

SOUTH MOLTON STREET, W1

by Walter Brookes

READERS of *The Listener* should know that I did not spend all of my time in England fossicking round places with literary associations and that sort of thing. In fact, the greater part of it was spent amid style, fashion, beauty and glamour: in short, while in London I worked in South Molton Street, W.1. It seems shocking to me now that when I went there I had never heard of South Molton Street, and knew nothing of the significance of W.1.

But now I can say that South Molton Street stands in the same relation to Bond Street as *The New Statesman* once said *The Times* does to the Government: "Alongside and a little above it." As for W.1, you can visualise that when I quote from Paul Jennings, the essayist in *The Observer*, who tells how, in a sudden burst of enthusiasm for fashion, one finds oneself "being measured for the suit that will look ridiculous outside W.1." Just imagine a place where people wear suits that will look ridiculous outside it, and you have W.1. exactly.

I spent my time delivering gowns—one of the more important occupations of W.1. This took me all over Mayfair and most of the West End, and often I went down to the City, too, to the Chamber of Commerce, to see about papers for the export of gowns to Paris, New York, Italy, Sweden, Curaçao, Morocco, and places like that. It was surprising how many places gowns had to go to, and I saw that they went. But I also spent some of the time in the showroom, with Miss Blossom, the manageress, Coralie, her assistant, and Mr O'Flanagan, the London representative.

Miss Blossom knew her fashions. "Do you know, Coralie," she said, "someone told me curves were going out. I don't believe it, but if they did I should like it. It's a funny thing, but I always like what's in fashion. I should hate

to be one of those people who don't like what's in fashion, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," said Coralie, but she sighed. She was a very attractive young lady and had beautiful hair. She had bleached it grey and dyed part of it pink, and it looked—well, just *right*. You have to have beautiful hair for that style to look just *right*. "What wouldn't I give," she said, "to be away from all this? In the wilds of Australia or somewhere."

"Wouldn't we all," said Miss Blossom. "But we just have to stay here and stick it out." People in South Molton Street may differ from others in some ways, but they have this in common with people everywhere else: they want to get away from all this.

Mr O'Flanagan came in. He was a cheerful soul, Mr O'Flanagan. He had come to London from Ireland 30 years ago, from Tipperary, and there was no place like it in the world, but he hadn't been back since, he hadn't the *time*, he simply hadn't the *time*. There was nothing about gowns that Mr O'Flanagan did not know—no, to be truthful I mean there was nothing about gowns that he did know. But there was never a man like Mr O'Flanagan for having a drink with a fellow and telling him a story, and never a man like him for placing a chair for a lady or solicitously enquiring after her health or complimenting her on her clothes. He was a man of business through and through.

"Good morning, Miss Blossom, good morning, Coralie," he beamed. "What a lovely blouse, Miss Blossom. Did you bring it back from Paris?"

"Oh, no," said Miss Blossom. "That's just something I picked up locally. In Bond Street."

"Well, fancy that," said Mr O'Flanagan. "Just fancy that. You wouldn't credit it, would you?"

"Yes," said Miss Blossom. "I just went in and told them. 'It's no use

trying to show me anything I don't like. You should know me well enough by now not to show me things I don't like. Do that to other people by all means, but not to me.'"

In my ignorance, before I came to South Molton Street, I thought shop assistants tried to show people things they do like, but apparently they try to show things people *don't* like, and they shouldn't be allowed to get away with it.

But the mention of Paris reminded me of something. Goodness! I had forgotten to go down to the City to see about the papers for those gowns to go to Paris. I tore off. Why, people in Paris might be reduced to wearing things they picked up locally!

I was taking it easy coming back, enjoying the sunshine, for it was mid-August, and at that time, of course, there is nobody in London. It may be difficult to envisage London with nobody in it, but that's how it is, except, of course, for a few key people such as Miss Blossom, Coralie, and myself, who have to keep things moving and help to maintain England's industrial supremacy. The others are doing their duty by taking a break and having their annual holidays at the seaside or in the country, where it is always raining at this time, so that they are prevented from overdoing things and thus get a chance to build up for the year's efforts. It is absolutely not done—and that is the end of the matter—to stay in London in the sunshine in August if you can possibly manage to get away, any more than it is to leave London in the winter unless you are carried out on a stretcher.

"Never give a penny to the street musicians," Miss Blossom told me. "They leave London in the winter and go away to the south of France while we

have to stay here with our noses to the grindstone."

Anyhow, as I was walking back, enjoying the sunshine, I ran into Tootler, a key man in coats as I was in gowns.

"Know where I'm going?" he asked. "Off to Claridge's. Usual job."

You will no doubt have heard of Claridge's, where the Duke of Windsor always stays and so on, but you may not know what a hospitable place it is. In fact, sometimes they simply won't let their customers go until somebody arrives with a bribe and brings a taxi to make sure the parting guest is comfortable. It was often this way with Tootler's boss's brother when he came in from the country or wherever he stayed. Claridge's was just round the corner, but I was always afraid to go in for that reason.

You got all sorts of people in South Molton Street. Greta Garbo used to come to the shop of W. Tubb Ltd., to buy polo-necked sweaters and things like that. But I always walked over to the other side of the street when she stepped out of her car. Too familiar a manner. Always wanting to stop and have a chat. I can say that that sort of thing did not go down in South Molton Street.

The old-established firm of W. Tubb Ltd., had a wonderful business, but some said it was all built on advertising. Certainly their advertising was brilliantly done, and they said that Mr Tubb did not even employ an agency, but did it himself. I would pick up a woman's magazine and read: "W. Tubb, Ltd. Scotch Woollens. South Molton Street, W.1. Telephone Mayfair 9999."

How forcefully and vigorously, and yet how subtly the quality and style of Mr Tubb's goods and the service he gave were conveyed. The Americans, hardened as they were to advertising, had their sales resistance broken down by this, and crowded his shop.

Mr Tubb's shop had a plate on it stating that William Blake, poet and painter, once lived there. But that was

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