

# Collier's

APRIL 19, 1941

## Workingman's War

Shanghai, Madrid, London—it's a familiar story: bombs don't break hearts. Come into London's dismal workers' slums with Frank Gervasi, where misery and squalor are forgotten as England's laborers resolve to "See it through"

by Frank Gervasi



**Hot food, cooked in communal kitchens and served in underground shelters at low cost, helps to maintain the excellent morale of English worker families**

**E**NGLAND owes her life to a few men in Spitfires. Everybody knows that. Each is grateful in his own way. Churchill expressed Britain's debt to the men when he said that never in the history of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few.

Britain's past, too, she owes to a comparatively few men—men who carved out her empire and defended it in men-o'-war, men who manned the merchant ships that brought food to England and carried away the goods she sold wherever men had money to buy or coconuts or tea to trade.

But England's future rests on Charlie Brickett and Minnie Cotter—upon the many who have toiled so long to provide so much for so few. There are eight, nine, perhaps ten million Minnies and Charlies in England. They're in mines, mills, shipyards, munitions factories and on farms. They're Britain's greatest army; their average weekly pay is about \$16. They're in this war as much as the men in the Hurricanes and Whitleys; as much as the men who are ramming tanks and cannon through Mussolini's empire, or those waiting on the chalk cliffs of Dover for the invader who must come or fail.

They live in a land where for generations there has been an insurmountable wall of caste between wealth and almost indescribable poverty. In peace their lives were dismal enough. Now they are more dismal than ever. Minnie and Charlie have been bombed out of their homes. They work harder and longer. They are tired and hungry and desperate.

OldMagazineArticles.com





**Gas-mask drill is a puzzling game to these nursery-school kids, who learn never to remove the strange gadgets until permission is given**

But the amazing fact emerges that they are unconquerable, as much for these reasons as for the fact that they're—British. It's an ironic circumstance that the survival of this "green and pleasant England" depends so much now upon those who live their lives in the black shadows of Stepney gasworks and Limehouse docks and Manchester mills. They have seen little of that green and pleasant England where men and women chase foxes, play tennis on velvet, age-old turf and shoot grouse on the moors.

They've seen as little as the small boy who was being evacuated from Lambeth. When the train got out into the country he peered from the window and shouted: "Look, look! They've taken the streets and houses away."

You may wonder why Minnie and Charlie fight on. It sounds banal to tell you, but it's the truth: They fight and will fight to keep their basic privileges—privileges they have won with toil and tears in the long years since the industrial revolution—since man began competing with machines.

They fight on for the right of collective bargaining and the preservation of their trade unions; the right to grouse and grumble. They have been economic slaves for generations, and they know it, but still they don't want to let go of those few rights they've won in dock-side and mill brawls, in strikes and strife.

Oswald Mosely tried to Black-shirt the workers of Stepney and Limehouse. The Communists tried to regiment them into a revolutionary machine to tear down "the bosses," but the workers ran them out. They saw that their destiny lay in a slower but surer fight for social justice. They knew they were no match for tanks and soldiers. They found that out during the general strike.



## Workingman's War

### Things Worth Fighting For

They didn't want war. They didn't want it any more than Frenchmen or Dutchmen, Danes, Czechs, Poles or Greeks—probably no more than the enslaved workers of Germany and Italy. They saw war as detrimental to their cause; they realized that England might adopt totalitarian methods in order to beat totalitarian attack and they dreaded what this would mean.

It would mean probable loss of all their prerogatives as men and as workers; a possible irreparable setback to their sweat-won progress. As yet, this hasn't happened. Britain's workers still are free men and what's happened in England since the war began gives the lie to those who insist a democracy can't function efficiently enough to overcome the advantages dictators enjoy in being able to conscript labor as well as capital for the war effort.

There hasn't been any conscription of labor in England. The short-cut artists who write our newspaper headlines might call it conscription, but if English labor were conscripted there wouldn't be any strikes in England. There are strikes, though fewer than ever. But when a latheman or a fuse-cap applicator or a miner has a legitimate squawk he can make it and have the wrong set right.

