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### BLITZ

The fire was a red bank in the grate. Soon it would collapse in the centre, and there were two hotly-contrasted schools of thought, one advocating immediate replenishment while the other, legs moving uncomfortably in the scarlet heat, effectively protested. We sat in a semi-circle of chairs with army blankets thrown over our shoulders, dreamily retailing stale obscenities. Beer winked comfortably in the firelight, and Newman was sluggishly wolfing his third pork pie. It was cosy and intimate in the firelight. There was a sleepy atmosphere of familiarity and peace. Next door they were noisily playing pontoon by the light of a candle.

The electric lights had gone half an hour before. We had watched them flicker, die down to glowing filaments, finally black out altogether. Outside four flares hung in frosty air, shells cracking round them and tiny red suns describing apathetic parabolas against the stars. Bombers surged constantly overhead, swinging out for another run-in on Southampton. Already there was a dull glow in the southern sky.

Captain Leigh swept in with an entourage of bustle. It was obvious immediately, by the exultance in his big brown eyes, that he had thought of something brilliant. Recalling his propensity for playing with unexploded land-mines I shuddered a little. Fears, however, were groundless. There were no time-bombs to detonate. Volunteers were wanted for a small party to penetrate the blitz and give any assistance necessary to the Southampton Home Guard.

We collected in the stark gloom of the Drill Hall, checking over gas-masks, tin-hats and ammunition. Leigh was depressingly serious. Names were taken by the Orderly Officer in charge, in order that the identity of possible missing might be clearly established. Leigh warned us.

"There's still time for anyone with doubts to back out. It's a bit sticky down there, and you may see some pretty horrible sights. If you want to eat, remember to keep clear of your uniform."

In ten stomachs the half-digested recollections of pork pies heaved in anticipation. Then we were straggling out of the Drill Hall to H.Q., feeling the frosty air against our faces the more vividly because of that throbbing crimson on the horizon.

At H.Q. I was fitted up with a greatcoat. The owner was not eager, but not averse to lending it. "Rather you than me", he said. Privately I shared his discretion. But I shrugged heroically. As well to be bombed for a lion as a lamb.

Only one car was available. I was instructed to secure another, and such was my mental condition that, despite knowing the place well, I knocked two other shopkeepers up before finding our Transport Officer. When I did find him he was very dubious about everything. Only he or Alan (his son) could use the car. Manfully I set out to find Alan. When I found him he explained that he had had little sleep for two nights and had to attend a Home Guard cadre in the morning. Then he came back with me to get the car.

Despite an embarrassing but understandable reluctance on his father's part to let him go he got the car out eventually. There were four of us. Alan himself, lance corporal, Corporal Newman, Volunteer Mutter, young and idiotic, and my corporal self. In the other car had gone Captains Woodley and Leigh, Corporals Harry Collins, Baster and Tommy Wright, and Volunteer Carpenter. Recruit Cook was cursing us for leaving him behind.

We swung out on to the main east road and were stopped immediately. She was young, pretty, appealing and desolate. She had to get to Romsey. Alan was artless and apologetic, explaining that we were for Southampton and, anyway, full

up. She wouldn't mind sitting on our knees. We were very regretful, but.... She could pay us. Alan snorted, and we drove on reminiscing.

Alan handled the car beautifully. Soon we were in Chandlersford, and swinging right towards the scarlet horizon. We passed the heavy gun emplacements with anxious exhortations to Alan not to be frightened if the guns went off. The glow was deepening. We passed fire engines travelling at a snail's pace and came down the wide sweep of the upper reaches of the Avenue well in the middle of the road. At Burgess Road crossing the traffic lights were still functioning, to our amazement. "We'll have to be carefull of stranded trans", said Alan, and simultaneously grazed one at thirty miles an hour.

The fires were breaking up, and we could see large blazes ahead on either side. Guns fired desultorily as we neared the town itself, but it was obvious that we were coming in during a lull. The lull broke with startling intensity as we turned right off the main road to circumvent the centre of the blitz. Bombs whistled and splashed on our left, bringing mental pictures of telescoped cars.

There was no moon but hundreds of tiny blazes mingled with the main conflagrations to light up our path. A detached villa-type house was blazing, and as we passed it we looked in with morbid curiosity. There was only the shell left, and all the little paraphernalia of pictures and chairs and curtains might never have existed. But there was no-one in the street, no-one taking the slightest notice. I recalled Eastleigh, the Fire Brigade turning out to deal with a bombed shed, and didn't feel like smiling.

