

THE FOLLOWING IS THE POSTSCRIPT TO
FOLLOW THE 9 O'CLOCK NEWS TONIGHT

Speaking as one who's earned his living in the streets of London for over twenty years, it's my opinion that the London public are definitely in a class of their own. Now don't get me wrong. I take it all our cities are very much the same because we're all of one tree, aren't we? So, if I say anything about the spirit of London don't misunderstand me, because in my own way I'm speaking for all. Only I must come back to London, for London's my City and I can speak of it with authority.

It seems to me that the rest of the world doesn't always understand us. They see us arguing and abusing one another. It's like a cockney man and woman having a fight in the street. I've seen it scores and scores of times. The man gives the woman a backhander and a stranger interferes, and then they both set about him. That's the same mistake Hitler made. When he set about us he set about the family. And I don't think he knew much about the spirit of that family, either.

Take my own case. As I said, I've known London all my life but I learned more about the real spirit of London through the blitzes in 1940 than I'd learned in all the years of peace. I idolize London - I really do, and I feel very sore when I see what Jerry's done to it. All those old firms that have been in the City of London for donkeys years were like friends and neighbours to the taximan. It's second nature to us to expect to see a name on a window - just as a man would expect to see his mate next to him at a factory. Well, many of those old City firms are all gone now. When I think of them I remember how the young girls used to be sitting in the streets at partly burned tables, among the ruins and the bitter cold, on mornings after the blitzes, carrying on their work just as usual.

Take a working woman I once saw down in the dock area. She was a one alright. John Bull's daughter, that's what she was. It was an early morning in 1940. We'd had a blitz the whole night through, and I was going up Whitehall when two gents stopped me and asked me to drive them to the docks. It turned out they were government assessors and were wanting to see the damage.

We got down there and the devastation was something terrible. There'd been tremendous fires raging all night and they were still burning but quiet now, fairly quiet. Well, the two gents got out of the cab and at that moment the sirens went again. Then they stopped, and everything was quiet. And then in the silence I heard someone singing. It was a woman's voice - almost on top of the wharfs.

Well, I thought, who the hell can be singing round here like that? And I got down to have a look. It wasn't opera sort of singing, you understand, just music-while-you-work, sort of business. A woman singing to herself, but fairly loud. There was absolute chaos all round, and just at that point a tremendous wall had crashed down and piled up. I walked round this great mountain of stones and there, at the back among all the miles of grey smoking rubble and broken glass, was a couple of little houses - slightly blitzed, but still standing.

And in front of one of them there was a woman down on her knees, cleaning the front doorstep. She was very well on the stout side and looked as if she'd been the mother of eight or nine children. She looked the sort who wouldn't leave her house unless she was carried out feet first. As if she'd been born in that district, and all her children there, and was determined to stay there - Hitler, or no Hitler - and was also quite determined to clean the front doorstep.

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That's the sort you can't beat, I thought as I stood looking at her, and then she turned round and saw me. Now I'm going to hear something, I thought - she's going to tell me whether Hitler's mother and father were married. But what she said was - "You ain't seen me bleedin' milkman around, 'ave yer?". Well that took the wind out of me. I'd expected her to say something about the bombs, or the fires, or the sirens that had just gone. And then she shot at me again, "Are you deaf and dumb or something" she said. And then I came to. "No", I said, "I haven't seen the milkman". "Well" she said "I wonder what's happened to him, 'ee'll be home in a minute (meaning her husband) and I must have his cup of tea ready".

Well, there you are! I made my exit very quietly and went back to the cab, but if I was to paint a picture of that elderly woman cleaning her doorstep that morning, I'd put a nice shiny frame round it and I'd call it "the spirit of London" or "John Bull's Eldest Daughter".

And I've another picture of her too! I was coming slowly through Piccadilly Circus, one night and it was one of the worst nights of the blitz. The guns were cracking away and the sky was full of searchlights, and I'd heard several bombs fall quite close. Well, almost outside the Universal Brasserie there was a red light flicking. It was a policeman's light so I went and had a look.

There was an old lady - eighty if she was a day - wearing old-fashioned clothes with frills and flounces all over the shop. The copper said "This old lady wants to go to the Dorchester, cabby". I looked down at her. She was a very old and wizened woman. I said "All right, I'll take her to the Dorchester. Bung her in".

The copper opened the door for her and in she got. She never said a word to me. We got to the Dorchester. The doorman came out and opened the door and I said "There's an old lady in there, doorman, help her out will you?". And a very squeaky voice inside said "I can manage, I can manage". "It's very unusual", I remarked into the back of the cab, "for an old lady to be out". And then she turned on me that sharp it nearly knocked me over.

