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SIXPENCE

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THE STRATEGICAL OUTLOOK

The news of fresh German successes on the Eastern Front makes such painful reading when we contrast them with our own immobility that our tendency may be to interpret them with excessive pessimism. We should judge that Marshal Timoshenko has made the ruthless choice which good strategy requires. He reached his conclusion at the start of this summer's campaign that with inferior forces he could not defend the featureless steppes either to the North or the South of the lower Don. Accordingly he is not accumulating any big forces or much armour in an attempt to delay the advance of the Germans. He has harassed them at the crossings of the Don and his Cossacks are skirmishing round their flanks as they sweep southwards. But there is no ambitious resistance in this region, and the result of an awkward prolongation of their drive of communication the Germans will be able to reach the Kuban river and the foothills of the mighty Caucasus range. The economic loss to the Russians has been heavy, as we all know, not merely of the coal and iron of the Donetz basin, but also of manganese from the Maikop oil wells and vast plains covered with ripe grain. To balance all this, Timoshenko is concentrating his numerically inferior forces for the defence of the great arsenal of Stalingrad. He has checked the straight eastward drive of the Germans in the bend of the Volga. What may be equally important: the German claw which might have moved towards the Caspian from its crossing of the Don at Tsyonka has yet made no progress in that direction. The Volga as Timoshenko holds the Volga securely, the oil from Baku will continue to reach its destination by way of the Caspian Sea. As yet the only element of interruption has been the bombing of the river. Russia will remain an unbroken factor in the war so long as Timoshenko holds Stalingrad, Astrakhan and Baku. On his ability to do this during the next four months, the future of ours may depend. On this purpose he is, doubtless with wisdom, concentrating. But it is probable that the Germans have not yet thrown all their forces into their converging drives on Stalingrad.

A supreme Allied Council of War, if we had one, would see in Stalingrad the centre of its world-wide strategy. Unless by direct aid or a diversion elsewhere, the threat to Stalingrad and the Volga route can be defeated, our hopes of victory are indefinitely postponed. That is the case for a Second Front this autumn. What actually confronts us is a spectacle of dispersal, intelligible for political or sentimental reasons, but hard to justify on military grounds. Our sea power is inevitably mainly engaged in defending our convoys not in the Atlantic only, but in the Arctic and the Indian Ocean also. The Allies are building rather fewer ships than they lose, a reckoning which takes no account of the lost cargoes. Our growing air power is largely occupied in raids on German cities, whose value is still open to debate. In Egypt we have locked up our only active army, with a disproportionate complement of shipping, for the purpose of defending the Mediterranean-Suez sea-road, which we cannot ourselves use. To India we have sent big British and American reinforcements for its passive defence. Whether, given our failure to enlist the Indian nation, they are adequate for this purpose, may be doubted. To the Chinese, on the other hand, our help has been stinted, though their territory and manpower are vital for the eventual defeat of Japan. In Australia, again, other forces are locked up. But it is uncertain where the Japs will next strike. Perhaps at India, when the rains cease. Perhaps at Asiatic Russia, though it seems late in the season. The result of this dispersal, to say nothing of our useless losses at Hongkong, Singapore and in Burma, is that we have available for a European enterprise forces less formidable than we might have possessed, had we concentrated on this objective, after Russia came into the war in June, 1941. The failure to use last year the unexpected chance for a blow at the enemy where alone he is vulnerable, may be pardonable. But to fail again, in the second year, by reason of the same lack of concentration, may be both fatal and unpardonable. Allow what is due for the greater volume of American support next year in men, ships and supplies, it cannot, on any reckoning we can make,

balance the loss we are risking of Russia as an active military asset. On the other side it is rightly said that it would be fatal to make a half-hearted attempt, with inadequate forces, to satisfy the public discontent by doing something somewhere without the will or the means to succeed. The answer, as we urged last week, is immediately to give authority over all this sphere of war to an Anglo-American Staff of Combined Operations. It must include all three fighting services and also Political Warfare, which for any Continental venture, is a vital weapon of war.

The Nazi Pretorians

The secret circular, captured in Libya, in which Hitler explains to the army the special function of the S.S. Black Guard is a document of the first political importance. These picked men, all of them young, and all volunteers, of pure German breed, indoctrinated with the Nazi "philosophy," can be trusted, he declares, not to fraternise with "the proletariat" and "the underworld," while in times of "internal crisis" they can be used, as a conscript army could not be, against other Germans (Volksgenossen). Every tyranny in history has had its armed gendarmerie, but this force is unique, in that it is thoroughly mechanised, has had its baptism of fire at the front, and amounts to twenty Divisions with their own tanks and Stukas. Against whom is this terrific apparatus of coercion devised? Certainly against the proletariat, whether German, Czech, or Polish. But chiefly, we think, against the conscript army itself. In short, it is a Pretorian Guard. There is evidence here, stronger than the most sanguine of us would have expected, of the volume and power of the latent revolt, both German and non-German, which the Nazis have to hold down. Here is the explosive force which we have to liberate. A premature explosion would be disastrous, but it is equally true that this kind of human gunpowder can go damp and useless from neglect.

