

THE NIGHT MY NUMBER CAME UP

Like most people I am an unlucky gambler, but I once won a chance at odds of a quarter of a million to one against.

They were quoted in a newspaper, early in 1940. There was a disagreeable picture of someone stopping a direct hit from a bomb, but to cheer us up some kind-hearted actuary had worked out that the chance of this actually happening to YOU, dear Reader, was - see above - 250,000 to 1. Other actuaries had other ideas, but it was the quarter of a million man I took to.

Even at those odds I had a nasty idea I was going to pull this long shot off, but as the blitz began, with life an odd mixture of the familiar and the fantastic, the thought receded.

What could be more familiar than getting the office books out of the safe, ready for the company's annual general meeting? But the cashier and I were the only two souls in the whole building, that bright October morning. Everybody else was well outside, beyond the scaffold poles and red flags cordoning off the area, for the City's biggest bomb was ticking over in the basement. We were allowed twenty minutes inside at our own risk, and each second going up the dusty stairs round and round the silent liftwell, or fiddling, sweating, with the safe-lock, disturbed by blast, seemed like fifteen of those precious minutes.

The Annual General Meeting itself, held in a borrowed room at the top of an ancient firetrap of an Early Victorian warehouse, went with a bang from start to finish, and at each bang the entire meeting rushed down the endless wooden stairs to street level, across the road and down two more flights of steps to a shelter. Then, when the All Clear went, up those nine (or was it ten?) flights again, and on with the meeting, till the next stick of bombs adjourned it once more, with another gallop down those infernal stairs. But at last, after I had proposed a vote of thanks to the auditors for their kind letter, which they had not in fact sent, in reply to one which I, as secretary, had unfortunately forgotten to send, the only nice bomb of the whole blitz went off close by with a noise like Doomsday, and cut short a lot of awkward and useless questions, the vote of thanks being carried nem. con. between the fifth and sixth flights on the way down.

And so home to a furniture-removing job. As my mother and sister were evacuated, and my brother and I were going into the armed forces, we gave up our old home and were going to stack our furniture in a couple of rooms in a nearby house of a cousin of ours. As it was only a few doors away we dispensed with removal men and did the job ourselves, and very silly the idea seemed as we struggled with the piano up the six steps to the front door of the new abode.

The bomb that crashed down from nowhere visible at this instant gave my cousin the erroneous idea that we had dropped the piano. Far from it - we pushed it up those six steps, along the passage and upstairs round a dog-leg bend in one breath. Then we rushed to the front door, where the entire local populace seemed to be assembling.

High up in the evening sky aeroplanes flashed like tiddlers in a jamjar. Bullets and spent pieces of shell pattered gently on the pavement, but this sound was soon drowned by the thuds of incendiary bombs, spacing themselves neatly along the curve of the road, mostly in the gutter, though a few strays sent a builder's yard flaring rose flames skyward, and two or three of our trees lining the pavement flamed into Roman torches.

A drunk I was trying to lead to safety broke away to kick a bomb out of his path; but this was not the big chance. The bomb meekly accepted the kick, rolled into the gutter and fizzled out in a shower of golden sparks.

Nor was the big chance in the top hat, where I found the bomb which got lost. It was seen to enter a temporarily untenanted house, it was said to be a dangerous hybrid, an incendiary plus H.E. cross which had to be found and dealt with. A growing mob failed to locate it, because it was hiding inside a huge wardrobe, having bored its way in through a top hat. It rested regally inside another top-hat, in a flaming inferno of burning clothing. It was all like a dream - rock-climbing up a fantastically large piece of

Victorian furniture in an unknown man's bedroom, the darkness outside the wardrobe and the blaze of light within, when the door burnt through and I clambered down from the top and helped throw sand into the fire. It felt like a Christmas party - I nearly climbed back and brought down some of the hats for us to wear. There was a clown with his foot stuck in the stirrup pump, and another toiling up from the basement with water and getting a bucket of sand kicked on to his head from the landing. Then the bomb was rendered safe and the fire quenched, and we dispersed.

Presently I was standing on someone else's garden wall, with a total stranger pointing out that the whole bowl of the night sky was one flame, in which we should soon be all fried to a crisp; but the night passed, and another, when we lay with our feet to the middle of the basement room and the furniture dancing on its Chippendale legs beside our heads, in time to the bomb bursts.

On the Sunday, the 13th October 1940, we went to see our mother and sister in Oxfordshire, returning in time to meet the evening raid at West Drayton. With a good deal of stopping and restarting the train eventually slid into the darkened vault of Paddington station, and we alighted and made our way down the steps to the Underground.

There are two Underground stations at Paddington; the deep Tube, on which we might get to Holborn station, and the Metropolitan, just below street level, which would take us to Farringdon station. The booking clerk at the deep level station had a thought which changed our lives; Farringdon, he said, was not shut as we supposed, but still open. We went across to the other booking office, and at twenty minutes past eleven by the dimly-lit clock far off on the station wall were on the east-bound Metropolitan platform.

We were just clear of the glass roof, under a night filled with stars. Immediately behind us was an exit archway opening into a small square space from which stairs led up and back to the main station, and to the footbridge connecting the two Metropolitan platforms. My brother and I talked in low tones, looking down towards the crowd of people farther down the platform, and the larger crowd on the other platform. It was very quiet and still.

A train edged in nervously and stopped, with its palely gleaming windows, half in and half out of the tunnel. Far off the booming and banging restarted. The train backed into the tunnel, changed its mind and came out again.

