

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH

CONCLUDING TALES OF A LONDON FIREMAN.

Dave Wilson

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH.

© 2002. Dave Wilson.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ISBN 0-9537978-1-3

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, rebound or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, scanning, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that which it is published without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

Published in the UK by:

Dave Wilson Publishing

Pangbourne

BERKS.

England.

RG8 7BU.

PREFACE

Having re-read this manuscript, even I find it difficult to believe that some of the somewhat bizarre stories I tell are in fact true. For the reader to fully believe them, they would need to have an insight into the history and nature of Hammersmith fire station, and its serving fireman in November 1977.

Hammersmith Fire Station was built in 1914 and was on the periphery of what was then styled the London County council. Beyond the boundaries of the station's fire ground would have been the county of Middlesex, which was still basically rural then. So, in those far off days the Big Smoke (the euphemism for London Town) began at Hammersmith.

For around fifty years, with the exception of the war time years and the inception of the national fire service, and its subsequent disbandment things stayed very much the same. Then, in around the year 1964, the politicians invented something called the Greater London Council. This basically meant that London doubled in size overnight. Likewise, the London Fire Brigade increased from 52 fire stations to around 104 stations. Hammersmith fire station had previously always been part of the 'A' division of the brigade, the premier division of the brigade, the Royal 'A'. It had been the division which included most of the tourist sights of London; Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, the West End, theatre land etc. This claim to premiership was always disputed strongly by the allegedly inferior 'B', 'C', and 'D' divisions of the brigade, but nevertheless, as a result of the subsequent administrative reorganisation, Hammersmith Fire Station now found that it wasn't on the periphery of the elite. It was instead, part of a newly formed 'D' division of the Greater London Fire Brigade. Along with a companion fire station, A9 Fulham, Hammersmith was now part of a division comprised entirely of ex-Middlesex Fire Stations. At this period in time these were considered by London firemen to be technically, if not socially, inferior: i.e. Swede bashers, haystack wallahs, (they even still carried pitchforks on their fire engines). Having stated this, it had been muted at one time (by the wags) that London fire engines should also carry pitchforks on their fire engines, not for use on haystack fires of course, but for a far more practical purpose of crowd control!

Thus, it came about that all true, proud, cosmopolitan, cockneys were deemed to have been born within earshot of the Bow Bells (albeit that you couldn't actually hear the of Bells of Bow church in Hammersmith). This was accorded no great importance, as very few firemen actually went to church on Sunday anyway. Thus, it came about that the proud, metropolitan London Hammersmith Fire Station became lumped in with the mediocre Middlesex rural riff-raff!

Hammersmith Fire Station, being previously on the very edge of the London Fire Brigade, the very margins of the Royal 'A' division, had always been deemed a somewhat troublesome child. Hammersmith was where all the naughty boys (firemen) got banished too, out of sight, out of mind. Buckingham Palace would have needed to be alight from end to end before Hammersmith and its incorrigibles got ordered on! It seemed that naughty station officers got sent there also because those that I knew were always rather forthright, outspoken, and positive in action, both on the fire ground and off.

Now, if this reorganisation of boundaries was a sad day for Hammersmith fire station, excommunicated from the Royal 'A', it was a blacker day by far for the newly formed 'D' division of the Greater London Fire Brigade. They were going to have to absorb not one troublesome child but two (A9 Fulham also). The borough of Fulham (latterly and poshly named West Chelsea) being somewhat more genteel than Hammersmith, but nevertheless had its fair share of reprobates also.

The problem arose that the Hammersmith firemen insisted on keeping all their nasty little inner London ways. All and everybody from the rank of station officer and above, no matter how exalted in rank, regardless of the weight of silver bird sh*t on their hats and shoulders, were called 'guvnor'. Middlesex firemen drove around in things called water tenders, the London firemen had things called pumps. On being informed that water tenders carried 400 gallons of water as opposed to the miserly 100 gallons of a London pump, the laconic comment was simply: "Blimey, you blokes

must drink an awful lot of tea then, to need all that water!" It was noted that Middlesex firemen tended to have shiny fire boots, to London firemen at this time, this was an anathema. Shiny boots meant only one thing, you were either on your way to or back from a brigade funeral, or you never went into fires, therefore a desk wallah! At around the time of the strike (diversing slightly) I actually knew a senior officer who kept his pristine, white fire helmet in a natty little linen bag, lest it should get scratched and dirty, needless to say he too was a desk wallah!

The problem with Hammersmith, as far as the incumbent ex-Middlesex senior officers was concerned, was not so much its irascible firemen, as its fire ground. Hammersmith's fire ground was (even by London's standards) complex, varied, multi-functional, multi-storied, high density, high life risk, both in residential, and industrial occupancies. To the uninitiated, unpractised, sober minded, church going, god fearing, and of course promotion minded senior officer, all of this was deemed quite a considerable career busting hazard (of which no ambitious prospective chief officer should ever let himself get involved in by choice). Even the fire station building itself (built in 1914), would be considered a museum piece by them, although by London standards it would be considered quite modern in that it had no stable accommodation for horses. The first fire engines at this newly built (1914) Hammersmith station were early motor appliances.

The fire ground itself could be seen as either most interesting and varied, or dangerous and career threatening, depending on one's point of view. It was an inner city mix and a jumble of multi-occupancy and multi-storied residential accommodation, intermingled with again multi-storied industrial and factory buildings, all dating back to around the year 1900. The average height of all the buildings in the borough would be four stories, all built with the best yellow London stock bricks. The only single storied buildings that I can recall would have been the municipal public toilets and they even built some of these underground!

So, the chapters in the first half of this book are intended to give one the flavour of Hammersmith Fire Station and the Hammersmith district of London in the 1970s. Thus, this should enable the second half of the book (Nine Weeks at Hammersmith), which tells the tale of an insignificant (!) period of time, to be better understood, appreciated, and commiserated with.

Acknowledgements.

My thanks to Sarah Jewell my sons partner and future wife, for having the patience to edit and proof read this edition for me. It seems that just when I have cracked this publishing lark, there will be nothing left for me to publish.

Dave Wilson.

CHAPTER 1

DAY DUTY.

This chapter is the story of just a routine day at Hammersmith Fire station. It is not an especially a busy day, in fact from the number of fire calls received it, could be described as a quiet day. The day will be a weekday, with the white watch coming back on duty, after a two day break. This would be our normal daily work routine, until the 14th of November 1977. when for a period of nine weeks, things were somewhat different.

The oncoming white watch will start arriving at the fire station, at any time from seven o'clock in the morning. The early arrivals, usually have long distances to travel across London, and arrive early to miss the rush hour traffic. The early arrivals will sometimes purchase, and take breakfast with the night watch. But a reciprocal agreement between the watch's, means that cups of tea are provided free to station personnel, at most times. Politeness demands, that the on duty watch get first call on the tea pot. The mess manager's permission is sought, before the off duty watch help themselves. The tea is usually made, in a large one gallon aluminium tea pot, to ensure enough tea to go around..

From around eight thirty, the Majority of the white watch are beginning to arrive for the day duty. Hovering around the ground floor watchroom, is a small group of the blue watch firemen, who have been on the night shift. These firemen have a pressing need to be off duty early, some to do part time work, others for domestic commitments. They are waiting, for their opposite numbers on the oncoming watch to arrive, and relieve them of their duties. The duty board in the watchroom will have told them, which of the oncoming watch are riding which appliance, either the pump or the pump escape. These exchanges are effected initially, by the simple request "ride the pump for me john". The night duty, or off going firemen, will then seek the officer in charge's permission for the change. He will then get the exchange of duties, entered in the station log book in the watchroom. Finally altering the nominal roll board on the appliance, and the exchange of duties is effected.

The brigades term for these exchanges of duties is 'mutual exchange of duties'. It is mutual between the two firemen exchanging duties, and mutual for the brigade also. It is not unusual, that when a fire call is received just before the change of watches. For the greater majority, if not all of the riders, to be oncoming watch firemen. When the call then extends past the change of watch time, no overtime payments are due to these firemen. A considerable financial saving, is made for the brigade.

The officers in charge of the station, rarely take these mutual exchanges. For there is much to be discussed, in the handing over of the fire station itself. Items of equipment that may have been used and broken during the course of the night shift. Station repairs and alterations, that will need mutual agreement between the three station officers. If you were to hand your own home over, to the care of another person, for twenty four hours, imagine the list of do's and don'ts you would prepare. Then the previous night's fire calls to talk about, any interesting calls, which part of the fireground did they occur. Many patterns of fires are discovered, in this change of watch casual conversation. During most of this conversation, I will be busy counting and checking the station petty cash, before I sign for it. Then finally the off going officer in charge, will hand me the station keys. Kept on a single bunch, and fitted with a safety chain. This is an unconscious but symbolic gesture, that I am now in charge of the station.

Six short bursts of the fire call bells ring out, the signal for the change of the watches. The oncoming watch are dressed in full fire gear, and lined up between the two fire appliances. The roll is called, if all are present and there are sufficient riders to man the two appliances, the off going watch is dismissed. It sometimes happens, that there may not be enough drivers for example, on the oncoming watch, to man the two machines. This is usually known before the roll call, and an off going watch, volunteer driver, will have been found to man the appliance. Until a stand by

driver, from another station arrives. Very seldom if ever, is it necessary to detail a driver, to remain on duty. Then only done to keep the pump escape, the rescue appliance, on the run.

Following the roll call, the riding positions and duties for the day are read out, followed by a quick check of the firemen's personal fire gear and equipment. To check that 'A' he has the equipment, and 'B' that it is clean and in working order. The duty watch is then fallen out for duties. Between now and nine thirty, is allocated for checking the men's breathing apparatus sets, and the appliance gear and equipment. Most of the firemen will have done these duties, in the time they arrived at the fire station, and going on parade for watch change. So they will now start drifting away in ones and two's, to the mess for yet another cup of tea.

This break for tea is unofficial, yet universal throughout the brigade. In the mess room, will be a fair sprinkling of the off going watch also. After forty eight hours off duty, the mess room will be a hive of conversation. So much can happen, in forty eight hours of a young mans life. We only meet the blue watch twice, in a six day duty cycle. So they will be busy telling us, of the fires and incidents, that occurred during their last tour of duty.

At around twenty minutes past nine, the sub officer calls out "pump's crew, LBA at nine thirty". This is to remind the pump's crew, that they attending an inspection under the London Building Acts, at nine thirty. The pumps crew rise from the table, take their empty tea cups into the kitchen, and make their way to the appliance room below.

*

The station officer, will very often conduct inspections under the London Building Acts, on his own. Every so often, if the inspection is an interesting visit, from a fire fighting information viewpoint. Or even an inspection of general interest, the pump and crew will attend. Today's inspection is to the Charing Cross Hospital, a vast hospital complex on the station's fireground. I have been carrying out this inspection, periodically on my own, over the past two months. Today the inspection is on the fourteenth floor of the building, which includes the medical museum, so the pump and crew are attending. The museum is interesting from a general interest point of view, and also a firefighting hazard. The museum contains a vast number of medical specimens stored in alcohol, and of course alcohol, is highly flammable. The museum is very interesting, if to the layperson, slightly morbid. Amongst its many exhibits, it contains a collection of aborted human foetuses, pickled in alcohol. They are set out in age order, and range from only weeks from conception, to fully grown babies. The large medical school dissecting room, is also on this inspection visit. The firemen content themselves, with a peak through the glazed swing doors. I will conduct the inspection of this room over a weekend, when the students are not present. An inspection of around one hour and twenty minutes, has generated enough paperwork, to occupy me for around an hour back at the fire station. So we leave, to make our way back to the fire station, in time for stand easy at eleven O'clock.

During this time back at the fire station, the pump escapes crew will have been busy. The sub officer with general administration routines, and telephone enquiries etc. The pump escape driver and one other fireman, have been doing routine maintenance on the appliance and all its equipment. Yet another fireman, has spent the time doing a complete inventory of fire hose on the station. Checking all the hose lengths serial numbers. Done in an effort to find the numbers, and then the location of lost fire hose. Hose that has been left behind at various large fires, over the previous two months, and not returned to the station. Lastly the mess manager, has been working in the kitchen and mess all morning. The mess manager, is available for all and every duty on the fire station, but as a rule, works in the mess and kitchen, unless required elsewhere on the station.

The pump reversed back into the fire station, as six bells are being rung the signal for stand easy at eleven o'clock. At every fire station in London, the firemen will be gathering in the mess, and the fare will be the same. Cheese, or cheese and onion rolls, and cups of hot tea. Occasionally where a fireman does not like cheese, something different may be offered, otherwise it is always cheese rolls. The conversation around the mess table today, is the gruesome sights the pump's

crew have just seen, in the medical museum. Then one of the pump escapes crew, that remained behind in the station, not to be outdone. Counters with the details of a particularly gory road traffic accident he attended, whilst serving at another fire station.

One of the senior firemen, with a bored look on his face, raises his right hand above his head. Making repeated pushing movements with his hand. When I was a young fireman, this action, usually coming in the middle of an exaggerated story, always puzzled me. When I finally asked what it meant, I found there was a nice story to it. It is yet another of the old naval customs, which the brigade abounds. I.E. the canteen is called the mess, tea break is called stand easy.

*

When firemen gather in groups, they tend to talk about all fires they have attended, and no doubt exaggerate the size of them. When sailors gather in groups, they talk about places they have been to, and storms they have sailed through. Of course likewise to firemen, the ferocity of the storm is always greatly exaggerated. In times of old, on the occasion that a sailor was telling a particularly exaggerated story. His shipmates will invariably, start to enact the storm. Swaying from side to side, with the supposed motion of the ship, slopping their mugs of tea all over the place. Then reach up with their hands, and swing the suspended lamp fitting. Again to simulate the rocking of the ship in the storm. On fire stations most of the light pendants, have been replaced with fluorescent tubes. So now a fireman would reach up, and merely go through the motions of swinging the imaginary light fittings. When in his opinion, a story is being grossly over exaggerated.

*

Six bells ring for the end of stand easy, and I quietly give the order "pump escape in the yard for drills", then add, that we will be working on the drill tower. This information tells the firemen, that the private cars in the yard will need to be moved. So that we have free access to the drill tower. The cars are driven and parked in the spare appliance bay, and to the end of the drill yard, farthest away from the drill tower, leaving a clear space around the tower. The pump escape was then reversed into the drill yard, with the escape ladder facing back towards the tower. All the firemen now rig into full fire gear, and await my arrival.

My journey to work each day, takes around one hour and twenty minutes. I very often use this time, to think up exotic drills for the men to perform. I think I am quite renowned, for my varied and unusual drills, that I dream up, in this hours journey to work. Drills to me are not something to punish the firemen with, but rather a challenge. When they are lined up for the initial drill detail, I will say to them, "right I bet you can't do this one". Which of course makes them doubly determined, that they can. I would never give a drill, that I could not perform myself, and they would know this. So the attitude was that anything I could do, they could do better.

Today is a nice fine bright day, and our first day duty, so I have decided we will have standard wet drills, with plenty of water. The object of these drills, is mainly for the younger firemen, to practise with their equipment, Then to put them under pressure, with multiple evolution's, and problems. It is a fact of life, that the more senior firemen, having done these drills' hundreds of times before. Will always know which particular job in the drill will give the easiest life, leaving the hardest physical jobs, for the youngsters.

The drills will be on and around the drill tower, which is an old standard London fire brigade tower, constructed of metal girders bolted together. It is five stories high, and has a vertical metal ladder up one side of it. We are not allowed to use this metal ladder, it is deemed unsafe, because it does not have protective metal hoops round it. We can though, go up the drill tower on hook ladders, and any other type of portable ladder. We can come down the tower, using any of these ladders, carried on the backs of other firemen even!. We can descend down the tower, suspended from slender lines. We must not use this purpose built iron Jacob's ladder, bolted to the side of the drill tower. Because it has no iron hoops around it, to prevent us falling off, such is bureaucracy!

There are nine firemen lined up and dressed in full fire gear, I gave the initial drill detail. Slip and pitch the escape ladder to the third floor, hook ladder from the head of the escape to the fourth floor. Get a jet to work on the fourth floor, covering jet to work on the ground floor. I

pause for thirty seconds before giving the command, "get to work", then ask any questions. There should be no questions asked for this is a standard drill, then I give the command "get to work", and it all happens.

The fifty foot escape ladder is slipped from the appliance, a hook ladder is removed from the top of the machine. Before the escape can be positioned in front of the tower, a covering jet of water crackles into life. Drawing water from the 400 gallon water tank, on the appliance. The extended escape ladder is pushed into third floor window opening, even before it is properly secured. A fireman is going aloft, with a hook ladder over his shoulder. He is followed closely by a second fireman, with a line on his back. The first man takes a leg lock on the escape ladder with his leg, then using both hands, pitches the hook ladder up and into the fourth floor. He continues to hold and steady the hook ladder, whilst the fireman carrying the line passes him. Ascending the hook ladder into the fourth floor of the drill tower. As soon as he is in the tower, he gives a cry of stand from under, and throws out the canvas line bag he is carrying. The bag falls to the ground, and the line feeds out of the bag as it falls. On the ground, a fireman quickly ties the line around the hose and branch, and calls out "haul aloft". The hose is hauled up and into the fourth floor window, and the cry of "water on" rings out. Very soon the branch begins to hiss and crackle, and a jet of water comes out of it, and the initial part of the drill is complete.

We now have two jets of water working in the drill yard, one on the ground floor, and one on the fourth floor of the tower. The appliance driver and pump operator, has already connected his appliance into the fire hydrant in the drill yard, and is now pumping from the mains water supply. I now give the order "jet to work on the third floor of the drill tower". The hose is laid out on the ground, and a branch connected, then placed over a fireman's shoulder. He then runs up the escape ladder, and into the third floor of the tower. A second fireman follows behind, and soon the cry of "water on" is ringing out again, and the third jet crackles into life.

The fireman manning the covering jet on the ground floor, is a relatively new fireman. He has already been accidentally on purpose, soaked by the jets on the upper floors. He will have had some instruction on working a fire pump at training school, and further instruction, when he arrived at the station. I now intend to put his knowledge to the test. I order this fireman and the pump operator to exchange places, the junior fireman is now in charge of pump operations. When he takes over, he has one length of hose supplying water to the pump, and three separate lines of hose going out to the jets. As his first task, I order that the soft suction hose be twinned. That the hose feeding water into the pump, be doubled in number to two lengths, to increase water supply. Then to prevent other firemen assisting him in this task. At the same time, I order a hosereel to be got to work, on the third floor of the tower. The new pump operator, has now to lay out another fresh hose line. Whilst he is doing this, he must continually adjust his pump controls, to feed the three jets from the appliance tank. Then when he then turns off the hydrant, and plugs in the new line of hose. All to be done without a break in water supply, to the three jets.

During the course of this drill, the two firemen who ascended the hook ladder to the fourth floor, have been enjoying themselves. They have been accidentally, once again on purpose, soaking all the other firemen within range, in particular the firemen on the floor below. These two firemen have been endeavouring to direct their own jet upwards, to get their revenge. The fireman on the ground floor also, is by now thoroughly wet. He is calling loudly, demanding for more pressure on his jet. In order to reach the fourth floor, to effect retribution!. The two firemen up on the fourth floor, have been getting things too much their own way, so I decide to even things up. I now detail the jet on the fourth floor to be knocked off, and replaced with a much smaller hosereel jet.

The drill yard is by now, festooned with hose ladders, and equipment, and inches deep in water. The firemen are all around the drill yard, and at every level of the drill tower. Then over the noise of the pulsating fire pump and diesel engine, the station fire bells are heard to ring. No words of command are needed, this is not now a drill, this is for real. The first priority is to get the pump escape, the rescue appliance ready to attend the call, if required. All the delivery outlets supplying the jets are closed down, and the pressure release couplings turned. The hose flies away from the pump deliveries, and the back pressure of the water in the hose up the drill tower, spews water everywhere. The hydrant has been turned off, and the hose couplings to the appliance broken. The standpipe key and bar, is replaced on the appliance. The aluminium hose couplings, are pulled clear of the appliance wheels, and its route out from the drill yard. The fire hose is left on the ground where it lies.

The firemen on the third and fourth floors, are now back down on the ground floor. Bringing only the branches (nozzles) with them, leaving all the other gear and hose in place. They have hosed the escape ladder, and are turning the ladder to mount it back on the appliance. Yet another two firemen, are feverishly winding the hosereel tubing, back onto the drum on the machine. When suddenly a shout of "pump only" comes from the dutyman, in the watchroom. The green pump indicator light in the drill yard, is illuminated. The intense activity drifts to a halt, the pump escape is not required on this call. The pump is in the appliance room, ready to attend. The pumps crew are also rigged and ready, if somewhat damp, from the proceedings.

The appliance room doors swing open, and with horns and fire bells sounding. The pump forces its way out into the heavy traffic, in the Shepherds Bush Road. The fire call is to a house fire on Kensington's fire ground, and the heavy traffic at this time of the morning makes the going slow. We have been battling through the dense traffic for around five or six minutes, when over the radio airwaves Kensington's call sign is heard. From Alpha 282, from station officer Morris, stop for Kensington Road, alarm caused by smoke issuing, return take appliances.

Station officer Morris, likes to send alarm caused, stop messages for a lot of his fires, it saves on paperwork. If a call can be downgraded from a fire, to that of alarm caused, instead of filling in the large detailed fire report, in quadruplet. The alarm caused report is just a simple single sheet report, so it is any ones guess, what the incident actually was. John Morris like myself dislikes unnecessary paperwork, but on this one, he has got it wrong. For bureaucrats and statisticians, judge a station on the number of actual fires extinguished, when assessing a stations work load. A small fire which is downgraded to alarm caused, just to save on paperwork. Does not help the stations cause, in the long run.

Never the less the message, return take appliances means that we are not required at the scene. So the horns and blue lights are turned off, and we make our way back to Hammersmith. The pump is reversed back into the appliance room, and the crew still dressed in their fire gear, make their way back to the drill yard. There the escapes crew have made a start, in making up some of the gear and equipment, strewn about the drill yard.

I called over to them to stop work, and join us in a 'smoke O'. In the higher echelons of the brigade, this would be called a "debrief", or consultative enquiry, or some other such long words. At Hammersmith it was called a 'smoke O', we stop work, light up our pipes and cigarettes. Then discuss what we have just been doing, in this case the previous drill. Debriefs and consultative enquiries, are all the vogue in the brigade at the moment, we are urged to make more use of them. They powers that be, just don't realise, that firemen have been doing exactly that, since the day they invented fire brigades. Usually around the mess table, with a cup of tea in one hand, and a cigarette in the other.

*

Even the word "smoke O" is derived from brigade history. It goes back to the days when the pumps in the brigade, were worked by hand and called manual pumps. When they arrived at the scene of the fire, able bodied men at the scene, would be recruited to work the pumps. They would normally receive a shilling, and all the beer they could drink, for their labours in pumping the manual pump. If the beer supplies began to wane, the warning cry of "beer O" would be given. This was a warning that if further supplies beer was not forthcoming, they would down tools and stop work. At a large fire with much manual pumping to be done, the cries of "beer O" were said to be loud and frequent.

I first came across the expression, when at Camden Town fire station. Whilst out testing hydrants, it had by then changed to "Mug O". The firemen were muttering "Mug O" repeatedly out loud, and with some feeling, as we tested the hydrants. They were telling the sub officer in charge, that, we had been working too hard too long. That the firemen wanted to go back to the station for a break, and mug of tea. In latter years, it came to mean simply a polite request for a break, such as "smoke O guv?" to the officer in charge. The interrupted drill had only been in progress for around fifteen minutes, before the fire call had been received. Yet it had generated work of at least twice that length. In making up, and re-stowing all the equipment used, back on the appliances. It was now twelve thirty, it would take the firemen until one O'clock lunch time, to make up and re-stow, and so I left them to get on with it.

*

In the station office, the sub officer and an acting leading fireman. That is a fireman carrying out unpaid, the duties of the leading fireman. They are endeavouring to complete a complicated return on outside activities, carried out by the station over the past month. Outside activities is the term for hydrant inspections, London building acts inspections, hospital drills, dry riser tests etc, that the station is obliged to carry out. Hammersmith besides being a very busy station operationally, has an inordinately large number of these other duties to perform.

The sub officer was complaining loudly to me. That it is impossible to carry out the monthly quota of activities, required by the bureaucrats at brigade headquarters. He has compiled his own set of figures, to prove that the quota is impossible. He was seeking my permission, to compile a report endeavouring to prove his point. I told him that in this life, nothing is impossible, and asked him to hand me the monthly return form. I then asked him, what is our quota of hydrants required for this month. He replied one hundred and thirty, and goes on to explain at length, why this has been impossible to achieve. I held up my hand to stop him, then write the figure one hundred and thirty, in the appropriate column on the form. What is our quota for London building acts inspections. Six he replied, and again attempted to qualify why this number had not been achieved. I held up my hand, and wrote the figure six, in the appropriate space on the form. Thus we made our way through the quota, of outside activities required for the month. Lo and behold, we achieved them all. I repeated back to the sub officer, "there you are, I told you that nothing was impossible", signed the form and gave it back to him.

The sub officer has a different outlook on life to me, and is appalled by this cavalier attitude of mine. To him the bureaucrats are senior officers, important people, and must be right, or in this case merely ill informed. To me, they are just people sitting in offices, at brigade headquarters. Who are made completely happy, just by seeing the figure one hundred and thirty in the hydrant column. Six in the London building act column, and so on. So why make these important people unhappy, by forwarding reports, saying that their figures and quotas are unattainable. Thus implying, that they do not know their jobs.

The whole brigade is in turmoil over these quotas. They just do not make allowances, for the fact that firemen have to occasionally go to fires. Nobody believes me, when I say that we always meet our quotas. For they know we are a busy station, with a high operational workload. With perhaps the exception, of one senior station officer from Fulham fire station. Who when told how we achieve them, decides to use the same method himself. Never once were my quota figures challenged, or even queried.

*

Six short bursts on the fire call bells, signal thirteen hundred hours, and lunch time. The firemen are already seated in the mess room, and eating their lunches. Having achieved the half hours work, in making up all the hose and equipment, in twenty minutes. They do not like to be late for lunch, there just might be one meal short.

Pearl, the cooks voice carries from the kitchen, she is replying to a young fireman, who has apparently asked for a large dinner. Such is Pearls humour, that we hear the following dialogue. "I would like a big one please Pearl". "wouldn't we all darling", she tells him, "Errol Flynn would do me nicely, but I can only live in hope". I do not think the young fireman, has even heard of Errol Flynn. But he knows perfectly well, what Pearl is referring to, and it is not his dinner. The younger firemen are very wary of Pearl, indeed all the firemen are very wary of Pearl. For the kitchen and mess room is her domain, she is a very good cook, and nothing is too much trouble for Pearl, if it is for her firemen. She is no respecter of great persons though. I myself, am greatly honoured to be addressed, and indeed referred to, as "Mr Wilson" by her, rather than just "the fucking guvnor". Pearl is a rough diamond, and her prestige and cooking are such. That on a Sunday morning, when no public transport is available. All watches will find some excuse, for the pump to leave the station. Then collect Pearl from home, at seven O'clock in the morning.

One of Pearls favourite stories, is about her husband Lennie. Lennie apparently likes to go down the pub, on Sunday lunch time. He is invariably late home for his Sunday dinner, which annoys Pearl. One Sunday, when Lennie had not appeared at home for his Sunday lunch. Pearl decided, that if Lennie would not come to his dinner, then his dinner would go to Lennie. She would take it

down the pub to him. When Pearl arrived at the public house, she stormed into the bar, confronting her bemused husband, with his dinner. Saying to him aggressively, "if you won't come home for your bloody dinner, you can eat it here". "Do you know what he did then Mr Wilson", she said to me. Remembering some of the previous tales of husband Lennie, and knowing the pub that Lennie drank in. I had a feeling something violent might have occurred, and said so to Pearl. She shook her head, and saying "no, the bugger just called the landlord, asked for a knife and fork, salt and pepper". "Then sat down at a table, and ate his dinner". "He then told all his mates, what a good wife he had, to bring his dinner down the pub for him to eat". Going on to say "she's a diamond my Pearl, always thinking of me". "None of your wives, would do this for you would they", he said as he ate his dinner. "What can you do, with a man like that Mr Wilson she said". I just shook my head and replied, "not a lot Pearl, not a lot".

As we were eating our lunch's, the door to the mess room swung open, and a small man dressed in civilian clothes walked into the mess room. He gave a cheery good morning all, then walked over to the teapot, and poured himself a cup of tea. The mess manager called over to him, there is a spare cheese roll there, if you want it mate. The civilian collected his cheese roll and cup of tea, then walked across the mess room. Sitting down in an armchair, then proceeded to read a newspaper.

This civilian is the clothing van driver, the clothing van calls at all fire stations, on all watches at six weekly intervals. The firemen's requirements are sent to the stores section, prior the clothing vans arrival. But fire gear and other operational gear, can usually be had on demand. The firemen like to keep on good terms with the clothing van driver. For such items of uniform that are on restricted issue, such as undress trousers, and NATO pullovers, Etc. Can usually be obtained surreptitiously, to replace lost or damaged items, thus cutting out paperwork, and enquiries.

*

I had finished my lunch, and just poured myself a cup of tea, when the call bells start their clamour. As I slide down the pole, the green indicator light in the appliance room comes on, it is a pump only call. I pulled up my leggings and then put on my tunic. The duty man strolls casually from the watchroom, and calls out "petrol spilled on road, Brook Green". Brook Green, is only minutes away from the fire station. When we arrive, we find the incident, is one of the commonest causes of petrol spilled on road. A parked motor car is leaking petrol onto the road, the petrol is coming out from his petrol filler cap. Motorist for whatever reason, fill the petrol tanks of their motor cars to the brim, on the nice level forecourt, of the filling station. Then they set off for their homes or office, and there they seek a place to park their car in London's crowded streets. The problem usually arises, when they park their cars on the offside of the street, facing the oncoming traffic. For now the camber of the road, is tilting the contents of the petrol tank, over to the offside of the vehicle. On most vehicles this is where the filler cap is situated, and the tank is now, in effect over filled. The petrol dribbles out of the filler cap onto the road, and a bored policeman, calls the fire brigade. Upon our arrival, we effect a little trick learned through experience. We simply bounce one rear wheel of the vehicle up onto the pavement, to level up the car. Give a quick squirt with the hosereel jet to disperse the petrol, then back to the nice warm fire station.

Sometimes when it is a nice day, or we have time on our hands, we will leave a little note under the windscreen wiper. This is to explain to a puzzled motorist, why one wheel of his motor car is now on the pavement, when it was not, when he left the car. So if you live or work in London. Then have returned to your car, to find one rear wheel on the pavement. Sometime previously, you having filled your petrol tank to the brim, you now know the reason why. Please don't write to your Member of Parliament to complain, for not only have we saved your car from a possible fire. Just as importantly, we have prevented a gallon or two of your expensive petrol, dribbling out of the tank and onto the road.#

*

Back in the fire station again, the pumps crew hurry to effect clothing issues, and exchanges with the clothing van. The pump and crew, are booked for a dry riser test at two thirty, and will need to forego part of their dinner hour to arrive on time. The thirty minutes or so, of their lunch hour that they lose, will, fire calls permitting, be made up later in the afternoon. Also the sub officer and myself change places, the sub officer will ride in charge of the pump, and I now ride

the pump escape.

A dry riser (to give it its full name, dry rising fire main) is a hollow metal pipe. Usually around four inches in diameter, that runs vertically up tall buildings. It is built into the fabric of the building, and cannot normally be seen. The bottom of the pipe is provided with inlets, so that brigade hoses can be connected, and the pipe filled with water. On each floor, or landing of the building, are outlets. So that again brigade hoses can be connected, and water drawn off to fight a fire. Dry risers are invaluable, in fighting fires in high buildings. For they save all the heavy work, of hauling hose up ten or twenty floors, or more. Alternatively, running out hose round and round the stairs, in the staircase enclosure. In high buildings they make the fireman's job of applying water on the fire, much quicker.

The test of a dry riser is basically, to fill it with water, then pressurise it to its working pressure, of around 150 pounds per square inch, or ten bars. Then to examine it, to see that there are no leaks, and that all working parts, control valves etc work. Before the riser can be charged with water, all the landing/floor valves must be examined, to make sure they are closed. For if they are open, water would pour out, and flooding could result. So that testing a dry riser entails, a great deal of walking up and down stairs, before and after the actual test.

The reason for my changing machines from the pump to the pump escape, is to enable me to catch up on paperwork. I still have the report of the London building act inspection, this morning to complete, plus all routine station admin work. Having missed my lunch time cup of tea, I made my way to the kitchen for a cup of instant coffee, to drink as I work. Pearl the cook, volunteered to make the coffee for me. In reality, she is trying to find out if I was involved in a joke, played upon her last week. She suspects, that I must at least have had knowledge of the joke, but I admit nothing.

On the last night duties, the pump had attended a fire in a derelict house, on North Kensington's ground. During or after the course of the fire, one of the firemen had found a copy of a human skull, made out of plastic. It was quite a good and realistic copy, except that it was not hollow, it was solid. During the course of the evening, the firemen had their fun with the skull, and then got bored with it, and discarded it. It was at half past two in the morning, that I had the idea, that perhaps we could make a stew for Pearl with the skull. Going on to then explain my thoughts!. So it came about, that at half past two in the morning, the firemen enthusiastically set about making a stew, for their much loved fire station cook, Pearl.

A large two gallon saucepan was half filled with water. The skull placed in it, then topped up with water so that the skull was below the water level. Gravy powder was then added, so that the water was a murky brown colour, and the skull could not be seen. Then began a hunt, for carrots and onions etc. The mess cupboards of the off duty watches, were raided in turn for these, potatoes we already had. A realistic looking stew, with all the vegetables floating in it was prepared, and the plan was as follows. The next morning when she came on duty, Pearl would be told, the stew was for our supper the following night. It was to be simmered gently during the course of the morning, and the liquid level kept topped up at all times. She was then told that the recipe was a white watch secret speciality, and that she was on no account, to examine the ingredients.