Labour and the Government

When 49 members vote against the Government and 32, including 3 front benchers, abstain,

someone a lunch and not to have to worry about whether one has enough money in one's pocket to pay for the dishes and the drinks that one has pressed him—too successfully—to take—that, too, is one of the freedoms after which many a poor man must have often aspired. At the same time, I can understand how an angelic egotist may achieve freedom simply by cutting down his desires and never standing anybody lunch. To free oneself from care about food, care about comfort, care about hospitality, care about all the normal pleasures of life, is one method of attaining spiritual liberty. But I wonder whether the man who attains it in this way is not simply a slave to an illusion.

The slave to Puritanism is—or used to be—as common almost as, say, the slave to tobacco. Neither of them was ever entirely free. The question is which is the nobler form of slavery. I should vote for the Puritan and go on smoking.

The truth is there is, as usual, much to be said on both sides of the question. The human being who can live happily without various things is undoubtedly free from the desire for these things, but may it not be that he is also free from the desire for liberty? Who, for example, would say that the Victorian woman who was perfectly happy without a Parliamentary vote had solved the problem of freedom better than Mrs. Pankhurst and the Suffragettes? The love of liberty has more often led men to increase their wants than to diminish them. Men who care for freedom have, throughout the ages, fought for their rights, and no one has ever been able to persuade them that it was a matter of no consequence to sensible men whether they won their rights or not. The history of the human race does not bear out the theory that:

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage

A philosopher with a free mind may make the best of things by telling himself while in a dungeon:

If I have freedom in my love,
And in my soul am free,
Angels alone, that soar above,
Enjoy such liberty

But this is merely the defiance of a free and gallant spirit. Not even the most silver-tongued chaplains in the Bastille on the eve of the French Revolution could have convinced the prisoners that, if Althea came whispering at the gates, they would be the rivals in happiness of the angels. I doubt whether the whispers of Althea would be a cure for claustrophobia.

And even the philosopher who can himself enjoy a measure of freedom in the confines of a gaol would not contend that men inside gaols ought to feel as free as those outside the walls. Good men have often defended both gaols and slavery, but on the whole, they have laboured to release other good men—and even ordinary men—from the restraints of both. The bird that lights up the poet's imagination is never a caged bird. Nor has there ever been a hero in literature who preferred being in gaol to being free. Thoreau maintained that in certain circumstances the only place for an honest man to be in was a gaol. But he never wrote a defence of gaols as good things in themselves. They were to him merely a stage for the fight against slavery. He accepted them in the same spirit in which Regulus accepted martyrdom.

I am inclined to think that slavery is no more desirable than imprisonment, though a slave who makes money out of his slavery might not agree. He might argue that a slave with money is freer at least than a free man who is poor, and that is a point of view that might appeal to some modern theorists. It is an opinion that is obviously held both by the rich and by the poor in Mukalla. Even so, as an old-fashioned disciple of Wilberforce, I should feel inclined to congratulate the unhappy wretch whom the Sultan has lately sentenced to freedom for the term of his natural life.

Y.Y.

PLAYS AND PICTURES

"The Merry Wives of Windsor," at the New Theatre.

This is perhaps the only play of Shakespeare that is incomparably better to see on a stage than to read. Twenty lines of poetry like *the descent in the basket* and the pinching by fairies, Falstaff's mastery of a language to convey fatness, and the bustle of the wives—what else shines out of the text? Mistress Quickly and Shallow are only ghosts of themselves; even the Knight's following, however their noses may sparkle, have paled. Yet a visit to the New Theatre leaves us wondering why this play should have been given so bad a name. It may not—certainly does not—do justice to the Falstaff theme, and there are deeper tones in Verdi's opera. But as a cadenza, as fun? The production by Mr. Esmé Church reveals one of the gayest farces ever written. It has been very prettily staged. The scenes flicker to and fro, as they should. The actors are active, and their knockabout agreeably teases the eye as a medley of accents does the ear. Among minor triumphs one welcomes specially Mr. Frederick Bennett's capering Welsh parson and Miss Ruth Wynn-Owen's Mistress Quickly with the Bow accent and the eyes of reverie. Mr. Richard Wordsworth's Slender is a lovely shy ass. The play, however, hangs on Sir John and the wives. Mr. Frank Petley, never hurrying, always at the centre of things, ruminates beautifully out of dignity and a burning liver; he never lays it on; after the plunge, for example, when he sits with his feet in a tub and swallows quantities of sack, the very red cheeks and the very white legs give the essence of a part more candle-grease than flame. And Miss Rosalind Atkinson and Miss Freda Jackson as the wives almost rival in style the Restoration gaieties of Miss Edith Evans. The Old Vic Company and their director, Mr. Guthrie, are to be congratulated on a very lively and successful production.

