

CHAPTER XI

Much illness came to our little family during those years between the two wars. Harley Street and its surroundings, with its grim Queen Anne and Georgian rooms, heavy oil paintings and sombre furniture, became depressingly familiar.

Father went in for quite spectacular treatments, baths that bubbled like soapy soda water, or long weeks of orange juice and water, from which he returned so altered that even Mother did not at first recognise him when he stepped from the train.

His diet after that special outing consisted of outlandish little bits and pieces of raw carrot, tough lettuce, and other mysterious oddments served in tiny dishes all round him, so that it took up a considerable amount of the dining-room table. Mother and I, groaning inwardly, had an ordinary meal on what was left of the table *space*.

Everyone who met Father during those long years of illness advised something different, so that the menu changed from day to day, even from meal to meal.

Mother used to be distinctly embarrassed and not a little annoyed when presents of food arrived from chance acquaintances, with a little note saying they had heard we could not get this special item, when all the time we had stacks of it, or else it was a thing which would have half-killed Father. It is asking for trouble to endeavour to feed other people's husbands, pets, or children.

One special patent medicine filled Mother with horror, but Father simply loved it and after every meal spread the contents of the bottle over the table counting the number that remained.

Dear Daddie! He tried so hard to get well for our sakes as much as his own and used to go into an operation with as little unconcern as entering his office. It was a sad day when his health forced him to give up his beloved work and from that day he slowly but steadily grew worse, until after years of suffering he was taken for the last time to St. Anne's Church, where amid a crowded congregation we heard those glorious words,

"I am the Resurrection and the Life" and the great building echoed with the magnificent music of Chopin's Funeral March. But never had I realised so fully the great length of the church, as I followed my Mother's fragile figure from the front seat to the west doors.

On one of Mother's visits to a specialist I thought my earthly career had ended. It was a weird experience. The specialist was a radiologist on Putney Hill, whose consulting room was filled with amazing and terrifying contraptions. He and the nurse having laid Mother flat on a stretcher with alarming wires and other oddments above her, he told me to sit beside her and hold her hands. As an after-thought he showed me a wire a few inches from my foot,

"Don't touch that wire, otherwise you will be dead immediately. It is charged with an enormous power of electricity."

Not exactly enjoying myself, I sat rigid as stone, while the radiologist disappeared into a large black box and the nurse turned out the lights. There were several flashes while he took photographs and all seemed well until suddenly that alarming wire touched my foot. All was silent and pitch dark. For a few moments I

wondered if I were dead. It was most uncanny. Then suddenly the lights went on, revealing Mother smiling sweetly and enquiring if all were over.

I also made an enquiry, asking why I was still alive. The radiologist was quite unmoved, merely saying he had switched off the current, which had made the wire jump. So that was that!

I contributed a certain amount to these family medical experiences, being carried out of the house one Sunday morning on a stretcher in a rigor, my teeth chattering like castanets. On arrival at the Bolingbroke Hospital I was soon on the operating table under the wonderful hands of Sir Zachary Cope, the "Great White Chief" of Harley Street, whose ancestors lived in our neighbourhood. A few days later, lying in my private ward with its French windows opening on to Wandsworth Common, where the trees were turning to amber and gold, a large and lengthy bunch of chrysanthemums was brought in and laid on my chest. I was too weak to do anything about it and found it distinctly disconcerting when another nurse arrived, remarking cheerfully:-

"You did give me a start when you moved. I thought you were dead and nicely laid out, flowers and all."

The Second World War came in less than twelve months from the time when my Father had passed to his rest. We remained in Wandsworth all the time, my Mother sleeping in her own "first floor front" quite calm and serene, while obeying Air Raid Wardens' instructions, I spent many nights on a mattress in a corner of the drawing-room. Our housekeeper slept in the morning room, emerging at intervals to enquire whether the aeroplanes chasing each other above the roof were inhabited by Germans or our own boys of the R.A.F.

Being brought up from my Mother's knee to be truthful I fear I erred from accuracy when I replied that no doubt they were some of ours.

But of all the horrors of those nerve-racking years, the worst was the flying-bomb, with its rhythmic "chug-chug-chug," followed by a sudden silence in which the world seemed to stand still, waiting for the explosion with its accompanying death and destruction.

