

ENGLAND AWAKES!

Written For "The Listener" From London By
JOHN GUTHRIE

THERE is no-one on earth more self-satisfied than the average Englishman, no-one more stupidly optimistic, no-one more essentially decent. I have watched him now for a year and a-half, in the state of constant alarm that we called peace when he was in a condition bordering on what can only be described as the jitters, and in the state of war when he is in a condition bordering on almost perfect calm.

Before war came he would have given away large slices of the Empire if he could have been sure of peace. Now that war has come he would not surrender a single inch of it without fighting, would rather die than give the slightest satisfaction to any Dictator. He is so stiff-necked that you would not be surprised to learn that from the day of his birth he had been brought up in one of those high starched collars. He can be led a mile by the nose but not driven a foot.

He began a war against the craftiest and most ruthless leader since Napoleon with a Government composed largely of amiable well-meaning old gentlemen who seemed to believe that Hitler, being the ruler of a powerful nation, must have been the German equivalent of Eton. When the Munich Agreement was broken, Mr. Chamberlain exclaimed in dismay: "I felt as if I had been cheated at cards." He had thought the fellow was a gentleman!

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IN his few brief weeks in France the Englishman participated in the most colossal defeat in modern times. But he didn't know it. That was the most astonishing thing about it. When the Army was brought back to him—and he himself, with total disregard of danger, helped bring it back in all the scrubbiest lot of ships that ever sailed the Channel—you would have thought he had won a huge victory. His face was one large smile. He had been driven out of the Continent of Europe, but he had got his boys back. It was cosy, it was like home again. The great defeat was utterly forgotten. In a few days it had almost become a victory. He produced such an array of reasons why it was better for the Army to be out of France that you almost began to wonder why he had sent it there at all. He does not do it to deceive you, he just can't help being an optimist.

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THOSE few weeks after Dunkirk were, one imagines, among the most critical in the whole history of the Empire. If Hitler had struck at Britain then, by air, land and sea, he might have walked off with the richest prize in the world. The army of boys was home but it was an army without arms. The Home Guard were on guard but they had nothing to

guard with. The Navy had lived for weeks without sleep, doing incredible work with tireless efficiency and courage. Hitler paused. Thank God he paused. It may have been that his stars were not right, or that the voices did not speak to him in the night, or that his heart was set on the theatrical revenge of bringing humiliation to France in the historic railway carriage at Compiègne and thereafter. More likely, it was the fact that there is usually confusion after a great victory as there is after a great defeat. A victorious army can only go so far without pausing for breath. It too must reorganise and reform. In those weeks the onlooker in England went round shuddering. The average Englishman went round with his one large smile. He had his boys home again. It was cosy, it was nice.

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THEN something began to happen.

Exactly what made it happen is hard to say. It may have been the stories that the boys brought back from Dunkirk of the flocks of enemy 'planes that bombed them day after day on the beaches, of the Tommy guns that spat red death, or of the mortar shells that plopped-plopped down like hailstones, and the boys couldn't do anything to escape from them. Perhaps it was partly the stories they brought back of women and child refugees gunned from the skies, for the Englishman is essentially a decent animal. It may have been the knowledge, clear at last, that war was on the doorstep, bloody and horrible and cruel, on the doorstep of England itself and waiting to come in. Whatever it was, it worked.

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SURELY never has there been such a renaissance in so short a time. It was like Samson growing his hair again and getting his strength back. Just as miraculous as that. In two months, three months, the whole nation put itself to war. Somehow, all at once, at last, it was adequately prepared. Guns lined the white cliffs, convoy after convoy of armoured cars and lorries rattled through the quiet English villages, canvas camps sprang up in the cornfields like mining towns in a night. Hitler had trifled away those precious vital weeks in dressing up the dead body of France for interment. Before he could drag himself from his morbid pleasure Britain was equipped and ready for invasion.

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NOW the bombs are dropping in fields and seaports and cities. The average Englishman is not dismayed. It has come and he can meet it. Even still the visit of an enemy 'plane is a phenomenon that he watches with curiosity and interest. When the first bombs dropped on London a short time ago, the people were not in their shelters, they were out on the pavement, their faces projecting towards the sky. Screaming bombs were



S. P. Andrew photograph

JOHN GUTHRIE, who here writes the first of a series of three articles describing life in London at the present moment. John Guthrie, as most of our readers know, is the author of two novels which have brought him and New Zealand some fame. He went to London about eighteen months ago and these impressions have been written under the hail of bombs. They are exclusive to "The Listener"

falling and the flames of a great fire lit up St. Paul's. But that night I saw no sign of fear in the faces, white outlines in the dark of the night, only curiosity. It was a free show, and these people had not had many free shows since the war. Searchlights were as thick as forests of silver birches. The pageantry of the streets had gone out, the pageantry of the skies had come in.

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AT this moment, as I write, the battle of the skies proceeds in earnest. London is having its tragic days. World famous landmarks are at the mercy of deadly explosives, life is in jeopardy for Londoners as never before. Their homes may be gone in a single crazy moment of the night. I said to a little London clerk: "Hitler hopes to cause a revolution by bombing the East End. What are his chances?" He said: "There's only one thing that will cause a bleeding revolution in London and that's if one of those bleeding parachutists comes down and the police try to hold the crowd off him."

He spoke for millions. London might be laid in ruins, England would still go on, strong, resourceful and tenacious. Hitler will never win by war in the air. There is more land in England than the square miles of London, and the people do not give in. In a Scottish cinema last week I heard an American actor in the film ask, "What is all this British tradition?" Surprisingly the answer came in a broad Scot's voice from the back of the hall: "We've never been beat."

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OF course they've been beaten. They were beaten in the last war in many a battle, beaten this time in Norway, beaten at Dunkirk. They may even be beaten out of London. But they won't know they are beaten. It is hopeless to fight against people who don't know they are beaten. It may be folly, this English form of madness, it may be sheer heroism. Perhaps between the two there's not much difference. But either way, even in all the grotesque stupidity of war, it is moving, it is even magnificent.