nothing when we are risking the life of the nation?"

The two air pilots went on talking.

A Grave Indictment

It was a terrible indictment, which afterwards I heard from other sources of information. The situation revealed that we at that time hadn't the aircraft, equipment, or organisation, which would give us the power we should need in another war. There was an appalling dilution of skilled personnel by hastily trained learners. Our biggest bombers had a short range, and were so slow compared with aircraft possessed by other nations that they couldn't hope to survive a long flight across hostile country, and did not possess the air endurance at any reasonable speed to permit of them operating from home bases into a country as far away as Germany. The increase of the Air Force was based on the production of machines of these old-fashioned, slow-going types of bombers.

"If we have a war forced upon us in the next few years we shall be powerless to retaliate in the air."

My host looked very grave, but kept extraordinarily silent. I wondered about all this. I could hardly believe it. Perhaps the man who did most of the talking was fanatical on some theory, or disgruntled for some personal reason, or obsessed by the fear of a German menace. There was no doubt in my mind

about the last point. He had no faith in German peace-mindedness. He gave them about two years—if that—before they strike. They were just playing for time, he thought. We should have to play for longer time than that, and even then we should be no match for Germany in the air, because all our policy was wrong, and under existing conditions of design and manufacture we should never catch up.

All this must be taken with heavy discount, I thought. This flying man is exaggerating his case and not making allowance for the Government's plan of development. Anyhow, Germany is not going to attack us. Hitler offers a Western pact. Why don't we take it? The whole of the German people are deeply anxious for our friendship—I know that as a fact. In my mind I was busy with this thought of German friendliness. Supposing I was wrong? Supposing some new crisis happened in Europe which might cut across Germany's vital interests or ours and brought us to a clash? France and Russia. Spain. Austria. Czecho-Slovakia. There were many possibilities of danger, as I knew. Supposing the friendly feelings of the German people were suddenly switched off to anger? Supposing a little bell rang on Hitler's desk one day, mobilising all his young braves? These questions stirred in my mind. Who could answer them with absolute certainty?

I left the house where those two airmen had been talking, and had a sense of dark doubt. I didn't

believe in piling up armaments as the way to peace. I was a League of Nations man. Ever since the war I had written little words on bits of paper with the simple purpose of revealing the stupidity, beyond even the horror of war, and working for a reconciliation of nations and the re-establishment of civilised intelligence. Lately I had been on that Arms Commission with the hope in my head that it might help a little in checking the intensive competition in armaments by a general limitation under international control. It would be out of my mental frame to become a propagandist for more and better bombing aeroplanes. But the League system had broken down for a time. Collective security had failed. The Labour Party—utterly illogical—were breathing fire and blood against Fascist nations and, at the same time discouraging recruiting and preparations for defence—or attack. Our Ministers were talking to Germany like schoolmasters to naughty boys. Italy had become hostile to us. Our Foreign Office was associating its policy with that of France, but France was linked too closely for her own safety, and ours, perhaps, with Russia. Something might “slip.” The sticking plaster holding European peace together might break somewhere. What then? What would happen to England if hostile bombers became active in our sky? What would happen to London and its nine million inhabitants? . . . What had that fellow said?

“We have no means of defence. Our Air Force is

incapable of striking a blow against Germany from England."

"What's the matter?" asked a friend of mine whom I met on the way home. "You look as if you had heard bad news. Worried about something?"

"Worried about human stupidity," I answered. "This planet is not governed by intelligence. We're all going stark raving mad again."

He was very much amused.

"We've never been sane," he answered cheerfully.

3

There is No Defence

I listened to a debate on defence in the House of Commons. Mr. Winston Churchill, the Right Honourable gentleman below the gangway, as they called him, sat making notes while the talk went on. Presently he stood up and attacked the Government for delays in expanding the Air Force. The government programme and pledges, he said, had broken down completely. We had been promised parity with Germany by a certain date. We were not approaching such equality with Germany with its present air strength of 1,500 front-line machines. He deplored "the years that the locusts had eaten."

As I listened to this debate I looked down upon the

members of the House and the two front-line benches where ministers and ex-ministers sat in various attitudes of mild interest or mild boredom. The Government men and their supporters with few exceptions seemed satisfied with Sir Thomas Inskip's report of progress. There was no sense of national danger sufficient to disturb their placidity of mind. They seemed to accept the inevitability of delay as though there were lots of time ahead, anyhow. Churchill's portentous phrases were what they expected from him, but did not make them turn pale or hear from afar the noise of wings over Europe. Words! Political argument with—party bias. An interesting debate. . . . Who goes home?

