

LET'S FACE THE FACTS

No. 9

1

**Address to the Men and Women
of Canada**

BY

MR. JAMES HILTON

**over a national network of
the Canadian Broadcasting
Corporation, Sunday night,
Sept. 15, 1940, at the invita-
tion of the Director of Public
Information for Canada**

Text of James Hilton's address over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation National Network on Sunday night, September 15, follows:

I'm not quite sure whether the title of this talk, "Mr. Chips Faces the Facts," is intended to convey that Mr. Chips, who was an old schoolmaster in a book, is facing the facts; or that I, because I wrote the book, am Mr. Chips and am facing the facts; and it really doesn't matter a great deal, since we are all facing the facts nowadays. But at any rate it is a teasing thought that a character need not die in a book, even if the author makes him, but can go on living and facing the facts of later ages just as long as people do not forget him.

Take the character who is probably the best known in all English fiction—Sherlock Holmes. He lived, as everyone knows, in Baker Street, London, about half a century ago—and a very pleasant time and place to live, believe me. The facts of life were quiet for Englishmen in those days. Distant, unimportant countries might totter, a few maniacs might throw a few bombs in odd corners of the world; but when all was said and done, there was little to fear while the stately Holmes of England, dressing-gowned and slightly doped for action, readied his wits for the final count with Professor Moriarty. And who was this Professor Moriarty? Why, just a big-shot crook whom that honest idiot Dr. Watson romanticised in order to build up his hero's reputation—just an elderly, stoop-shouldered Raffles! And that—mind you—was the worst that our fathers' world could imagine when it talked about Diabolical Forces and Powers of Evil!

Happy days—or at any rate, happier than today. For in 1940 the countries that have tottered are not distant and unimportant, but great countries and our own next-door neighbors; the bombs that are falling are not few, but in thousands and over the mighty

cities of our civilization; and the Diabolical Forces and Powers of Evil are not phantasms of fiction, but the facts of your life and mine. No writer could portray such a tragedy as that of the world today; certainly no inventor of crime stories can rival the latest newspaper headlines.

It is natural, when we realize these strange and terrible truths, to wonder why the storm should have come upon us—to seek to pierce behind the veil of outward events towards some inner pattern, just as the victim of a motor-smash may think further than the mere structure of the accident, and may wonder at the course of events that led both drivers along that particular road at that particular moment. Thus, in the cataclysm that has engulfed the world of 1940, the word Dantzig is rarely mentioned, because it is not worth mentioning. Perhaps even the word Hitler is mentioned far too often, for I would not exalt that man to the point of supposing that without his existence the world would have been a paradise. His name is a convenient symbol for the horrors we are engaged in fighting; but if he had died ten years ago or were to die tomorrow, the battle would still remain to be fought.

NOT A NEW BATTLE

Nor is it a new battle. It is, indeed, so old that if the great men of the past can look from their graves upon today, they must see much to remind them of their own times—along with one terrific difference that I shall come to in a moment. No, it is not a new battle. The struggle of brute force against the conscience of mankind began at the moment that that conscience was born—which was also the moment that civilization began. The same battle has continued ever since, and at various times in history the outlook, viewed in a small perspective and over a limited area, has doubtless seemed quite as ominous as it does today. To

the walled city of the ancients, pillaged and burned by barbarian marauders twenty centuries ago, the black-out must have looked complete; even to the historian, viewing centuries with detachment, certain of them have seemed worthy of the name "The Dark Ages." Yet, though generations may have lived and died without knowing it, there were at all times other lamps still burning—some too far away to be attacked, others perhaps too near and humble to be noticed. No ancient tyrant (and history gives us the names of hundreds) approached the power to put out all the lamps at once; in days when half the world was unknown to the other half, and when the utmost speed of travel was that of a galloping horse, such a total black-out of all that civilization means and stands for could not have been accomplished even had it been willed. But today this frightening thing is possible. It is the unique and terrifying climax to which modern scientific technique has pushed an age-long struggle.

