

CHAPTER 11

# Bombed Shops and Spedan's Welfare State





On the 18th September, that is to say in the early hours of yesterday morning, the more important of our two great shops in Oxford Street was struck by a large 'oil-bomb' and by at least one high-explosive bomb ... The strong wind was doubly unfortunate. In whatever direction it had been blowing it would have increased immensely the effect of the oil-bomb ... The wind was westerly and it drove the fire across Holles Street onto our East House. That was not burnt so completely as the West but the damage is very great.

FROM A LETTER WRITTEN BY SPEDAN LEWIS TO PARTNERS  
AND OTHER SHAREHOLDERS, 19 SEPTEMBER 1940

I had about twelve people sleeping, and just as I got there the second bomb fell somewhere in front of me. I had one moment of sheer panic. I could have sworn that the walls in front were going to collapse and that the ceiling would then come down upon us all. It was a curious feeling: it was not so much seen as felt – as though someone had put far too much into a cardboard hat-box and you know it must give way. However the awful moment passed and I went on.

EXTRACT FROM A LETTER TO BEATRICE LEWIS  
PRINTED ANONYMOUSLY IN THE GAZETTE OF 19 OCTOBER 1940

## SPELAN'S PARTNERSHIP

In the Gazette of 19 October 1940 a letter written to Beatrice Lewis was printed in its entirety. Nothing else can quite convey the events of the night of 18 September with such vivid immediacy. The writer is unnamed, but the context suggests she is a Miss Katherine Austin, then the secretary of the John Lewis staff manager. She had been looking after the evacuees in the basement of John Lewis for the previous ten nights.

No one seems to be turning up to be interviewed, so, although I disapprove of writing personal letters in business hours I will write this one. (There go the sirens again – the third time this morning – just my luck! I may have to break off and go to the basement if the guns start) ...

I wasn't actually on the Watch that Tuesday night as I was 'mothering' the evacuees, and had been for the previous ten days. I never knew how many I was going to have to find beds for, as some would try to get home and get stuck on the way, or actually get home to find a time-bomb and that they were roped off – so back they came to the haven of J.L. I just loved doing that job. I think I had about thirty there that night, including Mr and Mrs Moss and Mrs Pennell and Miss Rosser. Some of the others were terribly nervy after what they had already been through in their homes ...

We had had a pretty worrying night on the Monday when The Langham Hotel was hit and I do not think any of us except the evacuees got to bed before two o'clock. The ARP post had to leave the Langham and go to the RIBA and the manager rang us at about 1 a.m. and asked us if we could give breakfasts to about 200 as he had had to evacuate them to shelters. Capt Burnett gaily said yes although none of us had the slightest idea of whether we had enough eggs or bacon or even if any bread or milk would be delivered after such a bad night!

However we need not have worried, as Mrs Tatem turned up trumps as usual with enough eggs and bacon for three months. Butterfield, Lynn and I got up at 6.45 a.m. and went up to the Restaurant and laid tables and messed about in the kitchen to our heart's content until the regular staff arrived. We had just got all the 'guests' assembled at 8.30 when the sirens went and we had to get them all down to the shelters again. It was at once decided that at all costs the poor things must have coffee so (while CP harangued us to get us down from the 5th floor) we filled dozens of coffee pots and carried down tray-loads of cups and saucers and everyone had at least two cups! After the All Clear had gone they all went upstairs and had eggs and bacon and more coffee and then made a collection among themselves of £6 2s for our Spitfire Fund ... Then at 11 we had our own breakfast.

We were all, bar the Watch, in bed by 6.45 p.m. or so until wakened about 12 by the first direct hit. I put my trousers on back to front – I was very annoyed