

Collier's

JUNE 28, 1941

Full Moon Over London

By Quentin Reynolds



This is what residents of the Aldermany section of London found after a recent raid.

I DON'T like walking," I told Ed Beattie. Beattie is a member of the London Bureau of the United Press. He is all right in every other way but he likes to take long walks in the country. We were having dinner together one Saturday night and discussing plans for Sunday.

"All right, all right," he said. "I know a place in Kent where we can hire bicycles. We'll take a bicycle through the country. Incidentally, the place I have in mind has a fine pub."

The idea seemed more reasonable. Spring in England is all right. You do get a bit tired of London and a day in the country sounded fine. We were dining in the Savoy Hotel and it was mighty pleasant. The dining room was only half crowded and Carroll Gibbons, the orchestra leader, was playing nothing but American tunes. Then, cutting sharply through the music, came the sound of the siren.

"There's the nasty man," Beattie said. "It's full moon tonight. I thought he'd be over."

But no one paid any attention to it. Ten minutes passed and we had forgotten the siren. Gibbons was playing When That Man is Dead and Gone. The guns weren't firing. In the restaurant,

OldMagazineArticles.com



stretcher bearers bring out what's left of one who didn't make the shelter in time

which is brick-walled, we could hear the planes if there were any up there. Then came the deep-throated roar of a bomb explosion and the glasses on the table rattled, the floor under our feet shuddered. The echo of the explosion hung in the room. That had been a very big one, very close. We hadn't heard it scream on its way down. The very big ones, for some reason or other, don't scream the way the smaller ones do. A moment later three more explosions came. People began to leave the restaurant. The Savoy restaurant is on the ground floor, which isn't good enough.

Fire Follows the Bombs

And then suddenly Beattie and I realized that this was no ordinary blitz. Not a moment went by without us hearing another one drop. The Savoy is virtually on the banks of the Thames. We walked to the back of the hotel and into the street. The planes were buzzing angrily overhead, very low. The moon was full and bright and the sky was cloudless. The angry buzzing of the planes increased and the bombs rained down; literally rained down. We hugged the side of the building. Now the fires appeared. A large bomb burst in a brilliant orange flame, seemed to die and then spurted high into the air. The fire engines clanged sharply and then the air was filled with a great hissing as the water met the flames.

We went back into the hotel. We have two rooms on the first floor which are kept open all night for the convenience of correspondents who live at the Savoy. One by one they appeared.

Reports began to come in. "I'll have to get to Fleet Street," Beattie said.

"You're crazy," I told him.

"I'm in charge of the office tonight," Beattie said simply. "We have records there and I want to get them."

"You're a fool," I said.

"Anybody got a tin hat?" Beattie asked. No one had. We never have our tin hats handy when we need them.

Full Moon Over London

They're no good anyhow. I dropped mine once and it cracked in three places.

Claire Luce, the American actress, had come into our shelter. We call it a shelter but it's one flight up. She was playing chess with Larry Rue of the Chicago Tribune. She looked up when Beattie asked for a tin hat.

"Can I go along with you?" she asked.

London's Worst Night

Beattie said she could if she wanted to be a fool, and they both went out to face a mile walk in the midst of the worst blitz London or any other city ever had. The noise had increased and we could hear the terrifying roar of the flames. I went up to the roof to catch a quick look of the general scene. We are no longer allowed on the roofs during heavy raids.

"I'm from the Air Ministry—Intelligence Department," I told the roof spotter.

"You're from Room 554," he said, and I recognized him as the man in charge of the Savoy bar. He let me stay a few minutes. A German plane dropped a flare. Then the inevitable stick of bombs followed and the Savoy trembled. I looked and winced. Two large fires were reaching up into the night.

This dwarfed any blitz I have ever seen. Still both incendiaries and high-explosive screamed down. The night was filled with noise—all of it frightening noise. And above the planes still roared. It was so light that the balloons could be seen clearly. Now and then there would come the rattle of machine-gun fire, hardly heard over the crackling of fires and the noise of the bombs. But it told us that the night fighters were up there.