All this had only touched lightly upon the difficulties and delays in expanding our Air Force. But after that debate I came into possession of facts—they seemed to me reliable—which revealed the reasons why the young airman with whom I had taken tea one day had no touch of breezy optimism but was gravely anxious. Those facts were given to me, I suppose, because I might have the power of the pen to stir up the nation to a sense of its unprotectedness in the air and to bring pressure upon the Government to awake from its stupor. Those who were my informants acted, I am certain, from a high sense of duty to the nation and were ready to sacrifice their own careers that the truth might be known. The whole truth was not yet known, though some of it was exposed and

admitted in another debate of the House on January 27th of last year.

Sir Thomas Inskip acknowledged very frankly that the original plan calling for the provision of 71 new squadrons of twelve first-line aircraft in each squadron making 124 in all, had broken down in the time-table. Only 87 squadrons had so far been formed, though he anticipated that 100 would be reached by the end of March of this year. The remaining 24, "or at least 20," would be ready by July of this year. But not all of them would be real squadrons but only skeletons of one or more flight each, and Sir Thomas was not able to say that by that time they would be brought up to their full complement.

Mr. Churchill urged that there was an enormous percentage of deficiency. If 124 squadrons were completed by March 31st it would still not give us parity with German strength at that date, nor anything like it. We had been solemnly promised that here should be parity. We had not got it. We had no right, he said, to assume that any quarrel would arise from Germany, but that was not the basis on which we discussed those military matters. We should have no parity during the whole of 1937 and he doubted whether we should have it in the whole of 1938. He again asserted the truth of the figure which he had given last November, that the German strength then was fifteen hundred front-line machines. It was, he thought, considerably more now. Actually the

Germans were believed to possess 150 formed squadrons of twelve machines each. That gave the figure of 1,800 front-line machines at the present time.

The debate put many cards on the table which had been held back, but by no means all of them. Many of these had been placed before the Prime Minister in a secret report by Mr. Churchill, who found himself in the position of having a mass of information of an alarming character, as to lack of efficiency and failure in the very basis of planning and design which he could hardly publish to the world without the revelation of secrets which might encourage potential enemies.

Curiously enough, I found myself in the same position. I had notes of a very technical and secret character which seemed to me too important to ignore, or hold in my own knowledge. They were a grave indictment of official complacency, official inefficiency, and of a most distressing state of things in the Royal Air Force, which would endanger the lives of our young pilots in time of peace, and lead to inevitable disaster should there be war. But I could not bring myself to publish them in the Press in a series of scare articles. I decided to put them into the hands of the man who had taken up this subject and made himself the spokesman of the case for a strong Air Force. That was Winston Churchill, who might care to have my notes, though I might be "carrying coals to Newcastle." In his Secret Report he must have dealt with these facts, or some of them.

Meanwhile in many countries—Germany, France, Italy, Russia, Japan, the United States—there was at the beginning of that year a ceaseless endeavour to increase the numbers of fighting aircraft, their range, their speed, the bomb-carrying capacity, and the number of their trained pilots and crews. The Civil War in Spain had been a testing ground for some of these new types, and on a small scale—though very terrible to the manhood, womanhood, and childhood in Spain—their power of destruction had been revealed. Man, who after long ages has mastered the secret of flight and given himself wings—"they mount with wings as eagles"—by which he is capable of rising very high not only into the blue but into new adventures of civilisation and splendour, is now terrified of this new power which he has created. For all this talk of ground defence against hostile aircraft is, I fear, mere dope to lull public terror. At the heights they go, at the speeds they go, there is no defence from the earth and very little in the sky. Over great cities enemy aircraft would find their way and drop their bombs. It would not be a decisive method of attack unless the morale of enormous populations densely crowded were overcome by mass panic and mass slaughter. That is doubtful. Man has inexhaustible reserves of endurance against all horror. He is incredibly brave when it comes to self-preservation and the last chance of survival. Men and women would dive into cellars as

in Spain, though many dead lay in the ruins. The survivors would crawl out to fight their invaders. War would go on; and whatever is meant by victory, when everything is ruined and much is dead, would go to those most able to stand the terror from the air with unbroken spirit.

Led by Mr. Churchill there was a constant fire of criticism against the Government because of the slow and inefficient progress of our Air Force. In the early summer of the year, 1938, there was a change in the control of the Air Ministry and a new speeding up in production. Judged by the figures and facts (very variable) regarding Germany's air armaments and organisation, we are still behindhand on the time-table which for new types of machines and essential gadgets covers a considerable period. To bridge that gap in our immediate production 400 machines have been ordered from the United States and delivery of these, said Mr. Chamberlain on July 2nd last (1938), will shortly be beginning.

Speaking generally of the Air Force, he said:

"It is not possible for me to give details of the additions which have been made to it, but I can tell you they are impressive and both the number and quality of our fighter and bombing machines is becoming more formidable every day. There is no cessation of our efforts to increase our strength."