

Excerpt from *The Splendid and the Vile* by Erik Larson

Chapter 44: On a Quiet Blue Day

The day was warm and still, the sky blue above a rising haze. Temperatures by afternoon were in the nineties, odd for London. People thronged Hyde Park and lounged on chairs set out beside the Serpentine. Shoppers jammed the stores of Oxford Street and Piccadilly. The giant barrage balloons overhead cast lumbering shadows on the streets below. After the August air raid when bombs first fell on London proper, the city had retreated back into a dream of invulnerability, punctuated now and then by false alerts whose once-terrifying novelty was muted by the failure of bombers to appear. The late-summer heat imparted an air of languid complacency. In the city's West End, theaters hosted twenty-four productions, among them the play *Rebecca*, adapted for the stage by Daphne du Maurier from her novel of the same name. Alfred Hitchcock's movie version, starring Laurence Olivier and Joan Fontaine, was also playing in London, as were the films *The Thin Man* and the long-running *Gaslight*.

It was a fine day to spend in the cool green of the countryside.

Churchill was at Chequers. Lord Beaverbrook departed for his country home, Cherkley Court, just after lunch, though he would later try to deny it. John Colville had left London the preceding Thursday, to begin a ten-day vacation at his aunt's Yorkshire estate with his mother and brother, shooting partridges, playing tennis, and sampling bottles from his uncle's collection of ancient port, in vintages dating to 1863. Mary Churchill was still at Breccles Hall with her friend and cousin Judy, continuing her reluctant role as country mouse and honoring their commitment to memorize one Shakespeare sonnet every day. That Saturday she chose Sonnet 116—in which love is the “ever-fixed mark”—and recited it to her diary. Then she went swimming. “It was so lovely—joie de vivre overcame vanity.”

Throwing caution to the winds, she bathed without a cap.

In Berlin that Saturday morning, Joseph Goebbels prepared his lieutenants for what would occur by day's end. The coming destruction of London, he said, “would probably represent the greatest human catastrophe in history.” He hoped to blunt the inevitable world outcry by casting the assault as a deserved response to Britain's bombing of German civilians, but thus far British raids over Germany, including those of the night before, had not produced the levels of death and destruction that would justify such a massive reprisal.

He understood, however, that the Luftwaffe's impending attack on London was necessary and would likely hasten the end of the war. That the English raids had been so puny was an unfortunate thing, but he would manage. He hoped Churchill would produce a worthy raid “as soon as possible.”

Every day offered a new challenge, tempered now and then by more pleasant distractions. At one meeting that week, Goebbels heard a report from Hans Hinkel, head of the ministry's Department for Special Cultural Tasks, who'd provided a further update on the status of Jews in Germany and Austria. “In Vienna there are 47,000 Jews left out of 180,000, two-thirds of them women and about 300 men between 20 and 35,” Hinkel reported, according to

minutes of the meeting. "In spite of the war it has been possible to transport a total of 17,000 Jews to the south-east. Berlin still numbers 71,800 Jews; in future about 500 Jews are to be sent to the south-east each month." Plans were in place, Hinkel reported, to remove 60,000 Jews from Berlin in the first four months after the end of the war, when transportation would again become available. "The remaining 12,000 will likewise have disappeared within a further four weeks."

This pleased Goebbels, though he recognized that Germany's overt anti-Semitism, long evident to the world, itself posed a significant propaganda problem. As to this, he was philosophical. "Since we are being opposed and calumniated throughout the world as enemies of the Jews," he said, "why should we derive only the disadvantages and not also the advantages, i.e. the elimination of the Jews from the theater, the cinema, public life and administration. If we are then still attacked as enemies of the Jews we shall at least be able to say with a clear conscience: It was worth it, we have benefited from it."

The Luftwaffe came at teatime...

Excerpted from **THE SPLENDID AND THE VILE** by Erik Larson. Copyright © 2020 by Erik Larson. Excerpted by permission of Crown, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.