The effect of the practical joke, was told to us by the mess manager on the day watch, who was in on the gag. After we had gone off duty at nine O'clock, he had stayed in the kitchen as much as possible. So that Pearl would not be able to look into the pot, without being observed. During the course of the morning, she had topped up the water level once or twice. The duty mess manager, had stayed close by her, to prevent her looking at the ingredients. Following stand easy at eleven thirty, he was called downstairs to take part in drills. Then shortly after drills had actually started in the drill yard, a loud scream was heard to come from the kitchen. Pearl had found our secret ingredient!. Knowing Pearl as I did, the master touch had been to tell her that she must not examine the ingredients. What woman could resist that?.

Pearl abandoned her kitchen and refused to go back in, the skull had to be fished out of the stew, and shown to her. Only when she saw that the skull was made out of plastic, would she go back into the kitchen. Then all of the time threatening dire consequences, for the white watch, when they came back on duty.

I had been working on my report for around half an hour, when the teleprinter bell started to ring. This was quickly cancelled, by the duty man in the watchroom. Then shortly afterwards, the acting leading fireman came into the office clutching the teleprinter message. To inform me, the pumps picked up a shout guv. This was unusual, for whilst carrying out the dry riser test, the pump would have been off the run, not available for calls. When I heard the address of the call, I realised what has happened. The pumps crew have been called to release a person shut in a lift, at Shepherds Bush court. Which is where they are carrying out the dry riser test. Shepherds Bush court comprises two high rise, blocks of flats, each with two lifts. Which are to say the least, rather temperamental. We attend these flats on a regular basis to release people trapped in the lifts. So much so, that the leading fireman, has the incident report in the typewriter already, and is typing out the basic details, which are well known to him.

In the office up on the first floor of the fire station, I picked out from the noise of the traffic outside. The sound of the pumps diesel engine, as it returned from the dry riser test. I heard the crash, as the appliance room doors swung inwards, and back against the door stops. Glancing at my watch it was nearly three thirty, stand easy, or afternoon tea time.

In the mess over cups of tea. The sub officer was telling me, how the two ladies trapped in the lift could not believe, how quickly they had been released. They said it seemed the lift had no sooner come to a halt, than the firemen were letting them out. "We think you firemen are wonderful" they praised. The sub officer then said, after that glowing commendation, it was a shame to have to tell them, that we were already at the scene, testing the dry riser in the building.

This particular dry riser, had caused problems in previous years, for the ground floor of the high rise building, is a shopping complex. For the past two years, when the riser has been charged with water. The water has sprayed out into a bank managers office, on the ground floor. Today all has gone well, no leaks said the sub officer, and the bank manager sends his compliments. The bank manager is a most charming man, for two years running, water sprays out all over his office, and he doesn't turn a hair. Fortunately for the brigade, the maintenance of the dry riser, is the responsibility of the London borough of Hammersmith.

The time is four O'clock, now begins a daily ritual. "All right to get the net up guvnor" queries Charlie Woodroff. He means in effect, can they have permission to play volley ball. "Everything clean and tidy down below", I asked. "Yes guvnor" replied Charlie, a big smile on his face, "all gear put away". He continues, "four lengths of hose from the dry riser test, to go up the tower". "We are leaving that till after the game, because it will make the volley ball court wet". Our little ritual finished, I give permission for the men to play volley ball.

Fitness training, as volley ball is officially called, is normally limited to thirty minutes daily. But here the swings and roundabouts of station life, come into play. The pumps crew have lost thirty minutes of their lunch break today. To enable them to attend the dry riser test on time. The pump escapes crew have worked hard on their own all day, to complete the station routines, and get the station tidy, for four O'clock. So although they will play volley ball until five O'clock or beyond. Only a half an hour of that, is brigade time. Which visiting senior officers, sometimes find hard to comprehend.

The standard of volley ball playing at Hammersmith now, is quite high. One or two of the firemen, have previously played for the brigade volley ball team. Here, unlike some other fire stations, we now tend to observe quite a lot of the rules of the game. Like no touching the net, and players changing round after service. The watch has purchased its own official match volley balls, which are quite expensive. Rather than use the brigade issue, cannonballs. The game is played fast and furious, and injuries are fairly common. In the main the injuries are sprained and disjointed fingers, and sprained or broken ankles.

When fireman Eamon Mulvaney fell and broke a bone in his foot, during one highly contested game. His team mates, who badly needed to win the point, to save the game. Urged him "get off the bloody court Eamon, crawl man, crawl". So Eamon who was in quite severe pain, crawled off the volley ball court. He then lay at the edge of the court until the play finished, before his injuries were tended. Eamon is of Irish extraction, and normally is off a light coloured, skin

complexion. Now his skin colour was several shades lighter, a deathly white. He was in severe pain, and obviously had suffered more than just a sprained ankle.

An ambulance was duly summoned, when it arrived at the fire station. The crew entered the watchroom, where all the firemen were gathered. The ambulance crew, found themselves in the midst of a heated debate. Was the interrupted game of volley ball, to be abandoned, as a result of Eamons injury, or not?. The team that were losing, thought it should be abandoned, the team that was winning, thought otherwise. The ambulance crew enquired above the noise, "has somebody here, broken their leg". The junior fireman, who was being left out of the debate somewhat. Told the ambulance man "yes its him over there mate", pointing through the crowd. To a dejected ashen faced Eamon, sitting on a chair, in the corner of the watchroom. The conversation came to an end, as Eamon was carried away on a stretcher to the waiting ambulance. After waving Eamon farewell, as the ambulance doors closed, the firemen returned to the drill yard. The wounded had been evacuated, now all that remained, was to wash the blood off the volley ball court, and begin the game again. I made my way upstairs to the office, to start work on the numerous reports returns, and telephone calls, that these on duty injuries generate. Eamons injury was not too severe, just some minor bones in his foot broken, he was only off duty sick, for a month.

Six short burst on the station call bells, signal seventeen hundred hours, five O'clock and the stand down period. Then of course, yet another cup of tea. The mess manager and the rest of the duty watch, are still playing volley ball in the yard. Two members of the oncoming night watch, have made a pot of tea, and are sitting drinking it in the mess room. So I poured myself a cup of tea, and joined them.

They were engaged in a serious conversation, on the subject of hook ladders. The fire brigades union, were currently advocating that these ladders be abolished. They asked me, if I had ever used hook ladders in anger. Then what did I feel, about doing away with them. I answered "yes, I had used the ladders on three or four occasions, spaced over twenty years, to effect rescues". But then reminded them, that I had always worked at inner city fire stations, and this was where the problem lay. The bulk of the property at outer London fire stations, was two or at the most, three stories high. The properties would be detached, or semi-detached, or at least have an access way between each house. Through which, general purpose ladders could be got to the rear of the buildings. The firemen at these stations, could find no use for hook ladders. Indeed, viewed the periodic hook ladder drills, as an unnecessary risk to their persons. So they strongly advocated, that they be abolished.

At inner city stations on the other hand, the property was three four, or five stories high. Built in long terraces, without a break between houses. The only access to the rear of these house's, was to go through the house itself. The only ladder, that would pass through the house. Then be able to reach five stories in height at the rear, was the hook ladder. Therefore to the inner city firemen, the hook ladder was indispensable. In the main they took pride, in the ability to use one well. It was now five thirty, and I left them to carry on their conversation. The eventual outcome of the subject of hook ladders, was that the inner city firemen lost, for the brigade withdrew them from use. It was of course, the residents of the inner city area's, that really lost.

From five thirty we are again busy in the station office, getting all ready to hand over to the oncoming night watch. The handing over, or occurrence book, to be brought up to date. Petty cash documents, and moneys to be accounted for. Telephone calls from the oncoming watch firemen, booking sick, booking late for duty with transport difficulties. All to be recorded, for the oncoming watch officer. White watch firemen calling into the office, with requests for duty exchanges. "Fireman Smith red watch, ride the pump for me Guv". I duly authorise these mutual exchanges of duty, but at the back of my mind, I must note who is riding for who. For I once, got caught out!.

*

A fireman put his head, around the office door saying "Snowy on the pump escape for me guv". I nodded my head in reply, for I was quite busy at the time. During the next five minutes, two more firemen looked into the office, for permission for mutual exchanges, which again I OK'd. Then the standby fireman, from Fulham fire station. Who had been driving the pump escape, because we had been short of drivers that day, came into the office. He requested that fireman White, relieve him on the pump escape. I answered yes, and thanked for his assistance during the day. I was struggling with the petty cash, which would not balance with the petty cash vouchers. When the

thought suddenly struck me. Fireman White and Snowy, were in fact one and the same person, Snowy, being fireman Whites nickname. Fireman White, was now not only riding in the back of the pump escape, the rescue appliance. He having relieved two other firemen, was in effect driving the damn thing as well. So for all practical purposes, the pump escape did not have a full crew, and was therefore off the run. Once I realised this, it was a simple matter to find an oncoming watch fireman, to temporarily fill the gap. If a fire call had been received before I realised the mistake, and the pump escape had then picked up a rescue job, heads could have rolled.

Henceforth I decided no more nicknames, and until they got used to no nicknames, the firemen were puzzled. Heads peering around the office door would request "Smudger for me, on the pump escape Guv". "Never heard of the man" I would reply. The office door would open fully, and the fireman, with a surprised look on his face, would say. "Of course you have guv", then go on to describe Smudger, alias fireman Smith. I would let him proceed with the description. Then break in, feigning surprise, and saying, "do you know what, that description sounds exactly like fireman Smith to me". I would always explain, why I was not accepting nicknames any more. I think the firemen saw that it made sense, and accepted the change.

*

The time is now a quarter to six, Pete Elliot the station officer in charge of the oncoming watch, walked into the office. Pete sat down in a chair opposite me, and complained about the traffic conditions, on his journey to work. Peter normally arrives at the station, around five thirty. Peter and myself are old friends, we have served at other fire stations together, in the past. We spend the next fifteen minutes, talking about, Hammersmith fire station, and life in general, and on this evening I recount the following story.

The white watch at Hammersmith had recently taken part in a medical research survey, to ascertain whether or not firemen's lungs were adversely affected by continuous exposure to smoke and fire fumes. A very important aspect of this research was that it was for medical purposes only, and that individual results would be confidential, and not available to the fire authority. In due course A very pretty young lady had attended the station, with various equipment and tests, to carry out this medical lung survey. The young lady and all her equipment, were duly ensconced in the station officer's office up on the second floor of the station. From here she would call up the firemen individually, to conduct the various tests.

The firemen were in the main, gathered in the mess room awaiting their turn then as each man came back down he was quizzed by the others. One fireman in particular, a very junior fireman named Martin, appeared not overly interested in the test's being conducted, but instead much more interested in hearing about the young lady conducting them!. Martin was known on the station to have a keen interest in the young ladies, in fact he had a nickname, that of 'Fanny Rat'. As I have said previously, the meaning or reasoning behind these nicknames often puzzled me, this one did not though!. It seemed that the test's consisted of many questions, then height and weight being checked, finally testing lung capacity by blowing into a machine, I believe called a Spirometer. As each fireman returned to the mess room, he duly reported to the others, there seemed to be some competition amongst them, as to who had the greatest lung capacity. Then going on to report upon the delightful young lady conducting the tests. It seemed the young lady was around 22 years of age, had many other attributes which I will not comment on here, and most importantly was unattached, or had no current boyfriend. Martin was positively drooling at the mouth on hearing this information. As the last fireman back finished his account, he was asked casually by another, "how did you get on with the strength test then". At first he was puzzled and hesitated, then realisation dawned upon him "ah yes the strength test" he came back. "I did really well at the strength test" adding "in fact I am the strongest one so far, so the young lady told me". The fireman warmed to his theme, "in fact the young lady was so impressed with my strength, that if I had not been married, I would be taking her out tonight, without a doubt". Martin listening avidly duly noted this remark, all the other firemen present also noting, that Martin had noted it!. Martin was duly summoned for his meeting with the delightful creature, up in the stations officers office up on the second floor. Ten or fifteen minutes later he appeared back in the mess room, somewhat crestfallen. To the inevitable question, "how did you get on Martin, did you make a date with her" he simply replied "No, I didn't fancy her that much when I saw her close up". He refused to tell us how he had got on with the lung capacity test, or more importantly the strength test, in fact he really was a bit morose, and totally uncommunicative about the whole affair.

Later when the young lady had finished all her tests, and eight strapping firemen had helped her carry her half a dozen lightweight pieces of equipment down to her car, she called into the station office to thank us, and say goodbye. I asked her if all had gone well, and that she had all the information she needed. She said "yes all had gone well, until the last fireman came up" adding "that unfortunately he had then broken the machine". Naturally I enquired how the fireman came to do this, and she told me the story. The last fireman to go up had been Martin, all had gone well until it came to the lung capacity test. This entails blowing down and emptying one's lungs, into a small metal tube about one inch in diameter, which is connected via a corrugated tubing to the machine. She told me she had asked Martin to take the tube firmly in his right hand, whilst she re-set the machine. Then when she turned back to Martin to tell him to blow down it, she found he had crushed it flat. Adding somewhat tersely "he was quite red in the face, I do believe he did it intentionally you know Mr Wilson". Fortunately the young lady was bestowed with a good sense of humour!. When I told her how eager Martin had been to impress her. Then of the other firemen convincing him that there was a strength test involved at which he was determined to do well. He had obviously thought the lung test to be the strength test and given it his all. She told me between giggles "well I'm not sure if I am impressed by him, but I am sure, I will never forget him".

As I came to the end of the story, six bells ring for the change of watch. I handed Peter the safe and station keys, and we both made our way to the appliance room below. The oncoming watch was lined up in the appliance room in full fire gear, between the two appliances. Peter Elliot gives the command "call the roll" the roll call of the oncoming watch is called, and all are present. The sub officer who has called the roll, then states "Blue watch all correct, White watch dismissed". From that moment, I am off duty. Thus ending a fairly routine, if somewhat quiet, fire call wise day, at an inner London fire station.

CHAPTER 2

HAMMERSMITH BROADWAY

Once upon a time, Hammersmith Broadway was just what its name implies, a great broad way, or road. It was at the point where three busy, main roads joined into one major road and formed the Great West Road out of London. The Broadway was one of the busiest junctions in West London, as traffic left and entered London in both directions along its length. Hammersmith Broadway could be more accurately described as a district of London, albeit a very small one. The bulk of the district could be likened to an enormous traffic island, around two acres in area. On this island were offices, shops, a railway station, a bus station, a garage, a social club and public houses; all totally marooned on an island, surrounded. They were cut off from the rest of London by a six lane major road network, around which the traffic never ceased to flow. If it were not for the numerous pedestrian subways under the roads serving this archipelago, no pedestrians would ever be able to go there, and none leave. Without the subways, it would be necessary to catch a bus or tube train to arrive there. Only the very able, athletic and fittest, would have dared to cross on foot. If they wished to arrive safely, all others would have been advised to catch a taxi just to cross the six busy traffic lanes.

At its western end, the Broadway was dominated by the Hammersmith flyover, which in its time was one of the wonders of the land, being, I believe, the first traffic flyover constructed in the Great Britain. Old time villains and gangsters of the 1950s, who mysteriously disappeared around the time the flyover was being constructed, were rumoured to be entombed in its concrete columns, thus, in death, serving a useful public service which they certainly did not do in life i.e. holding up the flyover. At this point, the flyover sliced between the high steeple of the parish church and the lofty roof of the Hammersmith Odeon Cinema, before descending back down to ground level, carrying traffic into central London. All this then; the big island, the flyover, and the buildings and streets on the outer road ring of the Island, is the district known as Hammersmith Broadway. The Broadway featured very strongly in my life during my time at Hammersmith Fire Station. The fire station was but fifteen yards distance from it, along the Shepherds Bush Road. To turn right out of the fire station was to negotiate Hammersmith Broadway, either on foot, by car, or by fire engine. During my time at Hammersmith, a great many fires and other incidents, took place on or around Hammersmith Broadway. One of my earliest, exciting encounters with Hammersmith Broadway occurred as follows.

It was a Saturday morning and I was just finishing my two night duties. There was no officer relief for me on the oncoming watch which meant that I had to wait for my relieving officer to come from another fire station. I took the roll call of the oncoming Blue Watch, when I found that my Blue Watch driver was a certain Tony Thomas. Tony was a very mature and senior fireman, and although rather sedate in many ways, but he had a reputation for driving fast and furious. He was given many nicknames, such as Stirling Moss or Fangio etc. but I always thought the most apt nickname was Teararse Thomas. This was bestowed upon him because he was reputed always to be tear-arsing about the Manor (fire ground) in his fire engine, whether on a fire call or not. Tony's fire engines tended to have three speeds only: astern, stop, and full ahead forward (and he very much favoured the latter of them).

At around 9.20 a.m. the fire bells rang and the teleprinter chattered out the address of the call. The green light came on up on the appliance room ceiling, indicating a pump only call. I slipped my boots and tunic on. The duty man came out of the watch room, calling out the address of the fire and placed the call slip into my hand. Tony Thomas was already in the driving seat with the engine started, gunning the throttle, filling up the appliance room with acrid diesel fumes. The fire call was on Chiswick's fire ground but near the border with Hammersmith's ground, Hammersmith being the third machine on the call. This meant that if traffic conditions were favourable, it might be possible for Hammersmith to beat Chiswick onto their own fire ground. Unbeknown to me, these were the worst possible conditions under which to ride alongside Tony the Teararse Thomas!

I jumped up into the fire engine cab, slamming the door behind me and at the same time calling out, "Doors!" This was the signal or command for the fireman to pull the braided door line which opened the double appliance room doors. The big doors crashed open and the fire engine lunged viciously forward, narrowly missing the big doors on either side as they opened, and slamming me back down and into my seat. With smoking tyres, we screeched out across the Shepherds Bush Road and executed a violent right hand turn to face in the direction of Hammersmith Broadway. Tony gunned the big diesel motor up to maximum revolutions in second gear. We were approaching the 'T' junction with the Broadway, at thirty miles per hour, with no signs of him intending to brake. I braced myself, with boots on the dashboard fascia and my arms gripping tightly to the arm rests of my seat, ready for the violent left hand turn into the Broadway. As an added precaution against heart attacks, my natural responses took command, for I think I must have inadvertently shut both of my eyes. All to no avail, for a heart attack I nearly had.

My body steeled itself for the harsh left hand turn into the one way traffic system of the Broadway and the possible collision with the rushing traffic there. However, the impossible happened, as there was no centrifugal pull on my body resulting from a violent left hand turn. Instead, my senses seemed to be telling me that the fire engine was turning to the right. When I opened my eyes, my senses were correct, this was exactly what we had done. We had turned right instead of left and were now negotiating Hammersmith Broadway against the flow of the traffic! This was pretty hair raising stuff, no matter how big the fire was when we got there it could never compare with this. This really was living on the edge!

A London taxi driver of mature years, who in his time must have taken just about every liberty possible with London's traffic, was visibly impressed by our manoeuvre as we sped past him in the wrong direction. Likewise, so were a brace of startled private motorists, who broke right and left to pass down each side of us. Pedestrians stopped and stared, we could hardly be ignored, for I was now ringing the hand bell like a man possessed and my foot was pressed hard down on the two tone horn button. We were approaching the King Street exit from Hammersmith Broadway. In the outside traffic lane, coming directly towards us, was a number seventy-three bus. The driver's face told me that he did not believe what his eyes were telling him but he was braking violently, just in case. However, the bus driver had over-reacted and panicked! His passengers were tumbled all over the bus for no good reason at all, because with deft swings on his steering wheel, Teararse Tony swung the fire engine to the right and into King Street. He had deftly avoided the number seventy three bus and we were back into the relatively relaxing, hectic normality of London's traffic.

The rest of the journey was just a blur, partly because of the speed at which we were still travelling and partly because I was coming down from a euphoric high at still being alive and physically (if not mentally) undamaged. In spite of Tony's dramatic, speedy, virtuoso performance, Chiswick had beaten us to the address. This was just as well, for I would have been in no condition for further excitement had the call been a substantial fire instead of the false alarm it was.

Back at Hammersmith Fire Station and once the big appliance room doors had been shut, I had strong words with Mr. Tony Thomas. "What the fuck did you do that for?" I asked. He looked at me, astonished at my strong language. He also apparently did not know what he had done wrong, "Do what?" he queried. So, I helped him, "Why did you go around Hammersmith Broadway in the fucking wrong direction, that's what?!" A look of surprise and hurt innocence came across his face, "But I always go around that way on Saturday and Sunday guv, when the traffic is light," he said. "Don't ever do that to me again," I told him firmly, "when I am sitting in the number one seat, we go the long way round." I added tersely, "To go the short route might very well reduce the journey time by thirty seconds but it reduces my life expectations by at least the same number of days." Tony could see that I was deadly serious and agreed never again to circumnavigate the Hammersmith archipelago in the wrong direction, at least not whilst I was on board and captain of the ship.

*

The Broadway traffic had its many moods, usually to a set routine. Monday to Friday inclusive,

the traffic screeched around at breakneck speeds. This was the time of regular users and commuters, who were familiar with the traffic routes and lane disciplines. On Saturdays, traffic slowed down somewhat, as a sprinkling of shoppers and tourists joined the traffic flow. On Sundays, the traffic was at its slowest and most dangerous. Every other car on the Broadway seemed to be lost and seeking a way out of the circuit, lane disciplines were at their slackest.

It was on a Saturday afternoon that Hammersmith's pump, returning to the station after a fire call, was negotiating nervous traffic around the Broadway. We were on the outside lane and just approaching our turn off point at the Shepherds Bush Road, when without warning sprinted a motor car out from a side road, driven by a lady driver. She did not seem to be in complete command of the situation. The appliance driver braked hard and the motor car passed almost out of sight, beneath the windscreen, so close had the two vehicles been.

Unfortunately for the lady driver, the next car waiting at the road junction behind her was a police traffic car. Immediately, the policeman's blue lights came on and he gave chase after the lady driver. He caught up with her within the space of no more than fifteen yards and directed her into the side of the road, at the corner of Shepherds Bush Road. As we followed round in the fire engine, the policeman then waved his arms and directed us into the side of the road. He then approached me in the front cab of the fire engine and informed me in that brusque manner that they must surely teach traffic policemen at police college (for they all without fail, have it), "We are nicking her, we are going to do her for dangerous driving." I replied in my best upright citizen speak: "It's of no consequence officer, no harm was done, and we are not asking you to prosecute." I was fully aware that conviction for dangerous driving was quite serious indeed and I did not think the lady warranted it.

As we all know, traffic policemen do not willingly release their victims. This one informed me quite tersely that he was going to nick her, regardless of what we wanted. The lady in the car was a middle aged mum and we sat and watched as both policemen interrogated her and inspected her driving documents. Whilst we were watching, a third policeman, a local beat bobby who usually stood on this corner of the Broadway, also went over to the group. We were thinking to ourselves that it was taking three policemen to nick one little old lady, typical! After a brief conversation with the two traffic policemen, the beat bobby then walked away from the incident. Then, surprise surprise, the traffic policemen started putting away their notebooks. The driver next to me remarked acidly, "Doesn't look at all like a police commissioner's wife, does she guv?"

The traffic policemen sauntered back over to my window and said almost gloomily, "We are not going to nick her after all." I was curious, "Really officer? Why is that then?" I queried. I, like the fire engine driver, suspected police graft or favouritism. Mournfully, he told me the sad tale! They had fully intended to charge the lady with dangerous driving. The beat bobby had then come over, and hearing that the charge was to be dangerous driving, informed them that some weeks ago he too had charged a motorist with dangerous driving around Hammersmith Broadway. When the charge was heard at the local West London magistrates court, the magistrate threw the charge out with the dry remark, "Anybody that drives around Hammersmith Broadway has to drive dangerously, case dismissed." It was obvious from that verdict that Hammersmith Broadway was on that particular magistrate's route to and from work.

*

Another humorous traffic incident on the Broadway again involved a lady motorist and a traffic policeman. It occurred on a Saturday evening, shortly after we had come on duty for the night watch. Both Hammersmith's machines, the pump escape and pump, were negotiating the Broadway circuit in light traffic, in answer to a fire call. Both machines were travelling fairly close together, this was to enable the first machine to buffet its way through the traffic and the second to follow closely on before the traffic closed up behind the lead machine. The first fire engine came up close behind a lady driver, who was wandering slightly from lane to lane, a stranger to Hammersmith Broadway no doubt. Most unwisely, the officer in charge of the first machine sounded his two tone horns. The lady, upon hearing this cacophony of sound close up behind her, did what any lady would do under similar circumstances, she applied her brakes vigorously. The leading pump escape driver, who had at least had some warning of this, applied his brakes, juddering to a halt also. Alas, it was not quite in time, for his large chromium plated front bumper/fender dented her rear boot and in addition broke the glass lens cluster on the lady's rear light.

In the pump following on close behind, we could not see the lady meandering around the Broadway. The first we saw was the pump escape apply its brakes in an emergency stop, for apparently no good reason. The pump driver, having no chance to avoid the pump escape, slammed his brakes on also. What I now saw through the windscreen, was the rear end of the pump escape ladder looming up ever larger. Even if there had been time, there was no escape route from the front cab of these fire engines, as directly behind the front cab was a bulkhead on which the breathing sets hung. I was preparing to throw myself sideways over the engine cover, as the big wooden wheels on the back of the fifty foot escape ladder looked set to come into the cab with us, when the road speed at last dropped away and the pump finally juddered to a halt. Again, unfortunately, it did not stop in time, for the heel board at the rear of escape ladder struck the top of the cab. It shattered the fibre glass from which it was made, and at the same time the windscreen shattered into a thousand pieces and fell away before my eyes.

I jumped down from the machine in the middle of Hammersmith Broadway, totally pissed off because a three vehicle shunt involved a lot of paperwork. I walked to the front of the pump escape, there was relatively little damage to the car. The pump escape was unscathed, whereas the pump behind looked like it had demolished a lamp post. So, in accordance with brigade procedures, I told the pump escape to proceed on to the fire call. We remained behind to exchange particulars with the car driver. Both vehicles were moved over to the side of the road, the pump stationed directly behind the motor car. I got the appliance message pad from the cab and began to exchange particulars with the lady driver.

Whilst engaged in this exchange, the ubiquitous policeman appeared (always there when you don't want them). This policeman was a solitary, motor cycle traffic cop. He drew up at the rear of the pump, parked his machine and walked forward. As he came forward, the first thing he saw was the damage to the rear off the motor car. For some reason, fire engines involved in traffic accidents generally seem to amuse policemen and this one was no exception. With a big smile on his face, he said, "Involved in a little shunt, then lads, bad luck." Peering at the damage to the private car, his eyes moved back to the fire engine at the same level, looking to see what damage we had incurred. Seeing no damage there, his eyes moved upwards. I saw his eyes then open wide and his jaw drop, as he saw the damage to the fire engine. His head spun round to once again look at the damage to the motor car, and he spoke: "Good grief, I don't believe it, this little car, has well and truly buggered your great, big fire engine and its hardly got a scratch on it."

Thus, there began a long explanation, "No, officer, it wasn't this fire engine that hit the car, it was another fire engine." The puzzled officer then looked very suspicious, as traffic policemen invariably do, enquiring: "Well, what happened to that fire engine then?" I told him it had carried on to the fire in accordance with brigade procedures. Still puzzled, and shaking his head he said, "What caused all that damage then?" pointing back to the pump. I told him, "That damage, officer, was caused by a fifty foot ladder." He repeated back to me incredulously, "A fifty foot ladder?" "Yes, officer, the fifty foot ladder that was hanging over the rear off the first fire engine when we crashed into the back of it." This apparently made him really happy, wait until he told the lads back at the station about this one! After we told him that the brigade would not dispute liability for the accident, he lost interest in the incident. He got back astride his motorcycle and rode off with a huge grin on his face, no doubt, hot footing it back to the police canteen to recount his amusing story to his gathered colleagues.

The Broadway archipelago had in its time been involved in many fires, both on the island itself and on the embracing road network. Fires involving road vehicles were not at all uncommon but on one memorable morning we attended three consecutive vehicle fires all within the Broadway district, which was unusual.

The first occurred whilst we were at morning stand easy, in the mess room on the first floor of the station. A fireman, casually looking out of the window that overlooked the Shepherds Bush road, exclaimed in a startled voice, "Bloody hell, there is a car going like a bomb out there!" After looking out of the window to confirm the fireman's observations, it was indeed going like a bomb. Both machines turned out to the fire.

The car had stopped at the T-junction and was waiting to filter into the Broadway traffic. According to the drivers account, he had been driving around London for about an hour. He had stopped at this road junction and the car had simply ignited itself without any prior warning. The fire had started in the engine compartment, and judging by the severity of the fire, it was being

fuelled by petrol. Nevertheless, it was a simple, routine fire and was soon extinguished with the high pressure hose reels. The car was pushed to the side of the road, to allow the considerable traffic jam which had accumulated behind it to clear. A mere twenty or so minutes later, we were back in the fire station just twenty five yards away from the incident, finishing our cheese rolls with a fresh brew of tea.

The next call was received in the standard manner, over the teleprinter. This call was to a motor van on fire at Beedon Road junction with Hammersmith Broadway. The location of this call was in fact, a mere 150 yards distance from the fire station. To get to it (due to the one way traffic systems in force) entailed driving all around the archipelago and turning off left into King Street, then turning right off of King Street to approach the vehicle from a totally different direction to that which we had started out in. The motor van was a Volkswagen camper van and had suffered a small fire in the rear engine compartment. The fire was extinguished using portable chemical fire extinguishers, used to minimize any further damage to the engine and engine compartment. Once again, the vehicle was pushed to the side of the road to ease traffic congestion. I then gave considerable attention to trying to determine the cause of this particular fire. This was for selfish reasons, as I also owned and drove a Volkswagen camper van, and what had happened to him could quite easily happen to me. A quick examination of the engine compartment and a few questions to the owner/driver soon came up with a cause for the fire. As it happened, it was a fairly common cause of fires in motor vehicles.

My questioning line for fires in moving vehicles included the following: had the vehicle been giving any problems, or malfunctioning, prior to the fire starting, or had any repairs or maintenance been carried out to the vehicle immediately prior to the fire? The driver's answer to the last question had been yes. I had been anticipating this, for I had found the remains of the mechanic's oily rag in contact with the vehicle's exhaust system. The mechanic in this particular case had been the driver himself. We left him standing gloomily at the side of the road, reflecting upon his carelessness and awaiting the arrival of a tow truck.

The third call came in over the teleprinter and was to a motor car on fire outside the Metropolitan Line underground station, Hammersmith Broadway. This call was in fact only yards from the Volkswagen camper van fire. Since we had a more precise location on the call slip, we could go by a shorter route. Both machines went almost completely around the Broadway island, to where Beedon Road joined it on the left, then pulled into the side of the road, one either side of the road junction. The underground station was about fifteen yards down Beedon Road, which was a one way street. So, if the fire was of any size, the hose reel, would reach it from the appliances. If really necessary, the traffic would be halted in Beedon Road and the appliances driven down against the flow of traffic.

From the appliance cab, I could see that a motor car was parked on the railway station forecourt, for the driver was waving to attract my attention. From this distance, there were no signs that the vehicle was in fact on fire. As I walked closer, I could now see smoke coming from the engine compartment and that the paint work on the bonnet of the vehicle was blistered and burnt, over an area of around one foot square. The driver explained that he was driving along the road when the engine suddenly cut out without warning. He added that passers by pushed him onto the station forecourt. I asked the driver to work the bonnet release. He then told me that he had tried that already and that it would not actuate. The firemen fiddled around for some minutes, trying to actuate the bonnet release, during which time a quick squirt of water was directed into the engine compartment from the hose reel. This resulted in a considerable amount of steam issuing from underneath the bonnet. There was now no doubt that we would have to use force on the bonnet release.

I apologised to the motorist, explaining that we were going to have to damage his motor car in order to gain access to the engine compartment. However, he was apparently resigned to this already. For a few minutes, the bonnet defied the firemen's struggles with crowbars and hydrant bars. This was beginning to look somewhat unprofessional, in that it appeared we could not even open a tin bonnet lid. I told them, "Get the RTA gear," (Road Traffic Accident gear). Two firemen appeared, carrying between them a heavy wooden red box. The box was set down upon the ground and various tubes, pipes, fittings, and pump taken out. These were deftly fitted together, one piece inserted underneath the car bonnet, and a fireman worked the handle to the hydraulic pump. Seconds later, as the metal fractured, a sharp crack rang out and the car bonnet was opened.

What I saw beneath the bonnet was intriguing, for I had never seen or read of the like before. Most causes of fires were recorded as 'supposed cause of fire' but there was no supposing about the cause of this fire. It was plainly there, in fact, it was radiantly clear. The bonnet release mechanism on this car was worked by a cable, a thin wire inside a coiled outer wire, similar to most bicycle brakes. Whilst the car had been travelling along, the bonnet release cable had come free from its fixings. It had then fallen down from the bonnet lid and by sheer chance had laid across and touched both battery terminals. Over the passage of time, the plastic covering had worn away, through vibration or abrasion. As I looked at it, the coiled outer metal cable was glowing white-hot, suspended between the two battery terminals like a single bar radiant electric fire. It was the heat from this glowing cable that had caused the damage to the motor car, for there was no other source of fire at all. The metal cable had become welded to the two battery terminals with the heat. All we had to do to extinguish the fire was move the cable away from one battery terminal. This could have resulted in a most interesting stop message: "Viz., motor car damaged by fire, RTA equipment and pair of pliers in use." I chose instead not to rock the boat and sent a standard message: "Motor car damaged by fire, extinguisher in use."

*

There is one other motor car fire worthy of note, which occurred on a different date. Geographically, it did not occur on Hammersmith Broadway but was near enough and interesting enough to recount.

It was around mid-morning on a weekday day duty, the pump was out of the station on hydrant inspection, with the sub officer in charge. I was back in the fire station and riding the pump escape.

