

ST. MARTIN'S IN WAR TIME

The life of a curate at St. Martin-in-the-Fields was radically changed by the outbreak of the second World War. The early lull brought back to London many of the children whose schools had been evacuated to Cambridge. To give them occupation, we organised volunteers for daily morning school, with a service in church, and a variety of lessons in the crypt.

When Air Raids began we became very busy indeed, with some twelve hundred people sheltering under the church (this was subsequently reduced to seven hundred and fifty when bunks were erected). As she had done in the first World War, Lady Dawson of Penn organised a Canteen in St. Martin's crypt for the Troops using Charing Cross Station, and we also had a Canteen for the Shelterers. My wife helped with this, and it was estimated that she poured out three hundred cups of tea per hour. Much of this beverage came from a gigantic tea-pot called 'Aggie' which was suitably decorated with a wonderful scene of the Nativity. We were prepared to shelter all and sundry, and this led to complications as we seemed to attract more than our share of the undesirables from the West End streets. A Service was held every night in the crypt and Pat McCormick, the Vicar, came when he could though he was suffering from a bad heart and had been advised to leave the city. This he refused to do and he died during a particularly bad Raid. We arranged Concerts, Entertainments and even Dancing for the Shelterers, and C.E.M.A. sent us many notable Artists. I remember Max Miller, the comedian, who came to do a Show and who said: "It's all right, Padre, I'm not going to do my usual stuff tonight!" Many are the stories I remember; some of them unprintable. One nice old gentleman with a white choker round his neck comes to my mind who asked "Please sir, did you happen to find my false teeth when you were sweeping up this morning?"

When we were able to sleep which was usually about 3.0. a.m., my wife and I had a tiny cubby hole near the kitchen with a camp bed and mattress on the floor. This was over-run with rats dislodged from neighbouring bombed buildings, and they fought and screamed. I never went to bed without a pile of 'Songs of Praise' (a hymn book I did not like), by my side to throw at them during the night.

Each Underground Station had its regular clientele, and I occasionally took Services at Leicester Square Station where the shelterers tried to sing hymns above the noise of the trains. As Chaplain of Charing Cross Hospital, I was called there when they had an extra large number of casualties. I shall never forget the scene in the entrance hall after the direct hit on the Cafe de Paris. Then there were the grand fellows at the Auxiliary Fire Station in St. Martin's Lane. I had consented to be their Chaplain partly because their Canteen provided stronger refreshment than that produced at St. Martin's. Five of them were killed one night and I officiated at the mass funeral.

At Christmas 1940 we were able to arrange a Midnight Mass by candlelight and storm lantern, and the Shelterers, having practised the music beforehand, attended in a body - Jews and Christians of all denominations alike. I blotted my copy book by unexpectedly announcing there would be tea and buns for all afterwards; but the Catering Department, as usual, coped.

We lost many friends, but we made many also among the courageous folk who came with their bundles to St. Martin's every night. Our Churchwarden and his wife were killed by one of the first bombs that fell. There were two gallant sisters who lived in Shaftsbury Avenue and were helpers in the Canteen. One night, having returned home from a spell of duty, they were killed by a Land Mine which fell on their block of flats. I remember them and all the others each year as November comes around. May they rest in peace!

Edward Motley