Charlie Brickett can still stand on a rough bench in the parish church at Stepney—a church that's been converted into an emergency feeding center—and shout that the food is bad, that there isn't enough soap and that the washroom towels are dirty. I know what I'm talking about because I heard Charlie complain—and heard Minnie chide him with: "Y'r off yer nut, y'are!"

I had lunch with Charlie and about 150 of his fellow workers, men who eat with their caps on and whose idea of washing their hands is a dip into cold water and a hasty wipe on the trousers. We ate at a communal feeding center where, during the September to December blitz, women cooked stew and brewed tea in field kitchens contrived from odd scraps of sheet iron and a few bricks. Gas mains, water mains and current conduits had been broken by bombs. Coal had to be scrounged by parish padres—school children carted it in wheelbarrows and gunny sacks—and the hundreds of thousands who had been made homeless had to be fed.

The lunch was a good one—a deep bowl of mutton stew with potatoes, carrots and cabbage. We had thick slices of bread and then pudding with stewed fruit and tea. The whole business cost ninepence, or about fifteen cents, and was equivalent in quality and quantity to a fifty-cent meal in any popular restaurant in the United States. Before the war Charlie Brickett used to spend ninepence for fish and chips, which filled him up but didn't give him a very balanced diet. Now fish and chips cost about twenty-five cents, and many fish-and-chips shops have been bombed. Since these community feeding centers



## Workingman's War

have been set up throughout the nation, along with emergency canteens and central restaurants to take care of workers in the industrial regions—there are three hundred mobile kitchens, for instance, in central London alone—the workers have been obtaining far better food than they did before the war when they earned an average of approximately eight dollars a week, which is less than they earn today.

### Bombs Don't Spoil Appetites

In the lull that followed the bomb blitz and the fire blitz, feeding methods, menus and organization generally were vastly improved, as were air-raid shelters—which, however, are still dismally inadequate in size and numbers. The shelter situation would be more serious except that everyone has come to regard raids and the moaning of the siren that precedes them as a matter of course. Improvised field kitchens have become permanent affairs especially designed for their work and similar to army kitchens. They're protected by brickwork or reinforced concrete so that cooking can go on during the worst raids, and the people of East End London have become as blasé about eating while bombs fall as West Enders are about dancing, dining and wining in smart hotels while sirens wail, bombs crump and anti-aircraft guns pump their shells at the invaders.

Such is the tenacity of human nature and its adaptability to abnormality that East Enders won't leave their homes, won't part with their children. There are still 110,000 children in London. Immediately after the mass evacuation in September and October the number was reduced to 90,000. Twenty thousand have returned to parents who couldn't do without their Billies and Lizzies, and if anybody tried to enforce any kind of law compelling parents to send their children away there'd probably be rioting in the East End. Most parents, however, have thought first of the safety of their children and next of family unity. There were nearly 700,000 children in Central London when war came.

In the central or congested areas only 150,000 people—of a population estimated at about eight million exclusive of Outer London, which is relatively safe—sleep nightly in public shelters. On an ordinary raid night about 250,000 people use shelters and on a blitz night, when eggs are falling everywhere and London is turned into an inferno of flame and violent steel, from 600,000 to 900,000 of London's 8,000,000 take shelter—which gives you an idea.

The effect of Hitler's bombs upon the lives of Charlie Brickett and Minnie Cotter has been twofold—physical and moral. Their normal lives, of course, have been wrecked, and the best way to understand that is to see Stepney. This borough of London, which is really a city in itself, is about as big as Bridgeport, Connecticut. You drive for a full mile along Commercial Road and another mile on Mile End Road and still



## **Workingman's War**

another along Burdett Road into Limehouse. All the way, on either side of you, are obscene remains of houses, stores, markets, schools, hospitals and churches.

Whole areas equal to large city blocks of houses in America are razed, with only heaps of rubble with sheet-iron Anderson shelters protruding from the rubbish. Most of the churches, especially in the East End, have stumps of bell towers, their walls peeled off to expose fire-gnawed arches and flying buttresses like the ribs of charred prehistoric beasts.