NO BLAME TO SCIENCE

I am not going to blame the scientists—that would be too easy and too futile an alibi. It is not for a technician to hold back his skill because someone may misuse it. It certainly was a piece of sheer good luck for the last century that its chief invention, the railway, did not lend itself particularly to warlike purposes; and it is a piece of sheer bad luck for this generation that the aeroplane has proved such an apt tool for the tyrants. But the matter goes far deeper. Along with all the technical progress that has been made during two thousand years and especially during the last hundred, there has been one great science in which progress has not kept pace—and that is the science of human government. We have learned things, it is true, and the greatest of our ancestors framed and fashioned the democratic ideal, which is the noblest

political vision yet given to man. But the very phrases we use about it show how casually some of us have come to regard it. It has long been a favorite boast of some people that we muddle along. It is time to ask ourselves whether the inventors of bombs and poison gas have ever been content to muddle along. We may well wish that they had been; but that is only a reflex of the world's saddest might-have-been—if only wisdom had taught us what to do as well as cleverness has taught us how to do it.

I said just now that the democratic ideal is the noblest political vision yet given to man. Most of us believe that, and many of us are now prepared or preparing to die for that belief. But the trouble is that during the past twenty years, when no one had to die for it, most of us were not even bothering to live for it. We were just content to agree that democracy was all right—if, indeed we ever thought about it at all. We enjoyed our liberties as a man enjoys a nap after a heavy lunch—that is to say, we thought of them in terms of extra leisure, extra comfort, extra idleness. Even if we boasted of the superior qualities of our own democratic civilization we often measured them by the number of cars and refrigerators and radio-sets. We *agreed* with democracy, we were even prepared to vote for it once every now and then, and as an utmost tribute we were even willing to advertise it on our premises as a shopkeeper puts up a neon-sign—surely all that was enough?

LIP SERVICE FUTILE

We know now—or we are beginning to know—that it was *not* enough. We are already turning off the exterior lighting and turning on the central heating—we are already relighting the fires of faith to match the opposing fires of hatred. We may yet be in time. But to show what hap-

pens when these things are not done in time, or even at all—let us look for a moment at the pathetic example of the League of Nations. It was a far from perfect experiment, but it did constitute a step, at any rate, towards something we shall eventually have to have in the world, and most of us realized that. But the League sickened and died of that deadliest of modern diseases—popular approval without private faith; it demanded a crusade and we gave it a press-campaign. It might have sprung alive from the soul of a saint; it could only die of our innumerable votes of confidence and acts of indifference. It should have been preached until people were aflame with it; instead of which it was flattered until people were bored with it.

And it is the same with democracy. We have given it plenty of quite sincere lip-service, but not enough mind-service, certainly not enough soul-service. Religion is not the only thing that can die without faith, and democracy, which is a spiritual as well as a political concept, requires the *service* of its adherents as well as their acceptance of its benefits. When we look back upon that strange decade, the thirties, and further back still upon that even stranger decade, the twenties, we can see how gradually and insidiously the nations we call the democracies had slipped into the way of taking democracy for granted—until it became more and more like something turned on with the gas and the telephone and the electricity, all of which are highly necessary but none of which are the stuff to make martyrs and heroes. Thus, as democracy gained the respect due to a public utility, it was losing the sense of destiny that is the guiding star of all the great movements of mankind—even backward movements such as the one we are struggling against today.