The bells went down and the printer chattered, Hammersmith's pump escape and Hammersmith's pump were ordered (by radio) to a motor car on fire in Talgarth Road, Eastbound, by the Hammersmith flyover. Talgarth Road started where the Hammersmith flyover descended back to ground level. The road was dual carriageway, with the two carriageways being physically separated by a barrier. To get to Talgarth Road Eastbound, which was in effect joining the M4 motorway traffic making its way into central London, necessitated a journey half way around the Broadway circuit, then turning left where the flyover crossed over and travelling up a short slip road, to join the three lanes of traffic emerging down from the flyover. We joined the traffic stream, which was densely packed and moving slowly, as if there were some obstruction ahead.

Looking ahead, I could see a dense column of grey smoke, reaching up into the sky. At around three or four hundred yards distance, no doubt this was our motor car on fire. Suddenly, all three lanes of traffic stopped moving completely. It seemed that none of the drivers at the front of the traffic queue were prepared to drive past the burning vehicle. We were now trapped in our fire engine, we could not go forward and we could not go back. My first thought was that the pump proceeding to this call from hydrant inspection should not get caught in the same trap also. Picking up the radio handset, I requested control for radio talk through, with Delta 232, the pumps call sign. The sub officer's familiar voice came over the air, "Hello guv, what do you want?" In response, automatically replying using his Christian name (frowned upon in radio procedures), I told him what I did want. "Brian, the traffic is seized solid in Talgarth Road and we are trapped in it. Could you enter Talgarth Road at North End Road and travel westbound down the eastbound carriageway?" As he confirmed my message back, there was a note of apprehension in his voice, no doubt at the thought of meeting London's mighty traffic head on. I reassured him by telling him that at that point, no traffic at all was moving in the Eastbound Lane into London.

The brigade tends to have procedures for all eventualities. The procedure for when unable to proceed to a fire by vehicle, was to make your way on foot, carrying portable fire fighting equipment i.e. extinguishers. Looking ahead at that column of dense grey smoke rising high in the sky and knowing that London's impatient and often reckless motorists were not prepared to pass by it, I concluded that extinguishers would not have much effect on this particular fire. So instead, I ordered that lengths of hose, a branch, and the hydrant gear be taken forward. If all else failed, we would fight the fire using water from the nearest fire hydrant at mains pressure only.

After sending the radio message, I followed the crews forward. Arriving at the cross roads by Barons Court, I saw an impressive sight. There, just off centre, in the three lane highway and on the far side of the cross roads, was a motor car. To use a sometimes overly used expression (and

in this case it was perhaps an understatement) it was going like a bloody bomb! The car was alight and burning fiercely from end to end, every part of the car fabric was involved in the fire. It was little wonder that the motorists would not go past it

What we badly needed right now was a fire engine on the scene and I could see a way to get us one. With my back to the burning car and standing in the centre of the road crossing, I pointed at the driver of the vehicle in the near side lane facing me. I did this in my most authoritative manner (just like the arrogant traffic policemen I disliked so much). The vehicle was a huge, articulated lorry. I made stabbing motions with my forefinger at the driver and then turned to my right and made stabbing motions in that direction, thus indicating to the driver that he should take his great, big lorry and go up the tiny little side street to my right, and out of the way. Even though I was depriving him of his ring side seat to the proceedings, the lorry driver instantly understood that I was trying to bring up a fire engine trapped in the traffic behind him. Skilfully, he manoeuvred his big vehicle around the narrow corner and out of the way. As the cars moved up behind him, they too were all waved into the narrow side road, out of the way. At last, our fire engine emerged from the densely packed traffic and arrived at the scene of the fire. Just seconds later, the pump came thundering down the empty westbound carriageway at our rear, also to arrive at the fire.

A high pressure hose reel was taken off each fire engine and directed onto the blazing motor car. It soon became apparent that these two hose reels were having no immediate effect on the fire. This was most unusual, for two high pressure reels normally knock most vehicle fires down. I was not taken totally unawares by this because I had recognised the make and type of vehicle involved in the fire. The car was a Reliant Scimitar, the big and regal brother to the Reliant Robin. The Robin was famed through Trotter Enterprises in the television series *Only Fools and Horses*. I say the word 'regal' because I believe that Princess Anne drove a Scimitar for many years. The two vehicles did have one thing in common however, they were both constructed from glass re-inforced plastic. Contrary to public belief, fibre glass or GRP, will burn furiously once it is ignited, as we were now witnessing.

The number of hose reel in use had now increased to four, which was in fact, all the available hose reels. These were at last beginning to subdue the fire. The fire in the front end body work of the car had more or less been extinguished, under the onslaught of four high pressure reels. Nevertheless, the rear end continued to burn as furiously as ever. It was obviously being fed with fuel from the car's petrol tanks. I use the plural because one of the firemen (an auto buff) had informed me that Reliant Scimitars have twin eleven gallon petrol tanks fitted.

The hose reels were switched over to fog instead of a solid jet and the nozzle pressures greatly increased in an effort to snuff out the petrol flames, but to no avail. The flames were now mainly under the rear end of the car. Where the fuel lines had ruptured or burnt through, petrol was pouring out and igniting with blow torch fury.

High pressure fog had failed to extinguish the fire, which was again very unusual. The fire was now a personal challenge to me. We tried putting all four hose reels back on solid jet, increasing the pressure to around 400 pounds per square inch. Then, we aimed the jets onto the ground at the rear of the car, so that the water was deflected upwards, forming a solid sheet of water between the underneath of the car and the ground. We did all this but with no success. I clapped my hands and rubbed them together, saying, "Right, get the large applicator on it, that should do it." The large fog applicator, which was about five feet long and fitted onto the end of the large fire fighting hose, delivered a virtual storm of water fog. Because of its length, it could be held directly underneath the car where the petrol was igniting and burning. The large applicator was duly produced and got to work. It worked perfectly but had no ill effect on the fire, the fire continued to burn brightly.

Although there is always some danger of petrol tanks exploding, this was far from my thoughts. My mind was totally absorbed with putting this bloody perverse fire out. To the more senior firemen and myself, it was now a challenge! We could see the humorous side of it, it was beginning to take on a carnival atmosphere, so we might as well bring on the custard pies. As everybody knows, circus custard pies are in fact filled with shaving foam. This was, as it happens, the last weapon left in our armoury - foam! So, I gave out the only order left to me (other than everyone run away and hide), "Break out the foam gear!" To firemen, the foam gear was normally associated with oil or petrol road tanker fires and such like, not piddling little motor car fires like

this.

It took some minutes for all the foam making equipment to be laid out and connected up, and the reservoirs filled with the evil smelling, foam compound. Then, the number five foam making branch was connected up and set to its thickest mixture setting, and the order "Water on" given. A thick, creamy, smelly foam issued forth from the branch, whilst the branch men liberally covered the car and road underneath with a foam blanket. I thought to myself, what can be done if this does not work? The answer was nothing, it would just have to burn itself out. The foam blanket built up to around nine inches thick, underneath and all around the car. It was beginning to have an effect, for the pools of petrol underneath the car had been extinguished by the blanket of foam. It was merely the two streams of petrol coming directly from the fuel tanks that were still burning. I suggested trying to snuff these out with the high pressure fog guns, then oh-be-joyfuls, success, it had actually worked, there was no more fire.

The petrol was still pouring out from the tanks. We kept the fog and foam going to prevent re-ignition but by and large it was all over. This had been one of the most difficult motor car fires that I have ever experienced. Never did I come across another one quite like it in future years. Gear and equipment was strewn around all over the busy road. The firemen, the equipment, and even one of the appliances, were all covered in custard (foam). Before we could leave the incident, all the foam would eventually have to be washed off the carriageway. For such a simple motor car fire, we seemed to have used one hell of a lot of gear and created an awful mess on the road.

A driver approached me, message pad in hand, a subtle hint that he thought it was time for the stop message to be sent. The driver knew the basic stop messages as well as I did and had already written on his pad, 'Motor car damaged by fire'. He read this out to me, and with a grin on his face he enquired, "What do you want to follow that guv?" He then read out the actual equipment we had used: four high pressure hose reels, one large fog applicator, one number five foam making branch. Bloody hell no, that sounded a bit like World War Two all over again. I asked him to make it 'Motor car damaged by fire, one jet'. That would do nicely.

*

Over the years, the Broadway archipelago could be relied upon to give a large variety of calls and incidents. During one mid-week day duty, we were returning from a fire call on Chiswick's fire ground and I was preparing to wave to our admiring public, a group of winos that habitually hung around the Broadway and whom for some unknown reason, insisted on smiling, waving and even cheering, every time the fire engines passed by. All this could be very flattering but just what did we do in the past to make ourselves so popular with them, I often wondered.

Over to my right, on the Broadway island, across the busy traffic lanes, I noticed a small crowd of people. A small crowd of people on Hammersmith Broadway was not unusual at all but something about this group drew my attention. They were gathered in a circle, two or three deep, all looking downwards and towards the centre of the circle. I somehow instinctively knew that in the centre of that circle was a person in distress. I told the driver to put on the blue lights and make his way over to the centre island. The appliance drew up to the centre island and the crew and myself dismounted. Clambering over the pedestrian guard railings, we made our way back to the gathered crowd, pushing through the group of people, who drew aside upon seeing our uniforms. I saw an unconscious, elderly gentleman on the ground in front of me. Kneeling over him and rendering mouth to mouth resuscitation was a smartly dressed young lady. She was a single young lady, alone and unassisted in the midst of a crowd of rubbernecks (the brigade's slightly derogatory term for voyeurs of the macabre).

Although firemen are all trained in First Aid, our skill levels would not be as high as a trained nurse. At first, I assumed this young lady to be a trained nurse, for she was coping admirably. I enquired of her, "Do you require any assistance, my dear?". She looked up at me and a smile of relief came over her face but she did not reply, so I asked her once more, "Can we help you, would you like a break?" To my complete surprise, she spoke to me in a foreign language. I don't think she had understood what I had said and I certainly did not understand her. I decided then to take over the incident, I pushed her gently to one side, smiling and nodding my head in approval. I then told one of the firemen to take over the resuscitation, and after checking quickly for a pulse, I myself began cardiac massage. The crowd opened up to reveal the appliance driver looking down at me. I asked him to call for an ambulance over the appliance radio and then book the

pump attending a person collapsed in the street. We did not want to get ordered onto a fire call in the middle of all this.

The crew carried on mouth to mouth resuscitation and cardiac massage, until the ambulance arrived and took over. I looked for the foreign lady to thank her for her prompt action, for the old man was apparently still alive. But she had by then disappeared into the anonymous crowd. For the next couple of days, we telephoned the hospital out of curiosity and was informed that the old man had suffered an heart attack but was still alive and relatively well. Then, we entered into a busy spell and I completely forgot about the old man but I assumed that he still lived. It was only later the thought struck me that I had heard this story somewhere before! I wondered, did this good, young, foreign lady, who simply could not pass by without rendering assistance, by any chance hail from Samaria? She surely fitted the description.

*

The next story is of a fire that occurred on Hammersmith Broadway quite some years ago. Having written it and read it back, I realise that even then, I was suffering from a somewhat cavalier attitude to fires, and indeed life in general. It was not that I did not take every care at fires, especially for those firemen under my command, it was just that fires did not seem to frighten me any more. If I personally was involved in a close call or a near miss at a fire, I thought, so what? Why worry about what might have been? I think it must be something to do with the interpretation of the word 'danger'. What is considered dangerous by one man is of no consequence to another. In peacetime, should a rifle be fired within hundreds of yards of a man, it would be deemed dangerous. In wartime, if a bullet were to actually strike more than ten feet away, it would not be seen as dangerous and indeed, would be considered inconsequential. To quote an old Australian saying, I found that in fire situations 'I only actually whinged when my arse really was alight'. The remainder of the time, unless I was coughing my lungs out or totally and absolutely knackered, I rather tended to see the funny side of any drama. Thus, after writing this story, I discovered that I was seeing humour when in fact there was great danger. It would have taken but a tiny twist in fate to have lost two, or even three firemen, in the fire. Therefore, I thought that I really should add this little preface to the story, lest I give the impression that all fires are fun.

This particular fire occurred during what would be termed as a stressful time within the brigade. We were in the middle of a long, hot, dry summer There had not been any significant rain for months. As a result of this, the brigade was inundated with a large number of rubbish and grass fires. The local common lands of Barnes and Wimbledon seemed to be perpetually on fire, at times requiring eight pumps or more to extinguish them, and the same was happening on common lands all over London. At times, this resulted in a great shortage of fire engines available for calls to house or structure fires. The brigade decided that henceforth, until conditions improved, pump escapes would be held in reserve and only attend building or structure fires. They also decided that pumps would continue to do the donkey work and only attend building and structure fires on calls for assistance.

So it was that around midday on a bright, hot summer's week-day, a call came into Hammersmith Fire Station for the pump escape only, to attend a fire at Lilly and Skinners shoe shop at Hammersmith Broadway. The Lilly and Skinners shoe shop could actually be seen from the fire station, being at the junction of Shepherds Bush Road, over and across on the Broadway Island. At the time this was very annoying to me, a fire on my own ground that could actually be seen from the fire station, and I was not allowed to attend. The pump escape left the fire station for its short fifty yard dash to the fire. I walked out of the fire station behind it and looked over at Lilly and Skinners. There was indeed smoke coming from the shop. I went upstairs to the mess room to look out of the window for a better view. The pump escape was parked in front of the shop, partly obscuring my vision, but smoke was still to be seen issuing from the premises.

The procedure with these reduced attendances (as they were termed) was that upon arrival of the pump escape, if the fire was anything more than what could be extinguished promptly and immediately by the crew, the officer in charge would request normal attendance i.e. in effect a request for assistance, although really more as a precaution.

Looking out of the mess room window, I could see that the smoke was now getting thicker and beginning to obscure the front of the shop. I was now becoming very impatient to be at the fire.

The radio in the mess room was tuned to the brigade frequency, monitoring the calls. I was listening for the message, "Delta 231 at Hammersmith Broadway, request normal attendance," but it never came. Looking back out of the window, I was amazed to get a fleeting glimpse of a fireman donning a breathing apparatus set. "Sod it!" I said aloud, "if they need breathing apparatus to put the fire out, we are going on now."

Down below in the watch room, I put the fire bells down with the manual switch, then turning to the duty man I told him, "Called by stranger to a fire at Hammersmith Broadway." He smiled back at me, knowing like myself that this was an old ploy for going to fires that control do not want you to go to. This information (called by mythical stranger etc.) would be given to control over the appliance radio as we turned out. We brought the busy lunch time Broadway traffic to a brief halt as we cut directly across the flow to the centre island and parked in front of the pump escape. The Lilley and Skinner shoe shop was in a row of terraced shops and was a big double fronted shop, four stories high. I knew from previous experience that these shops were quite lengthy inside, perhaps some fifteen to twenty yards long. A few yards along from the shop was the entrance to Hammersmith Broadway's underground railway station. Directly underneath these shops ran the London Transport tube network. What I did not know was that the shop had an extensive basement running underneath it.

The only fireman in sight was the driver of the pump escape. I quizzed him brusquely, "What have we got?" "Dunno guv," he answered, "they are all inside, two of them in breathing apparatus." I walked through the opened double glass doors to the front of the shop and saw that the shop was extensively smoke logged. It wasn't heavy, thick, choking smoke but a light, whitish smoke that smelt of wood or paper. However, vision through the smoke at the door was no more than six feet forward. I walked deep into the shop and the smoke, calling out for the escapes crew through the murk, but I could find no-one. Puzzled, I made my way back to the entrance of the shop. Here, where the smoke was now getting noticeably thicker, I finally met up with a fireman from the missing fire crew. The reason I could not find them was that they were down below in a basement that I knew nothing about.

At last, I had got some information. The staff in the shop had told the first crew that arrived that the fire was in the basement of the shop. Thus, the firemen were down below still, searching for the as yet unseen fire. The fireman guided me to the stairs that led down to the basement. I took two or three steps down and then paused, the smoke was getting thicker all the while. I snapped at the fireman guiding me, "Have they got a hose reel down there?" He replied sheepishly, "No guv." My terse response was, "Get one." I sent two firemen at the rear scurrying away without further instruction, to do just that. Hose reels serve a dual role in basement fires; (A they provide water to put the fire out and B) if one needs to get out in a hurry, they act as guide lines. It was the latter that I had in mind when I ordered the reel to be brought in. This fire was beginning to ring alarm bells, not only in the fire station but in my head.

The light of our torches reflected back from the white smoke as we made our way forward down the length of the basement. The basement was the same length and width as the shop above, and indeed served the same use as a sales area. Cardboard shoe boxes lined the walls, from floor to ceiling, with racks of display shoes strewn throughout the length, and customer's seats and foot rests situated here and there. I walked along for what I thought was two thirds of the length of the basement, calling out as I went. There was no sign of the breathing apparatus crew. My ears began to tingle and the skin on my face began to stretch with the now rising heat. I began to worry! I had known from the outset that the firemen on the back of the pump escape were all relatively in-experienced. Two of them at least, were in this building somewhere, wearing breathing apparatus sets, and I was unable to find them.

It was getting noticeably hotter and smokier by the minute. We were standing in a basement which was stacked from floor to ceiling with flammable paper and plastic, and there was virtually nil visibility. Somewhere in or near this basement, an angry fire was raging, biding its time before coming out to bite us. On top of all this, I, as the officer in charge of the fire, apparently did not have a clue as to where half the firemen were. To an experienced fire officer this was a most unsatisfactory state of affairs, it was time to start all over again. I followed my instincts and gave the order, "Out! Everybody out of the building, evacuate the building!" This was the first time in my career that I had ever done this and it quite startled some of the firemen but out we all came.

Outside in the bright sunlight, I ordered a roll call of the breathing apparatus firemen, totally

ignoring the fire for a brief while. The breathing apparatus control fireman had gathered up three tallies from the doorway of the shop. We now had three firemen wearing breathing apparatus present with us, I was now satisfied, roll call correct. Then, the pump escape driver insisted that young fireman Massey had gone into the fire wearing breathing apparatus, and he was nowhere to be seen. At first I was sure he was mistaken, for we had three tallies and three breathing apparatus firemen, but the driver was adamant. So, whilst standing outside the shop window with the smoke billowing around, I began to check the names on the tallies with the firemen present. As I was doing this yet again, out of the open shop doorway and through the billowing smoke, appeared a fireman clad in breathing apparatus in full flight, his arms stretched out in front of him. Thank goodness, we had found our missing fireman at last. The escape driver thought otherwise, for he insisted that it wasn't fireman Massey who had just come out, but fireman Tink. I was now totally confused and began the whole roll call process all over again.

I was halfway through this roll call and standing facing the smoke logged window of the shoe shop, when I saw an amazing sight. Due to the heavy smoke logging, the large display window to the shop had taken on the appearance of smoked glass. It looked just like a grey, flat, opaque sheet. In the centre of the display window and through the smoked glass, I could see a disembodied pair of hands, palms forward and resting on the inside of the shop window. The hands began to move about over the inside of the glass window in a searching pattern, as though trying to find a way out. I must have looked at the hands for ten seconds before realising that this must be our missing fireman, or at least the palms of his hands. He must have become lost in the smoke, stumbling into the shop window display and was now endeavouring to find his way out. This is what smoke can be like in a fire, this fireman was eighteen inches away from a bright, sunny, summer afternoon and he was lost in smoke. Two firemen dashed into the shop and hauled him out of the window display, bringing him blinking into the daylight. At last all were accounted for, we could now make a fresh start in fighting the fire. I began a rapid series of orders to the driver, "Make pumps four," then to the BA firemen, "Make a re-entry down the basement stairs with a large hose and three-quarter inch branch."

Even as I was giving these orders, a window on the first floor of the shop opened outwards. I looked upwards startled. This appeared to be another cock-up because I had been told that the shop had been evacuated of all staff and personnel before our arrival! Out of the window emerged a fireman's helmet with two white bands around it. It was the sub officer! I had not seen him at all during the course of the fire, what the hell was he doing up there? He was apparently quite unconcerned and unaware of all the excitement happening below him. He had been quite contentedly looking for the fire all on his own. Well, if he but knew it, the odds were that the fire could even yet break out of the basement to rise up there and bite him. I ordered a ladder to be put up to bring him down the outside of the building. The fire so far had not pleased me. A lot of basic mistakes had been made in fire fighting procedures, which I preferred not to go into. The two young breathing apparatus firemen who had gone into the fire with no record of their being there, could quite easily have lost their lives for the fire subsequently flashed over in the basement showroom.

A completely fresh attack was made on the fire, by firemen all wearing breathing apparatus. They moved down and forward into the basement, behind large hose and a three-quarter inch nozzle. I went forward with the crews as far as the bottom of the basement stairs. The basement was burning well now and I spent a few minutes with the crews as they started to knock down the visible fire. Then I had to leave them, for there were still many things for me to do. The appliances despatched on the make pumps four had by now arrived, so we had plenty of manpower for the time being. The station officer from Fulham Fire Station was now assisting me with overseeing the fire fighting. I considered him my equal on the fire ground and was very pleased to have his assistance, for at this fire I was to play no further part in the actual fire fighting.

I had been approached by representatives of London Transport, who were concerned for the main tube lines running directly under the basement of this shop. They wanted to know whether it was still safe to run the trains. I explained that we had not found the main seat of the fire yet and that the final decision was up to them. I had to check for fire spread on the premises either side of the shoe store. I detailed firemen to search for an alternate way into the shop basement. I sent informative messages back to fire control, I conferred with police on the need to divert the traffic from the Broadway. In my travels, I discovered the original two lost breathing apparatus firemen. They were sitting at the kerb side with their hands immersed in buckets of water. They had both received burns to the hands, face, and ears. They were to be despatched to hospital when the first ambulance arrived.

As a result of smoke pouring out into the tube station concourse, a second entrance to the shop basement was found. Fire hoses now fed into the tube station itself, which had by now been closed to the public. As I followed this hose into the station, to check progress at this fresh attack on the fire, I noticed large pools of water from a leaking hose. I stopped to talk to a fireman in order to enquire of progress at the rear of the building. As I talked to the fireman, I inadvertently stretched out my hand and leaned against a train ticket vending machine. As my hand touched the ticket machine, I received a violent electric shock from it, which caused me to react and swear loudly. This gave some considerable amusement to two London Transport employees, who were standing idly nearby. This in turn caused me to react angrily and I snapped at them, "What are you laughing at? I just got an electric shock from that bloody ticket machine!" This only served to increase their amusement, for they were now both laughing aloud and saying, "Yes, you are the third bloke to get a belt of off that machine." That is why they were standing there, to watch the fun. Suffice to say, I enquired of them (in very strong language) whether they were waiting for someone to die before they did something about it. I then informed them that if they did not get the current to the machine turned off, I would get the electrical authorities to isolate the whole bloody railway station and inform the station master of my reasons for doing it. This seemed to have the desired effect, for they immediately stopped laughing and scurried away.

The fire was finally extinguished using two large jets. I had at one time considered making the fire a six pump fire. The timely discovery of the second entrance into the basement had obviated the need for that. This second entrance, gained by dropping a ladder down a light well, led directly into the seat of the fire, which had started in a separate storeroom of about fifteen by fifteen feet in length, at the far end of the shop basement. The fire in this storeroom was so severe that it had spalled huge amounts of concrete from the storeroom walls and ceiling. This damage was severe enough to suspect the future stability of the whole building. The jet taken in at the rear had actually extinguished the fire, which as the Fulham firemen (who had effected this operation) were at great pains to point out to us, they in fact had done very well. The jet taken in through the shop and down into the basement had played its part also, for this jet had held back the fire, confining it to the basement only and preventing it spreading to the upper floors. Had the whole building become involved in the fire there was a high degree of probability that the whole shooting match would have collapsed down onto the London Transport system below. This would have caused traffic chaos in west London for months to come. It was indeed fortunate that we had managed to confine and stop this particular fire because that was the way I travelled to work in each day!

During the course of the fire, a local newspaper photographer had been busily snapping away with his camera. A week later he came on to the fire station to show the resulting photographs to the firemen. The photographs, which to the general public would be quite dramatic, caused some amusement and embarrassment on the fire station. He had taken some good shots of the first breathing apparatus fireman exiting the fire at full speed. Then, there was a shot of the second breathing apparatus fireman being blindly led out, and photos of both breathing apparatus firemen seated at the kerb side with their hands immersed in a bucket of water. There was another very dramatic shot of the sub officer being ignominiously rescued down the ladder, and there was a not very flattering picture of me. For some reason apparently, I was pointing up at the sky. As one wag commented, "At that early stage of the fire guv, undoubtedly invoking the wrath of the gods upon us firemen."

Some years later, my daughter came home from her school in Berkshire, which was many miles away from Hammersmith. She told me that at school that day, her teacher had told them she had some photographs of London firemen in action, which she was going to show to the class as a topic for an essay. My daughter, who was then around eleven years old, held up her hand and said, "Please Miss, my Dad is a fireman in London." The teacher, taken aback, replied, "Well, you had better come out to the front of the class and see if you can see him in these photographs." The very first photograph she looked at was the very unflattering picture of me taken at the above fire, seemingly invoking retribution from up on high. To which my daughter commented, "Yes Miss, that one's my Dad".

*

Many years ago, on the corner of Hammersmith Broadway and King Street, was a fine department store, owned and run by a local family. Over the years, business and trade declined and the department store ceased trading and closed down. The premises were then taken over by another enterprising business man for a brand new innovating venture. The new venture, second hand furniture, became the biggest junk shop in London. For a few years it too prospered, and

gloried in the name Junk City. Then it also went into decline and closed down. After this, the once grand store became known as the biggest, derelict building in Hammersmith, alias the Hotel Wino, Hammersmith's premier doss house. It was very convenient for the Broadway's winos and bums, boasting spacious accommodation with doors wide open twenty four hours a day and excellent views of the Broadway and flyover. There was also at least a dozen public houses within staggering distance, what more could any dosser ask for?

*

One night, at around eleven thirty, we received a fire call to Junk City. The pump escape and pump, with myself in charge, both attended. Upon our arrival, we found a severe fire in progress in the basement of the building. The flames were issuing out through the broken pavement lights. There was a large basement running the entire length of the department store, so I had no hesitation in making pumps four as soon as we arrived. Nearby, where the flames were issuing through the pavement lights, was a door. This door unexpectedly led straight down into the basement. Hose was taken through this door and down the stairs to emerge into the basement, directly by the seat of the fire. The fire had started in a large stack of furniture and rubbish that had been left over from the Junk City days. As the fire was ventilating through the pavement light, the basement was relatively clear of smoke. It took but three or four minutes for the large jet of water to extinguish the fire.

I had made pumps four on the fire, therefore, this quick extinguishing of the fire was rather embarrassing. The lads obliged me by letting it smoulder on for a little while longer until the take machines arrived, before completely snuffing it out. I then waited for another ten minutes before sending a stop message, in which I dressed up the fire a bit. That is to say, on paper I made it sound bigger and better and more exciting than it actually was. I reported that ten percent of the basement was damaged by fire: one jet, breathing apparatus in use. This sounded much better over the brigade radio than reporting that two grotty armchairs, one abandoned sofa and some other assorted crap had been damaged by fire. Thus, this enhanced and protected the station's fire fighting reputation.

With the fire being out, I did my routine inspection of the whole basement, accompanied by another fireman. By the light of our torches, we could see that the basement was large and full of abandoned furniture and the like. Had the fire not ventilated, and instead filled the basement with smoke and fumes, and then spread, we could have had a good fifteen pump fire here. As we made our way to the end of the basement, I noticed a big iron door set into one wall. My curiosity aroused, I opened the door and shone my torch in. Leading away from me was a semi-circular tunnel, about fifteen feet wide at the base and ten feet or so in height. On the right hand side of the tunnel, my torch beam picked out a small stack of well constructed wooden boxes. My curiosity now knew no bounds. What was contained in these apparently abandoned boxes? Counterfeit bank notes? Gold bars? Object d'art? Ming porcelain? I just had to find out.

I spent a large part of my career searching derelict houses to check for spread of fire, dead dossers and the like. Otherwise, it can be somewhat embarrassing if the police find these after we have left the scene of the fire. At the same time as I conducted these searches, I was always looking for abandoned bank notes and bars of gold etc. but always without success. Thus, my expectations of hitting the big time were not too high. This time however, we had hit the jackpot, for when we opened one of the boxes we discovered champagne! It apparently had been abandoned. There were not just bottles but cases of the stuff, all packed neatly in those distinctive wooden boxes that top quality champagne is packed in. Although I am not an expert on champagne, it was obvious from the labels and seals on the bottles that this was real quality stuff. The bottles were from a number of distinctive champagne producers, and judging by the dates on the labels some of them were twenty or more years old.

Here now was the puzzle: what were cases of quality champagne doing lying abandoned in the basement of a derelict department store? We puzzled upon this question. Had they been stolen and cached here? This seemed very unlikely, as they had obviously been here for a very long time. We racked our brains but could not come up with a reasonable explanation. In theory, the champagne did not have an owner, as the department store was derelict. We discussed whether we should inform the police of our find. This drew a big NO NO from the now large group of assembled firemen; the general consensus being that we could drink the bloody stuff just as well as they could. After some discussion, it was decided to remove the champagne back to the fire station for

safe keeping.

In the brightly lit mess room back at the fire station, a case of fine champagne sat resplendently on the Formica mess table. Alongside it were placed a dozen of the regulation GLC half pint tumblers, freshly polished. A dozen expectant firemen gathered around. We were about to taste the finest champagne that money could buy! "Nothing but the best," commented one fireman. "Pearls before swine," said another. A bottle was opened and poured into the glasses, and tasting began. "Delicious!" said one fireman. "Horrible!" said another. "It tastes like cream soda," said a third. The consensus of opinion was that this bottle of champagne was definitely off. Another bottle from another case was opened and opinions varied again, with the exception of the third fireman, who insisted that this one tasted like cream soda as well.

Thus, we proceeded to taste a bottle from most of the wooden cases and we all agreed the stuff was total crap. The majority present now agreed with the third fireman, that it did taste like cream soda, and twenty year old cream soda at that. Half a dozen of the most impressive bottles were kept back to be given as presents to the other watches on the station. The rest was consigned to the large commercial Paladin dustbin in the station yard. Here at least, it was surmised, it would without doubt impress the local dustmen.

What possible explanation could there be for cream soda to be placed into expensive champagne bottles, laboriously and cunningly re-sealed, and ignominiously abandoned? The perpetrator could surely not possibly have conceived it as a joke, hoping that years later some gullible firemen would actually attempt to drink the stuff? After much deliberation, this was thought to be the most likely reason. The champagne/cream soda, was originally made for the London night club scene, more especially, the 'clip joints' as they were then known. The punters would be lured into the clubs and then the hostesses would inveigle them into buying expensive bottles of champagne at inflated prices. As only the girls would usually drink the champagne, it was possible to pass off cream soda, at that time costing around one shilling and nine pence a bottle. Champagne would have cost many, many pounds per bottle then. As this explanation was reasoned out over the mess table, one entrepreneurial fireman, his mind fixated on the many, many pounds per bottle, was heard to mutter disconsolately, "And we have just thrown the bloody lot into the rubbish bin."

Note: I fully realise that the word 'Archipelago' means a group of islands, not the singular as I use it. Nevertheless, I find it such a delightful word that I could not resist using it.

CHAPTER 3

THINGS THAT GO BANG.

Things that go bang, are one of the imponderables in a fireman's life. They come in all forms, gases, solids, liquids. Then again in all sizes, from a can of butane gas for refilling lighters, to an industrial boiler the size of a house. They have a nasty habit of turning up, only when you least expect them. You cannot just squirt water on them, and then they go out. You cannot just snuff out the blue touch paper, and thus end your problems. Your legs will be invariably telling you, to run far away from them. Again, having taken the taxpayers shilling, your heart and your pride, will be saying you really ought to stay.

It all started in training school, where the instructors spend a great deal of time. Telling the recruits, all about the dangers of compressed gas cylinders. Going into a great deal of detail, into the relative merits, and disadvantages. Of flammable gases and toxic gases contained in cylinders, when involved in fire situations. Any cylinder containing compressed gases, whether they be flammable, toxic, or inert. Will if subjected to heat long enough, rupture explosively.

I think that shortly before I joined the brigade in 1961, a fireman had lost his life due to the explosion of an acetylene cylinder. For the instructors put the fear of god into the recruits, over these particular cylinders. Acetylene cylinders, are invariably paired with oxygen cylinders, and used for oxy-acetylene cutting and burning etc. Before the introduction of liquid petroleum gases, they were the most common cylinders around. To be found on every building site, and garage etc, in the land. Acetylene cylinders have a peculiar ability to explode, without being involved in a fire. The acetylene is stored in the cylinder, not as a gas but as a liquid. It was possible, for a flame from the workman's blow torch, to travel back up the rubber hose then ignite the contents of the cylinder. This is termed a blow-back. The resulting combustion, confined to the metal cylinder, usually, if not effectively dealt with, results in a big bang!. Even a severe knock to the cylinder, can start the contents self heating. Again, with the possible violent explosion of the contents. All this was explained in great detail, at training school. A healthy respect of these cylinders, was installed in all recruits. It also appeared, that the operators of the oxy-acetylene equipment, had also been given this instruction in their training.

I had been out of training school for around three months, before I attended a call, to an acetylene cylinder over heating. In the ensuing time, I had discovered a new type of person, whom I shall call the 'British tradesman'. The British tradesman is to be found everywhere, building sites, factories, workshops and the like!. He has his own brand of humour, which mainly consists of mickey taking. He loves nothing better than a visiting fireman, or any other person who enters into his domain. The factory, building site, whatever, on which to practise his particular brand of humour. With firemen it usually takes the line, sorry to interrupt your game of cards, snooker, whatever.

The British tradesman when it comes to dealing with fires, or his workmates trapped, is usually quite brave and resourceful. It would appear though, that the British tradesman also, does not like things that go bang. Then he is quite happy to interrupt, our game of cards or whatever, and summon our attendance.

