

# WHEN ENGLAND LAUGHS

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CYNICS say that to understand the Englishman it is necessary to listen to his jokes, however painful that experience may be. Certainly the attitude of the man in the street towards the present war cannot be better illustrated than by the type of popular humour that has been evoked. As a student of the little things that conjointly make up social history, I have been particularly interested to observe the trend of that humour, and its brave significances. After a long experience of the overseas Briton in particular, his broad smile and emotional vagaries, I have been greatly impressed by the home-dweller's wholly individual reaction.

For instance, the man who seized me by the arm soon after the declaration of war, to confide the news that Hitler was in hospital as a result of falling over a Pole in the Corridor, was not displaying a flippant mind. Rather was he letting me know that war held no terrors for *him*. Thus humour is the Englishman's armour against adversity.

It is extremely significant, however, that a large proportion of the war-time jokes have been directed against Hitler personally. Humorous contempt rather than violent hatred for the Nazi leader, and for the leading members of his entourage, has been daily expressed by a multitude of quips, jests, sayings and even popular songs, reminiscent of the ballads on "Boney" at the time of the Napoleonic wars. Hearty choruses of such songs as "Run, Adolf, Run," and "We're Going to Hang our Washing on the Siegfried Line, if the Siegfried Line's Still There," have indicated better than any political analysis what is the spirit of the common Englishman. The climax of this type of humour was undoubtedly reached in the first days of the war, when a popular paper published full-page descriptions of the Nazi "Big Four" in the style of "Price on his Head" advertisements issued by the police. One of the most popular radio programmes weekly retails the adventures of "Hitma" and his confederates Funk, Fusspot and Bodkin; while popular parlance already labels "fatty Goering", "little Goebbels" and "Dribblingdrop".

But the story of the Cockney charwoman who enquired if it were true that Hitler had once been a painter and decorator

is perhaps the most revealing of the attitude of the common folk. On receiving an affirmative answer, she said reflectively: "Hm, yes, so's my husband. They're all the same." This is only matched, indeed, by the yarn about the newspaper seller in Ludgate Circus, who exhorted the passers-by: "Here you are—good laugh for a penny. Hitler's speech in full!"

Commenting on a remark by Goebbels that "Germans now know where they stand," a London bus conductor is rumoured to have said: "Yes, in a queue waiting for three-quarters of an ounce of synthetic tea." It was another Cockney who passed on the information that the German High Command would shortly issue a report on the flooding of the Siegfried Line, to be entitled "Mein Dampf". And much has been made of the Paris report that, whereas 34 inmates of a Saar lunatic asylum declared themselves to be Hitler before the war, only 12 still claimed that doubtful distinction once war was declared.

At least twenty people in all walks of life have attempted to tell me the story about the Russian in Berlin who says to his German guide: "I see that Hitler Strasse is late Bismarck Strasse, and Stalin Strasse is late Friedrich Strasse." Whereupon the Berliner replies: "That is so, comrade, late Bolshevik scum." But there is a slightly different ring to the reported conversation in a Regent Street bus between a woman who was expressing strong views on Moscow and the weedy conductor who eventually replied: "I can assure you, madam, as a member of the Wandsworth branch of the Communist Party, I happen to know that Stalin is playing the right game for this country."

The daily, or rather hourly, retailing of such stories certainly reveals the modern Englishman's grip of trends in international politics, as they display his capacity for "smiling at grief". Perhaps one of the most irksome features of this war to date has been the necessary evacuation of large sections of the city populations. There has been much anguish at parting, much discomfort and maladjustment, much strain on the patience of countryfolk. But all has been tempered by a running commentary of characteristic good humour.

For instance, there is the chestnut (already) of the East End mother who counselled her small son: "Tell your teacher that you don't want to be evacuated. You had a sore arm last time, remember." Then there is the yarn of the little lad who had been taken to a country house, and, as he was led up the magnificent, tree-lined drive, suddenly burst into tears. "I

don't want to live in a forest," he replied to sympathetic query. And yet another youngster told his country host that "the war will not last long now". On being pressed for a reason, he continued: "Well, father has just been called up for the Army, and mother says he never keeps a job for longer than a month."