A typical morning during the flying bomb season was while out shopping I had to take shelter three times; on the first occasion the grocer grabbed me by the arm and pulled me into a little dark cubby-hole at the top of his cellar stairs; the second bomb to arrive found

me talking to the Sister-in-Charge of the Church Army hostel, who hurried me into the basement into her store cupboard, where we sat amid jams and pickles until the evil thing had passed us by. The third caught me alone in the church as I was attending to my sacristan duties in the vestry. This one passed directly overhead, sounding as though it were just coming down. I dived under a pew and lay flat literally in the dust.

It will be remembered we were instructed to lie flat whenever expecting a bomb to drop, but I never saw anyone do so in the street. Once I looked up and saw aeroplanes fighting above my head. A Good Samaritan clutched my hand and ran me up the street, round the corner and into a doctor's surgery. The place was composed mostly of glass, which was really worse than the open street, but somehow we felt safer and in any case were surrounded by remedies if they did not join us in bits and pieces. I am not sure that we were not in a better position than a friend of mine who with bombs dropping in front of her was seized by a butcher and thrust into his refrigerator.

St. Anne's received the blast from many bombs, gradually losing every window but one. The climax came with a second flying bomb close by when one of the great

girders across the nave cracked and hung in a "V" shape over the centre of the church. We were classed as a "dangerous structure" but all the services were carried on as usual in the aisles, which fortunately terminate in two chapels. It was often a crush in spite of the evacuation of a large number of the congregation, often stone-cold, very draughty and extremely dark. Noisy too, for even a slight breeze set all the first-aid blackout in the glassless windows flapping and shaking.

Two of the people killed by that second flying bomb near the church were pathetic old ladies, who had a premonition that this would be their end, so that at the sound of a siren they always hurried to the house of a friend nearly opposite. This time they did not have time to leave their home. Nor did they ever leave it, until their poor little broken, lifeless bodies were reverently lifted from the ruins. A few days later they had a double funeral in the Lady Chapel of St. Anne's.

It was a strange life for Londoners in those days, for even such simple things as going shopping or to church might mean one would never see one's home again - either it or oneself being blown to bits.

Twice the majority of children in the neighbourhood

were evacuated, until our large Sunday School was reduced to a membership of two brothers. The Vicar, Father Stradling, a few months later to become ~~the first~~ Bishop of Masasi, Central Africa, conducted the two Sunday School "classes" in his study, one at either end of the room, the whole "School" retreating to the cellar when a flying bomb was heard approaching.

Father Stradling had an ingenious arrangement when fuel became short, of converting the Vicarage dining-room into three, by means of tall bookcases. The farthest end was his bedroom, with picture nails acting as a wardrobe; the middle became the dining-room proper; the part near the door his study. Quite cosy and entirely comme il faut, a suitable preparation for his *future* coming "palace" in Masasi, which consisted of a hut divided in two - one half a bedroom, the other a study, with a verandah which often served as a reception area, where he conducted many interviews, including divers matrimonial cases.

Bombs upon the living were certainly the worst, but bombs upon the dead, falling among the graves in Wandsworth Cemetery and the old burial ground on Battersea Rise had a gruesome horror of their own.

Forty-two thousand bombs of various descriptions fell in the Borough of Wandsworth, of which one hundred and twenty-four were flying-bombs. One estimate stated that every time one of these exploded an average of four hundred houses received more or less injuries. Thirteen hundred people in the Borough were killed and many thousands injured. It is with deep thankfulness I can record that although my dear home was blasted we were able to live in it throughout the war period.

One neighbour not far away refused to leave her badly damaged house and remained in it while ultimately the upper floor was removed and the remainder converted into a bungalow.

Other people's bombs are always boring, so that I mention only a few events of the second World War concerning Wandsworth. For many months and even years I slept on that mattress in a corner of the drawing-room floor - some nights when bombing continued from dusk to dawn in most of my clothes with my shoes and handbag beside me, a suitcase full of necessities within reach, in case I had literally to run for my life.

Many a time the house shook to its foundations and a number of windows disappeared, to be replaced by the

beneficent Borough Council with stiffened white linen or thick black paper. At the height of the raid seasons I used to go round two or three times a day endeavouring to nail up the bits and pieces which had been blown down. One lady to whom I mentioned I lived in a "blasted" house looked down her nose and registered shock, but a Canon of Southwark to whom I told the story agreed that it was the only suitable adjective.