We had been called to a very large building site. Where over the previous three months or so, we had attended various minor incidents, and small fires. This time, the call was to an acetylene cylinder, over heating. As soon as we arrived at the site, we knew this call was different. For the workmen had abandoned the site, and were all on the pavement outside in the street. They were all so pleasant and polite, that we knew something dangerous, was sitting in the building site waiting for us. The station officer in charge of the attendance, was being addressed as officer, instead of the usual "Guv". The firemen were all being addressed as firemen, instead of the usual "mate", all so different from the usual banter. They called to us "this way fireman, its just around the corner" beckoning us forward.

One man came forward, to inform the station officer, that he was the operator of an oxy-acetylene plant. That whilst he was operating it, it had blown back. Before he could turn off the cylinder valves, the flame had travelled back, and into the cylinder itself. That he had then called the fire brigade, because the cylinder was getting quite warm. I went forward with the station officer, into the now deserted building site. Together, we approached the two cylinders, standing upright in the middle of the building site. The experience, was a bit like approaching two 1000lb unexploded bombs. Workers in the building trade, are usually pretty blasé types. If they had decided, that this particular incident warranted evacuating the site, then we were inclined to believe them. Then the short walk, up to evaluate and check the cylinders, becomes a lonely worrying walk.

We approached the cylinders, and felt them. The acetylene cylinder, which was the main worry, felt warm to the touch. As though it had stood in the warm sun all day, but not excessively hot, which was a big relief. The only method of dealing with these cylinders if they are heating up, is to cool them down with water. If they are dangerously hot, we cool them down with jets of water from a distance. At the same time, keeping behind cover, of walls etc. The station officer with me, decided that this one was only warm. Therefore we would keep it cool, by immersing it straight away, into a portable dam of water.

The dam was made, by lashing four short ladders together, in the form of a square. A tarpaulin sheet is then laid over the ladders, and the structure filled with water. The weight of which, keeps the sheet taught and in place. The acetylene cylinder, is then immersed in the dam. The water kept topped up with a hose length, fed from a street hydrant. The cylinder will be left in the dam, for around twenty four hours. Checks being made from time to time, that the cylinder is not still heating up.

*

In latter days, the cylinders that are most commonly met, are the liquid petroleum gas cylinders, of Propane or Butane. These cylinders are relatively stable, compared with the highly compressed gas cylinders. The problem then lies, with the highly flammable contents of the cylinders. The gases are contained in the cylinders, in a liquid form. Then one gallon of propane or butane liquid, will evaporate off, to give around 240 cubic feet of gas. Which when mixed with air to its explosive limits, will make approximately 20,000 cubic feet, of explosive mixture.

An example of its power was demonstrated to me, when I attended a call to an explosion. Which had occurred in a large terraced house, in a densely populated area of West London. Whilst attempting to fit a can of Butane gas, the size of a can of baked beans, onto a cooking appliance. A lady ruptured the can, and the contents discharged into the room. The gas ignited with explosive force, blowing out all the windows to the flat, and blowing the door to the room off of its hinges. The explosion even, moved the internal stud walls, of the room. That is the walls made of timber and lathe and plaster, moved three inches out of place. Fortunately the main force of the explosion, had gone out through the windows, and prevented serious structure damage.

The lady occupier of the flat was slightly singed, but extremely shocked, and extremely lucky to be alive. All that damage, had been caused by a mere half a pint, of butane gas. Many years previously whilst at Paddington fire station, I had seen the results, as the same type, and size container of butane gas. The type where the top of the can, is punctured by a spike on the appliance, as it is fitted. This time it Demolished a shop, and the owner of the shop subsequently dying, of burns received in the explosion.

If a half a pint of petroleum gas, can cause that amount of damage. It is not surprising, that firemen have a healthy respect for the far larger sizes of cylinders. Those that are to be found, in nearly all commercial and private premises. In many cases precautions against cylinders, have affected fire fighting procedures. Site huts, or dining rooms and suchlike, on building sites, are in particular very prone to catching fire. Whether from carelessness, or vandalism I know not. Because they are temporary structures, heating or cooking, will invariably be done by propane gas. The cylinders will usually be sighted in, or very close to the buildings. So that if the buildings are alight, and burning well when we arrive. For safety's sake, they will be extinguished with large jets of water, directed from a distance. Thus keeping the firemen out of range of the very large fireball, that will erupt should one the cylinders rupture.

A basic firefighting procedure with petroleum gas cylinders is, that if they are alight and burning, to let them burn. Keep the cylinder itself cool with water, but the gas will be allowed if possible, to burn harmlessly away. Rather than being allowed to gather, in a large cloud of explosive vapour, which could then ignite. If at all possible, the gas will be shut off, at the main cylinder valve.

*

We had received a fire call to a cylinder alight, on the borders of Hammersmith and Kensington's fire grounds. When we arrived at the address, which was a very large old fashioned block of flats. We found to our surprise, that one machine from Kensington fire station was already in attendance. A line of hose was snaking out from the Kensington machine, and into the block of flats, via the front entrance. The driver of the Kensington machine, told me that the cylinder was in an courtyard, at the centre of the flats. I followed the line of hose into the flats, to where it led to the courtyard, in the centre.

The internal courtyard, was about 15 yards by 10 yards in size. In the centre of this courtyard, which was constructed to enable daylight, to enter into the rear rooms of the flats. Was a large tar boiler, being used to repair the roof of the block of flats. All around this tar boiler, where twelve very large 96lb propane gas cylinders, used to fuel the tar boiler. The crew from Kensington fire station, were drenching the whole of the cylinders and boilers. With a jet of water, from a three-quarter inch diameter branch nozzle.

In charge of the Kensington crew, was a young acting leading fireman. Who upon seeing me, came over and told me. That on his arrival the cylinders had been alight, and that he had put them out, before I arrived. Indeed he seemed very pleased with himself, and his actions. I asked him very slowly and firmly, "you put them all out did you"?. "Yes" he replied, quite cheerfully, "they went out very quickly, using the large jet of water". "Good" I replied, "now tell me, what do you propose to do about all the propane gas". "That as sure as hell, is now filling up this courtyard".

I do sometimes get a bit terse, in potential dangerous situations, and this was, a potentially dangerous situation. I tersely told the young leading fireman, what I suggested, he should now do. That was to go about three hundreds yards down the road, and then put his hands over his ears. If then he heard a very loud bang, resign from the London fire brigade, because he had cocked it up. Alternatively, he could stay close by me, because then he wouldn't hear the bang if it came, nor would he need to resign. He could instead, depart from the brigade, as the star, of a very expensive and posh fire brigade funeral.

I started issuing commands rapidly, the jet already working, to be changed to a spray. Another houseline to be laid out, also on spray. Both to saturate the courtyard with water, to prevent re-ignition of the gas. The anti-flash gear, and gloves to be fetched from both the appliances. I should really, have initiated an evacuation, of the entire block of flats. But there was no time for such dramatic procedure's, and I was going for prevention, rather than cure. I reasoned, that if my cure didn't work, I would not be around, to have to answer my critics.

When the anti-flash gear arrived, I first soaked the gloves in the water from the jets. At the same time wetting a spare glove, which I would take with me. I placed the hood of the anti-flash gear over my head, and made my way over to the first group of cylinders. The whole area, was being deluged with water, from the spray jets. The first group of six cylinders, were hissing fiercely. I could smell the petroleum gas vapours, through the hood of the flash gear. I tried the main valve, on top of the first cylinder gently. It was hot, but not hot enough to burn my hand, through the wet glove. This was why I had carried a spare glove. In case the cylinder valves were red hot, to then be used as extra insulation. I turned the valve of the cylinder to the right to close it, at first it did not move. I feared, that maybe it had become jammed open with the heat. After the initial inertia of the valve was overcome, it closed smoothly and easily, and the furious hissing ceased.

With the water cascading down over me and the cylinders, I moved onto the next one, again the valve was not too hot. After the initial resistance, the valve again closed down easily. So I carried on, for all six cylinders. One of the cylinder valves had been a little difficult. So that I had to remove the glove, to get a firm grip on the valve, with my bare hand, before it would turn and

close. Six down, and six to go, I moved round, to the other bank of six cylinders. At the first one, I could not hear the loud hissing of escaping gas. When I tried the cylinder valve, it was already turned off. I moved from cylinder to cylinder, and found that all the valves were turned off, obviously spare or reserve cylinders. I was now even more cross, with the young acting leading fireman from Kensington. He could have spared me this agony, at least. He had told me, that all of the cylinders were alight, yet the last six, had their main valves turned off. Soaked to the skin from the deluge of water. Now that the immediate danger had passed, my good humour began to return. I merely gave the acting leading fireman, a stern lecture, on what to do next time he came across cylinders alight.

The incident had occurred, because of lack of space in the enclosed courtyard. The cylinders, had been placed too close to the tar boiler. So that when the tar boiler malfunctioned, and its burner flared up. The resulting fire, melted the rubber gas supply pipes, from the cylinders. Had the acting leading fireman not, put out the roaring gas flames. The incident, whilst appearing more dangerous, would have been easier to deal with. Wearing the anti-flash gear, and under cover of a large spray jet, simply to walk up to the cylinders. Then extinguish the roaring gas jets, by simply turning of the cylinder main valve. Then with no danger of an explosion, from escaping un-burnt gas.

*

Another very common cause of explosions, is domestic gas supplies. In city areas, virtually every house, will have a gas supply. For the early part of my service, this was not too much of a problem. For the domestic gas supplies, were produced from coal, and a low volatile gas resulted. Excellent stuff for committing suicide with, (it had a high toxicity rating) but any resulting explosion. Usually only blew the windows, of the building out. Then around ten or fifteen years ago, the gas supplies in Britain, were changed. From coal derived gas, to gas supplied from the North Sea oil fields, a very different gas altogether. High speed gas, is what the gas companies described it as, and high speed it is!. The resulting damage from this type of gas explosion, fairly takes your breath away. I most strongly, do not recommend it for would be suicidal persons, unless they want to go out in a blaze of glory. For its toxicity is very low, and any death will usually result from burns, or from being crushed to death in collapsing buildings.

Following a gas explosion in a building, firemen will usually be called in to effect the rescue of persons trapped, or control any resulting fire. So that firemen get to see at first hand, the damage, high speed gas can do!. Whole houses, or blocks of flats, completely demolished, and reduced to rubble. Firemen as a whole, have a very healthy respect for this high speed gas. For a gas explosion inside buildings, will not only give you nasty burns, but very likely, bring the whole building tumbling down around you.

*

At around one O'clock in the morning, we had received a call to a house fire, in the Shepherds Bush area, of Hammersmiths fire ground. On arrival the house was a three storey terraced house, with a semi-basement, and was unoccupied or derelict. Smoke was coming out of the windows, on the first and second floors. The two machines pulled up outside the house, and the first crew dashed inside the house taking a hosereel with them. I got down from my appliance, and casually walked over to the building, fires in derelict houses are pretty routine stuff.

As I walked into the building, I could hear the crew working, and the high pressure hosereel jet, crashing into the burning materials. From the ground floor passageway, I could see that the first floor of the house, was well alight. The crew were huddled at the head of the staircase, at the first floor level, and not moving forward. As I climbed the flight of stairs towards them, I could see why. From half way up the wall, on the first floor landing. A jet of flame, was roaring ten to fifteen feet along the first floor passageway, like a giant blowtorch. I issued my first instructions. Totally unnecessary ones, but I have a nervous habit of saying them every time, I come across this situation. "On no account, put the bloody thing out ", referring to the huge tongue of flame, roaring down the first floor passageway.

We now have two immediate problems, first to carry on fighting the fire, above the gas jet. Secondly to stop the flow of gas to the fire. The Sub.Officer who was now behind me on the stairs. Was instructed to find the main gas intake valve to the house, then turn off the gas supply there.

Calling for two of the firemen to follow me, I crawled forward, with my tummy on the floor. I crawled along the first floor passageway, with the bottom of the gas flame, roaring about a foot above my head. The fire spread on this floor, was mainly confined to the back room. Unfortunately, the plaster has spalled off of the lathe and plaster partition walls, due to the heat of the gas jet. There is now a danger of the fire leapfrogging, to the second floor. Via the gap, between the two sides of the cavity wall. If a hosereel can be quickly got to work on this floor, it will be easily checked.

A hosereel was hauled up by line, through the front windows of the house. Soon all is under control, with the exception of the gas jet, which is still burning brightly at the head of the stairs. Leaving the two firemen with the hosereel, I crawled back under the burning gas flame. I want to find what progress is being made, with turning the gas supply off. I found the Sub.Officer, who is in fact already looking for me. To inform me, that there is no way of shutting off the gas supply, inside the house. The Sub.Officer is a very experienced fireman, and I really should take his word for it. I just cannot believe, that houses still exist, with no means of turning off the gas supply. Although I have experienced this before, I am convinced that this gas valve is hidden so well, that we just cannot find it.

Before searching myself, I take the precaution of sending a radio message. Requesting the urgent attendance, of the gas authorities. All the spare firemen including myself, are busy searching the basement, and the ground floor of the house. Looking for the main gas on/off valve, without success. We have traced the gas pipe coming into the building, in the basement. Then traced it through all the debris and rubbish, in the basement, to the first floor level. Incredibly, there is no on/off valve, fitted into the gas pipe. So now we will just have to sit and wait, for the arrival of the gas board, before the gas jet can be extinguished.

Up on the head of the stairs on the first floor level, the gas jet roared away. The fireman with the hosereel, is spraying everything with water to prevent re-ignition, of the fire. The two firemen above the gas jet, are doing the same. Alternating between the first and second floors, of the building. So we settle into a routine, nursing the lighted gas jet, and waiting for the arrival of the gas authority.

On one of my many trips outside of the building. I have been looking for something to plug the gas pipe, should it be accidentally extinguished. Clay, putty, or something of a similar nature. All I have been able to find, is an old copy of the financial times newspaper. Which I have wetted, with water from the fire engine. Then have kneaded into a papier-mâché ball, about the size of an extra large tennis ball. This has been sheer inspiration/desperation, for I have never tried this material before. Indeed I am very much hoping, that I won't have to, on this occasion either.

Whilst we are waiting for the arrival of the gas authority, we discover the cause of all our troubles. Lying on the floor, beneath the roaring gas jet, is a coin operated gas meter. It appears that somebody, has removed the gas meter from the wall. In order to obtain any money, that may be in it. In doing so, they would then have discovered that the gas supply, has not been turned off. Only, when the gas started to rush out of the broken unions. Whether they then, ignited the gas deliberately or not, we will never know.

At last after a forty minute wait, the shout came up the stairs, "the gas mans here Guv". I left the house to meet him, and found him at the back of his small van, gathering together his tools and equipment. To me he appeared very young, in his early twenties, but that may be that at my age, anyone below thirty appears young. I explained the problem to him. That there is a one inch gas main alight in the house, and there is no on/off valve in the premises. He then looked at me disdainfully, implying that of course there is an on/off valve in the house. Its just that I don't know where to look for it!. I accompanied the gas man into the house. Taking him downstairs into the basement, then showed him where the gas main entered the house. Together we traced the pipe through the house, up to the first floor level. At last he is now satisfied, that there is no on/off valve fitted to the gas pipe.

I then asked him what he can do to assist us, and stop the flow of gas. He looked puzzled for a moment. Then blithely replied, that he would have to send for a gang of men, to dig up the road. Then turn off the gas supply, out in the street. This reply irks me, if it has taken 40 minutes, for the gas man who is on emergency call, to arrive. How long will it take, for a whole gang of men, plus all their equipment to arrive, then dig a huge hole in the road. We are looking at a time scale

of days, not hours, meanwhile the gas jet continues to blaze away.

I explained to the gas man, that previously when we have had similar problems. The gas man had then disconnected the gas pipe, at a point farthest away from the fire. Then capped, or sealed off the pipe off there. Would the gas man be prepared to give that a try. He gave this long, deep, and serious thought, and finally agreed. With the proviso, that we should extinguish the gas jet, before he broke into the pipe. To prevent any chance of a blow-back, back along the pipe. The plan was as follows, the Sub.Officer would be in the basement, with the gas man, and would have a walkie talkie radio. I would be on the first floor with a radio also. When the gas man was ready to start work, the Sub.Officer would inform me via the radio. I would then order the gas jet extinguished, with the hosereel jet.

Back up on the first floor, I was crouching behind the man with the hosereel. He had been informed of the plan. The gas jet was still merrily roaring above us, I decided to check radio reception, and confirm the plan of action. Over the radio I was confirming with the sub officer. That when the gas man was ready. I would give the order "extinguish the flame" and the gas man could commence his work. As I spoke the words "extinguish the flame" into the radio, the hosereel jet burst into life. The flame instantly went out, leaving us in complete darkness. With the now extinguished gas jet, hissing angrily above our heads. I turned menacingly to the man with the hosereel, and said, "what the bloody hell did you do that for". He replied just as angrily, "because you just bloody well told me to". "You just said, extinguish the flame". I then told him "that I had not been talking to him, but confirming the plan of action, with the Sub.Officer over the radio". To which he very practically replied, "well its to late now, the bloody things out".

There we were all again, back in one of those potential bang situations. Sitting there in the dark, with the now extinguished, but potentially dangerous gas jet, roaring out above our heads. Still many glowing pockets of fire still around us, to provide re-ignition. This is what is termed in cockney slang, as threepenny bit half-a-crown time. This referring to the actions of the sphincter muscle, in tense situations like this. Opening and dilating vigorously to the respective sizes, of the threepenny bit, and half a crown coins.

After what seemed an age, a torch came on to illuminate the scene. I then remembered, that I was still carrying my copy of the financial times, in my fire tunic pocket. I sprang over to the open end of the gas pipe, and rammed the soggy ball of papier mache into it. Successfully and much to my relief, stemming the flow of gas. I held it in firmly in place, the wet paper hissing gently against the hot metal of the pipe. Until at last, the gas man disconnected, and capped off the pipe in the basement.

Again lady luck had smiled upon us, I had never tried the papier mache method before. I had merely thought of it, when I could find nothing more suitable. There were three or four firemen above the gas jet, another three or four firemen on the stairs. Then even more firemen, down in the dark cluttered basement. If the gas had re-ignited with explosive force. For it surely would have re-ignited, with all those small glowing pockets of fire around. At best, it would have meant just a few singed firemen. At worst, it could have meant digging us all out of a collapsed building.

*

Another gas incident that had a happy ending, occurred shortly after the preceding story. So it might be said, that I was still slightly gas happy, and was as follows!. I had finished a night duty at Hammersmith fire station. Because of sickness, there was no officer's on the oncoming watch, to relieve me. So I continued to be in charge of the station and ride the machines. Until an officer despatched from a neighbouring station, arrived to relieve me. This then meant, that I would be riding with the green watch. A group of firemen that I knew very well indeed, but did not normally ride to fires with.

At around 9-45 am we received a call to a house fire, on Hammersmiths fire ground. When we arrived at the address, the house was a two storey end of terrace house. With a shop on the ground floor, and residential accommodation above. The fire was confined to the residential flat, above the shop. As the two machines came to a halt outside the shop, the crew from the first machine jumped down. A hosereel very quickly and expertly, went into the building. I followed on behind, and by the doorway, met a lady who was the occupier of the flat on fire. In answer to my questions, she told me that the fire was confined to a bathroom, at the rear of the flat. Also that

a gas water heater, that served the bathroom, had suddenly burst into flames.

I made my way past the firemen on the crowded narrow staircase, that led up over the shop, to the flat on the first floor. Then followed the hosereel, through the flat to the bathroom, at the rear of the building. The room was a very small bathroom, with just enough room for the bath, and hand washbasin. The firemen were extinguishing the fire from the door of the room, which would for some reason, would only partially open. Most of the fire had been extinguished, with the exception of the gas water heater. From which the escaping gas, was burning quite brightly.

As I was working with a crew, I did not normally ride to fires with. I once again gave usual very firm instructions. "On no account was that gas jet, to be extinguished". So that when I left the room for a minute, and then came back again. Then saw that the gas fire was out, I was quite terse with the two firemen on the hosereel. Saying crossly "I thought I told you not to put the gas fire out", but they quickly replied "we didn't put it out, it went out of its own accord". "With a little help from your hosereel jet", I bad temperedly, snapped back at them.

Now yet once again we had to find the main gas valve, before to much gas escaped and re-ignited. I again, organised all the spare firemen into looking for it. At the bottom of the stairs, I met the lady who's flat it was. I asked her if she knew where the main gas valve, for the house was. She in turn, asked me why I wanted to know. So I explained to her, that the gas fire had been extinguished, and then the dangers of re-ignition. She in turn replied "the moneys run out". A not very coherent reply, but under the circumstance's (her house was on fire) understandable. Our search for the gas on/off valve continued, and every so often I would return to the first floor bathroom. There to see if there was a dangerous build up of gas. Would I need to withdraw the two firemen, who where still damping down the remaining fire. In passing, I asked the lady again "did she know where the main gas valve was". Again I got the same incoherent reply, "the moneys run out".

It was on one of my trips back to the first floor bathroom. That the two firemen with the hosereel, told me that they had found the gas meter. It was hidden under debris in the bathroom, and that they had turned the supply off, at the meter. Then they told me, with big smiles on their faces. For they were now exonerated, from having extinguished the gas fire themselves. "By-the-way Guv the lady was right, the money had run out". They went on to explain, that the meter was a prepayment, coin operated meter. That the money had indeed run out, and the meter had then automatically shut off the gas supply. I really should listen more carefully, to what people tell me!.

*

Electricity is not commonly associated with explosions. In metropolitan areas, where the cables are all buried underground, in cable ducts. Any malfunction or major short circuit, in these cables, will usually result in a very large bang!. With all sorts of debris, being thrown high into the air. I was very fortunate, that quite early on in my service, I had a demonstration of the power of these explosions in the street, as they are termed. We had been called to an explosion in the street. When we arrived, it was obvious that the explosion had occurred in an underground cable duct. For smoke was percolating through a nearby concrete and iron, manhole cover.

In retrospect, the office in charge of this incident, was grossly careless or badly informed. For he had the firemen remove this manhole cover, where the smoke was percolating from. A group of firemen including myself, were gathered around and looking down the hole. Waiting for the electrical authorities, to arrive. When about 100 yards to our right, another large explosion suddenly occurred. We turned around, to see a concrete and iron manhole cover. Weighing around 200 pounds, sailing up, and turning over and over in the air, in apparent slow motion. Fortunately it landed back in the street, causing no damage, I was suitably impressed!. Never taking chances, with explosions in the street henceforth.

In future years my caution was to cause me some problems. For whenever called to explosions in the street, which appeared to involve underground cable ducts. I would request the police to close off the street to the public, until the electrical authorities arrived. Which invariably took some considerable time, and they declared them safe. This in turn caused the police many problems, in diverting the public and traffic. They were sometimes not keen, to co-operate. On at least three occasions, in subsequent years. I had the pleasure, after insisting that the police close a particular street, to pedestrians and traffic. Off then hearing the loud explosion. Then seeing the manhole

cover, paving slab, or other assorted debris. Sail up into the sky, again to land harmlessly in the street.

Another kind of explosion in the street, to which the fire brigade is occasionally called. Does not usually, have an happy ending. Other than being invariably first on the scene, to render first aid, tender last rites, or whatever. The brigades services, are not really required. This is when unfortunate workmen, digging up the roads, or the suchlike, usually with pneumatic drills. Pierce a high voltage, electric cable.

The results of this are staggering, the unfortunate workman will be literally blown out of his shoes, by the explosion. He will have extensive burns to his body. They will be usually concentrated, to the more sensitive damp, parts of the body. The crotch, the armpits, the soles of his feet. The injuries are such, that they are very often fatal. These incidents will usually arouse, a great deal of sympathy from the firemen. For it is seldom the workman's own fault. The workman will dig, were the foreman or supervisor tells him to dig. Then the resulting burns so severe and painful, are suffered by the innocent workman, not the foreman.

*

Finally explosions that people think are very common, and are in fact quite rare. That is explosions involving the petrol tanks, of vehicles on fire. Then not involved, in collisions with other vehicles etc. In the whole of my service, with the huge number of motor cars and other vehicles on fire, that I attended. I saw only two petrol tanks explode. They were both very impressive, producing quite large fire balls. I certainly would not have wanted to be to close to them, but they were very rare events. Even so, it is still no consolation, to have written on ones gravestone. That you died of a rare event, and so precautions are always taken.

When a motor car or other vehicle is on fire, and well alight. The approach with the hoses, should always be made from the front of the vehicle. Farthest away from the petrol tank (keeping in mind, that some vehicles have the petrol tank at the front). The fire, then progressively extinguished, along the length of the car or truck. Finishing at the rear, where the petrol tank is usually situated. The theory being, that if the tank exploded, the explosion would go to the rear and sides of the vehicle. Thus causing the minimum damage, to the firemen.

It may have seemed in this chapter, that I was a bit wary, or nervous of explosions etc. Well I was! but for a different reason than one might think. If any of the preceding incidents had gone sour, and resulted in a loud bang. Then a firemen had been killed, or injured. The powers that be, senior management etc, will always come looking for someone, to take the blame. For these things in their eyes, can never be put down, just to bad luck. That the someone, who will invariably have to take the blame, will be the man in charge of the red engines. So if something is going to bang, and you are the man in charge!. The best place to be, is right in the middle of it!. This in itself, saves having to complete the mountains of resulting paperwork, that inevitably follows demising on duty

*

On a par with things that go BANG are also things that go CRASH. Things that go crash have probably killed more fireman than any other cause at fires, the things that go crash that I have particularly in mind, are the collapse of buildings, or structures.

This is something that I have never talked or written about until now, over and above the many rescues etc that I was involved in, in my career. I have saved from death or very serious injury at least a dozen firemen, always this involved collapse of buildings or structures. With time/years served in the job, plus perhaps the responsibility of rank, one acquires a great deal of awareness on the fire ground. It was not my job in the rank of rider station officer, to go charging into fires with the jet or hose, nor to climb the ladders and get the glory of the rescue. Instead it was my job to cover every eventuality, and cover the backs of those doing the hairy dangerous bit. The man inside the fire squirting the water, even if he had the experience and knowledge, would not necessarily be aware of an impending building collapse, that was my responsibility. With time in the job one becomes slightly blasé one has seen it all before. What to a junior fireman would be Armageddon, would be to myself just another Saturday night four pump fire persons reported. So then to be detached from the excitement and stand back, to see the woods through the trees,

viewing the overall picture. Then when firemen in breathing sets are going above an angry fire in search and rescue; bugged the water damage, hit the fire with everything you have got. When the building walls begin to imperceptibly bow and sag, get them all out quick. In a severe building fire to worry about, burnt away floors, or roof collapse. To effect a quick dash into the building without breathing apparatus to check conditions at the nozzle. So many times whilst doing this with my clearer vision and nose on the deck, would I be tugging at the firemen's leggings and shouting at them "the bloody fires over there" they not being able to see through the thick smoke. In the second half of my career, I could still quite easily have been the man on the jet, or the first man up the ladder, but by then I knew that my skills were more use elsewhere, and I like to think that the firemen knew that equally as well.

It was on a Sunday day duty in early spring of the year. At this time in the brigade, the station routine on Sundays was that only essential operational work was carried out on the fire stations, then the men being stood down for the rest of the day. The exception to this was that for the office staff this was quite a busy day, for all the routine paperwork, filing etc in the station office was brought up to date. This could entail quite a busy morning, if then if fire calls were received this work would carry on well into the afternoon. Then as the office staff, the station officer, sub.officer, plus any volunteers, IE. Guys interested in promotion battled with the paperwork. The remainder of the men read the newspapers or suchlike, or washed their private motor cars in the station yard.

As I remember it, it had been a fairly routine Sunday morning with not to many disruptive fire calls, so that the routine office work had been completed. Then the whole watch sitting down to the ritual of Sunday lunch, which was almost without fail a roast joint of meat, roast potatoes etc. At around 1-45pm I was seated at one end of the long mess table engaged in conversation, at the opposite end of the table the ubiquitous (at the time) card school of contract whist had commenced play, when the clamour of the fire bells disrupted all. The call slip ordered both of Hammersmiths machines, to a fifteen pump fire at Corney road on D25 Chiswick's ground. Chiswick's fire ground borders on with Hammersmiths, so if they have just made pumps fifteen and we get a move on, we should be in time for some interesting fire fighting. Both Hammersmiths machines arrived at the address which was a very large single storey warehouse type building, it was about 100 yards long by about 40 yards wide. The building had a steep pitched cement asbestos type roof which was about 60 feet high at the apex. Out off just about every crack and orifice of the building nasty grey smoke was punching out, but there was no sight of the actual flames themselves. Whilst this was patently an angry old fire perhaps waiting to bite someone, at least it was in a single storey building, albeit a fairly large and high one. I jumped down from the appliance and saw that Chiswick's station officer was in earnest conversation with a small group of other officers, so I walked over to join them. The station officer was explaining that there was a severe water shortage in this district, and that it would be necessary to set into an open water supply nearby. As I listened and faced him, framed in the background I could see the burning building. I listened attentively whilst he detailed the plan of attack on the fire, at the same time my eyes were watching the burning building. At a certain point in time my visual senses cancelled out those of hearing, for I could see that one of the sixty foot high gable end walls was leaning out of perpendicular. My brain immediately registered the cause of this, the roof girders were expanding in the heat and pushing the walls outwards. My eyes then went to the base of the wall, there they saw a group four firemen with a charged length of hose, trying to force an entry into the building. Without explanation I walked quickly away from the group of fire officers, towards the four firemen at the base of the wall. As I approached them from a better viewing angle I could see that the high brick gable wall, was dangerously leaning outwards. The group a sub officer and three firemen were endeavouring to force an entry through a steel rolling shutter door, and these can be notoriously difficult to break into. Continuing to walk towards them and using my loudest sergeant major voice I called the sub officer to bring his crew over to me at once. He paused and I could see the puzzled look on his face, so I repeated my call even more stridently. He started to walk towards me all on his own, a look of anger clearly upon his face. Then I repeated again more softly but still urgently "no bring your crew with you" his face was now a mixture of anger and puzzlement. I then walked them well clear of the gable wall end, then simply took them to the side of the building and pointed upwards. The sub officer looking up towards the gable end got it in one, a couple of the more junior firemen had to have it explained to them. In a very firm voice I told the young sub officer "stay here and do not let anyone enter this area" indicating a zone where I thought the gable end wall would expectedly crash down. I could see by the look on his face, that he did not much fancy being delegated as an officer in charge of a wall, when there was much exciting firefighting to be done. I then did something that I rarely did at fires, sternly I said to him "what is your name sub officer" then adding "what station are you from". After he had given his name and station to me I then repeated my order that he stay there and not let anyone

enter the area. (Should he ever read this book, I cannot remember his name, but do recall that he was from Richmond fire station). I then walked away to re-join the group of officers at the battle conference. Just as I arrived I heard a thunderous crash, (that word again CRASH) as the sixty foot brick gable end smashed into the ground, mere minutes after I had evacuated the crew of four firemen. The three firemen were probably by this time busily engaged elsewhere at the fire, but I am quite sure that the event will be indelibly stamped for ever, on the young sub officers mind

The remainder of the fire was a bit of an anticlimax, myself being designated as water officer and Hammersmith crews being involved in relay pumping from the open water supply (I think it was a canal). Never-the-less it was quite an interesting experience, inner city firemen do not usually get involved in pumping from open water supplies.

*

The second occasion that sticks in my memory probably saved six to eight firemen from death or serious injury, but this was a far more straightforward incident. We had received the call at Hammersmith fire station in the early hours of the morning to Hammersmith market. Upon our arrival we found the building involved to be a terraced three storey shop and dwellings and again to use the much used phrase, all three floors and the roof were going like a bloody bomb. The initial worry was were persons involved (not that we could have done much about it) with the severity of the fire. Fortunately the next door premises were a greengrocers who tend to start work very early in the morning and were already in attendance. They were then were able to inform us that the whole of the building on fire was unoccupied, thus we were able to concentrate on merely extinguishing the fires.

The first attack on the fire was to lay out two large hose lines with three quarter inch nozzles attached, then attempt to beat back the fire which was leaping out over the pavement on the ground floor. The two jets of water crackled into life working at high pressure, which entailed three or four firemen manning each one. This was really a stand back fire fought from the outside. The kind that the press photographers love so much, pictures of the brave firemen squirting water on the leaping flames. Once the two jets of water were working, I set about my next worry, fire spread to the adjoining buildings. I entered the greengrocers shop to the left of the building on fire, and made my way up to the top floor checking for fire spread on the way both at the side and rear of the building. On the top floor I espied a ladder leading up and out onto the roof of the building. Making my way up this ladder I opened the trapdoor and made my way out onto the roof. There I found that the two premises were separated by a firewall that extended up and above the two adjoining roofs. I was now beginning to relax somewhat, not much danger of fire spread here, never-the-less over my personal radio I ordered a covering jet to be brought to this rooftop. My trusted leading fireman Eddie had previously been despatched to check the building on the other side of the fire for spread, then since it was of a similar style as this one spread was unlikely.

Just when I was beginning to feel self satisfied and relaxed I had covered all eventualities, I saw it!. The building on fire had a gable end at the front of it facing the street, the fire had vented through the roof burning away the supporting timbers, the gable end was beginning to lean outwards. Oh Sh*t I muttered under my breath, I shouted over my radio to whom-so-ever would hear "quick get the crews away from the front of the building its in danger of collapsing". By the time I had arrived back on the ground floor and out in the street, the two crews with the jets had retreated. But they had merely moved back and away from the building, where when the gable end crashed down, the rubble would spew out and still get them. It was not until I had positioned them to the sides and away from the falling debris zone could I once again relax. Strange to say some minutes later when that gable end crashed down with a thunderous roar, and showers of sparks and dust, I felt immensely pleased with myself.

I don't suppose that the firemen involved in this incident (they are probably all retired by now) ever gave much thought to what might have been, that early morning. Nobody seems to remember the one that didn't get you, even if it came close by. It is only when I trawl through my memory for stories to tell, that I myself remember. So as I finish this particular story I can feel a little glow of satisfaction welling up within myself, at the memory of what could have been.