"Murder Without Crime," at the Comedy Theatre.

In the first few moments of this play, when the satin dress glimmers and the pinkish lights go up in the purplish room, it seems as though an excursion into the Never-Neverland of unearned incomes and night-club queens may not be worth while. But a dozen casual lines are enough to establish this faintly unpleasant couple and make us settle comfortably into their world. The situation of returning wife and threatening mistress builds up neatly and dramatically; the murder seems horrid, but not extraordinary. Once the ottoman has received its cargo the play relies upon the excitement of cat and mouse, but until the last curtain the mouse has a fresh scamper and the cat another pounce. Raymond Lovell gives a rich performance as the man who lives downstairs, wavering humorously between sadism and the solid rewards of blackmail, and Peter Croft is convincing as the rubbishy and driven murderer. Miss Joyce Heron and Miss Margaret Jonston have less to do, but do it well, and Mr. Henry Cass has marched the author's taut dialogue with a production as slick, easy and imaginative. Neatly constructed around a set of people who don't matter at all, the play is continuously exciting and as baffling as a set of Chinese boxes.

"Light and Shade," at the Ambassador's

A great artist like Yvette Gilbert could give recitals in which poetry, sentiment, ribaldry and pathos were mixed; and there is no reason why a revue shouldn't achieve the same. No reason at all, except the difficulty of doing it. Mr. Farjeon has had a shot. The lights of his new "little revue" are bright, indeed; the charming inconsequence of beginning and end; Miss Betty Ann Davies on the top of every wave, bubbling a nonsensical fish song, getting tight in Chelsea, filling the stage with imaginary queues; burlesque of Bleriot's Channel flight, surrealism, and the black-out. There is a subtle nostalgia as well as fun in the Victorian drawing-room of "Magical Lantern"—indeed, in all these glimpses of the past. So much for the light. The shade covers patriotism (more attractive than the usual theatrical brand), dramatic songs about Commandos and Christianity, a Nativity play, an elaborate Masque of Ariel satirising the B.B.C. The trouble about the last was that it was almost as solemn in its ritual as

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the institution attacked, and in general the serious numbers were too elaborate and did not mix well. This is a pity, because *Light and Shade* does extend the scope of the revue stage and proves at moments that lightness and poetry are not incompatible.

"Bambi," at the New Gallery.

There aren't nearly enough laughs in *Bambi*, and when we stop laughing at a Disney creation it begins to look commonplace. Bambi, a deer, grows up in the forest, finds a mate, escapes the huntsman, and we leave him with the arrival of little Bambi. He's charming in his early days, discovering raindrops, learning to skate, trotting back to his Ma; but then for long stretches we have to admire the forest and the seasons, and falling leaves or snowflakes and reflections in pools quickly pall. *Bambi* is in Disney's most realistic and sentimental mood. The voices are all straight; Bambi's Ma is a bore with fairy-tale intonations; the Great Stag of the Forest is a terrible bore; and heavenly choirs chant interminably without a tune one remembers. "Disney artists worked in oils for the first time in the picture," we are told; but a few more grins would have been worth a hundredweight of oils. There are, of course, lively and pretty passages, but the story by Felix Salten, from which *Bambi* was taken, has infinitely more character and charm.

NAMING OF PARTS

A Poem from the Forces

To-day we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And to-morrow
morning,

We shall have what to do after firing. But
to-day,

To-day we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all of the neighbouring
gardens,

And to-day we have naming of parts.

This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will
see of,

When you are given your slings. And this is
the piling swivel,

Which in your case you have not got. The
branches

Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent
gestures,

Which in our case we have not got.

This is the safety-catch, which is always
released

With a easy flick of the thumb. And please
do not let me

See anyone using his finger. You can do it
quite easy

If you have any strength in your thumb. The
blossoms

Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone
see

Any of them using their finger

And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose
of this

Is to open the breach, as you see. We can
slide it

Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards
and forwards

The early bees are assaulting and fumbling
the flowers:

They call it easing the Spring

They call it easing the Spring: it is perfectly
easy

If you have any strength in your thumb:
Like the bolt,

And the breach, and the cocking-piece, and
the point of balance,

Which in our case we have not got, and the
almond-blossom

Silent in all of the gardens, the bees going
backwards and forwards,

For to-day we have naming of parts.

HENRY REED