Only the other day a friend of mine entered into conversation with a small "evacuee" during a train journey. The child spoke very seriously about the progress of the war, but said that her brother knew far more about it than she did. "He reads all the papers and knows all about them foreign countries and what they're up to. You should hear him talk to me Moother about it. Argue, argue, argue all day long." My friend enquired as to the learned brother's age. "Oh, just turned seven", replied the little girl. I myself discussed the war with a sturdy lad of nine, and foolishly committed myself to the opinion that it might not last so very long. "Ah, but we said exactly the same thing in 1914, didn't we?" he instantly replied.

Then there is the case of the small evacuee who was asked to write an essay on living in the country, and who said: "It does seem odd not having any pavements to walk on. But I suppose country people have not got so much money as Londoners." Possibly it was the same child who informed her teacher that the Equator was "a Maginot Line running round the world".

Stories like these, circulating in club and bar, wardens' post and sewing guild, have undoubtedly helped England to bear the minor hardships of the war. Even the "black-out" each night has not unduly depressed a people who can extract fun from the most uncomfortable restrictions. "Put out that light!" shouts an A.R.P. warden to a weary householder, who replies patiently "That's the moon, mister." And the warden bellows: "I don't care what it is. Put it out!"

I can vouch myself for the incident concerning a member of the Police Reserve, on duty for the first time, who roused a householder to point out that his windows were inadequately darkened. Afterwards the amateur constable politely took his leave, apologising for any trouble he might have caused. Just as politely, the householder remarked that he, too, had something to point out. The policeman was wearing his helmet back to front.

A woman friend of mine thus unburdened herself to a mutual acquaintance: "I must write a letter to Mr. Chamber-

lain at once. It is about those horrid people next-door who leave their washing out all night. It makes such a splendid target for the enemy." And after the raids on the Forth a flood of "pawky" stories descended from the North. One concerned the reason why the sirens were not sounded during the first raid. It was alleged that Scotsmen never took cover save during hospital tag days. And naturally the occupants of the train proceeding over the Forth Bridge at the time of the raid did not disembark on the southern side. They had paid their fares for the cross journey, and did not want to risk having to pay them again.

There is no doubt now that the Englishman can find a joke to temper any hardship. A waiter remarked in my hearing recently that even the newspapers were doing their best to banish gloom from their pages, by omitting to publish weather reports and racing results. It was pointed out after the Budget that since the "cost of living" had thereby been increased to 14s. 3d., bank managers expected a busy time during the war, advancing the 1s. 9d. in the £ that their clients would need if they were to buy a bottle of whisky after paying their income tax.

But the greatest hardship of all for many people has evidently been the Government's unwillingness to accept all volunteers for the Services until such time as they can be efficiently absorbed. It is stated that one business man met a young stockbroker from Liverpool and asked him what he was doing in London. He said he had come to enlist. "Good heavens," was the reply, "you must have a lot of influence."

This desire to be "up and at 'em" is clearly shown by the vast number of humorous sallies about the leaflet raids on Germany. It is said that one of the R. A. F. pilots who had been dropping leaflets returned to headquarters four hours after he was due. His Commanding Officer demanded an explanation. "Well, sir," he answered, "all was so quiet that I went down and pushed them under the doors." Another pilot returned much earlier than the others. It turned out that he had dropped the heavy parcels of leaflets without undoing them first. "Good heavens, man," exclaimed his C.O., "You might have killed somebody!" And it was possibly the same pilot who asked his C.O. later: "Well, sir, what do I drop on them now, leaflets or ration cards?"

This humorous impatience has evidently spread to the other Services; witness the alleged recent scene on the bridge

of a patrolling destroyer. The First Lieutenant approaches the Captain:

"Why have we stopped, sir?"

"There is an enemy submarine immediately below us."

"Shall I get busy with the depth charges, sir?"

"No, I'm sending down a diver with leaflets."

So England laughs. But it would be wrong to judge from this apparent light-hearted attitude of the Englishman that he is not serious in his determination to fight and win. Laughter can sometimes be a danger-signal, as it is always a revelation of confident strength.