I went down to our "shelter." While I was away a bomb had knocked two dozen glasses off the bar. Titich, our all-night bartender, was sweeping up the broken glass. Earl Reeves, in charge of the International News Service, came in.

"My phone has gone," he said.

"You can share my office," Bob Post, acting chief of the New York Times, said. "It's only upstairs and we have plenty of room. Use my wire."

It's like that during a bad blitz. Tomorrow the boys would be "opposition" again, doing everything to beat one another. But this was an emergency. The night had leaden feet. It seemed as though it would never end. There was nothing we could do. We'd gotten the story of the night merely by being where we were. Details such as targets hit, casualties, etc., wouldn't be available until the morning. We sat there. Ben Robertson of PM was playing backgammon with an English reporter. Joe Evans of the Herald Tribune came in and dropped wearily into a chair. "The night fighters got fourteen up to one o'clock," Jim MacDonald of the New York Times reported gleefully.

"How many Jerries are up there?" I asked him.

"Around four hundred, I hear," Jim

Full Moon Over London

said. "That's a lot of airplanes."

Titich, the waiter, broke in, "Why doesn't someone invent a death ray?"

"Hold my drink, Titich," I told him. "I'll invent a death ray."

Then we argued as to which blitz was worse, this one or the famous Wednesday one in April. Both had their points. The old gal was taking a real pasting tonight and none of us felt good. I'm sure that most of us were afraid. George Lait and Red Mueller of INS walked in. Their clothes were filthy and their faces heavy with soot. They had had a bad time. They had been in a wooden house. One of a block of them. Three bombs had dropped and demolished every house in the row but theirs. They had pulled wounded from the burning buildings and brought them into their house. They had some iodine and they tore their sheets into bandages and did what they could for the tortured men and women who lay there bleeding. Finally doctors and ambulances had come to relieve them. Now they were reporting for work. The blitz was at its very height and more than once the big Savoy shook under the fury of the bombs.

The People's War

"I wonder how many of us will be alive in the morning," a woman said calmly. We looked at her incuriously. None of us knew her. She was a stately, middle-aged woman in evening clothes and she was sipping a tall drink.

"Well, anyway, so far so good," I said to her, and then incredibly, mercifully, came the long, joyous sound of the siren. It was Sunday morning.

Last fall after a bad raid people in London would shrug their shoulders and say complacently, "We can take it." All that feeling is gone now. I walked around the streets of London on Sunday morning. The streets were filled with grim-faced, sullen-looking men and women. They were through taking it. They wanted to give it. Every bomb that the Nazis dropped during the night carried germs with it—germs of hatred. I could feel the hatred rising from the ruins infecting everyone. Tight-lipped men and women stared at the debris of treasured landmarks and you could feel the hatred of Nazi barbarism emanating from them. This war is too important to be fought by generals—it is being fought by the people. The people have borne the brunt of the attack. The people will insist upon making the peace. The people will not be generous victors.

People stood staring at the smoking wreckage of a well-known church. The church was still burning and the light from the flames within showed softly through the stained-glass windows. Someone will have to pay for that one day, the faces of the people said. Another church was nothing but smoldering ruins. Historic Big Ben was hit but although his voice was stilled the hands of the huge clock still traveled slowly around the face. Westminster Hall

