

Two Letters from London

The grim courage of women whose homes are bombed day and night. They take no comfort in knowing that German homes are also being destroyed.

Central London, October 1940.

DEAR ———: I don't know how bad the picture is painted in your press of what is happening to us, nor how to give you an objective description of just what it is like. It is now worse than what we experienced in Spain, though not worse than the Spanish women suffered when they lost their all. Nor have we been driven from our native soil by an invading army as they were. Now that the evenings are getting darker London goes to shelter with the dusk. Many people enter the Tubes quite early in the day. Last Sunday, for example, I passed Mornington Crescent Underground Station about half past two in the afternoon and there was already a long queue of people with their bedding waiting admittance in order to get good places for the night. The thought of the little children who were amongst them going into the depths of the earth at three o'clock on a sunny Sunday afternoon, not to come out again till six o'clock the next morning, made me quite sick. How glad I am that my two children are not here, though it makes me ashamed to have been fortunate enough to send them away to Wales where they are safe and happy in the mountains.

A very large number of people would let their children go away if they could be surer that they would be well cared for. But experience with the method of billeting has made numbers of parents bring their children back, often more than once, because one cannot tell whether they would be put into a good home, or into a home where they will not be happy. Also a large number of mothers would go away with their children if they could be assured that they would be billeted with their children, and that their husbands would be able to get meals, laundry, and things like that done for them. Hundreds of others will not go away because they have some old person who does not come under any of the present schemes, and needs that loving care that old people must constantly have. So these heroic women remain, and they hush their children through the long crowded hours in the Tubes and cherish their old folk, and bring them all up in the morning and go home and make the house clean and cook meals and wash clothes and get the man's evening meal ready, and down again to the bowels of the earth. This is the morale of London women. It is a grim heroism. They know what self-sacrifice is.

I talk to such women sometimes, often when a raid takes place while they are in the building where I work, and we all go down to the shelter together. They tell about their homes, on which they have worked for ten, fifteen, twenty years "to keep things nice for the children," which have been destroyed or partly destroyed. This is the work of their whole

What They Prove

A DEVOTED reader of NEW MASSES sends us these letters. The second one comes from her mother, the first from a personal friend. These letters tell the story of the heroism of the British common people, especially of the women. But we draw a moral from these letters quite different from the moral which the New York Times draws from the letters it has been printing. For one thing, these letters do not arouse support for the Churchill government. On the contrary, they arouse disgust and anger with the men who brought this war on, failed to tend to the people's needs for a whole year, and still fail to do so. The second thing which strikes us is the self-reliance of the Londoners: their "shelter" organization, their newspapers, their hope for a better world. This is of cardinal importance. For we are being told that the only alternative to a continuation of the war under Churchill is submission to Hitler.

We are being told that the only way Hitlerism can be defeated is by the sacrifice of everything the British workers have built up in a hundred years. But these letters deny that. They show that the British people have a third alternative, the only real alternative. They have the resourcefulness, the intelligence, the potential strength to take political power into their own hands, away from the men who got them into this misery. By such action, they would rock the foundations of fascism in Europe and simultaneously destroy the system of imperialism which has oppressed Britain and half the colonial world so long. Until this happens, the perspective is only a series of horrible wars, of organized counter-revolution, of a gradual reduction of civilization until all peoples in the capitalist world are living in the catacombs. That is why we are looking forward to the People's Convention in Manchester on January 12, for it is the beginning of a process of independence of the British workers, leading toward a peoples' government and socialism. It brings the day closer, as the mother writes to her daughter, when "the peoples of the world will wake up and cooperate and rule themselves and not go on keeping the rich ones any longer." Real "aid to Britain" consists of helping the British people to take this path. Only this kind of aid to Britain will keep the American people out of war. And only by defeating reaction in every phase of American life can the American people achieve real solidarity and understanding with the peoples of the British Isles.

lives gone, and their feeling is that nobody cares. During the first few days I noticed a tendency to try and cheer themselves up by

saying, "Well, I hope we're doing it to them good and proper!" But that is not heard now, because they have begun to ask themselves, "What is the good of it all?" There is no comfort in the thought that another woman's home has gone too like yours, whatever nationality the other woman may be. We are just middle-class triers, those of us who do try to be helpful. But those women are the root and basis of English life, and they will be the ones who will find the way out.