One Sunday after a sleepless night, we found the whole neighbourhood covered with ash and charred paper. Fearing it might be a new weapon and possibly poisoned, I gingerly picked up a burnt sheet of paper from the lawn, on which were decipherable just five words, "Og the King of Basan." That special text from Holy Writ can rarely have given greater comfort, proving this was in itself no terrifying new power of destruction, although the result of destruction, being the result of the bombing and consequent setting on fire of a huge paper industry a short distance away.

Taking a bath in those days was a hazardous undertaking, as it might culminate in the unpleasant experience of a young lady about a mile away who was blown, complete with bath, out into the street.

One awful night seven hundred incendiaries fell on our road and the one parallel to us. Hearing the crackling I opened the front door, to be greeted with a sheet of flame, a terrific smell of sulphur and all hell let loose. For the moment I could do nothing but shut the door. A few minutes later there came a loud knock. An apologetic and most polite Air Raid Warden stood on the doorstep.

"Excuse me, Madam! Your house is on fire."

"What can I do about it?"

"Nothing, Madam, except shut the door and wait for the fire engine. You have no tin hat."

So that settled that problem! In the meanwhile, I handed out one of the buckets of sand always ready in the hall, to extinguish the fire burning merrily by the gate and shortly afterwards discovered an unexploded incendiary in an upstairs window sill. How many houses blazed that night it is difficult to say, but the work of the wardens and firemen was beyond praise, for not one of the houses was destroyed.

After my own blaze had been put out, it was discovered the top room next door at the back of the house was on fire. No firemen were available, but a tall ladder was

found on which a warden stood pouring in buckets of water through the window, which we filled from our scullery taps. His method of returning the buckets was to throw them into the courtyard about twenty feet below, each being greeted by my housekeeper in a tone of deepest anguish.

"Oh, Miss Irene! My bucket!"

Somewhere towards midnight, dirty, weary, yet triumphant, our houses saved, our neighbours and ourselves comforted, we prepared for some sleep, when a friend arrived with her two maids to spend the night, as there was an unexploded bomb in her front garden.

About half past eleven one evening during an air raid, when I was listening to an enemy plane which seemed to be developing an unpleasant habit of cruising over our house, I heard a queer noise at the front door. Creeping out into the dark hall in my stockinged feet, I realised it was a burglar running his hands up and down the door endeavouring to insert a jemmy. There was a distinctly nasty tone about it! I crept noiselessly on to the front door mat, put my mouth in just about the position I judged his face would be and in the deepest, loudest voice I could muster, enquired what the gentleman

wanted. Deep silence ensued, until I shouted again, when quick footsteps crunched along the gravel. Opening the door on the chain I saw my visitor hurrying out of the gate. In response to my telephone call two policemen arrived to search the premises. They discussed the situation with deep bass voices in the hall, close by the open dining-room door, where our housekeeper slept on the big chesterfield. She was a very bad sleeper, poor soul, and often said she had been awake all night. But she heard nothing on that occasion!

Friends to tea in the flying-bomb season was a hazardous experience, for we often had to make a hurried exit into the passage by the kitchen, or the cupboard under the stairs, while one of them made its horrible sinister progress above the house, suddenly cutting out. Time seemed to stand still as we waited for the sickening explosion, then rushed out of the house to see in what direction the dreadful, mushroom-shaped pillar of smoke would arise, symbol of the death and destruction beneath. One afternoon, Father Curwen, Vicar of All Saints, Walworth, had to rush out into the passage with us three times during tea. The third time he brought his cup and cake with him.

On another occasion one friend vanished into the cellar, another one went under the dining-room table. Perhaps we ought to have joined them! I don't know!

My brave little cat, Whiskers, a half-Persian tabby, took it all in his stride. Only on nights when the gunfire was very heavy did I bring him in his basket from the kitchen and put him beside my mattress on the drawing-room floor. He usually spent part of the rest of the night walking up and down my spine, possibly to assure himself I was still there. I was very much there!