CHAPTER 4

NOISY NEIGHBOURS

When friends asked which fire station I served at and were told Hammersmith Fire Station, their next question would usually be, "Whereabouts is that?" It saved a lot of time if in return I asked them, "Do you know where the Hammersmith Palais Dance Hall is?" No matter which part of the country they came from, most of them had heard of, or knew the whereabouts of the Hammersmith Palais. Almost without exception however, not one of them had noticed that the building very next door was Hammersmith Fire Station.

During the daytime, the Palais slumbered. There would be just an occasional band rehearsing or an afternoon sedate tea dance, with perhaps the coming and going of cleaners, caterer supplies and brewers drays. It would be quite easy to pass it by un-noticed. It was from around eight in the evening that it really began to stir from its sleep. Then, with its bright foyer lights on the early customers began to arrive, just as its next door neighbour (the fire station) slipped into a quieter routine. At the fire station, suppertime was at eight in the evening. The routine tasks would have been done and the firemen would now be on standby. All work from now on would be generated by the evening's inevitable quota of fire and emergency calls.

From the windows of the mess room on the first floor level of the fire station, at around nine to nine thirty in the evening, the first of the Palais watch would begin. These were the firemen, who no matter what the weather, could not resist watching the world go by and into the adjoining Palais. This watch would continue on and off throughout the entire evening, until the Palais closed and the last of its customers left at around two-thirty in the morning. The stone cills of these windows had a shiny patina on them, polished by the elbows of generations of previous firemen, all of whom would have served at Hammersmith Fire Station and participated in the Palais watch.

*

The Palais had its basic rhythm which the firemen knew and watched. From around eight o'clock in the evening there were a steady trickle of patrons arriving. This built up during the course of the evening until around 11 o'clock. At this time all the pubs closed and their customers, who were looking for further entertainment, made their way to the Palais. This was the time when a lot of the action took place, as the informed Palais watcher would tell you. The bouncers would be busily engaged in sorting out who would and who would not be allowed in. The drunks, the argumentative, and those wrongly dressed would be turned away. They would often wish to discuss the matter (very often quite aggressively) with the bouncers, usually to no avail.

This was the time when the enquiry bell at the fire station would sometimes ring. Upon answering it the duty man would be faced by a member of the public, who would state, "The bouncers have told me that you might be able to lend me a necktie, so that I can be properly dressed to get into the Palais." It was surprising just how many were accommodated this way and returned the necktie after use. It had even been known for trousers to be loaned (!) during the time that jeans were considered not acceptable, even though they were then the height of fashion. Shirts would also be loaned to those turned away because they were dressed only in tee shirts. How all this started I have no idea, it was going on when I was posted to Hammersmith and it was going on when I left. The bouncers sent them along to the fire station, and firemen being firemen, usually helped out. No demands for money were ever made to my knowledge but a packet of cigarettes or a can of beer would be appreciated upon return of the borrowed item.

*

At around eleven to eleven thirty at night, with the pubs now shut, the crowds would stream homewards around Hammersmith Broadway or make their way into the Palais. This would be the

favourite time for the 'NOCTURNALS' to emerge. The 'nocturnals' was the name given to the indigenous fauna that inhabited the Broadway at this time of the night. In the main they comprised of a mixed variety of hairy spiders, bats, sea gulls and vicious rats; all with one thing in common. They were all suspended on a piece of nylon fishing line, which was tied to the end of a billiard cue and dangled out from the first floor window of the fire station. The ladies were the favourite victims because they usually gave the best reaction, especially to spiders! Nevertheless, all were fair game: jack-the-lads, policemen, everybody, without fear of favour. It was hard to catch a policeman though because they would have seen it all before or would have been warned by their colleagues (the police station was only fifty yards down the road). However, it was not unknown for a policeman to steer his accompanying recruit colleague (usually a women police officer, though not always) neatly into position for the spider, bat, or whatever, to take effect.

On some warm, summer Saturday nights, quite a large crowd would gather on the opposite side of the road to watch the fun. Upon reflection, I cannot remember any time when the victims did not take it in good fun. On passing the fire station, the regular Saturday night patrons to the Palais would always look up from whence the 'nocturnals' came. If none were visible, they could seldom pass without a cheery shout, "What no spider tonight boys?"

*

At around this time of night, a lot of the men going into the Palais would arrive with cans of beer which they were not allowed to take in with them. They would finish the contents of the can on the fire station forecourt and deposit the empty cans there. Then, many of them would have the sudden urge to urinate and would move into the darkened corner by the end of the appliance room doors and proceed to do it there and then. There were dozens of toilets inside the Palais but they would relieve themselves up against the fire station doors. This annoyed the firemen quite considerably as after a few years at a fire station it gets to be a second home. Many retaliatory moves were made against these uriners, one being a jug of cold water from a first floor window. This was stopped immediately as it tended to result in bad temper and aggression. It was, I was informed by a police officer, technically a form of assault. The others methods were more subtle. There was a small window on the ground floor, adjacent to the appliance doors. By this point a fireman would be stationed with the window slightly opened, so that when a drunk was urinating up against the door, a voice would come from close by his right ear, "Oye, do you mind? You are pissing all over my shoes!" This would very often result in the startled drunk doing just that, pissing over his own shoes.

Another favourite trick was to run the wash down tubing from the back drill yard to the front appliance room doors. The wash down tubing was like a large garden hose pipe, with a one-inch internal diameter. When the drunks were busy urinating, and no doubt with the peculiar habit of men when relieving themselves, looking up at the sky, the wash down tubing would be turned on and directed under the appliance room door. When the drunk looked down, instead of just a pint of fluid there would be gallons of liquid running all over his shoes and down the gutter. This little joke could be improved upon and frequently was. The large diameter fire hose would be connected from the fire hydrant in the drill yard and this in turn would be led to the front appliance room doors. No branch or nozzle was fitted, just the big open end of the hose was used. When the hydrant was turned on, mega supplies of water gushed out from under the appliance rooms doors. This was very effective and no drunk normally returned twice for this treatment.

Strangely enough, this was the best method of deterring this nuisance. If you were to shout at them as they were urinating, you would usually get abuse back. For some reason the water under the door seemed to tickle their sense of humour, for very often they laughed louder than we did.

It was not only the men that used this corner to relieve themselves. It was much rarer of course, but sometimes the ladies were seen squatting down in the very same corner. It was also quite a popular spot for courting couples. If only the girls in their pretty, clean party dresses had known that they were kissing and cuddling in the midst of what in effect amounted to a public urinal.

*

Sometimes the firemen's' humour had to be checked. One evening, at around nine o'clock, I noticed a group of firemen over in the far corner of the darkened appliance room. They were

standing in a group by the door where the urinating was a problem. At first I had not given them a thought because there was a battery charging unit in that corner. The firemen would often use it to charge up their own car batteries in emergencies. However, when I passed through again half an hour later they were still there and I knew they were up to some mischief. I walked over to them and at first I did not understand what I saw. When they explained it to me I was horrified and told them in no uncertain terms that this gag was DEFINITELY not on.

One of the firemen worked part time as a driver for an import export firm. One of the items this firm was exporting to Spain was electric sheep netting, to keep the Spanish goats under control. This fireman had borrowed one of these sets of equipment and for the past half an hour, accompanied by his two mates, had been busily engaged in setting it up. They had positioned it under the end appliance room doors as an intended anti-urinating deterrent. Now it so happened that in the past, I had experienced a belt from one of these electrical fencing systems. The thought of being the officer in charge of the fire station, having subsequently to deal with an irate drunk who has just had 3000 volts of electricity or whatever passed up his penis, positively frightened me. I prohibited that particular stunt there and then.

*

The discarded beer cans on the station forecourt (mentioned earlier) could sometimes be an asset. The number of beer cans would vary in number according to the moods of the Palais. After a busy Saturday night there might be a couple of dozen discarded beer cans. If the Palais had promoted a pop concert, as they did occasionally, there would either be no bars in the Palais open, or the drink was far too expensive for the younger age group to be able to afford. This meant that the youngsters would bring their own cans of beer and bottles of wine to drink before going in. There would then be mountains of empty beer cans and wine bottles outside the fire station.

Towards the end of my career all alcohol was banned from the fire stations. Throughout my time in the fire service we had gone from official bars with draught beer, to cases of beer kept in a store cupboard, to the odd fireman with half a dozen cans of beer in his locker. However, now all alcohol was banned.

One particular station commander was a stickler for routine orders. On the days that he attended Hammersmith Fire Station in the mornings, we would watch him get out of his car and proceed to the large commercial dustbins in the station yard. It was not too difficult to reason out what he was up to! He was checking that the rules regarding drink on the station were being observed i.e. looking for empty beer cans etc. in the dustbin.

Thus, we resolved to give him something to find! It was good fortune that on our very next night duty the Palais played host to a pop concert. The next morning the firemen did their self imposed duty and tidied up the station forecourt, the dozens of beer cans and bottles collected all being duly deposited in the fire station refuse bin. When the senior officer came on duty and did his routine inspection of the dustbins, it appeared to him as though a gigantic orgy of boozing had taken place on the fire station the previous night! The dustbin was half full of empty beer cans and bottles! All was explained to him: "Part of our duties are to tidy up the forecourt in the morning guv." His morning routine dustbin inspections finished abruptly from that morning onwards.

*

At the opposite end of the fire station to the Palais there was a small private road which led to a large commercial lock-up garage at the rear of the station. It was unlit at night, except for the lights of nearby buildings. This private road tended to be used at night by courting couples from the Palais and occasionally by professional ladies of the night. Needless to say, the road was overlooked by a window on the first floor of the fire station, from which a casual but interested watch was kept on the activities there.

The usual gag with the searchlight was often played upon the courting couples. Then, of course, occasionally a giant spider would descend down upon them. On one night, two firemen were looking out of this window when they were joined by a third. "What's going on?" he enquired. The first two firemen explained quietly to him that there was a courting couple down below, adding salaciously that the man was trying his best to get his leg over. The lady apparently would not let him have his evil way with her because he did not have a rubber. Now, they were simply watching and

awaiting developments. "Just his bad luck," said the third fireman, who was a notorious chaser of ladies. "I always carry rubbers with me at all times, just in case." "Have you got one with you right now?" asked one of the first two firemen. "Of course I have, like I said, I always carry them with me," replied fireman number three.

Minutes later, a solitary fireman appeared in the private road alongside the station. He went up to the courting couple and tapped the gentleman on the back, saying: "Excuse me sir, but in order not to spoil your night, the firemen in the station next door have donated this." He then handed the man a contraceptive sheaf - a rubber! Needless to say, the love tryst ended then and there. This story makes the firemen appear as spoil-sports. Nevertheless, over the years quite a few nasty incidents between gentlemen and ladies in this darkened road were prevented because of the watchful, if somewhat curious, eyes of the firemen above.

*

Compared with other city centre dance halls, the Palais was relatively peaceful and very few major fighting incidents occurred. There were always a large number of minor incidents, with the patrons fighting amongst themselves or with the bouncers, but these seldom developed into major problems. The prime reason for this was that not fifty yards down the road stood a large, divisional police station. It took but minutes after an incident had started for up to twenty plus policemen to storm down the Shepherds Bush Road in a quasi cavalry charge. Upon arrival they tended to ask no questions and DID take prisoners (!), especially if their own colleagues were involved or damaged in the fracas.

On one occasion a fight had broken out between two gentlemen under the bright lights of the Palais canopy. Two further men intervened. They were obviously plain clothes or off-duty policemen because they held up what we assumed to be police warrant cards. The two men fighting immediately made peace with each other and decided to fight the policemen instead. Thus, now we had four men fighting, instead of just two! Shortly afterwards, the Blue Cavalry arrived at a fast gallop. It cannot be said that the police were not impartial. For in a very short time, all four men were overcome and subdued, with equal violence by the cavalry. It would be very difficult to say who inflicted more damage upon the two off-duty/plain clothes policemen: the baddies or the goodies (the cavalry).

This is one of the reasons why the firemen seldom got involved in Palais fights. On a few occasions in the past, when individuals or small groups of policemen were taking a bad beating, the firemen had added their weight to the fray. No doubt on occasions they had saved the policemen from serious injury. However, there really was a great danger that the arriving cavalry would just pitch into the battle with no questions asked, and that possibly a fight between the firemen and policemen could then ensue.

This almost happened on one occasion. Two policemen were heavily outnumbered and involved in a very vicious fight on the opposite side of the road to the fire station. I was watching from the first floor window and actually called the firemen to the policeman's aid. It was a very vigorous fight, a bit like Custer's last stand, with the cavalry arriving just in time. In the ensuing melee, two of the firemen were technically arrested. Despite my vigorous protests, the cavalry were very loath to un-arrest them. The problem arose that without the two firemen's' presence, one of the fire engines would be unable to turn out to fire calls. Eventually when all calmed down and the true story made known to the cavalry, the two firemen were released with thanks for their help.

*

The Palais bouncers had their own domain; the confines of the Palais building and out to the edge of the lighted Palais canopy. They would seldom venture beyond this canopy because then they would go from private to public property and many of the restraining actions they took against belligerent members of the public would then be regarded as assault. On at least one occasion, they did venture beyond their protective canopy, however.

One evening at around nine-thirty, we received a call to 'man with hand trapped in a bus shelter, 240 Shepherds Bush Road, by the Hammersmith Palais'. Now, as a rule we did not receive many calls to people with hands trapped in bus shelters, so we were curious from the onset. One appliance only - the pump - was to attend. The bus shelter was just past the Palais in the

direction of the police station, so the crew walked to the incident and the appliance followed on behind. The bus shelter was constructed of hollow square metal sections, and bolted to one side was toughened, armoured glass screens. The man with hand trapped in the bus shelter had somehow managed to insert his hand between the metal framework and the toughened glass sheet so that the spring tensions in the toughened glass itself were holding his fingers trapped.

He was a very big man in his mid-twenties and smartly dressed. He was apparently in a very bad temper because when we enquired as to how he came to be in this predicament he refused even to talk to us. In most calls of this nature, we always took with us the container of washing up liquid from the station kitchen, to lubricate the trapped parts and enable them to slide free. In this case, because the sprung glass was gripping his fingers so firmly, washing up liquid was of no use. Thus, we would have to unbolt the glass sheet from its metal frame. This was explained to the man and also that there would be a delay whilst we accomplished this. He again gave no reply, and stared fixedly at the Palais.

After about ten minutes work, we had released enough of the bolts to attempt to move the glass away from his trapped fingers. We warned him that we were now going to attempt to move the glass and free his fingers. This was because as the pressure came off his trapped fingers, the surge of blood back into them would increase the pain level. We moved the glass gently away from his fingers, releasing them. As his fingers came free, he gave out a great roar (not of pain as we might have expected) but of anger! The man then rushed away to under the Palais canopy and began immediately fighting with the four Palais bouncers, who had been closely following the proceedings. We looked on bemused, not quite knowing what was happening. Then, very shortly afterwards, the cavalry came rushing down from the police station. They eventually carried off our newly released victim to a nice warm cell in the nick! We stood around somewhat nonplussed, still not knowing what it was all about.

Later, a telephone call to the police station explained all. The man had been ejected from the Palais for bad behaviour; he had refused to go away and would not stop fighting the bouncers. The bouncers had carried him over to the bus shelter, leaned bodily against the toughened plate glass, and inserted the man's fingers in the gap created between the glass and the metal. They had then leaned back off the glass, allowing it to spring back; thus, trapping the man's fingers. They had then left him trapped there, a bit like the old fashioned stocks but infinitely more painful. In retrospect, I only wish they had told us this because instead of unbolting and re-bolting all that glass, we could have simply leaned upon the glass and released him in the same manner that the bouncers had trapped him

*

One of the disadvantages of having the Palais as next door neighbours was that occasionally, upon returning from fire calls (there was no time to shut the big double appliance room doors behind us when responding to fire calls) we would find strangers wandering all around the fire station. Usually they were people not having the money or inclination to enter via the front doors of the Palais. They would take the opportunity to enter the fire station and seek out the back entrance of the Palais. It was very difficult to gain illegal entrance to the Palais this way because on the ground floor the boundary wall was a solid wall with no openings. The only way into the Palais was over iron railings on the first floor of the fire station, and thence onto the Palais roof.

On quite a few occasions upon returning to the station after a fire call, we would find that we would have to rescue people, mainly young ladies. Having made the difficult journey over the railings and along the ledge onto the Palais roof, these people found that they could not gain access into the Palais, but then could not make the return journey back to the fire station. We would then have to slip and pitch the 35ft ladder to the Palais roof to rescue them.

The firemen considered these incidents as all in a day's work and we did not even bother with paperwork, or the police. The visitors we disliked were the ones who were seeking the rear entrance into the Palais and then helped themselves to the contents of firemen's' lockers, or whatever. There were also those who could not wait for a convenient fire call to gain access, and would phone in their own false alarms in order to empty the station. These were always referred to the police.

Another of the problems with being stationed next door to a busy dance hall was that it was

seldom possible to get any rest before the Palais closed. Most of the fireman needed to be fit for their part time jobs in the morning. The Palais did not close most nights until two o'clock in the morning and even then it would take another forty-five minutes for all the activity outside to die down. This was when the Shepherds Bush Road was at its busiest. All the cafes and kebab houses that surrounded and made their living from the Palais were at their busiest; their charcoal braziers and burners and the like, savouring the night air. Mobile hot dog vans parked on the station forecourt were moved on occasionally by the police, only to drive around Hammersmith Broadway and be back on station and serving again inside five minutes. They even had the fire station routine worked out! If the bells rang and the lights come on in the station when they were parked on the forecourt, they would instruct their queue of customers to move to one side and stay in line. They would then pull forward to allow the fire engines out. As we drove off down the road, they would be already reversing back onto the forecourt to re-join their queue.

Parked all along the Shepherds Bush Road were private cars. Their drivers would be seated in the driving seat, apparently ignoring all. However, they were in fact mini-cabs touting surreptitiously for custom. If a black cab, or a London taxi pulled up to collect a fare, all their activity would cease because it was illegal for them to ply for hire in the street. As soon as the black cab moved off, the activities would commence again. Occasionally, the police would have a purge on the mini-cabs but it really was to no avail. Just like the hot-dog vans, they would cruise around the Broadway and be back inside of five minutes. They did provide a service because at two o'clock in the morning there was not much public transport about. The London taxi drivers, whilst jealously guarding their monopoly to ply for hire, did not seem to like picking up the Palais crowds.

I think the strongest memory from my nights of Palais watching were the smells. When looking out from the first floor level of the station, the street's smells wafted upwards. There were the smells of all the ladies' perfumes and colognes, and the body smells of hundreds of people emerging from the hot confines of the dance hall and out into the cool night air. These mixed with the cooking smells from all the cafes and eateries.

I would hear the chatter of hundreds of voices as they wished each other good night. There were newly met couples arranging their next meeting and excited girls' voices slightly intoxicated and laughing. Occasionally, there were shrill voices as a squabble broke out amongst them.

Down on the ground floor of the station, the small wicket gate fitted into the large appliance room doors would be open. A group of the younger, single firemen would be chatting to lady acquaintances - young ladies they no doubt had met off-duty in the Palais. This was strictly against the rules really but had been happening for a great many years.

A fire call received at the station whilst the Palais was turning out almost always without fail got the brigade a rousing send off, with cheers and hoorays. Without fail, somebody would enquire if we are going in their direction, and if so could they have a lift?

Finally, at around two thirty to two forty-five in the morning, all would go quiet outside. The foyer lights to the Palais would have been turned off. The restaurants and cafes would be doing just a quiet trade of coffees and burgers. The firemen would now be drifting off in ones and twos to bed. For a brief two or three hours, the Shepherds Bush Road (with the exception of passing traffic or the occasional very late night reveller) would be relatively quiet.

To the firemen, these were the graveyard hours when most people were tucked up in bed. Nevertheless, we still got our quota of persons shut in lifts and rubbish fires and the like. In central London, these hours were the busy period for serious road traffic accidents. Drivers (perhaps having had a few drinks) assumed all the roads are empty of traffic, only to meet head on someone of a like mind coming in the opposite direction.

The carelessly stubbed out cigarette ends of some hours ago, which had been gently smouldering, would finally reach the inferno stage: the heat shattering the window glass and then displaying its awesome temper to a passing taxi driver. It took but one or two of these major/minor incidents in the small hours for there to be a fifteen-hour shift with no rest, and there would still be the part time job in the morning to earn the mortgage money. These were the times when Hammersmith firemen sometimes thought to themselves that next year they would apply for a posting to a quieter station, but they seldom did.

Over the years, the Palais was involved in some fires itself, including one major fire of six pumps which involved the false ceiling of the building. These calls were attended by the other watches on the fire station, so I have no knowledge of them. The fire call that I recall, involved more humour than drama. It is as much about one of the characters on the watch as the incident itself at the Palais, and the story is as follows.

Lee Finnan was of Irish parentage, although he was born and had lived all his life in the Pimlico area of London. He was inordinately proud of the fact that he held two passports; an Irish and a British one. When he was asked why he thought he might need two passports, he would reply that he had started out in life with a British passport but that when he saw the Irish passport, it was so pretty, with a nice golden Guinness harp on it, he just had to have one.

Lee joined the London Fire Brigade and was posted to the then Paddington satellite training school. He did his basic training over a period of three months and whilst there he became thoroughly indoctrinated in the ways of the Royal 'A' division. It was deemed the Royal 'A' by the wags because they had Buckingham Palace within their Divisional Boundaries. Also at the time, they allegedly considered themselves somewhat superior to other mortal firemen, by virtue of their royal connections. When Lee received his posting to station, to his horror he found he was posted to the 'D' division, D23 Hammersmith.

The 'D' division stretched from the London Boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, right out to Heathrow airport and beyond. To a man raised in Pimlico, this was Indian country, definitely rural. He was not a happy man, he lived and he socialised in the 'A' division catchment area and now the brigade had gone and posted him out into the wild and woolly countryside.

Once he arrived at Hammersmith he felt a little bit better. He felt even more better when he found out that D23 Hammersmith had in the past been called 'All Hammersmith', that it was once part of the 'A' Division and that his new station officer (myself) was an old 'A' Division hand. He soon settled in and forgot all about the 'A' Division but his new watch mates did not!

Lee and a group of other firemen were involved in appliance gear maintenance and were checking and cleaning the small gear on the appliances. This was a collection of miscellaneous items kept in a long footlocker on the appliance. One of the items of small gear was a ceiling hook, a wooden ash pole about eight feet long with a metal spike fitted to the top. About half way down the spike, at a ninety degree angle was a metal spur. The ceiling hook was designed for piercing and pulling down ceilings to disclose hidden fire, although it has many other varied uses as well.

Lee was cleaning the ceiling hook, when a fireman casually asked him, "When you were in the 'A' Division, did they teach you ceiling hook drill?" "No," replied Lee. "They must have taught you ceremonial hook drill, though?" the fireman enquired. "No," countered Lee, "They never taught me that either." The fireman's voice now sounded incredulous, "What? The Royal 'A' Division doesn't teach ceremonial ceiling hook drill? I find that hard to believe!" To which Lee replied seriously, "Well they didn't teach it to me!" After a bit of Mickey taking at the failings of the 'A' division, it was agreed that as Lee was a 'D' division fireman now, they would teach him how to perform the ceremonial ceiling hook drills themselves.

He was taught the drill in a similar manner to military arms drill i.e. shoulder hook, slope hook, present your hook; all with vigorous stamping of feet and shouting out numbers. As time went by he began to get quite proficient at it. Then one day, one of the senior firemen who had been watching him perform, said to him, "Do you know what Lee, I think you have got what it takes to be a Divisional Champion." That was it! There was no stopping Lee. He began stamping and shouting at all hours down the appliance room, forever asking firemen to watch him and correct faults. This all went on for some weeks. It was then rumoured that Brigade Headquarters had got to hear of the ceremonial ceiling hook drill and that they were thinking of including it in the standard fire services drill book. The other firemen soon got the wind up at that, the thought that they themselves might then have to perform these ridiculous antics brought an immediate end to the gag. They called Lee aside and told him, "Lee, pack it in, it was all a joke. There is no such thing as ceremonial ceiling hook drill and there is no Divisional Championship." Lee was a bit crestfallen for a few days but he soon recovered.

As time went by, Lee would use the same joke to his own advantage. When we had a standby fireman on the station who appeared a bit naive or junior, Lee's voice would be heard in the drill yard: "Did you know that fireman Finnan (himself) was once the Divisional Ceremonial Ceiling Hook Champion?" He then proceeded to demonstrate and teach his skills to the hapless youngster. Eventually, word of even this got around the division, the young sprogs would fall for the joke no more and it was thus forgotten.

*

Some eighteen months or so later, we received a call to a rubbish fire at the Hammersmith Palais in the early hours of the morning. The pump only attended, with both Lee and myself riding it. When we arrived, we found the fire to be confined to a paladin bin, or bulk rubbish container. The Palais fire party (the bouncers) had discharged half a dozen or so fire extinguishers on it but as it was still quietly smouldering they had dialled 999 and requested our attendance. We were met by the manager, resplendent in his evening dress and bow tie, plus the gaggle of bouncers similarly dressed. We were then taken to the rubbish bin, which was in a covered yard at the side of the Palais. As the bin was within the confines of the dance hall, we had to make sure it was out and would not flare up again. A high-pressure reel was brought into use and the bin turned over on its side and dowsed. At the same time, Lee was absentmindedly, and somewhat disconcertedly, stirring the contents with a ceiling hook. Rubbish fires at this time of the morning do not rate very high in firemen's' adrenaline surges.

The manager, who was in quite a chirpy mood, happened to remark to me, "That's a pretty ancient piece of equipment that man has got there." He was referring to Lee's ceiling hook. I myself was also quite bored with the proceedings, until now! A vacant mind is a fertile mind and in my fallow brain a seed germinated! "Good heavens!" I exclaimed, "Fancy you noticing that." I then went on to say, "Did you know that ceiling hooks, or very similar pieces of equipment, have been in use in fire brigades since Roman times? Their main use then was to pull down roofs or buildings in order to prevent the spread of fire. They continued in use right up until the seventeenth century, when buildings were then constructed mainly of brick or stone. After that they were used as they are today, to pull down ceilings and the like. However, in these modern days they are used mainly for ceremonial purposes." I complemented him further by adding how very observant it was of him to notice and appreciate such antiquities.

g this conversation Lee was leaning on his ceiling hook, looking very bored as the guvnor waffled on. When I mentioned ceremonial purposes however, he looked up, not sure that he had heard correctly. I carried on the conversation with the manager, "Did you know that in our very presence we have the Divisional Ceremonial Ceiling Hook Champion for the whole of west London?" Lee's attention was now totally captured; he could not believe what he was hearing. I continued by saying to the manager, "If you like, I can arrange for a quick demonstration of the champion's skills." Lee was now positively beaming! The manager, not quite sure what he would be letting himself in for, nevertheless didn't like to refuse.

We made our way to under the brightly lit canopy at the entrance to the Palais itself. There, in front of the manager, bouncers, and a large crowd of onlookers who had been waiting to enter the dance hall, Lee prepared to demonstrate his skills. Lee was smartly to attention with the ceiling hook close by his side. I gave the first word of command, "Present your hook." Lee placed his right foot smartly behind his left foot, at the same time holding out the ceiling hook at arms reach in front. At the next command, "Raise your hook," Lee raised the hook in front of him, so that the top of the hook disappeared up into the slatted false ceiling of the canopy. On the command, "Turn your hook," Lee turned the ceiling hook in his hands, so that the bill of the hook turned round ninety degrees. The bill of the hook was now in the opposite direction to which the ceiling slats were running. Upon the next command, "Prepare to pull," the onlookers all took several paces backwards. The manager, quite correctly anticipating the next word of command, panicked: "Oh no, lads!" he cried, "Don't do that, that's a brand new canopy. It cost ten thousand pounds, you will get me the sack." I fixed him with a steely gaze and said sternly, "Apologise for taking the piss out of our ceiling hook then." He was most anxious to do this, adding in all seriousness, "Sorry lads, I didn't realise you felt that way about your ceiling hooks."

Lee and myself walked away quietly to follow the pump (which was by now reversing back into the appliance bay), no doubt leaving the manager and the bouncers wondering whether those Roman fire brigades really did use ceiling hooks or whether the whole thing was a joke from

beginning to end? As will no doubt, a few of my readers be pondering the same question!

*

The Palais had its quieter moods; BBC television produced the programme 'Come Dancing' from the Palais. On those occasions the station yard would have a BBC outside broadcasting van parked in the drill yard and a television relay aerial bolted to the drill tower. No wet drills would be allowed in the drill yard for the duration, due to fear of damaging all their expensive equipment and literally washing out the BBC's transmissions. Also, amateur ballroom dancing championships were held at the Palais on occasional Sundays. On both of these occasions, the Palais watchers up on the first floor would be enthralled with the sight of the ladies in their magnificent ball gowns coming and going throughout the day and night. There were also the all night reggae sessions after the Palais had turned out and closed. These were usually held mid week or Saturday night. These all night reggae sessions took some living with. The decibels would be increased by one hundred percent and the bass volume control turned right up, so that on each beat the Palais roof would lift a little. In the summer months, with the doors and windows of the fire station all open, there was just no escaping the sound. Fortunately, there was never more than two or three of these sessions each year.

*

Finally, there were the Palais ducks. For two years running a mallard duck had raised a brood of ducklings on the flat roof of the Palais; through all the commotion of the noisy bands and discos and through the twenty-four hours per day activity of the fire station next door. When the ducklings hatched she took them down into the station drill yard, where the firemen assisted her in her watch over them, feeding them on a diet of bread and any other scraps they would eat. During stand down periods the fireman would construct emergency dams and fill them with water for the ducklings to swim in. The ducklings never seemed to stay more than two weeks and would disappear before they were fully feathered. It is possible that the mother attempted to walk them to the river Thames, which was about a quarter of a mile's distance from the fire station. On their journey there they would have had to cross the busy Hammersmith Broadway and many other major roads that feed onto the M4 motorway. Although of course I never did find out, I have a feeling that the story could only have had a sad ending.

CHAPTER 5

RUBBISH FIRES

Firemen spend a very great deal of their time dealing with rather mundane fires, that come under the general heading of rubbish fires. Even rubbish fires come in many shapes and guises. Part of a fireman's skill is to know how best to extinguish each individual type quickly and with the least effort. They must also be able to spot the inherent dangers with some rubbish fires, such as the likelihood of the spread of fire to nearby buildings etc. The fireman must also be aware of some of the more dangerous flammable and exploding objects that may be found in even the average, domestic dustbin. Fires under the general heading of rubbish fires vary in size; from ordinary street litter bins, to refuse collection lorries, to acres of refuse at local council collection depots.

Who actually sets alight all these rubbish fires is something of a mystery. Sometimes, people do set fire to rubbish in order to dispose of it. Rubbish fires caused in this way are small in number and confined to the domestic and occasional commercial fires. By far the greater number have no apparent cause other than that they are deliberately started therefore malicious, arson even!. Of course, it would be very exceptional for a fire officer, to carry out a detailed investigation as to why the contents of a dustbin or whatever have been destroyed. However, I remember that even my own curiosity as to who the culprit was, waned somewhat by the time we had extinguished our umpteenth fire of the night. So in the main, they go completely uninvestigated.

*

The very simplest of rubbish fires that we dealt with would be a street litter bin or dustbin, made of metal. These would usually entail a quick squirt with the hose reel jet to extinguish. It would be a little more difficult if the refuse container were made of plastic, for the container itself would also burn quite well. This made a much fiercer fire and was harder to extinguish than just the contents. It would require a high pressure spray from the hose reel to put the burning plastic materials out. The melted plastic would then have to be scraped off the pavement with shovels. Then, of course, there was no container to put all the rubbish back into at the end of it. Once the rubbish fire had been extinguished, with luck there would be no need to top up the tank with water on return to the station, unless the appliance water tank was already low. The whole exercise would have taken just twenty minutes or so.

The next scale up were fires in the large commercial rubbish bins, the type used in large blocks of residential flats. These bins are usually served by rubbish chutes discharging into them. In the event of a fire, these bins would generally need to be removed from their storage houses or sheds before they could be extinguished. Many a careless fireman sustained quite bad burns to their hands from the hot metal bins, in doing this without their protective gloves on. In large blocks of flats there were invariably two of these large bins. If one was burning well, the fire would have certainly spread to the other. High pressure hose reel jets would be directed into the top of the bins in an effort to penetrate the rubbish and extinguish the fire below. However, invariably the bins would have to be turned over on their sides and partly emptied before all the rubbish could be extinguished. Having put out the fire, all the damp, soggy, smelly rubbish had to be shovelled back into the bin again. In many cases, the fire would have spread from the refuse bin to the rubbish backed up in the chute above. The hose reel would then have to be taken to the floors above in an effort to extinguish these fires with water alone. Failing this, the rubbish would then have to be dislodged from the chutes so that it fell into the bins below to be extinguished. This took up to thirty minutes or more in all, and we always came away smelling of foul refuse.

The next scale from this were fires found in rubbish skips: the large square containers parked at the side of the road, sometimes for weeks on end. These are usually placed into position by builders or contractors renovating or clearing houses or gardens. With rubbish skips, it generally happens that every other person in the street with rubbish to dispose of proceeds to fill the

containers with their own personal rubbish, under the cover of darkness. This is much to the annoyance of builders or contractors, who will then set fire to all this foreign rubbish, also under the cover of darkness. They do this in order to make room for their own rubbish: the very reason for which the expensive skip has been hired in the first place!

Rubbish skip fires were at times very difficult to deal with. Flammable materials such as timber and old carpets etc. would have been topped up with brick rubble or similar, to compress it and make more room. Then, more flammable materials would be stacked on top again, making the fire in the skip deep seated and hard to expose. The secret to extinguishing these fires was the open end of the large diameter fire hose, with no nozzle or jet at the end. This would give a water flow of some hundred gallons of water in a minute. Then in just four minutes or so, the four hundred gallons of water carried in the fire engines tank could be transferred to the skip. For a long period of time, the skips could be extinguished merely by filling or partly filling them with water direct from the fire engine.