We are getting used to finding our landmarks gone when we pass through familiar streets. Mr. Churchill said last week that if you stood on Parliament Hill you could not see that it made any difference to the familiar outline of London. I haven't been there to see. He also said that at this rate it would take ten years to finish London completely, but I haven't found anyone at all who was comforted by that thought. The general reply was: "Yes, but it only takes ten seconds to smash my home to smithereens when the bomb falls on it."

A. and I continue to sleep upstairs in bed. It seems by far the most sensible thing to do, as we haven't a good shelter nearby. It is impossible for us to pack up and get underground before the hours of darkness. A. works one week from seven in the morning until two in the afternoon, the next week from twelve to seven in the evening. She cannot possibly get anything done unless she is at home sometime. Neither can I. I could sleep in a Tube (or try to sleep) but I am never home before six and must prepare and cook a meal and wash my clothes and make the house clean. So we carry on normally and sleep in bed. I worry so much about my children, now that they have only me. It was different when there were two of us. I've done everything I can to make things easy for anyone to get help for them if something gets me, and that's all I can do.

Amongst all those who were in Spain I find the same expression: "I never felt like this there." Of course, *you* will understand the many reasons why this is different. However, we know what we have to do and we are doing it in our various ways. All the women who went to Spain are working magnificently now.

Butter ration is back to two ounces a week. Since A. takes hers to her husband in the hospital, we just eat butter at one meal (extravagantly) and spend the rest of the week on margarine or rare dripping. This is the shortage I feel most acutely personally, as butter was my principal vice, my standby and the thing I enjoyed at every meal. Besides after I was ill last year, butter was ordered as part of my diet.

You remember where you and I used to live. Well, opposite our house is a large hole where once were two tall houses. Round the corner in the square are three more similar ones. In the street which connects the two squares a slice has been taken off a whole row, and the opposite square has several houses down, too. M. lived in the one last mentioned; he was obliged to turn out at a moment's notice because of fire, and spent the next two days in his pajamas and borrowed overalls. A. and I are a little spasmodic about such contingencies. Some nights if it has been noisy and active before we go to bed, we get careful and leave some clothes on and the rest handy, and A. packs a suitcase full of her nurse's uniforms. We take a look round before we blow out the light and memorize where two scoops of the arms would be necessary to collect our belongings. Other nights we go all desperate and rash and say, "Damn it all, I will take off my clothes and go to bed comfortable." A bomb fell most uncomfortably near us the other night but did not go off. It was a curious sensation, that. We heard the whistle, felt the impact like a blunt instrument going right through us and the bed and the floor. We clutched the bed or nearest thing and waited for the explosion, and then it did not come. The house rocked like a little boat, and then settled down again, and we wondered where that one was, and if it would go off later.

You will have heard how the people of London occupied the Tubes. This was done in the teeth of the Board's notices to the effect that the Tubes could not be used as air raid shelters. A lot has been done to make the stations more hygienic and habitable since then, sometimes through the formation of shelter committees and some direct from the ministry of health and local authorities. There needs to be more action of this sort to get some of the good shelters opened in big city offices and places like that where they close them at night. Power to open such places is in the hands of the authorities, but they don't use it unless enough pressure is put on them. I must say that the Communist Party has put a lot of work into this demand for shelters.

You can be proud of your Londoners, the way they have faced up to danger. I wish I could tell you about the courage and calm, wise work of some of the Communists. It will be known some day.