From that point the fires were continuous, some lining the road and others further back in the tangle of houses. I was completely lost, my meagre knowledge of the town confounded by the shifting lambent glow. Alan was serenely capable, swerving occasionally. "That was a crater." At my side Nitty Nutter was singing monotonously as the bombs fell, "Bang away Lulu, bang away Lulu". The rhythm was diverting for a time, then excruciating. "For Christ's sake lay him out", Newman called from the front. We scuffled feebly, like puppies in a forest fire.

I asked Alan where we were. "Hill Lane", he replied, "I came this way on cadre this afternoon. The corner just ahead had a bomb in last week's raid." We eyed the corner with interest. It did not exist. In its place was a field of rubble. "Guess it's had some more bombs", Alan remarked shakily.

"This must be like going over the top", interjected Newman. We debated the point academically. "I've always thought machine-gun fire would be the worst", I said. "No", Alan declared emphatically, "bayonet-fighting." I argued its obsolescence, from Tom Intringham and World Review. "They're teaching us on cadre that the bayonet will win this war", countered Alan. I was indignant, as usual, against reactionary authority, and said rude things about the cadre and all its connections. My invective was lost in the grind of a bomb.

We came into the road leading to Southampton H.Q., Hamilton House, missing another crater by inches. Hamilton House was curiously twisted in appearance, sheltering beside the stygian bulk of the Empire Cinema. Inside, this strange, almost 4th-dimensional twisting was accentuated by a muffling blackness. Curtains flapped in odd places and nothing seemed to run straight. One saw, seemingly remote beyond infinite passages, fires snouldering dimly in grates. A false step brought one into a circle of men, silent as corpses in dim firelight. Crouching to find the right door, and a comparative flood of light from a storm-lantern and many candles. The room was full of people sitting round an immense fire, or making tea. The Southampton Commander was ecstatically gratefully. "It's grand of you, grand", he repeated. "Make these boys some tea, Freda. Come and see the parachute flare we shot down."

We admired the flare duly, Newman offering intelligent remarks which the rest of us didn't understand. The silk of the parachute was soft and white, and the flare itself looked like a row of tin cans. We backed out and waited for tea. Freda handed it to us, smiling. She was plump, brunette and thirtyish, with horn-rimmed

spectacles and slightly-protruding teeth. Her smile was confiding and rather sensual. I basked in the warmth of it.

The guard-room was displayed, more solid than our own and decorated with nudes, doubtless for reasons of art. I went out on guard at the rear of the building and watched the flame pall drifting over the town. The twin cylinders of the power-house were etched phallically against the heat, obstinately unhit. As I leaned on my rifle the throb of bombers returned and I retired hastily to the doorway of the armoury. The question of being surrounded by such a barrier of high explosive material hardly occurred to me. A direct hit from a bomb would not require the added incentive of grenades, AW bombs and Molotoff Cocktails. Bombs shrieked through the air and I crouched inanely, terror evenly engaged with a refusal to look ridiculous by hugging the ground. Then they were over and I walked nonchalantly out. The third time I was sufficiently acclimatised to adopt a strained belly-down recumbency, like the intermediate stage in an arms bend exercise. The whistle crashed down the scale to a grinding rear and the floor heaved, rolling me over threateningly. I got up nervously in time to meet the flood of enquiries. It was established that a bomb had fallen next door on the Empire and we were all hysterically cheerful about it. The barman examined his canteen, and called us in to see it. "Look", he said happily, pointing to a small hill of smashed bottles and glasses. "They did the same bloody thing last Saturday. Bigger the bastards!"

I went in for another cup of tea, and when I stumbled out again my relief reported a fire in the houses some thirty yards away. We watched it blossom out of a bedroom window, and reported. There was nothing to be done, but Leigh and Tommy Wright went down to help. A downstairs room was cleared, a canary and Sunday joint being rescued. Leigh confided afterwards that it was bigger than his missus could afford. Dashing out with the canary they found the owner of the house dolefully surveying the incendiarianism which, had he had his wits about him, he might have prevented at the beginning. "Anything else?" Leigh gasped. "Well," he ruminated, "there's the piano...." The fire spread voraciously along the terrace, remaining dangerously constant with regard to our ammunition. Smoke billowed futilely out of two chimneys, which leaned perilously outwards.

The Blitz was dying down, if the fires weren't. Leigh, Harry Collins and Alan disappeared on an inspection of damage and returned serious. The rest of us were clamouring to get away and finally got permission. Even under the strain I could not repress a twinge of satisfaction that I, the despised god-forsaken intellectual, should be put in charge. We trekked up towards the Civic Centre, straggling along the middle of the road.