Off the main road and in the chaos of small, narrow streets the houses stare at you with burned-out eyes and you are reminded of Madrid. Somehow, in some small way or great, the sooty brick warrens of workers in the East End of London (as well as Coventry, Swansea and scores of towns in the Midlands) have been rendered uninhabitable permanently or for various periods due to broken walls, burned or broken roofs or the blasting of water and gas mains.

It is arguable that Hitler's boys were aiming at military objectives. Neither Charlie nor Minnie stops to argue about whether Germans were aiming at docks or factories. All they know is that their homes are gone and they hate Nazis as no one who knows the British and knows that their racial tolerance matches their social intolerance ever dreamed Britons could hate. So far as the workers are concerned Hitler isn't making war against capitalism, as he says he is. He's not the great proletarian he brags he is, but is instead deliberately bombing civilians, their schools, churches, homes and hospitals in order to throw the civilian population into despair and terror. Well, he has failed.

## **They Just Won't Quit**

In the psychological effect of the bombings of congested areas you're reminded again of Madrid. There, where as many as 4,000 died daily or were irreparably broken by bombs, shells, disease, starvation or firing squads, men and women came to accept the new way of life as normality. They just figured their chances for survival had been juggled from say one in a hundred to one in a thousand and went to movies and cafés as though falling debris and exploding projectiles were merely a bad storm.

Britons similarly adapted themselves to a new environment filled with indescribable noise and death and injury.

This man Brickett I've mentioned is no literary figment, no imaginary Joe Doakes. He's a pipefitter in a Stepney gasworks, and when he had done his grousing at the feeding center I asked him if perhaps he thought it might be better just to quit right now and ask Hitler to make peace. He looked with scorn at my clean shirt and semi-pressed pants and polished shoes and said, "Well, now you're talking about something else again. We're not quitting, not 'arf, we ain't." While we debated with Charlie a hollow-cheeked



## **Workingman's War**

man with an unlaundered yellow scarf tied ascot-fashion around his neck sauntered in with his hands in his pockets and chimed in with, "Look 'ere, chum. Just ye give us ships to carry our food and munitions and we'll fix the Hitler bloke fer ye."

I asked them what they thought of Roosevelt. I called him just Roosevelt. They called him Mister Roosevelt. It wouldn't do to quote what they said about our President. You wouldn't believe it all. I'll just report truthfully that the burden of what they said indicated that, next to a man named Churchill, Roosevelt is the greatest man in the world, for in England he emerges from the American scene in the minds of even the most inarticulate and uncultured Britons as a sort of righteous Moses.

In Coventry you meet the aristocrat of British workers. He's a skilled mechanic. He earns an average of forty-five dollars a week and lives in one of the rows of small six-room houses, each as similar to the others as a succession of smiling Dutch faces. He's considerably more articulate than Charlie Brickett and proud of his craft.

One of their leaders, the head of the Engineering Workers Union, calmly told me that labor is fighting for the socialization of Great Britain. He said, "We believe that production in this country must eventually pass into the hands of the people. What we want to see after this war is the extension of political democracy to economic democracy."

## **Labor Looks Ahead**

The British worker has been talking like that for decades. He has been the industrial world's most socially conscious individual. "The trade-union movement," a sheet-metal worker's deputy explained, "is a Socialist movement. We're no party to the continuance of existent inequality in the distribution of material wealth. And we're thinking definitely of the future. Make no mistake—our biggest concern aside from winning the war is what's ahead. We won't tolerate unemployment nor the least sacrifice in our privileges as free men."

The million pounds of German bombs that the Luftwaffe dumped on Britain's Detroit failed to shake Britons loose from their dream of a new world. They've clung to it more securely than ever. As one put it, "We know damn well that if we don't win this war we'll be worse off than before."

The labor shortage, which might eventually become acute, is beginning to make itself felt. At the end of February, after seventeen months of war, Britain began the training of thousands of operators for the machines that produce her weapons. Forty-two training schools have been started for women throughout the country. They'll be paid while training, moved into semiskilled jobs now held by men and the men will be released for more advanced jobs.