Full Moon Over London

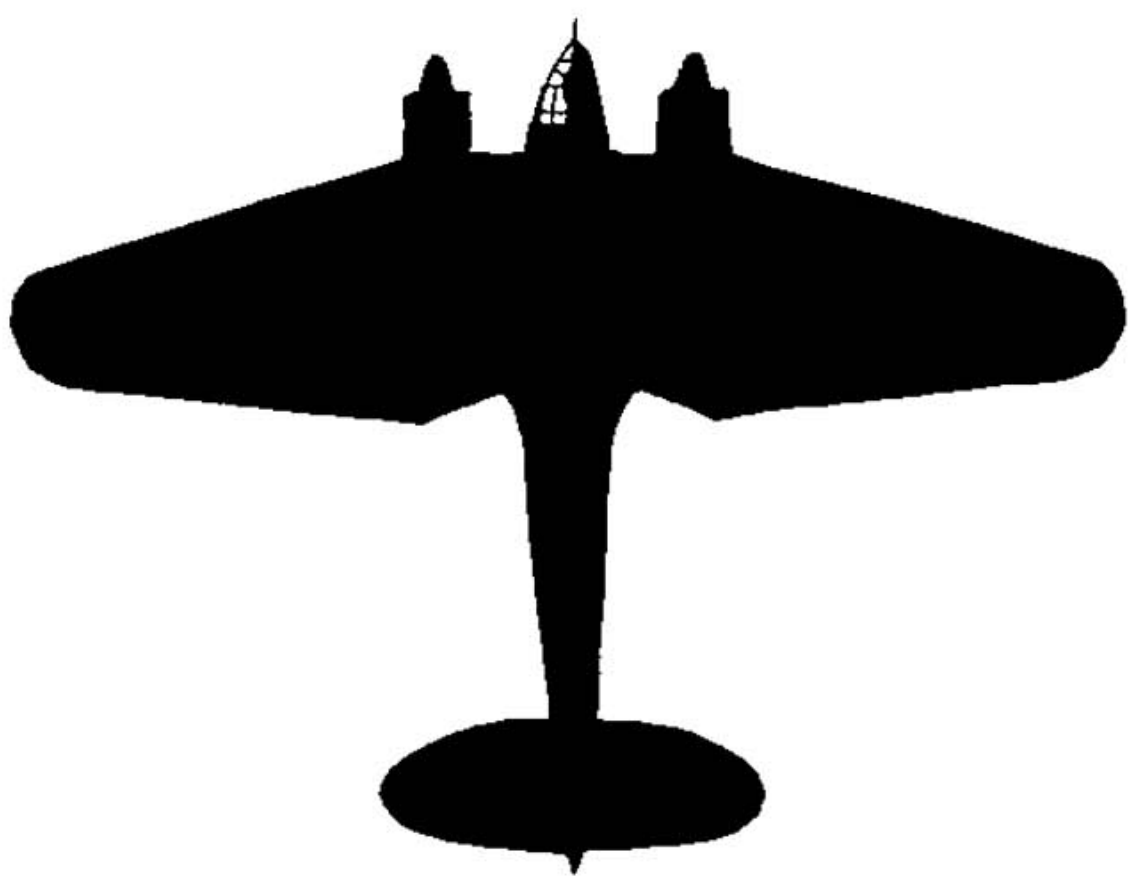
adjoining the House had the largest wooden roof in the world, built by William Rufus in the year 1200. Incendiaries had destroyed the roof. Bombs had found the two symbols representing what England is fighting for—the House of Commons, the symbol of free speech, and Westminster Abbey, symbol of a Christian form of life. People walked about the city grim-faced.

It was a beautiful day. A warm sun bathed the city but there was a pall of smoke over the city and through it the sun shone blood red. A breeze carried soot from still smoking buildings and your hands and faces grew grimy. The firemen, unexhausted after a bitter night's work, kept at their job methodically. Mobile canteens dashed up and uniformed girls served them tea and sandwiches.

Air wardens and police were searching among ruins, hoping against hope that they might find something living under them. Two men got out of a car in front of the House of Commons. They passed through the police lines. One man was bulky and he smoked a large cigar. The other was small, almost gnomelike. They walked through the ruins of the House, scene of so many of their battles. They wasted no time in being sorry for the old house. Then they came out. The very angle of Winston Churchill's cigar showed anger and determination—not complacent acceptance—and Lord Beaverbrook's face was grim. These men are tired of taking it. Like the people they govern they, too, are anxious to give it.

Two things remained untouched; the huge, frowning figure of Abraham Lincoln which looks across toward the House and Westminster Abbey, and the figure of George Washington standing in front of the Royal Gallery in Trafalgar Square.

Washington looked puzzled; in his time churches and civilians were not military objectives.



Collier's