THE GREAT CONSPIRACY

Let us thank God that this sense of Destiny has already returned to our cause. The fires had burned low, but they will not die now of neglect. Our task now is to defeat the Great Conspiracy that threatens to put them out by force. It is a conspiracy, perhaps the most gigantic in history, to reverse by a lightning blow the verdict of mankind after centuries of struggle—the verdict for the Defendant Individual against a Prosecuting Autocracy. This conspiracy, planned for years and put into operation with unsurpassed technical skill, has very nearly succeeded. One after another we have seen the trusting, comfortable democracies lose their rights, their freedoms, even their very existences after the sudden pounce; nor have all their riches or their boasted standards of living or their cultural backgrounds helped them in such an emergency. We must give the conspirators credit for having invented that clever psychological gulf between guns and butter. Guns and bread would not have sounded so well—because bread is the symbol of virility, of health, of life itself. But butter, when all is said and done, is fatness, and it would have been unfortunate if the democracies, in too great haste to accept an antithesis that Hitler offered them, should have taken butter as their sacred symbol.

But again there is little danger of that any more. We have wakened up; the only doubt is whether we woke up in time. There are signs from across the ocean that the Great Conspiracy is meeting its first real resistance. There are signs on this side of the ocean that the facts are being faced with ever-increasing resoluteness. Hitler has—quite unintentionally—done us some good as well as much harm these past few months. He has made the issue so clear, as between civilization and barbarism, that we need no longer waste time in apologiz-

ing for the admitted defects of our national life, or look doubtfully in retrospect upon certain tracts of our national history, because, after all, a sentry is to be judged, not so much by whether he was a bad boy at school, but by whether he can stay awake on duty. We, the democracies, were the sentries of civilization and were just dozing off; if we are to ask forgiveness for anything, let it be for that.

And another fact to be faced—to some extent a heartening one: the Conspiracy has staked all on total victory. Anything but that will sow the seeds of defeat—whereas, to the democracies, anything but total defeat will keep at least one lamp burning on a dark horizon. Thus the escape of the British army from Dunkirk was almost a British victory cancelling out the German victory in France; thus at the present time the bombs that fall on London will destroy Berlin if the morale of London holds.

NEW WORLD IS SHAPING

One thing is certain—whatever the outcome—it will be a vastly different world when this war is over. If the Great Conspiracy succeeds, it will be a hard, implacable, relentless world in which individual freedom may

disappear for so long that mankind may even forget what it was like. For centuries to come the only scope of the intellect will then be in technical discovery, and the only use of that will be for the greater regimentation of the millions. Truth, as an ideal, will be treasonous; as a word, it will merely dignify for a time the cynical propaganda by means of which the minds as well as the bodies of men will be enslaved.

If, however, the Conspiracy can be crushed—what have we then to hope for? Not an easy life—let us never make that mistake again. Nor shall we have easy problems—for the exact equations between freedom and discipline, between rights and sacrifices, will still remain for democracy to solve. But the world will at least have a chance to swing into a new era of progressive development—not an era of tired men sitting back to enjoy the fruits of victory, but of eager vigilant men watching ahead for further victories. For peace, as we have so often been told, and as we shall then find out for ourselves, has her victories no less than war.

To me, as an Englishman who loves America, one thing is today the brightest hope in a pretty hopeless world. It is the emerging shape of something that may

eventually be born—not out of a clause in a treaty, like the League of Nations—but out of the hearts and minds of men who fight the same battle in the same mood. We can call this emerging shape an English-speaking world only with the proviso that it is not what language people speak that matters, but how they think and feel and believe and wish to live. And if there is some historic unity in the idea of this English-speaking world drawing closer to wage and win the struggle of the centuries, there is also the geographic unity of the Western Hemisphere—an ideal of equal grandeur, overlapping and perhaps infiltrating the other. At any rate there is no incompatibility between them. When Hitler described the new agreement for air bases between the United States and Canada and England as the beginning of the liquidation of the British Empire, he may or may not have sincerely thought it was, but at any rate he was wrong. We know in our hearts, if not yet on our maps, that it is no sign of liquidation but of consolidation—the beginning of the consolidation of a new empire of faith and purpose—an empire not yet aware of its own physical frontiers but only of the boundlessness of its dreams.

*When you have finished reading this address it is suggested
that you pass it to a friend*