Most people's life is nothing but work and shelter. A shelter-culture is coming out of this. Already certain Undergrounds are publishing their own newspapers. One of our friends who is on the editorial board of such a periodical told me the other day that she had received a request from the Imperial War Museum for copies of each issue. They are "noticed" in such papers as the *Times* and *Telegraph*. I think there is a good scope for group entertainment and other cultural activities and no doubt this will grow. People will not be able to get through our long, dark winter without something of this kind. I have been giving history talks to young people, so my time is fully occupied, and in spite of all the diffi-

culties we do get something done in the way of education.

Yours, N.

North West London. Nov. 20, 1940.

DEAR ———: I am sending you this letter in hopes that it will reach you. Everything is in such a dreadful state and so uncertain. I wonder if you have heard what has been going on here. Last week the bombing was awful. We never get a night's rest. The guns go on overhead all night and we just lie and wonder if they are coming down on us. We cannot sleep in our shelter now, as owing to the heavy rains lately, the shelter is several feet under water. It is the same all over the district. Hundreds of houses are down and roads closed because of time bombs having fallen in the roads. So R. and I sleep on the Put-Me-Up in the front room downstairs. They say it is safer not to sleep upstairs. If anything does happen we can rush out to the cupboard under the stairs for protection. But it is a dreadful time.

The school you went to when you were in the Infants, and the Technical College have been hit badly, and of course the factories round here. We can only just go on hoping.

We are very well and have plenty of food, at least as much as we can afford. Everything is so dear; eating apples are 10d a pound, lemons 8d each; potatoes are cheaper, but not good. We make our ration of tea do all right although it is only 2 ounces each. Cups of tea and cigarettes are my only vices. I have not had an egg for eight weeks, and we are going to have cheese rationed now. You would laugh at the things we make up for our meals, but are none the worse for doing without luxuries. We just go on hoping, and if the worst comes we just hope it will be sudden.

The Board of Education has moved to Wales. That's where they have gone, so now it takes time to get any business done. The schools here are altering their times: they open at 9 o'clock and close at 3 o'clock with half an hour off at noon for lunch, so that the children and teachers can get home before the blackout.

It amuses me to see how much braver the women are than the men. They don't complain half as much as the men do. They get on with the next job to be done. At your cousin's house, old Mrs. H. sleeps in the back sitting room. Your uncle sleeps in the kitchen, and M. and her husband on the hall floor. Nobody, if he can help it, stays upstairs. I have applied for an increase in my old age pension. Ten shillings a week is really not enough to live on with prices what they are. But I have been refused because I live with a daughter.

Our Cooperative Women's Guild now meets in the afternoon. It is impossible for the women to go out at night. There are fewer now, since many women have been evacuated with their children; and of course, our Children's Circle has had to close down. I only hope the seed we sowed in their minds will develop at a later day. Surely it was not all wasted. I still send things to aid the Spanish refugees when I can get them. Our weather is miserable, torrents of rain and wind. The dampness everywhere is dreadful. We are only allowed $\frac{3}{4}$ cwt. of coal at a time and bad coal at that. There is no firewood to be got, only what we can pick up from the debris of the bombed houses round us. But we are not in despair. We go on hoping some day the peoples of the world will wake up and cooperate and rule themselves and not go on keeping the rich ones any longer.

MOTHER.

Return

This year is written in images of terror.
The heart assassinates us with visions
Even in the quietest hours. I have lain
Awake at night (haven't you?)
Crying—help me—from the
Brigand at the breast, the sudden air-raid assault
Of memory, the convulsive recollection
Of the agues of continents.

Yet certain is our return
Even now, in shipwreck,
To certainty, to man's homeland.
As the river-wide breast of salmon,
Or the herd's invisible net
Gathers the courage of each to return—
O, archipelago of desire
The birds will pass toward you; the flock contract;
The gulls press together and swing
Landward—and we return
Forever past the seawrack of this year.

MILLCENT LANG.