Revolutionary schemes have also been evolved by Captain Oliver Lyttle-



## Workingman's War

ton, president of the Board of Trade, calling for "mobilization" of two thirds of Britain's nonessential industries—producers of gloves, hosiery, shoes, hats, luxuries as well as necessities. Hands "freed" from such work will be more usefully employed making machine guns, ammunition and other paraphernalia of war. At least half a million, perhaps a million, workers will thus be thrown into the British war effort or made available for military service.

That Britain faces a desperate emergency—implicit in the fact that 48,000,000 Englishmen are fighting some two hundred million Germans, Italians and satellites—none denies. But that won't prevent them from criticizing, arguing, debating. Real trouble in England would come in the event that these prerogatives were curtailed. There might be revolution.

I wanted desperately to know whether the workingmen of England know where they're going or what's ahead. So I called on Father St. John Groser in his vicarage in Watney Street in Stepney. He's known as "The Saint of Stepney"—a tall, godly man of spare frame and white hair and sharp features. There are 200,000 people in Stepney and he knows at least 30,000 of them by name and holds the loyalties of 100,000.

Father Groser told me, "They're not thinking much now. They're thinking only of survival and of the imperative-ness of seeing this ugly business through. If they're thinking at all about the future it's in terms of security and of holding the gains they've made in social legislation which protects them through trade unions.

"They're wary of all labor leaders after Ramsay MacDonald deserted them, but they trust their Minister of Labor Ernest Bevin."

They don't read much and their relaxation they derive from "a bit of gab over a pint of pyle ayle" or a game of darts. The London county council and the relief agencies bring them films that are shown them in the larger shelters or churches. They listen to probably dull lectures by refugee Poles, Frenchmen and Belgians on conditions in the conquered or occupied countries with particular interest when they concern working conditions and labor's status.

Another Anglican clergyman, Father Carter of the Bow Common parish, who looks after 13,000 people—sees they get coal, food and blankets—told me the war had brought a revival of interest in religion. It's not a revival in the camp-meeting sense but a reawakening of interest in the Supreme Being.

He confirmed, too, what Father Groser had said and what I'd observed—that if there's to be any appeasement of the dictators it won't come from the laboring classes. And Winston Churchill has checkmated the Tories, among whom there might possibly be some last-minute appeasers, by moving in as the leader of the Conservative party. If anybody can keep old appeasers thoroughly under control it's Churchill.

This determination of the worker to "see it through" isn't entirely attribut-



## Workingman's War

able to fatter pay envelopes. His wages, with bonuses for overtime and working Sundays, have increased by from 20 to 50 per cent. But prices of goods have gone up by 48 per cent, and despite the fact that rents have decreased generally by about five per cent he's not particularly better off than he was before the war started. Furthermore, he has lost lots of sleep and considerable property, although he's being indemnified now for furniture and personal losses incurred in the bombings.

## No Place for Isolationists

Those who know agree with our own observations that British workers realize Fascism and Nazism are phony ideas which, if triumphant, would mean annihilation of their personal rights. Father Groser is a shrewd old skeptic. He thought so and so did Father Carter and the Reverend Doctor Cobb and Schoolmarm Ruby Hodges and Miss Grenfell, the social worker down in Old Highway by the docks, who runs a settlement house for children in what used to be what's politely known as a house of ill fame. Now it's a place where children get milk and gaily colored paper with which to make cutout pictures. Miss Grenfell of the Labrador Grenfells has spent twenty years down in the East End and she knows what the kids' parents think and that there are no isolationists in Stepney. They're as scarce as capitalists.

The settlement house was bombed the other day but Miss Grenfell got the place fixed up and when I was there children from five to thirteen were learning to sing a song called Jerusalem.

Minnie—that's the siren—moaned low and high and low and high but the kids went on singing a bit louder than before "—till we have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land." Miss Grenfell said thanks for the waterproof raincoats and ponchos Americans have sent. They're handy in damp air-raid shelters. She said sweetened powdered cocoa would be good to have and the syrup that makes coffee when hot water is added.

**Collier's**