

French Tragedy

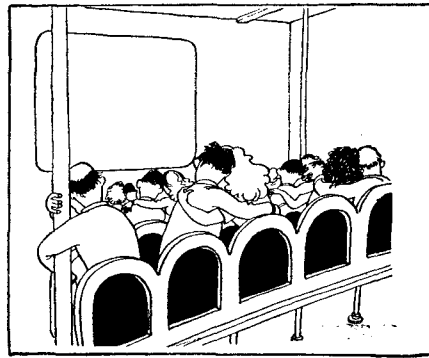
"Assignment to Catastrophe," by Major General Sir Edward Spears (A. A. Wyn, Vol. 1: "Prelude to Dunkirk," 332 pp. Vol. 2: "The Fall of France," 333 pp. \$5 each vol.) is a study of the military and political collapse of France in World War II by a Briton who served as liaison officer. It is reviewed here by Gordon Harrison, editorial writer for The Detroit News and former U. S. army historian.

By Gordon Harrison

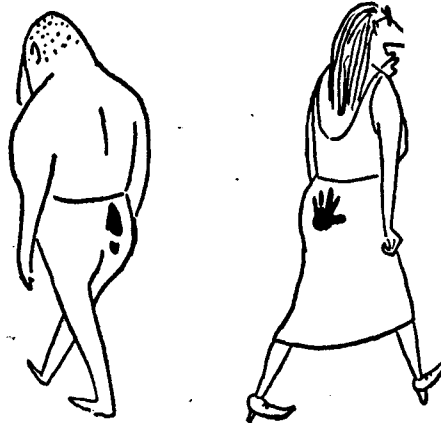
WHEN World War II began in September 1939 Edward Spears was out of uniform, sitting in the House of Commons as the Conservative member for Carlisle. His situation even then was peculiarly fortunate for an historian. A lifelong Francophile, friend of Winston Churchill, retired brigadier general, author of two brilliant studies of the First World War, one of a small band of anti-Munich Conservatives, he was already deeply involved in the struggle to save England and France from the appeasers, already committed personally and politically to Churchill, and already in a position where his intimate knowledge of two countries, his contacts with the leaders of both, and his own prestige set him at the center of the drama then developing. Shortly after Churchill became Prime Minister, and Hitler's armies moved into the Lowlands, General Spears went to Paris as Churchill's personal representative to French Premier Paul Reynaud.

Most of "Assignment to Catastrophe" is a day-by-day account of that mission. Since this is a book published fifteen years after the event by a man who has read widely and thought deeply, it could have been a full-dress military history. It is not. It is something both more limited in scope and richer in human meaning. With a novelist's intuition and skill, General Spears has stuck rigidly to his own point of view, permitting the reader to see only what he saw as Churchill's *alter ego* working among the leaders of France in the effort to stiffen them with the Churchillian will.

The result is, of course, not objective, but neither is it ever mere personal reminiscence. As protagonist General Spears had precisely those qualities most likely to illuminate the drama he witnessed. His two great loves—for Churchill and for France—



—Bernard Aldebert.



—I. M. Bosc.

TRES GALLIQUE: The cartoons reproduced at the left, although they come from two separate books—"Love from France," edited by Brant House (A. A. Wyn, \$2.50), and "Frankly, I Don't Get It" (Hanover House, \$1.50)—have one thing in common: they are the work of French artists. And, as you would expect, these and most of the other cartoons in both books deal with just one subject: *l'amour*. There are a hundred or so variations on this pleasant theme, some amusing, some obvious, some downright macabre. Sometimes one or another of the cartoonists feels that his subject matter needs a line or so of English to explain it. Generally, however, the cartoonists feel no such need at all and, whether or not they are explained in English, all the cartoons have very little trouble remaining—to use just one good English word—very French.

involved him emotionally on both sides of the struggle and forced him to seek the truths about men in something like their real complexity. His philosophic anchor—the irrepressible sense of being English—provided on the other hand uncompromising standards by which to measure the disintegration of his beloved France. As artist General Spears makes full use of the intensity which this personal vision affords.

THROUGHOUT the two volumes of the book the recurrent and haunting theme is why did these things happen? How was it possible that a nation, possessing what was reputedly one of the best armies in Europe and unquestionably one of the greatest military traditions, should break like an eggshell at the first touch of war? Was France betrayed? Was she rotten with too much civilization or too much democracy? Were her generals foolish, her leaders incompetent, corrupt? Or was blitzkrieg irresistible under the conditions then existing?