Just at the corner a house had been laid flat by a bomb. It looked infinitely sadder and more tragic than the fires all round, which were at least warm on a very cold night. The Civic Centre seemed to have suffered no further damage, and I heaved a very personal sigh of relief which had been repressed all night. Concrete blocks simulated antiquity on the lawns, and a huge crater blocked the road. Just beyond the Art School was brilliantly on fire, its flaming interior attracting a larger and more catholic crowd than it had ever done in peace. Outlined against the fire were groups of people hugging a few blankets or an armchair. One moved unobtrusively amongst them, hearing everywhere indications of bewilderment and annoyance. "What shall we do?" was the key-phrase. I saw no weeping.

One wall was still standing of a brewery, and a pole sticking out from it was burning at the end. People were amused. "Put that light out", they called. A hose ran past the non-existent front door and, from a leak, squirted a pitiful jet on the smouldering interior. We beat round into the High Street.

Here the damage was catastrophic. Fires in the big stores ran the whole length with only sporadic breaks. The firemen were heroic but hopeless. We worked further down. As we reached the Regal Cinema, still miraculously untouched with a church beside it, a wall just ahead collapsed outwards, flinging blocks to unbelievable dis-

tances. From that point on the street was a twisted river of rubble and wood, with torn books and trinkets woven into it. We stumbled over it in army boots through an ever-thickening cloud of smoke. BOOTS, we saw, was untouched apart from broken windows. We pushed ahead into the smoke, and were lost except for vocal contact.

The smoke was choking and blinding, with black smuts and fire embers floating in its tawny fog. We agreed to turn back, and for a moment I was lost, choking and stumbling helplessly over the grotesque stone. Chaos all round, and the shifting, insubstantial rubble beneath. Eighteen, unreasonably, seemed an uncommonly young age to die at. Then the smoke thinned into the steady drizzle of spray from the hoses.

Back up the High Street, avoiding leaning walls. Two policemen fell in with us for a time. "On duty?" We assented. "Watching for looters, I s'pose? Orders to shoot on sight?" We agreed importantly. "Bloody good thing, too." I attempted a discussion on the contrasting ethical values involved in picking up a chomise from a store supporting several millionaires, and the violation of small, bombed-out houses, but could see it was not going to be successful. The other policeman, young and well fed, spoke. "I don't believe in Hell, but by Christ the people who started this will roast in torment." I saw what he meant. Curiously I heard no talk of reprisals. We were too numbed and shattered to want anything but a respite. Not that they wanted peace. The possibility of enslavement to a type that could run the length of a town dropping bombs so relentlessly on civilian targets stiffened them if anything.

The Forum was intact, but a thin pyre of smoke rose from the top. All along that block fires munched steadily and, with walls leaning outwards all the way, Newman and I detoured round the back. We passed buses and trams scorched like living organisms. Newman is going to be a pilot. "Swine!" he granted.

We wanted to get round somehow to the Bargate. I suggested cutting across the Park, and we set out. Even the trees and bushes had been stripped by bomb blast, and craters were everywhere. At the other side of the Park, in a street of purely private houses, at least one in twenty was ablaze. A chest-of-drawers, sheets, blankets, two arm-chairs and a mattress huddled on the grass. We walked on, ruminating.

Back in the streets we cut through narrow thoroughfares in an endeavour to get through. Finally, surrounded by fire on three sides and with beer foaming along the gutters from a blazing public-house, we gave it up. We trudged back, my foot growing sorer and wearier at every foot and every inch of rubble. Nutty was stationed outside HQ, warning passers-by to keep to the right. A cyclist told him to go to hell, and he had the satisfaction of seeing him hit a crater.

The night passed rather quickly, even after the All Clear had been sounded on one tentative siren. Hoses were working now, and the fires seemed at last possible of control. At 6.30 we set out again for home. We were all too sleepy to take stock of damage. We hit a crater and the springs creaked. The houses still standing looked very cold in their casing of frost. As we moved out the fires behind deserted again their component parts, and coalesced into a dull, cloud-reflected glare. The engine hummed peacefully.

Back to the Drill Hall, and a guard sleepily emerging from blankets. All very curious, but we were too tired to say much. That's the point where the physical beats the psychological. Just now we weren't even remembering the flattened houses, the steel girders with the charred red "3d. and 6d. Woolw--", and the wash-stand and easy chair outlined against the glare of climbing flame. We weren't even saying, "If people let another war happen after this man won't deserve to survive." In the grate the fire was low but red.

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The next night the bombers returned, striding with iron feet through the burning ruins. Again the air-torn howl of bombs and the pallid refulgence of deadly flames. And from Coventry and Bristol, Birmingham and London, help came to the doomed city. Their own towns mashed ruins behind them, they rode into the bomb glare. Vos saluto!  
I, at any rate, am proud of my countrymen.

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