"And why shouldn't I be out, cabby?" she said. "Excuse me", I said, "but there's a blitz on here you know". "You're out, aren't you?" she snapped. "Yes", I said, "But it's my living to be out". "Well, I'm out too", she said, as snappy as could be "and I'm living". And with that she paid me - very well. Gave me 10/- as a matter of fact. And then she sort of feebly hobbled around the glass door, and the doorman squeezed my arm - as though to say "Don't say anymore".

He told me afterwards this old lady had heard people went down tube stations in a blitz. She couldn't believe such a story but she was determined to look into matters for herself. So that's what she'd been doing. She wasn't concerned about bombs dropping, guns cracking, or anything else, so long as she was satisfied.

Well now, to me that's another example of the spirit of London - John Bull's daughter again, or, maybe, his grandma this time. The complete opposite to the woman at the docks, but the same character. And talking of shelters, it's a funny thing, but my own sister, now, when there's a bad night, she won't go down the stairs, not she. "I want to fall on the house," say's Florrie, "not the house on me!"

Now, I don't want you to think I'm taking all this too - well - too lightly. I've seen many horrible and terrible things since the war began in this City of London. It's not easy to talk about them. Many a time I've had dead or dying men and women in the back. The taxis were often the first to arrive on a scene after a bomb had fallen. Like the Cafe de Paris night. The boys from our cab shelter were the first on the scene that night - of course, we didn't wait for ambulances.

It was a terrible sight. Officers, wounded themselves, staggering out with girls on their backs. I remember one chap - a Naval officer - I've never heard anyone saying - taxi - taxi - in just the way he was doing. He had a woman on his back, the clothes almost blown off her, and blood was flowing from a big wound in his own head. He was tottering like a drunk man - just muttering under his breath - taxi! taxi!

Now I tell you that just to emphasise the fact that although I've seen bad things, I've never seen - not in all the bad times we've had - any panic in London. It was as if Londoners felt they were on the battle-field and they were determined not to show nervousness in any circumstances whatever.

Just to show you what I mean; there's a chap I know, a cabman. A bomb fell on a cab at Hyde Park Corner. It killed the driver and his fare. It blew out the back of the cab in front, my pal's cab, killing a colonel and his lady friend who were inside. I took the driver to St. George's Hospital. He was stunned, but it turned out he wasn't otherwise hurt. In a couple of hours he was down again at the garage, got another cab and was out working again just like an airman after he crashes.

At bottom, the Englishman's got a lot of confidence in himself, enormous confidence. We've had our ups and downs, of course. The taximan knows all about that. People tell us things they wouldn't tell their own fathers or mothers or husbands - but don't be afraid of that, our middle name's "oyster." People tell us all sorts of things, and we have, well as I was saying, to sympathise with them all.

Take the time of the collapse of France, for instance. Driving a cab in London then was agony, sheer agony. Many's the time I've said to a person of noble descent who was climbing into my cab - Cheer up, guvner, I've said, it won't never happen. And they did cheer up. For underneath, the Englishman has always been sure he's going to win and he's going to stick it till he does.

There's the determination in him, the absolute determination, to stand up to the worst they can do to him, and stand up to worse the next night if necessary, and worse still. But give in - never. No more than the 8th Army! I saw it. In that bad time Londoners were prepared to die any night or day. They just enlarged their ideas to include the idea of sudden death. And having done that, they carried on with the day's work just as usual. And it would be the same tomorrow.

I remember one night I was making my way down Bond Street. The noise of the blitz was like hell let loose. Half-way down the street I noticed a large obstruction. It was two taxi-cabs stuck right across the road. The two drivers were arguing the point. One was asking the other if he thought he'd bought the so-and-so street? And the other was saying, he was entitled to use the road as well as the other, and if this fellow hadn't come out of Grosvenor Street so fast this wouldn't have happened.

There was one of these war-time police there, patiently and longingly waiting to take down some particulars - quite a decent chap he was with a Ronald Colman moustache. I see all sorts of things in the dark - you'd be surprised. Well this chap, after trying, just said - "For Gawd's sake, shut up. Let's get all this over and have a little peace and quiet." Cor - I thought that was rich. London blowing up all round them and these three chaps quite oblivious. One asking the others to stop arguing so that they could all have a little peace and quiet.

And there's another side to that too. Sometimes when I hear people having a row in my cab I say to them - I'm very diplomatic - Now, look here, I say, look what's going on all over the world, people being blown to bits. I don't care what your trouble is, it's nothing to other people's. And, I say, don't forget you're in England. You're in London, the finest City in the world. And I believe that from the bottom of my heart.

But there, it's no use the Germans thinking they can put it across us. Or put the fear of death into us either. They can't. I saw them try here in London, and I saw them fail. And now they're up against our armies. Well! There'll only be one end to that. And then as this chap said in Bond Street, we'll be all set for a little peace and quiet.

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