

Collier's

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Expectation

By Clare Sheridan

The feeling of "What next?" is everywhere in England. How will the invasion come? Will it be accompanied by gas? With it is the ever-present food problem. So the farmer becomes a hero, and cows and fowl precious as ammunition



A steel-helmeted A.R.P. volunteer rounds up her geese before going on duty

DURING the winter London, the industrial towns and the ports had their blitzing, but the country knew comparative quiet. The winged terror returned to us with the daffodils. "The better the day the better the deed" and so, when the sun shines and all the world is smiling, skirmishes are resumed in the sky.

But we—and by we I refer to my neighbors in this part of "Sussex by the sea"—have undergone a change since last year. We are definitely hardened. We tell one another that we "don't mind it so much in the daytime," it's the nights that get one down.

It is curious how every man and woman going about his work in the early morning knows just where that bomb fell that made us all (for miles around) jump at ten o'clock last night, and the one at two o'clock in the morning and so on—

How do they know? Is it the milkman? Is it the postman? And how should they know? But they do know and they are always right. One night it is to the east of us, the next night to the west. The only explanation of these droppings is that they unload around these parts on their way home if they haven't been

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able to get to London. We know that any one of us may be "for it" tonight.

But it takes a lot to kill the age-old habit of looking forward, and although we tell ourselves it is useless to make plans we make them all the same. I, for instance, have reluctantly assented to a publisher's demand for a new book.

I take my manuscript in to Hastings, eight miles away, to be typed. In the office five typewriters on five small tables stand inactive. The head of the office, an undefeated young woman, explains: "Top of the building—so they wouldn't stay." Too dangerous when the blitz comes, and it comes suddenly to these coastal towns, almost simultaneously with the warning. But "I'd rather be at the top of the building than at the bottom," says the young typist. Well, there it is, you may have your preference: Be blitzed on the top floor or buried on the ground floor.

The interesting aspect of all this is the discovery that we can get used to almost anything. I say guardedly *almost* for our propaganda has suddenly started an intensive publicity campaign in expectation of gas.

I have prepared for the food shortage and for the incendiary-bomb menace, but I confess that the possibility of gas overwhelms me.

I have from the very beginning put gas out of my thoughts and refused to carry a gas mask. But in a mad world growing daily madder who knows what the madmen may not resort to! I have attended the local gas lectures, watched the giggling boys and girls, the old women whose only social intercourse has been mothers' meetings, the old men retired from hard work, each and all sniffing uncorked bottles of specimen gas. Some of them like myself must have been sick for twenty-four hours as a result of overeagerness in the sniffing

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line. And have we learned anything? Are we prepared? I certainly am not.

If Gas Comes

We know that mustard gas burned the soles of the barefooted Abyssinians when the Italians resorted to this method of conquest. My handbook tells me that it will permeate "all substances except metals, glass, glazed-bricks and tiles. It will penetrate thick clothing in ten minutes. The respirator (i.e., gas mask) gives protection *only* to eyes, lungs and face."

According to the gas booklet the stuff will come through the window cracks, under the door and down the chimney. If gas comes, sprayed from low-flying planes, then I and my hens and geese and ducks and rabbits and pigeons will, I fear, be found with our toes turned up.

The military seem to think that mustard gas is less likely than choking gas, preceded by nose gas which makes you sick so that you spew into your mask, with the result that you throw it aside. You are then a ready victim.

The soldiers do gas drill and walk about the park in their hideous masks, getting acclimatized.

The gas propaganda has already affected some of us. I continually have the impression that I can smell it. Like a hind I sniff the breeze, sensing danger. Villagers repeatedly tell me how sleepy they have been feeling all day. "If there'd been a blitz I couldn't have moved, my head was so heavy," and gas was the explanation. "Perhaps a way off they were letting it go, and we got the back kick of it."

Of course nothing of the sort had happened; it is pure self-hypnotism.

Preparing for gas training is a quiescent process; preparing for starvation requires untiring activity. Townsfolks have recourse to shops and can lay in stores, but some things will not keep and many things can no longer be bought. Then, too, there's always the danger that the storeroom may be blitzed.

So during this whole year we have become more and more intensively merged in the peasant life of the community, sharing problems and difficulties. The sporting instinct saves us from utter discouragement. We are, as our prime minister says, in a beleaguered fortress. Americans can never experience anything like this because they are a continental people. Our island begins to feel very small and there is no escape. We must take whatever comes. Have we not taken blitzing in stride?

But a more formidable invader threatens, against whom guns and planes

AIR RAID SHELTER



are impotent. I mean the death's-head specter, famine. Against this threat we must work untiringly. A few years ago my French son-in-law was shocked by the amount of derelict land here in contrast to supercultivated France. England was agriculturally broke.

Today there is no derelict land. The government urges us to plow and even pays for the plowing. Farmers are at it from dawn till dusk.

Fortunately, my own land is not only growing but breeding potential foodstuff—fowl. These normally require special feeding. The catalogues list items that are now obsolete. Specialists used to feed growing fowl number one and then number two in turn. But we have discovered that their well-being is not dependent upon artificial foods. The alternative is a boiled mass, but this takes time to prepare. The government is doing all in its power, short of penalizing us, to stop us from keeping hens. The grain ration is almost negligible and the controlled price of eggs discourages egg production beyond one's own personal needs. The rumor is now spreading that the government will control the supply of potatoes. Hungry people cannot feed potatoes to hens, oatmeal to rabbits or rice to ducklings. These crimes we have at times been guilty of. When you consider that to produce one pound of human food a hen requires fifteen pounds by comparison with a milk cow, which requires only five, you can hardly blame the government for its attitude. But we amateurs are a tenacious lot and will not be beat.

With daily decreasing feeding facilities the word "goose" spreads like an electric current. Did not geese save Rome? They may yet save us. They demand no food other than grass. Anyone with a stretch of grassland can breed geese.

Already all communities with available brood hens have them sitting in rows on goose eggs. Everywhere you see flocks of goslings of varying ages and colors.

Last week the price of gosling at a local market went up to ten shillings. What will fat goose be worth at Michaelmas if the government doesn't interfere? Ducks too have an advantage over hens; they lay as many eggs and can fend for themselves.

Another branch of potential food with one hundred per cent profit is rabbit. They combine the dual purpose of meat

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and pelt. I've paid as much as twelve pounds for a pair of white rex rabbits on account of the fur. Since the cessation of imports, rabbits are wanted in tens of thousands. We really cannot breed sufficient quantities, and children in the village have started on this commercial enterprise.

Since the severe milk ration came into force we have acquired a couple of pedigreed Jerseys that I milk myself. Hitler would despair of a successful blockade if he could see my cream and butter. I may not sell it, but there are plenty around me who can share it with me.

When the Russian revolution hurled the intellectuals and the aristocrats into a void they staggered back into life as artisans adapting themselves in the struggle for existence. Now people of long-rooted traditions face new conditions which cannot be regarded as temporary. Life can never be the same again for those who survive.

Even as I write, great guns are booming on the Channel. The reverberating explosion has shaken the house, soldiers at the foot of my garden are feverishly digging trenches. When will this capital Something happen? We are all keyed up waiting. There are those so firmly convinced of Hitler's historical sense that they insist he will land here by air or sea or both and that the battle of Britain may be re-enacted here on the site of 1066. And so we wait.



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