Father Curwen was one of London's hero-priests, who bit by bit, saw his whole parish literally blown to pieces - the church, the Vicarage, the hall, the rest centre and complete streets containing the homes of his people. The Vicarage collapsed around him as he stood on the landing, so that he had to climb to safety down what had ^{a few minutes earlier} ~~once~~ been the roof. Many times he escaped death, as he endeavoured to minister to his people. For a time he, his assistant priest, his housekeeper, and his deaconess occupied a room in the church hall, using it as living, eating and sleeping quarters, sharing it with six air-raid wardens at night. Outside the crowded room it was one continual round of heartrending scenes - death, mutilation, bereavement, lost and

shattered homes, ruins and destruction.

St. Anne's was restored in 1948. Fear had been expressed that the famous Pepper Pot tower would have to be lowered owing to its ominous cracks. To everyone's joy this was avoided, for so skilful were the contractors they actually moved huge blocks of damaged stonework, replacing them with new pieces. They had a terrifying lift (which took the workmen ² up to the top of the tower) (consisting of a board and a light rail in front). The first time the Vicar, Father Bear, was taken up to inspect the work, he was told just to hold on to the person who was working the contraption. He did hold on and to much faith as well. Posterity will know he did go up, for his portrait appeared in the local Press, close up to the Cross, with his hair, always so immaculately neat, flying in all directions. An expression of patient endurance completes this picture of the twelfth Vicar of St. Anne's, Wandsworth.

The re-dedication of the restored tower took place on a platform not far from the summit on a cold morning with an icy wind. A photograph shows the Bishop of Kingston looking distinctly chilly in his gaiters, shaking hands with the chief workman, surrounded by

brave mortals, including the Vicar, a churchwarden, the contractor and the Rural Dean. We more timid females were assembled on the church green many feet below, desperately hoping that none of those so far on high would descend suddenly upon our heads. One or two of the more cautious gentlemen did not find their faith sufficient to make the return journey on the lift, so descended less romantically and more slowly by way of the workmen's ladders.

It was a happy day when the heavy network of scaffolding came down and the Pepper Pot Tower, one of Wandsworth's best known landmarks, was fully revealed once more. During the air raids, just as the peasant on the Roman Campagna looks each morning towards the dome of St. Peter's, so the residents of Southfields on the other side of the Wandle looked across the valley when the hours of darkness and terror had passed, to see that the Pepper Pot surmounted with its Cross still pointed upwards into the heavens, triumphant and unhurt.

But a day was approaching, a day tragic indeed in the history of the church, for at three o'clock on a lovely June afternoon in 1950, one of the clergy saw smoke issuing from the Pepper Pot Tower.

The church was on fire! And from a cause which apparently will always remain obscure. Men had been working on a small hole in the lead of the roof that morning. Beyond that nothing is known!

Within a few minutes of the alarm flames began to appear, the Pepper Pot acting as a giant chimney. Fifty firemen and eight engines were quickly on the scene and by their valiant efforts saved the church from utter destruction. The wind was in the west so that the west door was free from smoke and volunteers of every description rushed in to save the ornaments, vestments and carpets. Women threw down their shopping baskets to leave their hands free and everything was flung down on to the green before the great west doors, or hurried into the Vicarage.

On receiving the news, I hurriedly drove as near as I could to the east end, then leaving the car, ran through a dense black cloud of smoke with my handkerchief to my mouth and nose, to see with a sorrow too deep for tears, the fierce gold and red flames flickering through the roof of the church in which I had worshipped with so many dear to me for nearly all my life. As I entered the west doors the roof was blazing from end to end.

I hurried into the vestry but almost everything had been removed. A fireman's voice behind me spoke sternly,

"Come out of this at once, Madam! I don't want your death on my shoulders as well as everything else."

Grasping an electric fire in one hand and two antique pictures of the church in the other, I ran out underneath a cascade of water from the galleries above my head. A few minutes later, I stood at the great west door looking into a scene of indescribable desolation - smoke and flames in the roof, thousands of cascades of water from the burning timbers, the crucifix above the pulpit hanging upside down on its nail! A few seconds later the central portion of the roof crashed in with a thunderous roar. I turned away from the horror and destruction to see the Vicar, who, visiting in the parish, had heard no news of the tragedy. He proved himself a brave and calm leader, so that within a short time he had restored order out of the chaos and before darkness hid the shattered ruins from our sorrowing eyes, the parish hall had been turned into a temporary church, with its smaller room as a vestry. The next morning the Holy Communion was celebrated in the hall, as had been the custom in the church for so many years. And even

while the firemen were still fighting the flames the Bishop of Kingston and the Mayor of Wandsworth arrived to offer their sympathy.