A problem would arise when the truck came along to remove the skip. The weight of all the rubbish combined with the weight of the water (which alone weighed around 4000 lbs) made the skip too heavy for the lorries' lifting equipment to lift. The skip owners solved the problem from their point of view by simply cutting holes in the bottom of the skips so that the water ran out. This then meant that the 400 gallons of water carried on the appliance would not always extinguish a deep seated fire, because the water ran out the bottom of the skip as fast as it was put in at the top. Thus, we had to set the hoses into the street water hydrants, keeping the water flowing until it reached and extinguished all of the burning rubbish in the skip. One of the main dangers with rubbish skip fires is the spread of fire. For although skips are normally placed in the road at the kerb side, the pressure on parking cars in places such as London is so great that cars are parked up close to rubbish skips. Fire can spread from the skips to the cars.

A rubbish fire we found even more difficult to deal with were those occurring in rubbish compactors. Rubbish compactors are huge steel containers, very similar to large shipping containers. The rubbish is rammed or compacted into them by mechanical means, thus using less space and reducing transport costs. They are usually found in large office complexes, street markets, and the like. The main problem from the fireman's view is that it is virtually impossible to gain access to the compacted rubbish inside the container. If they are just left to burn, the heat will damage the very expensive compacting machinery fitted to them. The usual approach in my time was to cut holes in top of them, using the compressed air cutting equipment used in road traffic accidents. Then, we tried to flood them using open ended hoses. This of course, was very time consuming and not always successful. During day time or office hours, the simplest way was to try to simply control the fire, then request the owners or refuse contractors to remove the container to the nearest rubbish tip and discharge the contents. If the fire occurred during the night, it was best to try to cool and contain the fire till morning. This meant two or three visits during the night to pour on more water until the container could be removed and emptied the following day.

*

Another fairly common rubbish fire was a fire in the refuse collection trucks themselves. The loads of collected rubbish used to frequently catch fire. When the refuse collectors loads of rubbish caught fire, their usual procedure was to proceed to the nearest emergency tipping point, such as the local authority depot. Very frequently, the fire had taken a good hold and they liked to have it dampened down a bit before proceeding with the journey. It was not unknown for them to drive their lorries to the fire station to have this service rendered before proceeding to their tipping point. Again, because the rubbish had been compacted into the refuse lorry it was usual only to be able to dampen the fire down. If a fierce fire was involved, or if the tipping point was some distance away, the fire engine had to accompany the refuse lorry to its tipping point. This may have been up to ten or more miles away and sometimes the firemen had to stop occasionally on the way to dampen the fire down. This service was given not to prevent the damage of household refuse by fire, but to prevent damage to the very expensive refuse lorry.

Very occasionally, we would attend a rubbish fire that could be called interesting! Once, the call slip was summoning us to what appeared to be a very simple job: a refuse lorry on fire. We arrived only to find the whole of the vehicle engulfed in a sea of flames, including the vehicle's rubber tyres. It was quite impressive and as the lorry was parked on a busy traffic through route,

the traffic for miles around was backing up. The fire was such that nobody would risk driving past it.

Apparently, the refuse crew had known that the load was on fire and were on their way to the nearest tipping point. The fire had increased in intensity on the journey, burning through one of the hydraulic pipes that worked the compactor equipment. The hydraulic oil contained in the pipe sprayed out at high pressure in a fine mist and caught fire. The resulting fire damaged more hydraulic pipes, which sprayed out yet more flammable hydraulic oil. This meant that on our arrival the whole lorry was on fire from end to end. To add to our problems, as soon as one of the hydraulic oil fires was extinguished, using a very high pressure water spray, it would be promptly re-ignited by the others. The attendance to a refuse lorry on fire is usually one fire appliance only, but on our arrival I had fortunately requested the attendance of another appliance. We had to keep increasing the number of high pressure hose reels in use, two working hard from the first fire engine, then a third from the second fire engine, and finally a fourth hose reel. It eventually took all four high pressure water sprays to knock the fire down and bring it under control. It was deemed a very interesting fire by all involved, not least of all by the crew of the refuse lorry. These gentlemen in the past had always been a little bit casual when their lorries loads of rubbish caught fire. Unfortunately for them, on this occasion they had been forced to leave the lorry so quickly that they had to abandon their personal possessions in the vehicle cab. These were destroyed by the fire.

*

In London, and no doubt in most metropolitan areas, it is a fact of life that any abandoned waste site, or gardens of derelict buildings and the like, will slowly and inevitably be filled up with refuse of all kinds. This ranges from the inevitable shopping trolley, to three piece suites and household furniture of all kinds. Also, there are always, always, black plastic bags, which are unfailingly squidgy and smelly! Only the boldest and brave, and those with cast iron stomachs, ever look inside them. It is another fact of life, that sooner or later somebody will set fire to this decaying heap of rubbish. Providing that there was no danger of the fire spreading we found that it would simply a question of hydraulics (which according to the books, is the study of fluids at motion and at rest). Should we use the large hose with a branch or nozzle to throw the water a longer distance and penetrate into the rubbish? Or alternatively, should we use the hose with no nozzle and just an open end, to pump large quantities of water and flood the rubbish completely? It all became very much a matter of routine. If at all possible, we tried to avoid having to handle the decaying rubbish, as from experience we knew that lots of nasty little things could become mixed up in it.

*

We had received a call to a rubbish fire at the Avenmore Trading Estate, which is on the Hammersmith Kensington borders. This trading estate was around ninety to one hundred years old and comprised rows of terraced warehouse type buildings, five and six storeys high. These were situated close together and considered a very high fire risk. Upon our arrival the fire was seen to be in a gap between the lines of warehouse buildings; this gap being used by the local businessmen as a car park and known to the local firemen as Jack's Gap. Jack was the Christian name of a past station officer at Hammersmith Fire station who had picked up a four pump fire at the trading estate. The four pump fire had progressed all the way up to a twenty pump fire and totally destroyed the building involved. It left a gap in the otherwise symmetrical terraced row of warehouse buildings and was subsequently marked on the big fire station map in the appliance room as Jack's Gap. Thus, it was remembered long after the said station officer had departed.

The rubbish fire involved a very large heap of general refuse, including timber pallets and builders refuse. It was well alight and was threatening cars parked nearby. To me, it was just a routine rubbish fire. I instructed the firemen to use an open ended hose on it, as the mains water pressure here was a bit on the low side, and to pass the hoses through the appliance pump to boost the pressure a bit. All this the firemen quietly and calmly did. I then instructed the driver to send the stop message: "Rubbish one jet in use." I spoke to the local security officer, who told me in his opinion how the fire had started. I then walked back to join the firemen and found one fireman only, the junior fireman, directing the water onto the fire. As I started to speak to him, I looked at the heap of blazing rubbish. There to my surprise, I saw at least six compressed gas cylinders in the middle of the fire. I immediately recognised them as being carbon-dioxide gas

cylinders, as used in the brewery trade. The CO2 gas itself would be inert and is in fact used to extinguish fires, but if any of the cylinders were full they would be compressed to around 3000 pounds per square inch. This meant that if subjected to extremes of heat, as they were being right now, they would make a very loud bang indeed with pieces of metal flying in all directions.

Such is a fireman's life; one minute we have a very peaceful rubbish fire which the junior ranking fireman can exercise his skills on and the next minute we have six potential unexploded bombs. To cap it all, I had already sent the stop message which in effect says that we need no further assistance. We all retreated behind a brick wall and a large three quarter inch nozzle was placed in the hose. Fire fighting operations were then conducted from behind cover. The nozzle pressure was at around 100 pounds per square inch and rubbish was being blasted all over the derelict site and the cars parked thereon. The small crowd of people that had been watching had to be moved away to safety. For around fifteen minutes or so we poured on water until most of the visible fire was extinguished. I then emerged to check the cylinders, and thankfully they were all cool to the touch. I discovered there were in fact ten of them hidden away in the stack of rubbish. It would have required but just one of them to explode to have ended a promising career or two, not to mention lives.

*

On one occasion, to my certain knowledge, a rubbish fire did contribute to the blighting of two promising fire service careers. It was whilst I was attending a course at the fire service college at Moreton in Marsh and the sub officer and leading firemen at Hammersmith had been elevated one rank to cover my absence. One dark winter's night they had been called to smoke issuing at the Avenmore trading estate (as in the previous story). On arrival they made contact with the security man at the entrance gate house. He had no knowledge of the call but directed them to a rubbish fire burning at the side of some premises. The sub officer in charge (now elevated to the rank of temporary station officer) was in fact renowned for being over cautious. Using the security officer's land line telephone, he contacted fire control and eventually got to speak to the member of the public that had made the original fire call. This is something that even I had never done in my career. The caller was viewing the smoke from the third floor of a block of flats some distance away and could not be sure of its exact location. The outcome was that they convinced each other (my surmising) that the smoke the caller had seen was coming from the rubbish fire. Sad to say, that an hour or so later, upon receiving further calls to the estate, the temporary station officer was despatching over the radio waves his own career first "make pumps eight" message to another building at the Avenmore trading estate.

After the fire, the muck hit the fan; heads had to roll and a grand enquiry was conducted. The first caller insisted that the call was intended for the building fire. The outcome was that both the sub officer and leading firemen were very lucky not to be demoted in rank, due in the main to very good character references given in mitigation, myself included. They both received substantial stoppages in pay and the sub officer was transferred to another fire station. They never did rise above their current ranks of sub officer and leading fireman. Without doubt, all honest and truthful fire officers would say, "There but for the grace of god, and a little bit of luck go I." Not all is gloom and doom though, for it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good! Previously, the car parking facilities on this Victorian trading estate had been horrendous. The remaining tenants welcomed the addition of the extra twenty or so extra parking places thus provided.

*

We had received a fire call to the Wood Lane area of Hammersmith's Fire Ground. Both machines from Hammersmith were proceeding to the call. As we approached the area, a large black cloud of smoke was reaching up into the sky. This district behind Wood Lane was a large, derelict area of some fifty acres or more, where many illicit businesses were carried on without planning permission: motor lorry repairers, heavy plant repair, scrap metal dealers, plant hire firms and the like. From the distance, this black column of smoke indicated at the very least a large motor lorry burning well. This would cause inherent problems because there were no fire hydrants on the site. Water would have to be fetched in relays (in the 400 gallon tanks that each fire engine carries) from the nearest fire hydrant a quarter of a mile away and transported all over rough ground. As we drove into the site, it was with some relief that I saw in the distance what appeared to be a large rubbish fire giving off the dark clouds of black smoke. Then, as we approached it became very obvious to my practised eyes what it was. Someone had been burning off copper wire!

Copper wire has a high scrap metal value. Before it can be sold profitably, the plastic insulation materials need to be burnt off. This was exactly what was happening now. This incident was rather unusual due to the amount of copper wire that was being burnt. There must have been well in excess of a quarter of a ton of the stuff. Although there was no danger of the fire spreading, the act of burning off copper wire was in fact illegal, because the practise contravenes London's clean air or smokeless zone regulations. The firemen were quickly putting the fire out and I was looking around for the owner, or person responsible for the illicit burning. A quarter of a ton in weight of copper wire would represent a good week's wages at the least, and would always have an owner. At last I spotted him, or at least a very likely individual, nonchalantly skulking behind a derelict building. I made my way across to him and greeted him: "Good morning Sir, is that fire over there anything to do with you?" He answered in a delightful, soft Irish brogue, "Oh dear me no Sir, that fire is nothing to do with me." So I countered, "That is a pity, I had thought that you might be the owner." Then, with a broad grin on my face I added, "But if you are not the owner, then being as it was valuable scrap copper, I would have to call the police to take charge of it". His reply was again delightful, "Ah, well now sir, now that you come to mention it.." He then agreed that perhaps it was something to do with himself, after all. He solemnly declared that the next time he came to burn off his copper wire he would not be so ambitious and would do it in smaller instalments. We left him a happy and relieved man, for it must have taken some considerable time to gather that much copper wire together.

*

Another rubbish fire which greatly affected Hammersmith Fire Station occurred early one morning at around 3.30 a.m. A policeman rang the station front door enquiry bell and asked the duty man, when he emerged through the small wicket gate, if he knew that the fire station was on fire? The duty man, being familiar with the guiles of policemen who will go to outrageous lengths to get a nice, hot cup of tea on a winter's night, replied scathingly, "You're joking, do you know what time it is?" The policeman was insistent and directed the duty man's gaze upwards to the first floor of the fire station. There, billowing out of the first floor mess-room window, he saw dense clouds of black smoke. The duty man dashed back into the fire station and put down the station bells, as per station fire drill regulations. Then, as the firemen appeared sliding down the poles, started shouting aloud: "Fire, Fire!" at the top of his voice, only to be told by the irate firemen, "We know that, you silly bugger, that's why the bells are ringing. What is the address of the fire?"

The duty man was a popular fireman of Maltese extraction, who spoke excellent English but still retained a slight accent. In the past, he had once informed crews that the address for an incident was Washerdown Road, when in fact the appliance was being ordered to wash down the road (petrol spilled on road) at an entirely different address. So when he was asked the address of this current fire and replied excitedly, "Itsa da here, itsa da here!" he merely received the query, "Yes Nick, but whose fire ground is it on?" Again, he replied excitedly, "Itsa da messroom." Once again, the reply from the gathered firemen was, "Never heard of that one before, Nick." From behind them in the watch room came the voice of another fireman saying that there was no fire call on the teleprinter ordering slip - was it a false alarm? The duty man did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He took them outside through the wicket gate and showed them the smoke. The firemen said in unison, "Bloody-da-hell!"

Up on the first floor of the fire station, two firemen answering the call bells via the stairway had seen the smoke and had already discovered the fire, which was confined to a black, plastic dustbin which used as the rubbish bin in the kitchen. With peculiar fireman's logic, they were now extinguishing the fire with metal waste paper bins filled with water. Although there were at least three fire extinguishers up on this floor, a fireman's logic realises that fire extinguishers take about fifteen minutes each to recharge. Again, the problem was not the rubbish contained in the bin but the black plastic of the rubbish bin itself. The burning of this was emitting vast clouds of dense, black smoke, which was then melting down to a thick, tarry mess on the kitchen floor. By the time the crews had brought a hose reel upstairs from the appliances below, the fire was all over and only the cleaning up remained.

Cleaning up was the big problem, the wonderful chemistry of fire had transmuted that black, plastic dustbin into a gas and then deposited that very same gas back as a solid, over and under every possible surface in the kitchen and mess room. The watch spent the rest of the night shift cleaning up the mess. The day watch also spent the whole shift cleaning all the walls and ceilings, just to make the place habitable. The whole of the mess room and kitchen had to be totally re-decorated throughout. The resulting fire damage being virtually nil, the smoke damage horrendous!

*

Of perhaps all citizens, metropolitan firemen appreciate the work the refuse collectors or dustmen do. To the average citizen, who puts their rubbish into a metal or plastic bin (or through a hole in a wall down a rubbish chute, never to be seen again) rubbish is usually something not to get involved with, as it's nasty and smelly. This changes when, for whatever reason, the dustmen decide not to remove the rubbish. It does not take too long (for urban areas especially) to become awash in the stuff. The average block of flats in London will generate two large metal bins, or paladin containers, of the stuff per week, and if the dustmen do not remove it, that is two large container loads spread over the ground at the end of the following week. All the derelict and open sites will then begin to acquire and build the mountains of black plastic bags that will have accumulated at the end of a prolonged strike.

Enter the firemen, for as soon as these heaps of rubbish begin to build up, people will set light to them in order to dispose of them. Other people will be unable to live with the objectionable smell of burning rubbish and send for the fire brigade to extinguish them. After the dustmen have been on strike for more than three or four weeks, it gets to be a pretty full time occupation putting out rubbish fires. I remember well on one occasion attending a rubbish fire at the rear of the Hammersmith hospital. The incident comprised of a mountain of rubbish-filled, pretty coloured plastic bags, which were gently smouldering and giving off an acrid smoke. As we stirred and prodded the heap with our shovels and ceiling hooks, and clambered up and over the heap knee deep in rubbish, a hospital employee blithely informed me to be careful of the yellow bags for they contained biological waste, which to me the layman, meant discarded bits and pieces of people. Yuk!

*

Question: when is a rubbish fire not a rubbish fire? Answer: when the rubbish is in a dwelling. For many years outside Hammersmith Fire Station and along the Shepherds Bush Road, there could be seen a peculiar little man shuffling along. He was very small in stature, had an unkempt appearance and dressed all in black. Since it was always the same black attire he wore, we assumed he was either very fond of them or they were the only clothes he possessed. This little man seemed to spend all of his time wandering around the district, rummaging through the contents of all the litter bins. It seemed he was either an avid collector of knowledge or did not possess a television set because it was old newspapers in the main that he picked out of the rubbish bins. He was such a common sight that he had been bestowed with his own name. He had been dubbed the Shuffler by reason of his peculiar, shuffling gait. He had originally been given another nickname of B.O. B.O. but this tended not to be used. By the way, B.O. stands for body odour, so B.O. B.O. stood for extreme body odour i.e. he was a very smelly gentleman, malodorous even! Outside in the open air, with a stiff breeze blowing, this personal hygiene complaint was not too bothersome but when we eventually came to meet him in the line of duty it was to prove quite stomach churning.

It was a warm mid-June summer's morning just before dawn, when the fire came in at Hammersmith. The call was to Hammersmith Grove, on Hammersmith's own fire ground. At this time of the morning when most of London were fast asleep, fire calls were taken very seriously. Hammersmith Grove was a long, terraced road, with buildings of three and four storeys in height, and was in the main of multiple occupancy; therefore a very high fire risk. When we arrived at the address, it was a building of four storeys in height, with a semi-basement. We were met by the lady who had called us and who lived in one of the upper floors of the building. She directed us up to the semi-basement flat from which smoke was issuing, telling us that a man lived there all on his own. Given the early hour of the morning and the fact that most people would be tucked up in bed at this time, the fire fighting operations took on some urgency. The lady told us that she had received no reply upon knocking at the door to the basement flat, so we promptly broke open the door and made an entry. The smoke inside the flat was very thick and acrid but there was very little heat present.

Once again, the age old fireman's cry of "Get in, get in, or make way for some bugger who will!" rang out. In reply, came the muffled voices of the breathing apparatus wearers, "We can't, we can't, there's no bloody room!" To me, this was ridiculous; these were large Victorian buildings which even in estate agents' parlance would be described as 'spacious and commodious'. For a brief moment, there was an impasse at the door to the flat. It was obvious to the back up firemen that

there was no vicious heat in the flat, only smoke. However, the breathing apparatus firemen refused to move forwards and inwards. This was being interpreted as a lack of moral fibre by the men at the rear and the discussion became quite heated. The matter was resolved by the loud, irate muffled voice of a breathing apparatus man: "Come and look for your bloody self then." Low and behold, there wreathed in thick, white smoke, yet plain for all to see was an obvious obstruction. The passageway beyond the front door was piled up on either side with what appeared to be stacked newspapers, to a height of around four or five feet, with just a twelve to eighteen inch gap down the middle. Once we had made an entry into the basement flat, it became obvious that we had encountered one of life's peculiar people; the inveterate hoarders of apparently useless rubbish. The whole of the three room flat was stacked to a height of three or four feet with an accumulation of newspapers and general rubbish. Little gangways were left between the stacks, no doubt so that the man could pass through and add to the tops of the stacks. He left small spaces in the living room though, and kitchen, where he lived a hermit-like existence.

If I remember correctly, I think the fire had started in the small space in the living room, in a grotty armchair. Normal fire fighting procedure would be to remove the armchair outside the building. This was going to be patently impossible without a great deal of work, due to the accumulated rubbish. Nevertheless, it was going to have to be done. Again if I remember correctly, I think it took about two hours before we got enough of the rubbish out of the flat to deem it safe from re-ignition. The rubbish was removed and piled in a huge heap in the semi-basement's small garden area. The lady from the flat above who had made the initial fire call viewed all this with seeming dismay. Then, when I attempted to commiserate with her, explaining we had no other option but to do this, she replied quite cheerfully, "Oh well never mind, at least now the council will have to act and now I might get rid of the smelly bugger." This last remark reminded me of a peculiarity of this fire. Normally, when inside buildings have been involved in a fire, the smell of fire fumes and smoke over-ride all other smells. NOT in this building! The ever pervading smell overriding the smoke and fumes was a peculiar, strong, sweetish smell, which at one point was causing me think that there was a long dead body lying around somewhere, but in reality was extreme B.O. B.O. body odour.

During the time that we were moving all these tons of rubbish to the basement area (at around half past four on a bright summer's morning), an electric milk float came gliding serenely down the middle of the leafy tree lined avenue. The driver of which was no doubt surprised to be waved down by a group of hot, sweaty firemen, who duly purchased a whole crate of milk from him. I will add that the milkman had obviously not long left his depot because on this warm summer's morning the milk was still chilled. It tasted like nectar.

CHAPTER 6

INSPECTIONS

A great many of the general public still think that firemen sit around all day playing cards and waiting for the bells to ring. What a wonderful life the fireman's would be if only that were so! In the London fire brigade (and I am sure in most other fire brigades) they have something called 'outside activities' to occupy the time of bored and idle firemen. Outside activities is a general term for any of the following: fire hydrant inspections, dry riser testing, fire exercises and drills away from the station, fire inspections under the London Building Acts, fire drills and instructions to staff at all hospitals, hostels, old/young peoples homes and hostels, plus many other commitments. At Hammersmith Fire Station, an average of two hours during day duty and one hour during night duty would be taken up with the so called 'outside activities'. In addition, the station was expected to give training on the fire station to various youth groups, in courses such as firemanship and the various Duke of Edinburgh awards.

As a newly promoted station officer, I was now expected to give drill instructions and lectures etc. to the public. Unfortunately, nobody had ever given me any instructions on performing the latter. Without doubt, due to Murphy's Law, the very first fire lecture I ever had to give remained until the end of my career the largest audience I ever had. It was at the West London Hospital in Hammersmith, in a large purpose built lecture theatre, the seats in tiers reaching upwards to the sky. I estimated that there were at least one hundred and twenty people all looking expectantly at little diminutive me, at the rostrum on the stage. I felt like a rookie comedian on a Saturday night at the Glasgow Empire. Stage fright? Sheer terror would be a better description! If only I could be instantly TRANSPORTED away to some searing hot, smoke filled building with walls crashing down about me. I would be a far happier man than on that lonely rostrum! Suffice to say, I remember very little of that lecture. In all probability, a protective blanket had passed over my brain, else I would never again be able to conduct another lecture. I still wonder whether the hospital staff continue to talk about the gibbering idiot whom they had to listen to for forty minutes on that day. Hospital drills and instruction were to feature quite strongly in my future career, for we had four large hospitals on Hammersmith's fire ground. I remember I had been attending and instructing at one (the Royal Masonic hospital) for many years. After the instruction, one of the nurses came to me and said that she had been at this hospital for around ten years and that this was the first fire instruction she had received. She went on to explain that because she was operating theatre staff, they could not be spared to leave their sterile environment to attend the lectures. After a short discussion with hospital management, the outset was that if Mohamed could not go the mountain, the mountain would have to go to Mohamed. My next visit to the Royal Masonic found me fully rigged from head to toe in sterile operating theatre kit, the full works(!) and giving my lecture in the operating theatre suite.

*

In later years, these fire drills and instructions were given to hospitals, hostels, homes for the elderly, and even remand homes (these being a sort of prison for junior villains). Sometimes, they could have their lighter moments. On one occasion, I was conducting a fire drill and instruction at a place called Nazereth House, a care home for elderly people and unmarried mothers. Nazereth House was a huge three storey building, built around 1850. With its narrow corridors, narrow stone staircases, and small timber and glass partitioned cubicles, I judged it to be one of the biggest fire risks in West London. I had even mentally made my plan of action for this building should it ever catch fire when I was on duty, as it could have been a career buster. My plan was that if I was ever called to this building on fire and the people were shouting from the windows, I would ignore them and go for the fire. My theory was that because this building was so complex and dangerous, in the time taken and number of firemen engaged in rescuing (perhaps a dozen people down ladders) the fire would have spread and killed hundreds more.

Upon arrival at the building I was met by the Mother Superior. This is a pretty daunting title

isn't it? Does it imply that everyone else is inferior? In this case, the answer was no. She was a most delightful lady, all kitted out in her number one nun's rig. She led me through the building to what appeared to be a day room for the residents. Here, I found myself facing about twenty nuns, who were again dressed in their number ones. Like a lot of other people, I do not have much contact with nuns or nunneries, on the face of it, they seem a pretty stern and daunting lot. As my instruction/lecture went on I found otherwise, quite frankly they were like a big bunch of giggling schoolgirls. I began to quite enjoy myself and relaxed. Given the high life risk in this building, I had decided to prioritize methods of evacuation, that is, removing non ambulant people from the building. I had run through the whole gamut of methods: blanket, mattress removal, one handed carry, three handed carry etc. and was reaching the end of this subject. Then, one of the nuns asked what the well known fireman's lift was. Now, I had been specifically avoiding this particular one, having given it some forethought. Nuns are very holy ladies, deemed untouchable to the layman, and they wear long black dresses called habits. How does one stick one's arm through a nun's legs to demonstrate the fireman's lift, without the habit riding up and showing the nun's stockings and knickers? I paused and pondered, I even called a nun forward for me to demonstrate on. I moved my hand down towards her crotch but it just didn't seem dignified. I thought to myself, would the Pope approve of me doing this to one of his ladies? My embarrassment was obvious to them all because every single one of them was trying to suppress their giggles. The matter was finally resolved to everyone's satisfaction when the building maintenance man was sent for (the only other man on the premises) and the fireman's lift duly demonstrated upon him.

*

This training of outside groups on the fire station, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award, was not very satisfactory from our point of view. This was because courses could last for many weeks and very often there was not enough riders for the appliances to enable the sub officer or myself to come off from the run. On one memorable occasion, we had just returned from a fire call at six thirty in the evening to find a group of young ladies in the eleven to fourteen year age group (I believe from one of our local up market convent schools) waiting in the appliance room. They were in the middle of a course of instruction for the fireman's badge of the silver Duke of Edinburgh award. I asked them to make their own way up to the second floor television cum lecture room, where I would join them as soon as I could. Some ten minutes later I made my way to the lecture room to join them, intending to apologise for the delay and inconvenience which seemed to occur every time they attended for instruction. All was calm and peaceful as I entered the room and the well bred, well behaved young ladies, were all seated quietly reading.

I think at this period in time one of the firemen at Hammersmith must have had a part time job in a wholesale magazine distributors or suchlike, for the fire station seemed to be blessed (saturated even) with what can only be described as lurid, top shelf glossies! The subject contents of some of those magazines surprised even me! Needless to say, it was these magazines that our demure young ladies were avidly reading! They seemed not at all embarrassed as I gently coughed and said, "Right, ladies. If you care to place your reading material beneath your seats I will begin." I made a mental note to myself that I must make sure all the 'filthies' (the top shelf mags) were stowed away out of sight before next week's lecture commenced.

*

The next story concerns Lee Finnan, who featured in some earlier chapters. He had joined Hammersmith Fire Station as a recruit from training school.

Lee was a very social and gregarious young man. We had been called to a fire in one of the residential blocks at the Charing Cross Hospital. Somebody had broken one of the break glass fire alarm points, which rings all the landing fire bells in the block and automatically calls the fire brigade. Upon our arrival at the address, which was a tower block of around sixteen floors in height, the residents were streaming out of the building - both from the front doors and down the stairway enclosures. We had been having quite a spate of calls to these residential blocks at this time of day and these were usually false alarms. I always felt very sorry for these people, for quite a lot of them worked night shifts and were having their well deserved sleep patterns disturbed. Due to the number of calls received, we had subconsciously slipped into a little routine. Firstly, we asked questions of the people evacuating the building, then we walked up the sixteen floors and investigated each floor for smoke or information. If nothing was found after this, we sent back a false alarm message and returned to the station. On this occasion, all the foregoing

had happened without any results. I had mentally deemed it yet another false alarm and sent the stop message. By then I was anxious to return the fire station, as it was about 12.50 p.m., ten minutes from dinner time!

After the pump-escape and take machines from D24 Fulham had been sent home, the leading fireman informed me, "We are waiting for Finnan, guv. We don't know where he is, we can't find him." Now, I became rather annoyed because this young whippersnapper Finnan had a habit of disappearing when he was wanted and I was quite fed up with him. To my mind he was probably chatting up some pretty, young nurse on the upper floors of the building, whilst we awaited his pleasure down below. The two tone horns on the appliance had been sounded some minutes ago and still no sign of the missing Finnan. Right, I declared to myself, sod him! We have more than enough riders on the appliance so we will go back without him and he can walk back to the fire station. Here, a smile came to my face as I fantasized about fireman Finnan walking all alone back down the busy Fulham Palace Road in broad daylight, clad in full fire gear, with all the public looking at him. Serves his own bloody right, I thought to myself!

Back at Hammersmith, enjoying my dinner and quietly smiling to myself at the thought of Lee having to walk back to the station, I was interrupted by the ringing of the telephone in the mess room. The leading fireman answered the telephone, saying to me in an aside, "It's Finnan guv." The following exchange took place: "Good," I replied "tell the bugger to walk back." The leading fireman then said, "He wants to talk to you, guv." Savouring a nice piece of Yorkshire pudding on the end of my fork and enjoying the thought of Finnan getting his just desserts, I declared, "Well, tell him to get a number eleven bus back then." I added, "He will have to pay the fare out of his own pocket though." A further exchange of conversation took place over the telephone between the leading fireman and Finnan, which resulted in the leading fireman saying me rather apprehensively, "But guv, Lee's says that he's found the fire." Oh, SH*T, I thought to myself, this is my most favourite dinner: roast beef, roast potatoes, and Yorkshire pudding! I've got to bloody well leave it now and go back to the Charing Cross Hospital to see what Finnan has found. As I got up from the table, I muttered ominously, "He bloody well had better have found the fire, or else!"

Technically, (for his sake) Lee had indeed found the fire, albeit it would have been normally deemed a fire all out. That is, it had been a dishcloth or tea cloth which had ignited on an electric stove and set off the smoke alarm and was then immediately extinguished by the occupants of the flat. They, the occupants, being somewhat embarrassed by the mass evacuation of the block, were rather hoping not to be blamed for the occurrence. Even a fire deemed 'all out' still requires a standard fire report to be completed. As I noted down the particulars for this, I was still being quite terse with young Lee. He, in turn, was trying (rather like a young puppy on its back with its legs in the air) to placate me, explaining, "Honestly guv, I was calling out of the window to you (from the tenth floor) but you didn't hear me."

*

There were three large cinemas on Hammersmith's fire ground. During this period of time (mid 1970s) all of these cinemas would give matinee performances for the local children on Saturday mornings. The fire regulations for these events were extremely strict and enforced rigorously. The regulations said that on at least four occasions a year, an unannounced inspection must be carried out by the fire service. These inspections were then delegated to local fire stations. Therefore, three cinemas by four inspections meant we would visit one of the premises at least once a month. The visits became very much routine and the cinema managers were also aware of the penalties of failure to comply. Thus, we rarely found faults and if we did happen to find minor faults they were instantly put right. One of the points that was checked rigorously were the fire exits. We inspected every single exit route, opening every exit door to check for obstruction. The door locking mechanism to these doors were called panic bolts, and as every young boy of my era knew, these could be easily opened from the outside with a wire coat hanger. At night time, when there weren't any members of the public on the premises, these would be secured with a padlock and chain. To ensure that these were removed before the public were allowed onto the premises, the cinemas had devised a system. In the manager's office would be a large wooden board upon which the padlock and chains would be hung. If there were ten exit doors in the cinema, ten chains and padlocks would need to be placed on their respective pegs before the cinema could be opened. To open the cinema without this display would have been an instant dismissible offence for the manager.

One bright Saturday morning, the pump and crew at Hammersmith booked out of the station for

a cinema inspection visit at the Odeon Cinema at Shepherds Bush Green. On our arrival, the appliance parked directly outside the cinema on the double yellow lines. The driver stayed with the vehicle, and myself and the remainder of the crew went into the cinema. In the foyer, I enquired after the manager and was told he was in his office. Having done this inspection many times before I knew that the manager's office was up on the first floor of the building. I told the crew to remain in the foyer and made my way up to the first floor office. The manager of this cinema was a long serving, jovial man of around 50 years of age. He was very popular with all the children, they all called him Uncle Jack. The reason for his popularity was that he simply loved children. Each Saturday morning during the interval, he would go up on the cinema stage and entertain the children for ten or fifteen minutes. The reason I knew that he did this was because I had sometimes watched his performance myself. He could be a very funny man and would have the kids and myself in fits of laughter. So, as I walked up the stairs to his office to meet him I was quite looking forward to his company.

I knocked on the door to his office and heard a cheerful "Come in!" I walked through the door with a smile of greeting forming on my face. The manager was seated behind his desk, and as I entered he rose to greet me saying, "Good morning Mr. Wilson." The fact that he knew my name showed how long I had been doing these inspections. As he arose from his desk and stood upright, my gaze lifted with him. As I looked him in the face, I saw the padlock and chain board directly behind his head and it was completely empty! He must have seen my facial expression change because his own did likewise. I paused for some brief seconds, then purposely leant my head to one side in order to look over his shoulder at the board. For a very short moment he looked puzzled, then a look of sheer horror came over his face, and the blood drained away from it. His face took on an instant white pallor as he realised that he had opened up the cinema to the children with all of the exit doors still padlocked and chained. I was the inspecting fire officer and I had discovered one of the most heinous of crimes, a children's Saturday morning matinee performance and all the fire exits were locked. I now did something which I have never regretted. I looked him full in the face and said slowly and deliberately, "I am going upstairs with my crew to inspect the projection room, will you join me there when you are ready, please." It would be hard to describe the atmosphere in that office. The poor man stood dumbstruck in front of me. He had been found guilty and expected the death sentence, his life to be in ruins from that moment on. Yet, in the mere time space of sixty seconds, he had been pardoned and his life given back to him. Upon reflection over the years, I now myself realised what effect that simple, spoken sentence would have had upon that man's life and future.

