

THE RAID BY THE RIVER

The convoy of merchantmen, after a calm, quite uneventful voyage across the ambushed sea, put into a port on the Channel for the night, and the following morning dispersed to their various harbors. Some sort of coast patrol boat "not much bigger than an Admiral's launch"—the words are those of my friend Steve Jordan of the Armed Guard—took the S.S. Snowdon, under her metaphorical wing, and brought her up the Thames.

The vessel lay in a basin just off a great bend in the river, in a kind of gigantic concrete swimming pool bordered with steel arc-light poles planted in rows like impossibly perfect trees. To starboard, through another row of arc poles and over a wall of concrete, they could see the dirty majesty of the great brown river and the square silhouetted bulks of the tenements and warehouses on the other side.

Steve, hospitably invited to remain aboard, went to the starboard rail and stood studying the river. The last smoky light had ebbed from the sky; night, rich and strewn with autumnal stars, hung over the gigantic city, and a moon just passing the first quarter hung close by the meridian, and shone reflected in the pool-like basin and the river's moving tide.

Suddenly Steve heard from down the street a sustained note from something on the order of a penny whistle, and an instant later a window was flung up and a figure leaned out. It was too dark to see whether it was a man or a woman. Then the same whistle was blown again several times as if by a conscientious boy, and a factory siren with a sobbing human cry rose over the warehouses. At the same moment the lights about the deck flickered, clicked and died. There was a confused noise of steps behind, there were voices—"Hey, listen!" "Wot's that?" (the last in pure cockney), and a questioning, doubting Thomas voice said, "A raid?" The figure of the captain was seen on the bridge. One of the ship's boys went hurrying round, probably closing doors. It was Steve's first introduction to British unemotionalism, and I imagine that it rather let him down.

Presently a number of star shells burst in fountains of coppery bronze. Every hatch covered, every port and window sealed, the Snowdon awaited the coming of the raiders. Whistles continued to be heard faint and far away. From no word, tone or gesture of that English crew could one have gathered that they were in the most dangerous quarter of the city. For the one indispensable element of a London raid is the attack on the water front, the attack on the ships, the ships of wood, the ships of steel, and the hollow ships through which imperial Britain lives.

There is little to be seen in a London raid unless you happen to be close by something struck by a bomb.

The affair is almost entirely a strange and terrible movement of sound, a rising catastrophic tide of sound, a flood of thundering tumult, a slow and sullen ebb.

"There! 'Ear that?" said someone.

Far away, on the edge of the Essex marshes and the moonlit sea, a number of anti-aircraft guns had picked up the raiders. The air was full of a faint sullen murmur, continuously as the roar of ocean on a distant beach. Searchlight beams, sweeping swift and mechanical, appeared over London; the pale rays reaching the black islands between the dimmed constellations like fingers of the blind. They descended, rose, glared, met, melted together. The sullen roaring grew louder and nearer, no longer a blend, but a sustained crescendo of pounding sounds and muffled crashes. A belated star shell broke, and was reflected in the river. A police boat passed swiftly and noiselessly, a solitary red spark floating from her funnel as she sped. . . . The roaring gathered strength. . . . The guns on the coast were still; now one heard the guns on the inland moors, the guns in the fields beyond quiet little villages, the guns lower down the river. . . . They were following the river. . . . Now the guns in the outer suburbs . . . now the guns in the very London spaces—ring, crash, tinkle, roar, pound! The great city flung her defiance at her enemies. Steve became so absorbed in the tumult that he obeyed the order to take shelter below quite mechanically. A new sound came screaming into their retreat, a horrible kind of whistling zoom, followed by a heavy pound. Steve was told that he had heard a bomb fall. "Somewhere down the river." . . . Nearer, instant by instant, crept the swift, deadly menace. A lonely fragment of an anti-aircraft shell dropped clanging on the steel deck.

"You see," explained one of the twins in the careful, passionless tone that he would have used in giving street directions to a stranger, "The Huns are on their way up the river, dropping a kettle on any boat that looks like a good mark and trying to set the docks afire. The docks always get it. Listen!"

There was a second "zoom," and a third close on its heels.

"Those are probably on the 'Aetna' basins," said the other twin. "Their aim's beastly rotten as a rule. If this light were out, we might be able to see something from a hatchway. Mr. Millen (the first mate) makes an awful fuss if he finds anyone on deck. I know what's what, let's go to the galley; there's a window that can't be shut." . . . The three lads stole off. Beneath a lamp turned down to a bluish yellow flame the older seamen waited placidly for the end of the raid, and discussed, sailor fashion, a hundred irrelevant subjects. The darkened space grew chokingly thick with tobacco smoke. And the truth of it was that every single sailor