



FRENCH PEASANT

FRANCE is essentially a peasant country. Both her faults and her qualities arise from that. I believe that actually forty-eight to fifty per cent. of the population live directly on the land. And to this I want to add that class of people who live directly on the peasant: the small town dwellers, the traders, the lawyers, functionaries, country nobility, or bourgeoisie: all these people are the servants, the leaders, or the parasites of the peasant. I reckon, then, that two-thirds of France live from the land. And the rest often rise directly from the peasant classes, and are very apt to retain the spirit of the peasant in their altered circumstances. For example, the famous French chefs of the great London restaurants are mostly peasants exploiting the innate taste in quality of food which comes from their having grown the food since the world began. Monsieur Lebrun and Monsieur Daladier are peasants at the head of the State, and behave with the persistency, the calm, and the strength of the peasantry.

#### In England It's Different

Look at England from that angle, and notice the essential difference. Eighty to eighty-five per cent. of the population are town dwellers. Very little food as you know, is grown in England. The natural leaders of the nation are the great landowners who do not live on the peasantry but who keep—with great difficulty as a rule—a small class of tenants on their great estates. There are no peasants among the rulers of England: only sometimes a workman from the trade unions. You can see how difficult it is to make the French and the English understand one another. They belong to different worlds.

#### Close To The Soil

If you want to see how close the French are to the soil, go to the mountains. English people don't generally realise that France is a country of mountains—and mountains, so to speak, move slowly. If you divide England and France into six parts (I'm leaving out Scotland and Wales), one part only of England out of the six would be above six hundred feet high, but four parts of France would be six hundred feet or higher. I know intimately some

# THE SPIRIT OF FRANCE

By DENIS SAURAT, in "London Calling"

*This penetrating analysis of the French peasant, the backbone of France, with its illuminating comparisons between French and English national characteristics, was broadcast recently by Denis Saurat, Professor of French Language and Literature at the University of London.*

peasants from the Pyrenees who, until fifty years ago, had never seen wine or white bread. They used to bake their own wholemeal; they used to take the wool of their own sheep down to a small mill in the valley. The owner of the factory kept so much of the wool for payment and returned the larger part as cloth. The village women made the cloth into trousers and coats for their men folk and into petticoats and bodices for themselves. And these clothes lasted not for two or three years, not even for ten years only, but for generations.

#### The Peasant's Self-Sufficiency

They grew all they needed, potatoes and cabbage and maize. They bred pigs, sheep, and cows. Money to them was not a medium of exchange. They never bought anything. They went to a small town in the valley once a month or so and sold something they did not need: a pig or two, fowls, a cow sometimes, and they kept the money: it was a symbol of wealth. This we now call hoarding: it was not hoarding. It was the accumulation of something that was a sign of success: like the medals on a soldier's coat. Of course, a great deal of this is changed now, since the motor lorries have made their way into all but the highest villages. But the spirit of the peasant is not changed. He had lived that way since the beginning of the world. He had accumulated the instincts of endurance, foresightedness, and self-sufficiency. Fifty years of change is not enough to lose those instincts. The English have adapted their instincts to other modes of life, but they still keep them, and that is after a hundred and fifty years. When you put the English in the trenches before the enemy, the ancient ability soon comes back: and it is essentially peasant ability. The English yielded a century earlier than France to this modern progress, because their country was flatter: they were at the mercy of horse transport. Contrast them with Scotland in this. But the mass of the French held out longer. They were only partly subdued by the railway train and mainly by motor transport. And they are not yet adapted to the mass mentality of towns.

#### Slow To Move But Quick To Think

Their rhythm of life is slower. Yet here is one of the paradoxes of the French. They are slower to move, but they are quicker to think. From a long history full of mishaps, they have learned every dodge by which man can protect himself. Now there's no doubt that peasant life is healthier than town life. The healthy peasant is one of the most cheerful people and he has been civilised for a long time. The French peasant has seen the Romans go by, the feudal system perish, the Revolution rage through the land, the kings go, and at last the Republic governed by his own sons. His wealth of experience makes him quick-witted. He loves his life. He refuses to have it altered much. He uses his quick wits in defence of conservatism. What he has established must be left alone: his land, his money. He opposes his aggressors with the qualities which he has bred in his contest with the earth and the weather. Few human opponents have the qualities of the earth and weather: and few can subdue the peasant.

Under the Great King Louis XIV., the excellent soldiers who opposed the Duke of Marlborough were professionals and younger sons, not peasants. The French peasant, when pressed for military service, had the reputation of being the worst soldier in Europe. He did not see what there was to fight for: he avoided the King as much as he could. But under the French Revolution the French peasant became the best soldier in Europe: Napoleon's soldier. He

knew then what he was fighting for. His land now became his: and this he called liberty. Now, what I have said implies difficulties, not only for the enemies of France, but for the Government of France.

#### Hidden Hoards of Money

A small country solicitor—a French notaire—in the north-east once explained to me the wealth of the land. In this small place of two thousand people, he said, there are perhaps twenty millionaires (please note, in francs). And if you were to take their money away from them, he said, their lives would not be changed at all. They would eat the same things from their land, dress in the same clothes, and do the same work with their cows and horses. Their money is a reserve. Their real wealth is in things: grass, pigs, houses. What wealth they have in money does not move about like English money does: because they do not need it to move about. They hide it. It is hard for the Government to have access to it. The French Government is poor in a rich country. In England, Government wealth, money wealth, and real wealth are all one: money is interchangeable with goods, and the Government just taps the money in income taxes. But in large parts of France there is no connection between the wealth of the Government and the wealth of the people; nor any connection between the money which the people own and the way they live.

#### They Hate Interference

A difficult country to administer, as you see! Fundamentally, French peasants do not want to be administered. They resent government. They think it a disguised tyranny; they can run themselves. They want to be left alone. In this perhaps they are more like the Scottish than the English people.

In the same spirit, though of course much more strongly, they resent the presence of the enemy on their land. They have had the enemy on their land several times in a century, and they all remember it. They demand from their government concrete measures of protection. They have no trust in words, promises, or contracts. They are used to fighting against the weather, which makes no promises and keeps no contracts. Now think of the English! The English are used to business arrangements based on straight dealing, among themselves. They trust promises from the enemy; the enemy to them is only the other party in a deal. The French peasant does not trust the enemy; he hardly trusts his own government. He looks upon them as upon the weather: capable of anything. So he wants facts and concrete reassurances. A mountain, a river, make a good border; at least have the Maginot Line, not promises or papers. In the last twenty years, the masses of the French, when they were aware of things, always thought the English much too trustful. Here is a deep difference: the difference between the English business man who has to trust the word of the opposite party, and the French peasant who will trust only the concrete fact. We shall have to remember this at the peace.

#### Protection But Not Revenge

But again, by another paradox of his nature, once the concrete fact is established, the peasant bears no grudge. A peasant peace entails no revenge, but it demands protection. Here I think the English spirit will be the same as the French. But the French will demand more concrete protection; the English perhaps will be more easily satisfied with pledges.

No tyrannical system of government can ever be built on such people. They represent a wealth of instinct, of strength, and of intelligence not to be lightly endangered or abandoned.