In less than eighteen months, mainly through Father Bear's untiring efforts the second time for the restoration of the church, it stood again, its wounds healed, its interior more beautiful than ever before. Resurgam, I wrote at the end of my article in the "Wandsworth Borough News" describing the fire and a wonderful Resurgam it proved to be.

Lead had not been used on the roof this time - too many light-fingered gentry were interested in it, so that copper has taken its place. I have been hoping the copper would turn the delightful green one sees in country districts, but I understand our London soot and grime prevent this pleasing effect.

The fashion for lead-stealing is not confined to our generation, for in 1827 portions of lead piping were surreptitiously removed from outside St. Anne's so that some brilliant person evolved the plan by which the churchwardens instructed the Beadle to remove the valuables to the house of the Parish Clerk after the Sunday services. Each of these gentry was rewarded

two and a half guineas per annum for his trouble, "a barrow for conveying the paraphernalia to and from the church" being procured for one pound, eight shillings.

It is with a shudder one thinks of that "paraphernalia", for assuredly the Communion plate must have been included in it. The whole transaction savours oddly of that class of society which regularly visits a building adorned with three golden balls after the requirements of Sunday have been duly met.

Bolingbroke Hospital is the last survivor of the five houses known as Five House Lane, or "Trotting Mile", where Earl Bolingbroke used to exercise his horses and which now bears his name.

In those good old days the little river Falcon flowed gently at the end of the grounds of Bolingbroke House, with white swans lazily moving upon its surface. Birds sang in the tiny wooded copses and flew across the sloping lawns.

Northcote Road, with its shops and coster barrows is now built above the pleasant little river. Rumour states it still can be seen and even heard, through a grating at the bottom of Battersea Rise, but only a person out for suicide would endeavour to locate it in

the centre of those perilous crossroads. The lawns, the gardens, the copses, all are gone, replaced by a nightmare of so-called "development", in other words, terraces of small, ugly houses each occupied by several families, complete with "all the week round" washing very much in the foreground.

Those were the days of the stretcher ambulance, a horribly grim sight, which persisted even as late as my younger days. The patient, usually the victim of a street accident, lay prone on a contrivance resembling a wide plank on wheels, with a black mackintosh covering. The patient's suffering face was mercifully, though suffocatingly, concealed by a hood of the same funereal material, but if he were tall his boots stuck out pathetically at the bottom, a sight which my childish eyes first encountered near Charing Cross and which I have never forgotten. In this case the boots were very stiff and the owner very dead. The unfortunate occupant of this wheeled stretcher was pushed along the streets to the hospital, usually by a policeman, escorted by a morbid crowd of inquisitive busybodies.

Canon Erskine Clarke, that genial old Vicar of Battersea who attributed his length of years to "a good

conscience and an easy bank balance", founded "The Bolingbroke Self-Supporting Hospital and Home in Sickness", soon to be shortened to the "Bolingbroke" Pay Hospital. It was set on its feet by a fancy dress ball in the Albert Hall, fully pictured in the "Illustrated London News" of February 17th 1883, where Turk and Infidel, Claude Duval and Julius Caesar, Faust, Mephistopheles and Marguerite danced gaily together in aid of what eventually became one of the happiest of London's hospitals.

Viscount Bolingbroke is buried in the crypt of the ancient church of St. Mary's, Battersea with the inscription, "Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, Secretary of State to Queen Anne. Born 1678. Died 1751."

In the chancel above the Viscount's supposed resting place are the figures of two young men in brass, separated from each other by an ominous inscription.

"As we were, so are ye,
As we are, so shall ye be,
Yourselves by us see here which lie,
Who died to live, though born to die."

My only recollection of the church is a Requiem held for men of the district who had fallen in the 1914-1918

War. The trench warfare of those days accounted for the distressingly long death roll. The Mayor of Battersea and his attendant satellites attended in state, complete with my Father as the Borough Solicitor, in correct mourning attire of long frock coat, black tie, pin-stripe trousers and shiny tall silk hat. I occupied a humble seat farther down the nave where I listened with much surprise to a hymn in which some lines were something to the effect of

" Here and now we leave our lamb,

In the bosom of Abraham. "

Father Abraham must have been a little surprised at the age of some of the "lambs" thus added to his flock.