After an interval of ten minutes or so, the manager joined us in the projection room. He was very quiet and subdued, not at all his usual, jovial self. We then carried on with the inspection. The firemen returned to me one by one, to duly report that all exit-ways and doors were clear. At last, we made to leave the cinema. The manager accompanied us to the foyer and just before we left, he said to me quietly, but very sincerely, "Thank you, Mr. Wilson."

*

Stamford House remand home was a government institution for detaining junior reprobates; I think they are called young offenders in these enlightened days. Of course, in the bad old days, I believe they called these places Borstals. There had been a change in government regulations and we were now required to carry out fire drills and instructions at these premises. Over a period of time, I did quite a few of these inspections at Stamford House and I found them quite a challenge. The young gentlemen seemed much more interested in starting fires than preventing or extinguishing them. There was no point in demonstrating how the fire extinguishers work, for they knew well enough how to do this. I think they discharged ten percent of them every day in their pranks. Then, of course, in a remand home, it is no good insisting that all doors should be able to be opened from the inside because this rather obviates the whole point of a remand home. To talk about means of escape (from fire of course) just brought smiles to their faces and enquiries, "Did I want to join their escape committee?" So to sum up, Stamford House was a bit of a steep learning curve for me.

At one period in time, around the early 1970s, we were receiving a spate of fire calls to Stamford House These were all occurring in what was called the secure block. Now, it so happened that I had never been inside the secure block on an inspection, and remarked so to one of the officers. He in turn, replied that if I wished to do that, it would have to be an evening inspection. So, one dark November's evening, I made my way from the fire station to Stamford House, alone and unaccompanied. From the outside, the secure block looked like a single storey, long, narrow

Victorian schoolhouse. To gain entry, with an officer accompanying me, we had to pass through two sets of security doors, rather like an airlock on a spaceship. We went from there into a long passageway, with single doors on each side along the length, and this was it - the cell block!

The officer conducted me along the passage, showing me into occasional rooms (cells) and explained to me their security procedures. It seemed that the individual rooms did not have bars but were instead fitted with the very latest (at the time) see-through plastic material, considered to be virtually indestructible. He then went on to explain to me that the lads (the inmates) thought otherwise. He told me they had tried hammering and banging and cutting, all to no avail, and that now they were trying the magic of fire. At this time he opened a locked cell door and introduced me to the young man incarcerated there, saying, "This is young Fred, he's a bit of a 'wiz' at starting fires, aren't you Fred?" Fred just grinned back at me. The officer then took me into another empty room, saying, "This was Fred's last cell, look at the window." There, I could see that young Fred's intelligent and imaginative but obviously bored brain, had figured it out. If you can't break or cut these new plastic windows, perhaps you can melt them. Sure enough, he had started a small fire on the window ledge, and indeed had partially melted the plastic window. Unfortunately for Fred, the plastic manufacturers had (unknowingly) built in a safeguard against this very kind of thing. Burning plastic gives off dense clouds of nasty, acrid, choking smoke. Poor old Fred, instead of escaping to the cool clear night air, he had to be ignominiously rescued from his smoky, fume filled cell by the officers. I was then told that this had rather adversely affected his 'street cred' with the other inmates.

At around this point, the officer with me said, "Right, come on, we will go and meet the lads." I had been on quite a few prison visits before to Her Majesties 'all grown up' prisons, (Wormwood Scrubs, Pentonville etc.) After those visits we had all retired to the prison officers' canteen for a beer, so I rather thought that was where we were going now. Instead, we left the secure building and went out into a small brightly lit yard, enclosed on three sides by 30ft high chain link fencing. This was the secure block exercise yard, there lounging arrogantly against the building wall and all staring at me were what appeared to be around twenty or so, grade 'A' reprobates. Then, the officer with me dropped the bombshell by saying, "This is the local fire officer with me lads, and he has come to give you all a talk." TALK! I knew nothing of talks, nothing had been said about giving a talk, and what do you say to major league villains - "Don't be naughty lads!" There was little point in talking to a brick wall and no sense in appealing to their better nature because in the main they were a bunch of evil sods. My brain raced for something sensible to say and finally I stammered: "Look lads, if I was like you and I was banged up in here, I wouldn't set fire to my cell." I could see the looks of disdain appearing on their faces, they looked at me like I was a big softie. I carried on, "The reason is that when they built this place, the secure block, they built it with the purpose of keeping you lot in, and in my opinion they did a very good job of it. So, if it keeps YOU lot in, it will certainly keep us lot, the fire brigade out, for some considerable time. So, if you do decide to set fire to it, you will be all on your bloody own for quite some time, think about that!" For some peculiar reason I seemed to have said exactly the right thing, for they were all now grinning like monkeys. I spent a further twenty minutes in humorous conversation with them. Sad to say quite a few of them had aspired to be firemen, but of course with their records there was not much chance of that.

*

Over the course of many years, whilst doing these fire drills or inspections etc., you get to see some very interesting sights and places that the general public never see. I have been behind the scenes in most of the South Kensington museums in London, and fascinating sights there are to be seen. Did you know that only around ten percent of a museum's collection will be on view to the public? I have seen dead penguins floating in a bath of formaldehyde. This was in a small yard at the side of the museum and the nosey fireman that lifted the lid of the container got a bit of a shock! I have seen porpoises, dolphins and all sorts of other aquatic animals and fishes in the museum's freezers. They have the pelts (skins) of virtually every know mammal stored there, they have thousands and thousands of jars of pickled beasties, in what is termed the spirit room. Whilst wandering around in the rear areas of the museum, I once saw what appeared to be a gigantic whale's jawbone, around twelve feet in height, leaning against a wall, all dusty and brown stained with age. When I read the tiny little label on it, I was looking at the world record; the largest elephant tusk's ever known. The beast had been shot in Africa by some-one in the late 1800s, and had no doubt gathered dust in the museum ever since.

I have wandered in the basement of the British Museum, and seen, amongst other things, some

of the lesser Elgin Marbles and other artefacts not on display to the public. I have clambered over the roof of St Paul's Cathedral and climbed a narrow, winding stone staircase to the whispering gallery. There, to my amazement, amongst many other seemingly uncared for items, I saw the dusty, time worn death effigy of Mary Queen of Scots, just lying on the floor. In my twenty-seven years with the fire service I have been on countless, fascinating visits and inspections. The beauty of it all was that I was getting paid to do them! I have paddled in London's sewers, I have meandered on foot down the middle of Shaftsbury Avenue at peak hour traffic times, albeit I was ten feet underground in subterranean service tunnels.

*

On one occasion at least, I was able to make use of this wealth of knowledge gained on these visits. I was near my home at Pangbourne in Berkshire and my wife was buying vegetables at a small market garden at Mapledurham house, a beautiful old house dating back to Elizabethan times. Nearby, and apart from the main house, was a most unusual brick building with very high walls and no windows. Previously, when I had passed by the house, I had always wondered what use this particular building could have been put to. My wife was being served by a venerable old gentleman, so I enquired of him, "Excuse me, but can you tell me what that peculiar high walled building over there is?" He stopped attending my wife and turned to me, saying in a delightfully slow Oxfordshire accent, "Ah! You never have seen one of them before boy, that is a Real tennis court, dating from the days of Queen Elizabeth the First." Oh dear, what a shame, I thought to myself, for he seemed such a nice man. I just hated telling him, "Funny enough, I saw two of them only last week." As, indeed I had. The previous week we had been engaged in an inspection and visit to the famous Queens tennis club, which is on Hammersmith's fire ground. There, they actually have two Real tennis courts on the premises, and a very interesting visit it was indeed.

*

Amongst many strange inspections that I have carried during the course of my career was the following. We had arranged to carry out a dry riser test, at a high rise block of municipal flats. This would entail charging up the dry rising fire main with water and testing all the outlets, taking pressure reading etc. Then testing the inbuilt fire lift, and examining the lift motor room, this would normally take around one hour or so. Upon arrival at the flats we made our way to the residents porters flat, and rang the doorbell. The door opened and there in front of me stood a small boy of around nine years of age. I said to him "is your dad in son, we have come to test the dry rising fire main" he replied "wait just a minute" turned around and went back into the flat. He reappeared minutes later with a big bunch of keys in his hand, walked out of the flat shutting the door behind him. He walked away and we followed on behind him expecting to be taken to meet his father, instead he took us to the ground floor dry riser inlet box and proceed to open it with a key from his big bunch. By now somewhat mystified, I asked him "where is your dad is he coming to join us" only to be told "oh no he's got another day time job, I'm in charge here". Initially I had some reservations, about carrying out the inspection with a lad as young as this, but he seemed to know what he was doing and I did not want to hurt his feelings. I did think to myself though, does the rather politically correct London Borough of Hammersmith know that they had a nine year old assistant porter on their strength, albeit a very efficient one.

CHAPTER 7

LONGNIGHT

Exactly what comprises a busy night or busy day at a London Fire Station that has a high work load? It could be the dustmen on strike and twenty to thirty rubbish calls on a single shift. It could be a cloudburst/thunderstorm setting off every automatic fire alarm for miles around, then causing the rest of the shift to be spent travelling from address to address, pumping out flooded basements. It could be a single pyromanical idiot, wandering around the fire ground, setting fire to everything flammable. From rubbish bins and skips, to motor cars and derelict houses, it could merely be two four pump fires inserted into an already busy night. Or, it could be the kind of night that even after years gone by is still remembered. Around the mess table somebody would say, "Do you remember that night?" When reminded, all would nod their heads and say, "That was a busy night, that was!" This is the story of such a night.

The night was our second night duty and I had spent the day up in London instead of going home to Pangbourne. I had met some of the watch in the Laurie Arms pub at lunch time for a few beers. Following that, I had gone back to the fire station and caught up on a couple of hours sleep missed from the previous night by dozing in the armchair in the station officer's room on the second floor. I awoke at around four thirty in the afternoon, showered and changed into my uniform. At five o'clock I then made my way down to the mess room and scrounged a cup of tea from the on duty watch. At five-fifteen, I walked into the station office and greeted the on duty station officer, Peter Elliott. "Do you want to go home Peter?" I asked him. "Yes, please," he replied, handing me the station keys. In effect, this formally handed the station over to my charge. Then, as he often did after handing the station over to me, Peter forgot about this. He would then spend what was in effect his own time chattering to me about the day's events and general station matters. Only if he had some really pressing business would he depart immediately after the handing over, and on these occasions he would usually have asked me if I could possibly come in early and relieve him.

At twenty minutes to six, our conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the fire bells. We both made our way hurriedly to the appliance room below; Peter, to remove his fire gear from the fire engine, and me to gather up my fire gear lying on the floor by the front cab of the appliance. The green indicator light came on up on the appliance room ceiling, indicating a pump only shout. Shortly after, the duty man sauntered out of the watch room, call slip in his hand, and in a bored voice called out: "Person shut in lift, Scott House." So began the night in a routine and very much mundane manner.

At around ten minutes past six, the pump reversed back across the busy, rush hour traffic in the Shepherds Bush Road and into the appliance room. One very thankful old lady had been released from a lift, where she had been entombed for over an hour because the lift breakdown alarm bell also was defective. The day duty firemen on the fire engine gathered up their fire gear and scurried away to go off duty. Quietly and efficiently, the night duty white watch firemen appeared to place their fire gear on the machine and carry out the change of watch routine checks on the appliance and equipment. Ten minutes later, most of the watch were seated around the mess table, drinking our first cup of tea of the evening shift.

As always, this period around the mess table was used as a time for an exchange of views, information, and humorous stories. One of the day duty firemen, who had remained behind for a cup of tea before facing the evening rush hour journey home, asked if we had heard the story about the Red Watch's flasher. On being told no, he recounted the story with obvious relish.

*

The Red Watch had been called to assist the police in gaining entry to premises in Ladbrooke Grove, on North Kensington's fire ground. Both of North Kensington's machines were out on a fire

call, so Hammersmith, the next nearest pump, had been ordered onto the call. The call had been received at the end of a warm, muggy night, at around six o'clock in the morning. As Hammersmith's pump made its way along Ladbroke Grove (a long, wide, straight road) towards the call, they could see in the distance a crowd of twenty or thirty people, which was quite a large gathering for this time of the morning. As the pump drew up at the address, they were met by a group of policemen who explained to them that they had a pervert up on the third floor who was exposing himself to the public. The police said that they needed the brigade's assistance to break into the premises to arrest him. The firemen looked across at the buildings on the opposite side of the road, it was a terrace of shops with dwellings above, over four storeys high. The crew could see that even now the pervert was standing naked at the window on the third floor, exposing himself frontally, and grimacing at the crowd gathered below. "He's got some front, ain't he?" said one fireman. "Don't know, can't see it from right down here" said another.

A plan of action was formulated with the policemen. The firemen would accompany the police up to the third floor. The firemen would then break down the door to the flat and the policemen would rush in and arrest the man. The plan was duly put into effect, the door was forced open and the police rushed into the flat. All was quiet for a while, then a policeman returned to the door of the flat smiling, and said, "Firemen, I think we need your help again." To the firemen, this was surprising as looking up from the ground floor he had not seemed to be a particularly big pervert. Three policemen should have coped adequately.

The firemen entered the flat and went through to the room facing onto Ladbroke Grove. There, they saw the pervert standing, still exposing himself at the window. He was totally naked and with his back to them. He was facing the window, with his hands resting on the horizontal glazing bars of the sash window. Both policemen were trying very hard to suppress huge grins on their faces. They explained, "He's not a flasher, he's trapped by his fingers." It transpired that the night had been a warm, muggy night, and the man, who normally slept naked, could not sleep. He had got up in the early morning to open the window, to let air into the room. As he opened the window, the one remaining sash weight cord broke. The window slammed down, trapping his fingers in between the two halves of the sash window. He had been trapped in this position for almost an hour before somebody spotted him from the road below. That somebody did not see a man in pain, but rather saw a naked man exposing himself, and reported it as such to the police. The man had suffered severe bruising to the fingers of both hands. He was subsequently taken off to hospital in an ambulance.

After the fireman had finished his story, I made my way to the station office with a smile on my face. Over the years I had encountered a number of people with fingers trapped in sash windows but none with such an amusing twist as the story I had just been told. I was chuckling to myself, the only way to better that story would be to encounter a man with his penis caught in a window. Again, over the years I had come across men with their penises caught in some unusual objects, but never to date in a sash window. I now, could but live in hope, if only to counter that particular amusing story.

As I walked back to the station office to complete the routine change of watch paperwork, I wondered to myself what we could get the firemen to do to occupy themselves between now and eight o'clock supper time. It was now too late to do any serious drilling in the station yard. I was pondering what to give them to fill in time, when the bells went down again. In the appliance room, the green light only came on again, another pump only call. As I rigged in fire gear, I was expecting the duty man to call out, "Person shut in lift!", or "Rubbish fire!", or "Petrol spilled on road!", or some such other routine call. However, he called out, "Houseboat in danger of sinking, Lower Mall, by the Rutland public house."

We did not need directions to get to this call because the Rutland was one of our summer watering holes. Situated alongside the river Thames, many a sunny afternoon or evening had been spent outside this pub doing mainly three things: drinking beer, watching the river Thames, and watching pretty girls go by. It was not necessarily in that order, although the latter two would not be nearly as pleasant an occupation without the first.

We arrived at the Rutland, where the tables and chairs on the pavement outside were filled with local office workers all enjoying a drink on the warm summer's night before making the journey to their homes. We were directed to the embankment wall opposite the public house and told that the boat was in the river, just over the wall. Peering over the wall, we saw a small, wooden jetty

leading out into the river. Moored at the end of the jetty, was the houseboat. The hull of the house boat was an ex-infantry assault landing craft, about twelve feet in breadth and thirty feet long. Into the centre of this basic hull, somebody had built an oblong shaped, wooden shed with windows; the house part of the boat. To call this a houseboat was a bit pretentious because it had no engine or motive power. It was in effect a floating shed, but nevertheless, it was somebody's home.

I walked down the wooden jetty and onto the houseboat. The boat seemed low in the water but from the deck there was no sign of water on the boat. The door to the cabin or house was locked. I entered the cabin by breaking a small nine inch pane of glass and reaching in and opening the lock. I stepped down about eighteen inches and then into around four inches of water on the cabin floor. This hardly constituted a danger of sinking, so I made my way out up onto the deck once again. Looking over the side of the boat, it became clear that there must be a further one foot of boat below the main deck level. This made a total of sixteen inches of water on board the boat. Therefore, with the tide on the river Thames coming in and the water rising fast, this call was technically incorrect, I mused to myself. There was not any danger of this houseboat sinking for it was already resting on the river bed. Instead, there was a very great danger indeed that when the tide did come in it would merely fail to float. For a brief moment I was engrossed in thought, 'houseboat failed to float' as opposed to 'houseboat sank at moorings'. This would sound much nicer on the stop message if things did go wrong.

The appliance driver broke into my train of thought, "Do you want a message sent, guv?" "Yes, please." I replied. "Request the nearest pump carrying an Alcon lightweight pump to attend." The Alcon pump was a small, lightweight electrically powered pump, used mainly for working inside buildings where carbon monoxide from petrol engine exhaust fumes can cause a problem. Back at Hammersmith Fire Station, we had one of these pumps sitting in the appliance room but it was off the run defective. I was now hoping that the nearest Alcon pump would not be located too far away since the houseboat was beginning to move on the rising tide.

For a few moments, I was briefly distracted by the pumps crew, represented by the appliance driver (the senior hand in the group). Being the greatest imbibor and connoisseur of beer on the watch, he requested that one of the crew be allowed to go over to the pub and buy some beer to drink whilst we waited, as we were parked up opposite and at the moment had nothing to do but await the arrival of the lightweight pump. There were times when I would agree to such a request, but this was not one of them. There was still a good chance that if the lightweight pump did not arrive soon the houseboat would fail to float. If the houseboat failed to float whilst the fire brigade sat around looking on and happily drinking beer, I could very well imagine the kind of letter a disgruntled boat owner would despatch to the Chief Officer. Only victors drink the champagne and at the moment we were far from being victorious, in fact, the opposite was highly probable.

My failing to float theory had just been scotched because the houseboat was now actually floating on the rising tide. Its stability was very tender indeed because the weight of the wooden gangplank was making her list on the embankment side. All three firemen on board the boat were sitting on the opposite side to balance it and counter the list. Above the embankment wall, a second fire engine drew up and four helmeted heads peered over the wall. It was the smiling faces of the men from the neighbouring Fulham Fire Station. One by one, they clambered over the embankment wall. Then one by one, they started to walk down the wooden gangplank towards us. I am not sure exactly which fireman it was; it may have been the third, or it could even have been the second, but all I know was that as this particular fireman put his full weight onto the gangplank, the boat began to roll over to one side.

What happened next reminded me of one of the training school's venerable instructors, whose favourite saying was: "Nobody will panic (pause), until I myself give the command panic (pause), then everybody will panic like fuck." I did not need to give the command panic, it was a reflex action. If the boat was going over I did not want to be on it. The two other firemen sitting either side of me also panicked. Fortunately, the Fulham firemen coming down the gangplank and seeing us panic, panicked themselves and retreated smartly back up the gangplank. We were fortunate that the side of the house boat nearest the bank had only around one foot of water underneath it, for that side of the boat touched the downward sloping river bottom and then bobbed back up again.

Two of the heaviest of Fulham's firemen joined us on the far side of the houseboat to provide

further ballast. Then, the two lighter firemen quickly carried the lightweight pump down onto the boat. In a very short time we had the pump working from a neighbouring boat's electrical supply and the water level in the boat quickly began to go down. We raised a hatch in the floor, and in around ten minutes we had pumped the bilge and the boat completely dry. Beneath the deck and in the bilge area, we discovered the reason why the boat had almost sunk. The boat was a very old boat and had an almost continuous seepage of water into the bilge. The owner of the boat had devised a Heath Robinson system to pump it dry. He had connected the drive spindle from a very small water pump into the chuck of an ordinary domestic drill. He had the drill trigger taped in the on position. He had then wired a simple float actuated on/off switch into the electric drills electricity supply. When the water level in the boats bilge rose, it activated the float switch and the water was pumped out back into the river. Really, it was quite ingenious, simple, and cheap to install. It was almost foolproof and most of the time it served its purpose well. The system was flawed though, for it relied on a constant supply of electricity to keep the boat afloat. The owner had apparently neglected to feed enough coins into his electricity meter to keep the pump working and he almost lost his home.

*

We arrived back at the fire station at around 7.45 p.m., anticipating that supper would be ready in fifteen minutes, at eight o'clock. Whilst we had been pumping out the house boat, the pump escape and its crew had also attended two incidents; one being a small rubbish fire in a refuse container, and the other was washing petrol off the road following a road traffic accident. The mess manager, also the cook, had been driving the pump escape, so supper would not now be ready until eight-thirty at the earliest. I retired to the station office to fill in the incident reports for the house boat and other calls. At around eight o'clock the bells went down again, this time the call was to a house fire at Holland Road.

The call was to 137 Holland Road, in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. It was nevertheless still on Hammersmith Fire Station's fire ground. The pre-arranged attendance for any fire call to this road was three pumping appliances and a turntable ladder. The three pumping appliances would provide a minimum of twelve firemen, and 1200 gallons of water would be carried on the machines. The turntable ladder was being despatched because the buildings in the road were known to be more than three storeys high. Two pumping appliances were attending from Hammersmith; the third, and the turntable ladder, from Kensington Fire Station. We turned into the Holland road, which was a very wide road and about three quarters of a mile long. On each side of the road, were five and six storey (once very fashionable) terraced houses, built around the turn of the century. We entered the road at the low house number end and the odd numbered houses were on our left hand side.

In a short time, the appliance had reached a speed of around 40 miles per hour and the street numbers were flashing by. Without warning, the pump escape which was preceding us, slowed and began to pull over to the side of the road. I suddenly realised what the problem was. The houses on this side of the road all looked alike and symmetrical. They were indeed meant to, but for 300 yards or so, if looked at carefully, they were in fact different. They did not have front doors or street numbers. They were in fact, the backs of the houses. The reason for this apparently odd arrangement was that the front of the houses had been placed so that they faced onto a delightful leafy square instead of a busy through traffic route. This lack of house numbers was puzzling the pump escape driver. I had experienced it before so I told my driver to carry on past them. I did not want to be delayed for at this point because we were very close to the boundary with Kensington Fire Station's ground. It was a point of great pride in the Brigade to always be the first in at your own fire ground unless there was very good reason otherwise.

I was looking ahead now and I could see smoke coming from an upper window at around where number 137 should be. We could possibly have a working job on our hands. As we drew closer, people could be seen waving from the pavement. Arriving at the address, the pump driver pulled slightly past the house. This very often agitates the pavement wavers because they think we haven't seen them or have ignored them. However, this is done to leave room at the front of the house for ladders (or even the 100 ft turntable ladder) to be got to work, if required.

As I jumped down from the appliance, I subconsciously noted the building involved. It was an old, imposing building of six floors and a semi-basement, with a wide, short flight of stairs leading up to a large, grand front door. Whilst I was questioning the occupier as to the extent and location

of the fire and whether there were any persons still in the building, a high pressure hose reel tubing snaked behind me and through the open door of the house. It didn't look too promising because I was informed that the building was used as a hostel for mentally disturbed persons and that there was a severe fire in progress in a ground floor back office. Judging by the smoke issuing from the upper floors, this had then spread up the internal staircase enclosure. The occupier, who was in fact the resident warden in charge, said that at this time of day it was impossible to know who was and who wasn't in the building.

As I entered the building to take a quick look, I quickly re-directed the firemen with the hose reel. They had been trying to make their way upstairs to find the fire, whence the smoke was issuing, whilst unknown to them the seat of the fire was below them in the back office on the ground floor. One quick look at the fire situation was enough to tell me this was a four pump fire, with most likely persons involved. I made my way back out into the street just in time to see the appliances from Kensington arriving. I called the Kensington crew over and told them to lay out a large hose line and get that to work on the back office fire. I then told the crew working there to transfer their high pressure hose reel jet to the fire on the staircase. The reason for this was as follows: there was obviously a large, angry fire there in the back office which would need to be knocked down as quickly as possible, thus the large jet of water. At the same time as they were working on the backroom fire, other firemen would be going up the stairs above the fire, both to extinguish fire there and search for possible persons trapped. The high pressure hose reel, whilst not quite as efficient as the larger hose jet, was more manageable to take up stairs and around corners etc.

Out in the street, both of Hammersmith's drivers were working hard in shipping a standpipe key and bar to the street fire hydrant, then laying out hose lines to connect the fire engine to the mains water supply. I managed to detach one of them briefly to send a priority message: making pumps four and stating that there were persons involved in the building on fire. Whilst I did this, two firemen wearing breathing apparatus dashed into the building, both of them pausing briefly at the entrance to throw down onto the floor their breathing apparatus identification tallies.

According to the book, they should hand these tallies to a fireman, who would be conveniently waiting there for them. This fireman would check that all the details on the tallies were correct and then write upon the tallies the time the firemen entered the building. He would also write on the tallies the time firemen should be due to come out of the building. He should check the cylinder gauge on the breathing set in order to ascertain that the cylinder's contents were the same as written on the tally. He should then insert the tallies into a special breathing apparatus control board that he would be carrying. He should then make a cursory check of the fireman's breathing sets, finally giving the men permission to enter the burning building. That is how the book says it should be done. The gentleman who wrote the book had perhaps not heard the agonised screams of people being burned or perhaps not seen the choking, gasping, laboured breathing of mucus covered victims of smoke inhalation. For, if he had experienced either of these incidents he had forgotten to make allowances for it when writing his manual on breathing apparatus procedures.

The two firemen had in fact acted in this case on their own initiative. They knew that there were people trapped in the burning building. They knew that breathing apparatus would almost certainly be needed to reach and rescue them. I had myself given permission for them to rig breathing apparatus, for I had seen them rigging whilst I had been dictating the assistance message to the driver. The senior of the two firemen had caught my eye and put his thumb up to seek my approval. A simple nod of my head and they carried on.

Outside the burning building, the initial attendance was now complete. The second of Kensington's appliances had arrived and its crew dashed into the fire. Kensington's turntable ladder had also arrived, and because there was still a lot of smoke issuing from the upper floors, it had reversed at an angle into the gap left for the ladders in the front of the building. It was sitting there with its power take off engaged and its supporting jacks down, ready in an instant to get to work if required. The fact that its front end was sticking way out into the road carriageway and causing traffic chaos was of no consequence, it was ready for instant use if needed. The crew of the turntable ladders (a driver/operator, and a leading fireman) I knew well from previous fires. They were very experienced and good at their jobs. They, like myself, had assessed the building on their arrival. They had judged that because of the wide pavement, the small front garden, and semi basement area in front of the house, rescues from even as low as the third floor would require the use of the turntable ladders. Thus, they had positioned their machine ready and were

standing by it waiting.

Fire fighting was proceeding well, the crew with the high pressure hose reel had made their way up as far as the second floor, extinguishing the fire in the stairwell enclosure as they went. From here upwards, there was no more fire to extinguish and they had paused. The breathing apparatus crew had gone on forward into the smoke to search for anyone still in the building. The problem was that although the fire had been put out in the staircase enclosure, the smoke and gases were still pouring up from the fire in the back office.

I now made my way back down to the crew working there below. I arrived just as they themselves were discovering that although they had put out all visible fire quickly with the large jet, hot gases and smoke were still pouring out of a large hole in the middle of the office floor. This was a pretty good indication that the basement was alight also.

Leaving just two men to man the large jet, the remainder of the firemen went back to the fire engine to get yet another high pressure reel and take this down the outside steps of the house to the semi-basement, to make an entry all over again into the basement of the house. The outside door was forced open. There was a lot of thick smoke about but not too much heat, a good sign. Just before I entered the building again with the crew, a leading fireman from Kensington tapped me on the shoulder and said, "The breathing apparatus crew pulled one out from up on the fourth floor, he seems ok, and they are back in again." Translated, this meant that the breathing apparatus crew had found someone still trapped in the building on the fourth floor! They had assisted/carried him down through the smoke and out of the building. He had appeared physically unhurt so the breathing apparatus crew were back in the building searching again.

I followed the hose reel to guide me through the smoke and catch up with the crew. Although the smoke was fairly thick, the lack of heat indicated that the fire in the basement was not too severe. When I caught up with them, the crew were stumbling through a very large room full of tables and chairs, which appeared to be a dining room. From the back of the room I could hear the sound of the hose reel working. It was a very distinctive sound, as the water at very high pressure crashed into the contents of the room. Guided by the sound, I made my way to the men on the branch. "What have we got?" I queried, for such fire as there was had very quickly been put out and all that could be seen now was steam and smoke. Very nonchalantly he replied, "Not a lot guv, a bit of burning debris fell through the floor and started a small fire down here, that's all." The object which fell through the floor (the bit of burning debris) subsequently turned out to be a huge filing cabinet, weighing almost a quarter of a ton. I wouldn't have liked to be below when that fell through the floor!

So that was it then, the real excitement more or less over in less than thirty minutes and it was now just a case of tidying up loose ends. Firemen were now moving through the building upwards, floor by floor, opening windows to ventilate and let out the smoke. I made my way past them up the stairs, where two of the breathing apparatus men were coming down towards me with their masks hung loosely round their necks. They stopped to tell me that the man they had found and assisted out of the building had been found asleep in a front room on the fourth floor. He had been very surprised indeed when informed that the building was on fire.

I met the last three breathing apparatus men up on the very top floor, again with their face masks hanging loosely on their chests, indicating that their job was done. I also noticed that the very top room of the house was a converted loft room, built into the roof. A hatch in the wall of this room, which gave access to the roof void, was open. Looking in, I could see the roof void was full of smoke. I knew that people trapped in a building which is on fire tend to make their way as far as possible away from the fire. I told one of the breathing apparatus firemen to put his mask back on and check the roof void just in case.

Upon leaving this room, I met the senior officer who was attending the fire on the landing outside at the head of the stairs. At four pump fires where persons are involved, a senior officer will usually attend the fire. A senior officer is deemed an officer above the rank of station officer. The gentleman concerned was an Assistant Divisional Officer, by the name of Smith. Mr Smith was, by my description, a gentleman of the old school, which meant that he knew and understood the problems of operational firemen and indeed officers. He having been an operational fire officer himself for a long time and acted accordingly. I was giving him a brief rundown of the fire and any problems encountered i.e. the secondary fire in the basement and the man assisted down from the

fourth floor. I told him that it was more or less all over, with the exception of the breathing apparatus man who was searching the roof void.

As I mentioned the man searching the roof void, I automatically looked upwards in his direction. There, directly above my head (about 15 feet in the air and set into the ceiling of the stairwell) I saw what appeared to be a 3 feet by 3 feet square access to the roof void. It was shiny and it was black. As I looked at it I was puzzled and I knew not why! Suddenly, the penny dropped! There in the middle of this shiny, black square were the soles and heels of a pair of firemen's boots. The shiny, black square was in fact a sheet of glass set into the ceiling to give light onto the staircase below. The soles and heels of the fire boots belonged to the fireman searching the smoked filled roof void, whom, with his vision impaired by the smoke, was unknowingly standing in the centre of the pane of glass set into the ceiling.

A quick panic ensued as I dashed up the short flight of steps into the room and had the fireman quickly withdrawn from the roof void. By way of explanation I took him to the head of the stairs and pointed up to the 3 foot square of glass in the ceiling where I had last seen him. He was quite a lucky man because a dead drop fall from that height (passing through shattered sheet glass on the way and wearing a heavy thirty pound breathing apparatus set strapped to his back) could have done quite considerable, physical damage. Also, I had been standing directly below. A fourteen stone fireman, wearing heavy breathing apparatus, could have caused considerable, physical damage to my own person.

The routine work of cutting away and damping down was now being carried out. All the appliances had gone back to their stations, with the exception of Hammersmith's two machines. The crews were busy at the main seat of the fire in the back office, cutting away charred timber and looking for small pockets of smouldering fire. All cavities that could not be visually examined were damped down with a spray from the hose reel. The problem was that if just one tiny pocket of fire was missed, we could be back in two or three hours again to repeat the whole thing over.

A voice called up at me through the hole in the ground floor where the filing cabinet fell. "Here, guvnor, come and look at this." "What is it?" I queried back. The voice insisted that I make my way to the basement and look for myself. Two firemen were at work in the basement, mainly clearing up the debris that had fallen there from the floor above. Amongst the debris they had found a folder containing many drawings, done in pen and ink, pencil, and various other materials. The drawings were beautifully drawn (mainly of human figures) and anatomically correct in every detail. They had been drawn by a very gifted person. Although not a very artistically inclined person myself, I was impressed by the quality of the work, but it was the subject of the work that disturbed me. The subject of the drawing which I considered to be the masterpiece of the collection, was a most beautifully drawn and detailed picture of a women giving birth to a child. As the child was emerging from the womb, the mother was strangling the baby with her very own hands. You will understand why those pictures remain so vividly in my memory. I then understood the full meaning of the saying, 'the difference between genius and madness is very narrow'.

Another quite minor detail of this fire subsequently involved me in a great deal of paperwork. Somebody had very far-sightedly installed portable smoke alarms on every floor of the building; that is to say those alarms that are powered by batteries and common in many domestic properties. At that time they were very new on the market and very little was known publicly about them. It was one of these smoke alarms that had actuated and had given the initial alarm of the fire. I duly recorded this on the standard Home Office fire report. It then appeared that this was the first, or one of the first times, that one of these alarms had given alarm of a fire and the very first time that somebody had recorded this fact on an official fire report form. The subsequent correspondence with the Home Office, who wished to know just about every detail of the fire and the building imaginable, carried on for some months afterwards.

On our return to Hammersmith Fire Station, Chiswick's fire engine and crew were in attendance for fire cover during our prolonged absence. They gave us a bright and cheerful greeting; they were pleased to see us, having attended three calls in our absence. Fresh hose was lying in the appliance bays ready to be re-stowed upon our machines. Most surprisingly, we were informed that our supper would be ready in twenty minutes or so. Unbeknown to me, the mess manager, who had been riding the pump escape, had found a telephone that was still working at Holland Road. He had known that there would be a machine into Hammersmith for fire cover and had telephoned the station, asking the Chiswick crew to put our supper back on the stove just before we left the

fire. With a little bit of luck, we would yet get our supper before midnight.

