

# LONDON UNDER FIRE

Written For "The Listener" From London

by JOHN GUTHRIE

ON the way up to London by the coach, everything was much as usual. In the fields by the road the people were playing village cricket. The large manufacturing city of Reading was untouched, only fifty miles away from the city. So was Slough, thirty miles out, and the Great Western Road with its huge factories. Soldiers stood on the roof tops, spotting, to warn against enemy 'planes, the guns beside them with their noses reaching to the blue sky. The River Thames, at Maidenhead, was as pretty as a picture, and just as still and quiet. There was not a single scar of war on the face of all this large tract of England.

The coach swept on up Chiswick High Street and into London's Kensington High Street. Barker's, Derry and Tom's, and all the huge stores of the High Street were intact, their great windows stocked with costly wares. In Hyde Park only the flowers of late autumn showed bright patches of flame. St. George's Hospital was still at Hyde Park Corner and Victoria Station was still all in one piece. There was not a single sign of damage so far to be seen, along this section of London.

St. Paul's, Buckingham Palace, the National Gallery, the Nelson Monument and Trafalgar Square, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the Mansion House, the Royal Exchange, Law Courts, the huge newspaper offices of Fleet Street, the Temple Church and the Bank of England all stood unharmed. So far. This was on September 14. One gives the date deliberately. One never knows now how long it may still be so.

JUST three weeks before, I had seen the first bombs drop on London, and sudden flames leap into the night sky with a terrible menace. That night the white faces of the people had peered up all along the pavements. Since then much had happened. There had been raid upon everlasting raid. London had been singled out with venom. I wanted to see into the minds of the people. When the first bombs had fallen three weeks ago it had been an excitement to the people of London, a free show. And now?

This week-end I found a deep change. Londoners were talking, they were horrified, they were angry. They knew now, none better, the death that came swiftly from the skies. If they had not themselves suffered their friends had suffered. They had seen havoc and the slaughter of innocents. There is anxiety in London, there is always anxiety when death is so close at hand. But it is a sensible anxiety. When the raiders come few people stand now in the open, they go

into shelters or stand under arches. There is horror.

No man can see the home he knows wrecked in a blinding flash or his neighbour buried under a chaos of brick and masonry without horror. But it is a steady and wholesome horror. It is the horror that hates destruction. There is, too, anger. When the sirens sounded I watched women fly out of their doors into dirty streets and swiftly snatch up their children from the pavements and so run with them to shelters. It was not pretty to see. I saw old women hobbling on sticks to the shelters while the black raiders whined above. Their old eyes had the look of animals that are being beaten and do not comprehend. They were trying to hurry, and their bodies wouldn't let them. I heard men beside me swear softly as these women passed and look away from the old women with distress and anger in their faces. Stories have been told of English country people giving enemy aviators who had come down cups of tea, or taking them to the local for a glass of beer. But when two German aviators landed by parachute in London that day I was told that men from the East End went out with knives in their hands. I can believe it. It was perhaps fortunate for the aviators that they came to earth already dead.

WHEN people write that there is no alarm in London they lie. There is alarm, but of the nerves only. The nerves must be upset when the bombs fall and the mighty anti-aircraft guns smash out against the sky. But it is not panic. The people walk to the shelters rather than run. They sit inside them with a still and admirable demeanour. They are so controlled they might be sitting in a church or at the films.

The men of London, A.R.P. workers, volunteer firemen, special police, man their posts in the open. They are middle-aged or bearded. The young men are in the fighting forces. These who are left are the old freemen stock of London. They are on duty to defend their kind, their homes, and the homes of their neighbours. In all their faces I saw no trace of unsteadiness, only strength and a new purpose.

BEFORE the light had paled, the first alarm sounded that evening. From St. Martin's Church, in Trafalgar Square, I watched the streets empty themselves of people. Only a few stayed in the open, some young girls chatting with soldiers, a man without teeth in a blue suit, some young men feeding the pigeons in the Square. The anti-aircraft guns thundered and the pigeons soared in consternation. Down in the street the man without teeth ran up and down pointing to the sky. Up there a fleet of Britain's fighters winged after the enemy like a flight of distant birds. "Look, there's thousands of them!" cried the man next to me, but strictly speaking there were twenty-three.



"... Few people stand now in the open"—watching a daylight air-battle from the safe neighbourhood of a deep underground shelter

In half an hour the all clear sounded. No bombs had fallen within sight. All the buses began to run again, the steel doors of the tube entrances were opened again. London came quickly to life. Once more the city opened shop.

UNTIL after midnight that Saturday the city had rest. Londoners need their rest now, so much of it has been stolen by the bombers. They go to shelters with pillows and canvas chairs but it is not easy to sleep in shelters, sometimes damp, always hard and ungracious. To-day Londoners are in shelters for most of the night and often for several hours a day. I have known a woman curved over with the curious reaction of explosions on the nervous system of the solar plexus. Nor can it be good for children to live so much in shelters. If the days of strain go on, and they will go on, London must send away its women and children. It must become a city of the hard breed of London men alone.

That night was strangely still up till midnight. I stood on New Waterloo Bridge with a sailor boy, home from six weeks in a submarine. We stared down across the haze of the river towards Tower Bridge, where a red light glowed on the bank of the Thames. "That fire has been going for days," said the sailor boy. "It's a target for him, you see that, don't you? But we've fires over there, too, lots of them, you bet."

WHEN I went to bed at one o'clock in the hotel in the Strand the night was still quiet. Quarter of an hour afterwards, dull thuds drew me to the window. The raiders were over, and in a guardian ring about the city, the great guns spoke. Their flashes blazed in the sky. The sound was like the beating of carpets and sometimes like the beating of drums. Some late-going cars raced through the drizzle in the deserted Strand. The noise was frightening, heavy. It was queer to think that this great city that had seemed so secure was now no longer secure and that its solidity that had seemed eternal hung now on a slim thread of Destiny.

In the hotel passage now, people passed me going to the shelters. A foreign woman swayed, her husband had a sick look, rolling his eyes. On the ground floor and in the basement smoking room, people were sleeping in chairs and on couches and on the floor, their luxury beds above untenanted. All the time the guns boomed thirty or forty to the minute.

Outside in the street was the empty dark and the menace from the sky. One felt like a child again with nightmare. The same absurd, impossible things were happening that always seemed so real... and this time they were real. Against the shelter of a wall in the Strand an A.R.P. warden watched and listened. "The guns are all right," I said. The Warden said "It was bad before. Jerry had it his own way. There was no gunfire, only searchlights. He could drop his bombs and people didn't know he was there until they fell. Now they hear the guns and go to the shelters. The Jerry has to fly high, he's getting plenty of trouble. Before, the bombs just fell down and hit people before they knew. It was nearly getting on people's nerves."

WE listened to the pounding of the guns. They were to hammer the sky for three more hours that night. Sometimes the shrapnel fell nearby like hail. The Warden said: "If it hadn't been for the guns there wouldn't have been much left of London now."

The guns have saved London much, but they will not save it altogether. Famous landmarks, lucky so far, will surely fall. Women and children may have to leave the city. But London will not be destroyed. It exists in more than bricks and stones. It lives in the hearts and minds of the grimy A.R.P. men, the firemen, the special police, and the nurses and women who run communal kitchens. If it were shattered, it would still be proud; even if it were annihilated it would still exist. London is immortal.