A book that asks big questions should not offer small answers. General Spears is aware that many things

were ill-managed in France in 1940 and for two decades before, but no one of the nation's manifest shortcomings meant the difference between victory and defeat. If the sicknesses of France had a common virus, it must be found in Frenchmen, great and small, leaders and led, politicians and soldiers. And it must be searched out in the heart, for General Spears believes it is only when the heart is wasted that a nation surrenders. So this first-hand report on what Frenchmen said and did in their hour of crisis becomes a study of the devitalizing of a great people.

During the "phony" war in the fall and winter of 1939-1940 a plan was developed on Churchill's suggestion to destroy bridges and disrupt barge traffic on the Rhine by launching chains of floating mines in the upper river. Compared to the commitments of the Western powers to enter the war in full support of Poland, the operation envisaged an offensive so minimum as to be almost frivolous.

Yet the French Government, General Spears reports, rejected even this as too bellicose! They feared it would antagonize the Germans and invite re-

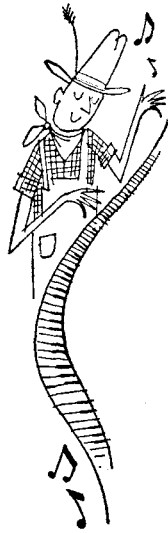
tiation by air bombardment they were not prepared to defend against. The decision General Spears attributes to Daladier, architect of Munich. But the fact that Daladier remained in the War Cabinet under Reynaud with power to frustrate even that much military initiative is eloquent of the helplessness of France in her need.

Although Daladier was pushed out in May, defeatism remained. The men of Vichy were already strong in the Government of Paris. General Spears does not suggest that they constituted a conspiracy subverting the nation's will. It was not that simple and it was much more serious. Defeatism prevailed simply because it could be tolerated at all. The key lies in Paul Reynaud, a kind of minor tragic hero who loved his country, hated the Nazis, admired Churchill, and wished to be strong. But Reynaud could never struggle free of the scheming, the folly, and the lethargy of those around him. General Spears was fond of Reynaud, believing him brave and often inspired. He sees the premier as both principal and victim, fighting against desperate odds but failing as a leader in ways so exasperatingly self-evident to one who stood at Churchill's side. Something, perhaps, was due to the sinister influence of Madame de Portes, a singularly unattractive *femme fatale* as portrayed here. But the essential fault was Reynaud's double weakness as an unstable personality and as head of a dispirited nation. Thus Pétain was kept in the Cabinet because France, worshiping the symbol of past glory, was indifferent to the present reality of a foolish old man. General Weygand remained as commander-in-chief because Reynaud himself, even when faced with gross incompetence, had not the imagination or will to find and defend an alternative.

The French had better generals than Weygand, stronger potential leaders than Reynaud. Yet Reynaud was probably the strongest leader who could have risen to head a nation which for twenty years had learned to make peace with evil by pretending that the devil at the door was not so bad as others that could be imagined. Weygand was the product of the chaos which a tired democracy had tolerated between wars in its military establishment. He was, like Pétain, a relic of the great past imposed on a disordered present that he could neither understand nor control.

Because General Spears writes wisely of men he writes more than a record of the past. Like all human classics, "Assignment to Catastrophe" does not so much read a lesson as hold

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Vice Verses

By Felicia Lamport



GREGIOUS ERROR

Many a new little life is begot
By the hibited man with the promptu plot.

SOUND AND SIDIOUS

A pianist who'd played for the highbrows
Caused a critical lifting of eyebrows
When he signed with a hillbilly band.
He explained why he'd taken this stand:

"I've had plenty of probrium, lots of solescence,
But not enough funds to buy delicatessens.
Time after time I have given my all,
But I never made much of a Carnegie haul.

"I loved being veighed for by critics I played for
But the time had arrived to do things I get paid
for.
I'll frankly admit that it's Bach-breaking work,
But it makes me pecunious, digent, and serk."

UTTERABLE WISDOM

The wife of a brilliant, becilic professor
Should never show anity too.
Unless she admits that her brain is the lesser
Their marriage will never stay skew.

SCREEN STAR

He was known from here to Quito
To both lowly and élite. Oh
How the populace would gape
When he went abroad cognito
In his handsome Verness cape!

TRAUGHT THOUGHT

Life would be such a nice broglio,
Running so smoothly and mok,
If I had a little portfolio
Full of negotiable stock.
And if it were tax-exempt,
I would be gruntled and kempt.

SHORT MORAL TALE

The businessman whose ways are licit
Seldom shows a handsome ficit,
Seldom winters in Miami.
Ah! but friends, his name has famy!