I have always detested the smell of matches, and now suddenly it seemed the vilest match that ever stunk was lit in my face, illuminating the whole cavern with a ghastly hellish glare. My brother and I turned automatically towards one another, and immediately we were flying noiselessly through space - straight out through the arch marked "Exit".

The 250,000 to 1 chance had come up; but what chance placed us right in front of that saving arch I cannot calculate.

My back and head hit a wall hard, then I was sprawling head and face downwards on the bottom steps of the exit stairs. It was dark as the pit. I wondered vaguely why I had not heard the bomb that fell between us; I heard the next one clearly enough, just past our doorway. We were thrown up and down in our tiny square shelter like dice in a dicebox; I hit the ground, bounced back again to the stairs, and landed right way up this time, staring at the ceiling. More bombs were whistling down; the next one, I thought, will finish us.

There was an inexpressible sense of being forced against a dark, icy wall, beyond which lay what? This surely was inexorable death.

As the bombs landed I began to count them, waiting almost impatiently for final destruction; and then, suddenly, in the mental transition from "two" - not yet - "three" and on to "four" hope sprang up. "If this one doesn't do us" came the thought. "We may live!"

A tremendous crash came in answer - but certainly farther down, and then another. Now the bombs still falling were more and more distant.

Lying in the inky dark, not at all sure that I was not dying and my brother already dead, I was filled with panic terror over a completely imaginary injury. My left ankle, it seemed, was a smashed jelly - the

horrible image filled my mind till I wanted to scream. In fact the ankle was perfectly sound, apart from a beautifully clean hole drilled right through its exact centre. True, the foot below the ankle had been crushed by the bomb into a piece of black charcoal, still retaining the form of the foot - but as I was blissfully unaware of this it did not enter into my worries. I wobbled an exploring hand down towards my left ankle, and immediately found a hole in the back of the thigh big enough to put a football in. Exploration stopped abruptly.

From where I lay I could see my brother lying face downwards in the doorway. It was bitter to think of him being dead - I just managed to touch his leg with my right hand, and he groaned. It was a heart-rending sound, but yet heart-warming, because he was still alive. and might yet be saved. I strained to hear, through a whistling like a kettle in one ear, if help might be coming.

And suddenly it was. Feet scrunched on the glass and rubble above us, at the stair head. A voice said "Do you think there's anyone down there?" and another replied "No, all dead this side. Come on over the bridge".

I made the effort of my life. "Help" I squeaked; in a voice like a mouse a mile away. The nicest voice I ever heard, called: "Is there someone down there?"

"Oh, yes" I whispered. "My brother and me" and waited.

"Can you hold on?" the unseen speaker asked. "We've got a lot of bad cases here. Can you wait?" "Oh, certainly" was my prim little squeaking reply. My brother told me afterwards that if he could have moved a muscle he would have strangled me, devoted though we were to one another. In fact, I began to think myself I had said the wrong thing. How horrible to die through a few minutes wait, so close to safety.

But suddenly a shower of rubble and plaster came down the stairs on my head, in front of the stretcher bearers. The light of their torches fell on the blood dripping down the walls. They had my brother on the stretcher, and one man was splinting my legs. It was absorbingly interesting; I had been going to First Aid lectures, had a certificate of proficiency, and had splinted a broken arm for an injured labourer. Now I was being done myself - pull down the leg, splints, strapped, slid on to stretcher.

After a while we were passing along the tunnel leading up to the main platforms. On each side were rows of shelterers. They had had a bad time that night, and the fear of death was still on their faces.

Unfortunately it increased to a marked degree as we were carried past them. I have never seen such horrified repugnance, as face after face took up this regrettable look. A nasty thought crossed my mind.

We were laid in rows in the waiting room; everyone who came in almost automatically shoved a cigarette in my mouth. I hate tobacco, and was too weak to do more than splutter the beastly stuff out.

Then some other newcomer would repeat the horror, till a good samaritan sat guard over me.

He was dreadfully wounded himself, a mass of blood, bandages and chalk-white flesh. To reassure him I said "You're going to be all right. Don't worry". His answer amazed me.

"Luvaduck, mate" said he, "You ought to see what you look like!" and scared me stiff.

Then we were in the ambulance, jolting over rubble, and so to the light and comfort of the entrance hall of St. Mary's hospital, where the stretchers were laid out in rows, with everybody present boasting a lovely pair of black eyes. Now the surgeons were probing, and anomaly after anomaly came up. How on earth had we managed to get our legs full of bomb splinters, and yet each of us had a right trouser leg as unmarked as though nothing had happened? He was still puzzling over this when he slit my right trouser leg up, and disclosed a bomb splinter as big as a cocoa tin sticking out of the right kneecap - it looked absurdly like a set of false teeth. I stared at it in amazement as he pulled it out and held it up, it was so utterly unexpected. He stitched the wound - all as painless as though I were anaesthetized. Then, as my brother was taken off for immediate operation, they found a German pistol bullet wound in his calf, with the bullet embedded in his shoe. Everything was mad that night, but at least nothing so mad had happened as an enemy pilot scoring a lucky hit with a Luger. In fact it was a souvenir my brother carried in his trouser pocket, and which had exploded into action.

They took some of the pound of glass out of his thick mass of hair, and the splinter tightly held in mw own bushy eyebrow. I was still firmly clutching my trilby hat - the blast had neatly removed the sweat-band from the inside and replaced it accurately round the outside, over the ribbon. Also I was horribly sick, with the dirt of a hundred years of London forced at high pressure down my nostrils and throat; but I was going to live and so was my brother. More stitching, and at last tucked up in bed, side by side, in a cosy ward.

A clock on the wall showed a few minutes past midnight. The night my number came up was over.

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