In the station office, Chiswick's sub officer in charge of the appliance was very pleased with himself. He told me about the three calls they had attended whilst standing by at Hammersmith: two small fires in houses and a rubbish fire in a skip that entailed setting into a street fire hydrant to extinguish. I was also very pleased with him since he had not only put out the fires but had also done the resulting paperwork, which saved me having to do it.

We had been back in the station half an hour or so, during which time we had managed to re-stow the machines, check all the gear used during the fire, and service and re-stow the breathing apparatus. Most of the crews were in the middle of washing all the muck and grime of the fire off themselves when the most welcome of calls rang out through the fire station, "Grub up!", closely followed by six short rings on the fire bells. Tonight we had been lucky, the supper was spaghetti bolognese, garnished with chips. Spaghetti bolognese is a meal that keeps well. Also, as the spaghetti and chips had not been cooked before the fire call, the meal was fresh and not a dried up wreck. At such times as this, never was a meal enjoyed more - two and a half hours late, following some vigorous, if somewhat exciting exercise. Spaghetti bolognese, garnished with chips and eaten with thick slices of freshly buttered, crusty bread, all washed down with scalding hot, thick, sweet, fire station tea. This was truly gourmet fare, fire brigade style.

*

The time was now around eleven o'clock and we had been back in the fire station for around three quarters of an hour. During which time I had eaten my supper and had now returned to the station office to attack the paperwork that had accumulated as a result of the evening's activities. I had no sooner got my notes together and seated myself down in front of the typewriter, clicking the paper underneath the roller, when the fire call bells clamoured yet again. Uttering under my breath that old saying much used in the brigade, "No peace for the bloody wicked," I crashed open the pole house doors and slid down into the appliance room below.

Before I had put on my boots and pulled up my leggings, the duty man appeared into the appliance room, calling out the details of the call: pump escape and pump, fire, Perham Road, on Hammersmith's own fire ground. I knew Perham Road well enough, it was in the Barons Court area of Hammersmith. It was part of an enclave of run down bed-sit type properties. The problem was that the properties were around six storeys in height, all with basements, and laid out in long terraces, compounded by heavy parking congestion in the area. Each of the houses would very likely have been divided and then sub-divided so that each individual room comprised a separate dwelling, making it a very high life risk area. For this reason alone, I liked to get out of the station doors just that little bit quicker. Also, the third appliance attending was coming from Fulham Fire Station. If they cared to get their finger out they could possibly beat us to the call.

The two fire engines turned into Perham Road, it was dark and lit only by street lamps. There were no immediate signs of unusual activities, that is activities other than the usual unusual activities that usually took place in this district. Even at this time of the night there were lots of people about and around the streets, cars coming and going, and lots of street activity. None of this activity was unusual though, the odd street altercation with raised shouting voices would be considered quite normal. The occasional tinkle of smashing glass would not arouse too much curiosity in these parts. As we turned into the road, my senses were tuned for the excited crowd of people gathered in a knot at the kerbside, waving both arms above the head to attract attention to themselves, which would usually indicate a fire of a more serious nature. However, this was missing tonight. The people just ignored us in their blasé cosmopolitan manner and went about their business, and I began to relax slightly.

Given that there was no major conflagration to greet us, the next most likely call at this time of the night would be a false alarm call. I was now beginning to hope this would be the case so that I could get back to my mounting paperwork. Accompanied by a small group of firemen, I walked up the short flight of external steps to the front door of the house whose number had been given on the call slip. I banged loudly on the door knocker and rang all the door bells at the side of the door. I waited for a short while and nothing happened, then I automatically put my false alarm procedure into operation. Turning around, I told the firemen waiting on the steps below and behind me to check the properties each side of this one. Then turning back towards the door, I banged loudly on the door knocker and rang all the doorbells once again. I was now accompanied by two

firemen, one of whom I was engrossed in conversation with, the other was standing idly by. The idle fireman was also impatient to be back once again in the nice, warm fire station, for he bent down to peer through the letter box to see whether the occupants of the house were answering the door.

My conversation was interrupted by a loud, startled shout coming from the fireman peering through the letter box opening, "Christ, guvnor, its going like a bomb in there!" Without further ado the fireman scurried off in the direction of the nearest fire engine, calling out as he went, "It's in here lads, I've found it, its in here," adding excitedly, "It's going like a bloody bomb!". Disbelieving, I bent down and opened the letter box flap and peered through. The young fireman had not exaggerated, it was indeed going like the proverbial bomb inside. Much to my astonishment, I could see a fierce fire raging in a back room at the end of a long passageway. This was all the more surprising to me because I had been standing outside the door to the house awaiting a reply to my knocking for a full two minutes, without an inkling that this fire was raging inside, and mere feet away from me at that.

Having at last found our fire, all we had to do now was put it out. Already, firemen were making their way from the fire engine with hose and breathing apparatus. A small knot of firemen had gathered on the landing at the head of the short flight of external stairs. Two firemen were clutching the inch and three quarter light weight hose (the branch or nozzle snapped into place into the end hose coupling), both waiting quietly whilst the hose hissed and bucked as the air was driven out by the water surging through the hose towards them, forced forward by the now screaming fire pump. In front of the two branch men, were yet another two firemen, facing the door to the house with arms around each other's shoulders. Again, both were quietly waiting. It would soon be the job of these firemen to back up and support the weight of the hose forward in the attack on the fire. Being unencumbered by hose or equipment, it would be their job firstly to force open the door to the house, using well directed, synchronised, stabbing kicks with the soles of their firemen's boots.

Down below the short flight of stairs and on the pavement were yet another two firemen, hastily rigging in breathing apparatus. The reason for their haste was that if they could get rigged and started up before the branch men began their attack on the fire, they, as breathing apparatus wearers, would be more easily able to commandeer the branch, thus, get to do the actual fire fighting. Of course, the two firemen that currently had hold of the branch knew this. They were likewise determined that they should do the fire fighting, so were now shouting impatiently across the pavement and parked cars to the pump operator, "Water on, water on, hurry it up!"

During this very brief pause (before the initial attack was made on the fire) one of the appliance drivers hurriedly approached me. He had been told by a neighbour that the flat was occupied by an old gentleman who was a semi-invalid, and that this gentleman seldom went out and would almost certainly be in the flat at this time of the night. I had not been able to see the full extent of the fire yet but with persons involved and the potential for rapid and extensive spread of the fire, I felt quite safe in instructing the driver, "Ok, make pumps four, persons reported." This was the reply he fully expected and he then dashed away to send this message.

The line of inch and three quarter hose stiffened and a surge of water came out of the nozzle. The branch man immediately shut off the water with the hand control lever, then nodded to the two foremost firemen, saying quietly "Go." Two fire boots crashed in unison into the front door of the flat, striking at the position of the door lock. The door shuddered but held fast, the crashing of fire boots was repeated but still the door held fast. At the third strike of the fire boots, one of the firemen said quietly and confidently, "Ok, it's going." Then, as the two fire boots crashed into the door for the fourth time, the door grudgingly gave up the struggle. The timber holding the tongue of the door lock splintered away and the door opened inwards a mere few inches.

The two firemen that burst open the door moved quickly to each side of the doorway. The branch man moved forward, passing between them and warily pushing the door fully open with his boot. His hands were firmly gripping the water on/off control lever on the branch at the end of the hose line. The branch man was a very experienced fireman since no water issued forth from the branch immediately. Instead, for a brief moment he just stood and looked. What he saw was a passageway about twenty feet long and at the end of this passageway there was an open door leading to a back room. The back room was well alight and the tongues of flame were reaching out, beginning to involve the passageway itself. Still, no water issued from the branch at the end

of the hose line. Instead, the fireman moved forwards into the passage, dragging the hose with him. He moved forwards until the heat from the fire began to stretch the skin on his face. Finally, after stopping for one last look around the burning room, he opened up the control lever on the branch and the jet of water at last crashed into the burning room.

This fire had so far been a slightly unusual fire, in that up until now it had almost been a textbook movie or T.V. series fire; the T.V. series or movie where the brave (sic) fireman can be clearly seen. There is no smoke or steam to obscure his performance, or fog the camera lens. The fire can be seen burning brightly and clearly and can be heard roaring loudly; all of this action taking place actually inside a burning building. This is not the norm for metropolitan fire fighting. We were to find out later that the fire had ventilated itself by burning through a window in the back room involved in the fire. All the smoke, gases, and confined heat that make fire fighting so difficult had dissipated out through the shattered window, so that at this fire, fire fighting was to be relatively easy.

Soon after the jet of water struck into the burning room, the branch man directed it back and forth, up and down and over his head, then repeated this all again. The water had snuffed out the fire and at the same time snuffed out the light. Now we were back to the norm, unable to see a hand directly in front of the face. This was why the branch man had waited so long before he opened the branch control valve. He was now enveloped in a murky, grey, mixture of smoke and steam, just an occasional red glow would be seen through the murk for him to direct the jet of water at. This was why he had moved in close and waited before opening up the jet, for he was gauging the size, dimensions, and contents of the room. He had been noting the main seat of the fire and its hold on the fabric and contents of the back room. Now that he was enveloped in the grey murk, he would be directing the jet of water into the room, mainly from his memory of the room and contents.

Even a half inch diameter nozzle, such as was being used now, pushed out large quantities of water. It quickly subdued the main fire in the room. Now that the bulk of the fire had been knocked down I was concerned about water damage, so I ordered a hose reel tubing to be brought in to replace the larger jet.

This was in fact a small, three roomed flat and in the early stages of the fire. Before the fire had shattered the rear window and ventilated itself, the whole of the flat would have been heavily smoke logged. Two of the rooms in the flat still retained their charges of thick, oily smoke. It was in these two rooms that the breathing apparatus firemen (those who were frustrated in their attempts to commandeer the branch) had been searching for the elderly gentleman believed to be involved. They reported back to me that there was no sign of the man after having searched the remaining two rooms thoroughly. It was now to be presumed that if he was indeed in the flat, he would be found amongst the debris of the burned out back room.

The leading fireman approached to tell me that he had broken in the flat immediately above this one and that there had been no upward fire spread. He added that it had been a close run thing though because the glass to the window in the room above the fire was cracked from the heat and the timber frame charred. This damage had occurred when the fire in the back room broke out through the window. The flames had belched out and upwards to the floor above. Had the call to this fire come in a mere five minutes later, no doubt the whole building would by then have been involved instead of just a back room and the passageway.

A disconsolate voice called along the passage from the back room, "He's in here guv, we've found him!" "Damn!" I muttered under my breath, the tone of the voice told me what I already knew. If the old gentleman was still in the backroom, he was undoubtedly dead. For me, tonight was a damned inconvenient time for him to die! Two firemen were standing forlornly in the back room with their torches shining down at the debris on the floor. Amongst the debris at the side of a bed I could make out the vague outline of a human form, badly burnt and devoid of life.

I went into my automatic routine and started issuing commands, most of them unnecessary for the firemen know them well enough. "Don't disturb the debris, inform the police, inform the brigade, request attendance of photographer, bring in emergency lighting." I was perhaps a bit terse because the discovery of the body would mean staying at the fire scene for around another two hours and in all probability it would generate yet another two hours of paperwork. I had not, as yet, completed the sinking boat saga paperwork.

I made my way back out to the fire engine and gathered up my pipe and tobacco from the front cab. The driver, seeing me do this, smiled and said to me, "All under control then guv?" I nodded back at him, for this was a standing joke at the station. When I fetched, or sent, for my pipe and tobacco from the appliance, no matter how bad the fire situation may seem from the outside it was in fact all under control and more or less over. I made my way back into the building, and with my pipe filled, lit, and smoking well, I began the fire investigation. This was one of the few bonuses of being a fireman! Nobody ever complained about the smell of smoke (at least not tobacco smoke) in the workplace!

The emergency lighting and the beam from my torch lit up the old man's body as I examined it. The body was intact but the skin on the upper surface was badly charred. It was possible to see that he was clad only in pyjamas. All this and other details I noted down. On a table at the side of the bed was a partly consumed meal. The old man apparently ate sausages, potatoes, and beans for his last supper; condemned prisoners fare much better. Just feet away from the body, in the centre of the crowded, debris, strewn room, stood a small upright paraffin heater. On top of the heater was a frying pan, it appeared that the old gentleman had done his cooking on this paraffin heater. A quick check on the services to the flat confirmed that both the gas and electricity had been disconnected. The old man had managed to cook a meal of potatoes, sausages, and beans on that single, tiny paraffin stove. This was a feat many modern housewives could not manage, I was sure. I was having a problem trying to determine whether it was a cigarette that had started the fire, or whether it was one of the candles that he had used for lighting in the room? I had just decided that I would record them both as possible causes and let the coroner decide for himself, when I was distracted.

The ambulance attended first and confirmed death by declining to take the old man's badly charred, earthly remains away in their sterile ambulance. Then, the police and coroner's officer attended. They were fussing around, scribbling in their notebooks, for they had their own various forms to be filled out. A harassed brigade photographer appeared next, he too was having a busy night. As soon as he found out there were no suspicious circumstances involved, he fired off his camera and flash gun no more than half a dozen times, then he also was gone. All that remained for the old man's last vigil were the four firemen from Hammersmith's pump and a solitary police constable.

At long last, a plain, unmarked grey van drew up outside the house. Two men in dark suits emerged out of it. They spoke briefly to the policeman standing sentry outside the house, then went back to the grey van. They opened the rear doors and drew out a dark coloured, shiny, plastic coffin, or cadaver transporting box. Undertakers (for undertakers these two gentlemen in dark suits were) are notoriously sombre and doleful. This demeanour is reserved for grieving relatives and friends of the newly departed, where it is no doubt needed and appreciated. We, the firemen, were not friends or relatives and thus were greeted brightly and cheerfully by the two men, despite the early hour of the morning. We shared their problems with them: how the devil were they going to get the old man into the box and then close the lid? The coffin was a very commodious coffin, indeed, the problem was that the old man had expired with one of his legs bent, caused by the contraction of muscles or sinews in the heat of the fire. He just would not fit into the coffin. Sideways, he would not fit into the coffin at all and if placed on his back into the coffin, his raised leg prevented the lid being fitted and closed.

I watched closely with macabre fascination as I had heard some gruesome tales of callous undertakers allegedly breaking or cutting off such offending limbs, then tossing them in the box afterwards. The body was placed on its back into the coffin, then after pulling and pushing at the offending limb for a short time, one of the undertakers stood upright and said loudly and crossly, "Sod it, the bloody thing won't go in, there is only one thing for it." He then looked directly at me and said, "Do you think we could possibly borrow a, ere, um..." At this point in his sentence his speech stumbled, as if plucking up the courage to say the word. So I said the word for him, "A saw, you want to borrow a saw?" He looked startled for a moment, then repeated the word back at me. "A saw? Good grief no!" he said, "What would I want one of those for? What I want to borrow is one of those large, black, plastic sheets you carry to cover things over with. What do you call those?" Cheerfully and much relieved, I loaned him a black, plastic salvage sheet, which was then draped over the top of the open coffin in place of the now useless lid. Then, the poor old man was rather ignominiously born away in a plastic box, draped over with a salvage sheet, cum black plastic shroud.

The pump reversed back into Hammersmith Fire Station at around two o'clock in the morning. The mess manager, hearing the heavy appliance doors crash open on the floor below, put on the kettle to make a pot of tea. The pump escapes crew, who had been back in the station for more than an hour now, replenished the hose on the pump and then bore away the two breathing sets that had been used at the fire, to service and re-charge them. This left the pumps crew free to wash up and adjourn to the mess room for a much needed cup of tea. Over tea in the mess room, the sub officer was briefing me on events during my absence. Chiswick's pump had again stood by for fire cover whilst the station was empty. During this time they had picked up a further two minor calls, for which they did the paperwork, good old Chiswick! The paperwork for the earlier four pump fire was almost completed but was awaiting some details that only I could provide (such as the actual cause of the fire etc.), good old sub officer! I was drinking my third cup of hot, sweet tea and life was looking decidedly brighter already. All I had in hand now was the fire report, the coroners report, and messages to the divisional commander for the fire we had just attended. This was a mere two hours work perhaps and then we were up to date. At a quarter to three in the morning, the night was still young. I might even yet get my head down for an hour or so.

At around 3 a.m. I was seated behind my desk in the station office, drafting out a rough coroners report before beginning typing. The station was still bustling with activity, as the firemen carried out reports and checks on the appliances and gear following the fire. The station office was crowded and busy, with the sub officer and myself doing paperwork and the firemen standing idly around, or amending records following the checks and tests on the equipment. The teleprinter bell on the wall outside the office had been ringing on and off since we came back to the station, with messages from the recent four pump fire etc. Once again, it began its routine shrill ringing. All in the office ignored it, merely raising voice levels to talk over it. It rang for around ten seconds; all had by now mentally decided that it was just another routine teleprinter message. I was crossly thinking to myself, why doesn't the bloody duty man press the acknowledgement button (which switches the bell off) on the teleprinter?

Normally, the teleprinter bell ringing at this time in the morning would briefly bring all activity to a halt. The firemen would stop and wait in anticipation that the printer bell would be followed almost immediately by the ringing of the much bigger, call out bells. This was the routine of a fire call at London fire stations. Firstly, the printer bell would ring. This was then followed one or two seconds later by the clamour of the bigger fire bells. If after five seconds, the fire bells did not ring, the firemen would visibly relax. The printer bell would most likely just be announcing that another routine teleprinter message was coming over the printer in the watch room.

There was only one situation when a fire call did not follow immediately after the ringing of the teleprinter bell. This would be when fire control were keying into and despatching multiple stations to a fire call. This usually happened when a large make up fire occurred. Fire control would activate up to half a dozen teleprinters at different stations, all to be despatched to the fire, and then remotely activate all of the stations fire call bells simultaneously at the press of one button.

Despite the ringing of the irksome teleprinter bell and the general clamour in the station office, I was again hard at work drafting the coroners report. I want to get it finished and perhaps get some sleep for an hour or so. Suddenly, over the top of the shrill teleprinter bell, came the strident clamour of the big fire call bells. "Bugger it!" I intoned under my breath. Somebody on this station must have been really wicked today and we were all paying the price by getting no peace at all tonight.

Due to the list of stations to which this call was being sent to, it took longer than usual to print out. I had my boots, leggings and fire tunic on, and was standing in the watch room by the printer as it chattered out: 'D23 Hammersmith's Pump, to a fifteen pump fire, at Tottenham Court Road on A24 Soho's fire ground'.

The run to Tottenham Court Road was a good one because at this time of the morning there was very little traffic around on the streets. Less than ten minutes after we had left Hammersmith Fire Station I was handing over the appliance nominal role board at the fire control unit parked in the Tottenham Court Road in the West End of London. After the excitement of a speedy ride there came an anticlimax. We were told to join other crews waiting by the side of the control unit and wait for job details to arise. I stood, bored and idle, at the side of the control unit, gazing at the building which had been involved in the fire. It was an ex-department or furniture store which was

now in use as a super music store, selling everything from sheet music, guitars and rock band equipment, to grand pianos. There was no sign of fire at the front of the building. Thick, yellow smoke was billowing up from the rear of the four storey building, indicating that there was still some fire left to fight.

After a wait of around ten or fifteen minutes, the control officer called out, "D23 Hammersmith." I reported to the sliding window in the side of the vehicle. He firstly enquired, "How many in your crew?" I answered, "Four." "Good," he replied, "I have a job for you." Showing me a diagram of the building, he instructed me to proceed with the crew to the rear of the building at the northern end, to meet up with A21 Paddington's crew, who needed assistance. We made our way through the main entrance on the ground floor, through to the rear of the building, to a motor lorry loading area. Then, we headed in the direction of the northern end. All was in darkness, and smoke and steam wafted across the rear of the building. Fireman's hand lamps twinkled like fireflies as individuals and groups of firemen scurried and hurried around.

We made our way along the outside of the darkened building, calling out over and over again, "Alpha 21 Paddington." Then, out of the gloom a voice called back, "Over here mate!" We made our way over towards the voice, which sounded familiar to me. As we approached I could tell by the white helmet that it was another station officer. I now knew why the voice had sounded familiar. It was my old station officer, Knocker White, from when I had served at A21 Paddington as a leading fireman. When Knocker White recognised me, he called out cheerfully, "Hello Dave, what are you doing here?" There really was no sensible reply to this question, I was a fire officer on duty and this was a fifteen pump fire. So, I replied by telling him cheerfully, "I didn't want to come Knocker but the bastards made me." The greeting "What are you doing here?" was habitual with Knocker! I am convinced that if on one distant day he has the good fortune to go to heaven (as opposed to the other place) should he happen by chance to meet the Pope whilst up there, he will use exactly the same greeting for him, "Hello Pope, what are you doing here?"

Hammersmith's firemen disappeared to help the Paddington crews and I was left talking to Knocker White. He explained to me that the part of the building where we were now fighting the fire was the administrative part of the store. It was divided up into small offices, each of which had had to be extinguished separately. At one time, they had consistently re-ignited behind them, which is why he had called for assistance. Following the line of hose, we walked into the building and up the stairs, squeezing past firemen pulling at the heavy hose. We arrived at the floor where the branch or nozzle was actually extinguishing the fire. Here, there were to be seen really angry flames, accompanied by much crashing of the jet of water and falling debris. In the smoke and swirl of steam, we carried on our conversation, only now it was regarding the whereabouts of old watch mates and the good times we had had together at A21 Paddington.

This had happened so many times before; old friends meeting in the middle of a raging conflagration, or similar, and proceeding to talk about old friends and good times whilst hell burns around them. So many times did it happen that it makes me wonder whether other branches of the services did (and still do now) the same thing. Does a soldier, who leaps into a foxhole to avoid the bombs and bullets and finds the hole already occupied by an old mate he has not seen for years, ignore the war (if only briefly) to talk about regimental good times and old comrades, I wonder?

It seemed like we had only been talking for ten minutes (although in reality it would have been more like a half an hour) when one of the Paddington leading firemen approached Knocker White, saying, "That's it guv, I think we have got it." Knocker broke off the conversation to check that the fire was indeed all out. I called together Hammersmith's crew, supposedly to make our way back to the control unit but really in effect, to have what is generally called 'a smooch around'. This entailed a general tour of the building involved in the fire, usually done out of personal interest in both in the fire and the building.

The ground floor of the department/music store was a large open floor with a high ceiling. It had not been involved in the fire but had been subjected to water damage from the floors above. All of the stock on this floor, musical instruments and the like, had been covered over with salvage sheets to prevent the water from damaging them. The only lighting on this floor was from sparsely spaced searchlights and emergency lighting. All that could be seen in the dim light was a series of mounds of salvage sheet covered goods. We wandered through, curiously looking under the salvage sheets to see what musical instruments they concealed. I could hear a guitar playing faintly in the

background. I led the way towards the sound, through the dark maze of covered, stacked goods. In a darkened corner of the store I could see the backs of around half a dozen firemen. When I moved forward towards the edge of the group, I saw two firemen seated on boxes, playing guitars. The two firemen were entranced with the guitars. I think the guitars were professional instruments and priced far beyond that which mere firemen could afford. They played and handled them lovingly. It was obvious from the occasional conversation between them that the two firemen had never played together before, if indeed they had ever met each other before. They played together beautifully and being a lover of the guitar I stood and listened. Once, they looked around and seeing my station officers helmet, stopped playing and went to get up, but I motioned for them to carry on. I lingered on for around twenty minutes, talking to them and listening to them play, before duty called and I moved on.

It was now eight o'clock in the morning and full daylight had just arrived. For the past hour we had been making up the wet hose and heavy ancillary gear and were now standing around in the cold with nothing to do. In effect, we were just awaiting for the relief appliances to arrive before we could leave the fire. At a large fire, the first machines to attend would normally be released from the fire first. Therefore, Hammersmith, which attended on the make pumps fifteen, would be one of the last machines to leave the fire. I now did something that I had never done before and never did since. I went up to the control unit and asked to leave the fire early. I explained that we had had a very busy night and that I still had several hours work in hand when I eventually got back to the fire station before I could go off duty. Thankfully, the control officer, who no doubt over the years would have heard many tales and reasons as to why appliances should leave early, believed me.

We reversed back into Hammersmith's appliance room at 8.40 a.m. I did not bother to book the appliance back on the run with control. I was not going to chance another fire call: we had earned our money several times over this night. For once at least, I had had enough of fire fighting. After a quick wash and shave and a quick breakfast with multiple cups of tea, I went on with the paperwork! I finally booked off duty just after eleven o'clock in the morning, having completed eighteen hours of continuous, arduous activity. I had been spared one small routine morning chore however, that of making up my bedding. I had not had time to even put it down.

An amusing little end piece to this chapter occurred that very same evening. After the long arduous night, there would have been no time to clean our fire gear before going off duty. Yet, that same night, as I was waiting for six bells to ring for the changing of the watches and the White Watch to come back on duty again, I saw fireman Derek Hill (who features in previous book chapters - he of brown bread, and olfactory fame) scurry into the station just before six o'clock. When he appeared on parade just minutes later, he was clad in immaculately clean fire gear. Given the previous night's activities it would have been perfectly acceptable for him to have gone on parade in mucky fire gear. At around this period in time, Derek would have had around nine or ten years service in the brigade; I, myself, would have had ten or fifteen years of service. I walked all along the line of parading firemen, giving them an overly severe inspection. I gave them the order, "One pace forward march" and inspected them from the rear. I then gave them the order, "Off helmets" and proceeded to inspect the fire helmets. Just as I had suspected, the rear under curtain of Derek Hill's helmet (in the position where the fireman's name would be marked) bore the name Fm Smith in white paint. Nice one Derek!

CHAPTER 8

SENIOR OFFICERS

Being as we are about to go on strike in the next chapter, I can now freely voice as many comments as I like about Senior Officers without fear of retribution.

The PBI of the British Army (Poor Bloody Infantry) have for generations complained about their Generals, so is it really surprising that the PBF (Poor Bloody Firemen) do likewise?! I would not go quite so far as to use the First World War expression: 'Lions led by Donkeys'. Instead, I would suggest that 'Donkeys braying at Lions' is about right for the Fire Service. Unfortunately, in these modern times, Senior Officers tend not to lead on the fire ground but to merely direct. I am sure they have their own problems, such as Health and Safety at Work and the like, and of course, firemen getting themselves killed whilst attending fires does tend to blight an otherwise quite promising Officer's career. Thus, their directions at fires are usually ultra safety conscious i.e. in the main to retreat seems to be the order of the day. My philosophy whilst in the Fire Service was to favour leading from the front, then if any deaths did occur, one of them would probably have been my own and I wouldn't then have had a career to worry about anymore! Not only that but there would have been the added bonus that in the case of my own demise some other poor sod would be left with all the paperwork that demising on duty entails.

So there we have it! Whilst I feel I could have quite confidently coped with the social life of being a Senior Officer, I was probably otherwise unsuited. That being the case, I am therefore fully qualified to complain, whinge, prevaricate, and any thing else I like, on the subject of Senior Officers.

*

The first story is about the time we were ordered as a relief crew to the Caledonia. This was an old paddle steamer that had been converted into a restaurant and moored on the River Thames embankment in the centre of London. Upon arrival we met the original fire fighting crews of whom we were relieving, I knew some of them from my 'A' division days. They told me about the fire which had apparently been quite 'exiting'! No, that was not a spelling mistake, it was both 'exiting' and 'exciting'! When the initial crews were below decks with a jet, the fire flashed over on them, hence the very rapid exiting part. The exciting part usually came later when one was back at the Fire Station and the adrenaline levels were dropping back somewhere near normal. Then, as one recounted the tale to one's watch mates, only then could the sheer unadulterated terror of the bloody white hot flames chasing one up the stairs be explained away as rather exciting.

The original fire crews attending the Caledonia had met with some unexpected problems. Firstly, it was quite a large vessel with a severe fire below decks. Secondly, it was moored but a few hundred yards on the opposite bank of the Thames from the Headquarters of the London Fire Brigade. The first problem would not be too difficult to deal with, given expertise and a little luck. The second problem was a different matter altogether. At this time, the renowned London and Tilbury Docks system had been 'Thatcherised' and was no more. Thus, sitting in the Headquarters complex of the London Fire Brigade were literally dozens and dozens of Senior Fire Officers, none of whom had the attendance at a ship fire on their CV's. I was informed that they allegedly attended in their droves. Never had the saying 'more Chiefs than Indians' been more appropriate. "Couldn't see the water for white hats," "When the big white chief moved, they all moved together," and "Then the boat took on a list to starboard, bloody nigh on had to abandon ship," were just a few of the derogatory comments I heard. This is still an ongoing problem for very Senior Officers. If one is to attain a high rank in the Brigade, one has to start scrambling up the tree at the earliest possible moment. It does not pay potential high fliers to spend years skulking around on scruffy fire stations just to gain practical fire experience! Practical firemanship can be gained simply by reading practical books, everybody knows that! These comments are made very much tongue in cheek. After all, Moreton in Marsh has a concrete ship cemented into its fire

ground, so at least the ship fire fighting problem should be solved!

*

In the late 1970s, whilst I was a very senior (long serving) Station Officer at Hammersmith Fire Station, we were called to a fire at Uxbridge Road on Hammersmith's fire ground. It was close to the border with Acton Fire Station's fire ground. Uxbridge Road was a long, straight, major road that led directly from Hammersmith to Acton. Traffic conditions were such that both Hammersmith's two appliances and Acton's supporting machine were arriving at the address at the same time. As we slowed down to check street numbers, I saw that flames were issuing from the ground floor front room of a four storey house on the near side or left of the appliance. I then saw that Acton's machine had swung across the centre of the road onto its offside. It was now heading directly for us on our side of the road. This was not unusual, it simply meant that Acton's driver was trying to park up first outside the burning building, thus claiming that it had beaten us onto our own fire ground. On the face of it, this was a mere technical point but in practice to be beaten on one's own fire ground without good reason was dishonour! Although I must add that the appliance drivers of adjoining fire stations were forever endeavouring to dishonour one another all the time. The driver of my machine was clearly intending that the other driver should not succeed for the two fire engines raced towards each other on the same side of the road.

Whilst this was happening, I was looking at the fire. If the fire had extended beyond the front room from whence the flames were issuing it was possible that this would be classified as a four pump fire. Then, there came a loud and strident priority call over the appliance radio. It seemed somebody else had picked up a working job as well as us. Then, the call sign registered with me: Delta 222 - Acton's pumps call sign. The fire engine that was literally only yards away from us was making up on my fire ground with me in attendance. In fire service tradition this was the very height of ignorance, bad manners and insolence, or call it what you will. The two appliances came together, nose to nose and bumper to bumper. There just in front of me was a young, fresh faced sub officer, making pumps four on my fire. If it had not been for the two appliance windscreens separating us, I could have reached out and literally taken the radio handset from out of his hands, so close were we.

I jumped down from the machine, fuming at the sheer arrogance of the young whipper-snapper. I opened the door to his cab just as he put the radio handset down and told him in no uncertain terms that if he ever made up on my fire ground again whilst I was already in attendance, I would cancel the bloody thing. I added for good measure, "I don't think that's ever been done before so then you would be famous, wouldn't you?" Still very cross, I told him: "This is my fire ground, you sit where you are and don't move until I say so." I then walked away, leaving him marooned up in his cab.

The firemen were already attacking the fire in the house with high pressure hose reels. Whilst severe, the fire was confined to the front room only and there were no persons involved. The door to the room had been ajar, so heat and smoke had travelled up the staircase enclosure. In these circumstances it was reasonable to keep the classification as four pumps, although to teach the unrepentant young sub officer a lesson I could have quite cheerfully downgraded the fire. However, this would then have been broadcast over the entire brigade radio system, no doubt incurring a slur upon the 'D' division as a whole. I was not prepared for this to happen so instead I gave the order, "Acton's pump back to station." This brought smiles to the faces of Acton's senior hands, they knew brigade protocol as well as I did, even if their young Sub Officer did not. I was sending them back to their station before even the fourth machine on the attendance had arrived. Their Sub Officer had been a naughty boy and was being sent home in disgrace.

The young Sub Officer had shown his inexperience but unfortunately was unrepentant about it. There were many old adages and lores in the fire service about the making up at fires, such as never make up on smoke alone, and always have a good look at the fire first before making up because it might not be all that it seems. It was not unknown for fairly long serving officers to have embarrassed themselves on occasions when they had not followed these rules. One example of this was an officer who had radioed through from the scene of a fire to make pumps four on a room where the fire was apparently burning well. The officer then returned to the room to find that the curtains (which was all that had been alight) had burnt themselves out. In such cases, one would be in the very embarrassing situation of not having any fire left to fight.

*

I was once guilty of something like this myself, although it was not quite as straightforward as the previous example. We had been called out in the wee small hours of the morning to a shop alight at Shepherds Market on Hammersmith's fire ground. Upon our arrival a policeman pointed towards the shop and it seemed fairly obvious that there was a severe fire inside. When I say obvious (!) the front to the shop was protected by timber lattice rolling shutters, and even these were well alight. Viewing between the gaps in the burning shutters, it seemed clear to me that the shop was burning well. Breaking in through the shutters was causing us some problems so I had a look at the shop next door (which had glazed windows) in order to gauge the dimensions of the shop which was on fire. The shop next door extended back some forty feet and was beginning to fill with smoke itself. Thus, I confidently made pumps four and prepared to be ready to extinguish a fierce and substantial body of fire. The firemen were furiously attacking the timber roller shutters, with large axes and the like. The jet was laid out and charged with water, and fireman wearing breathing apparatus were standing by. As the shutters came away the immediate fire around the doorway was killed with the large jet and the BA men prepared to enter.

The Breathing Apparatus Control Officer took their tallies. The BA men picked up the large jet and made to enter, in order to fight the raging fire. The first man went through the door and then the second man walked forward to enter the shop. This was as far as anybody went, however. "Get in, get in!" was the cry of the fireman waiting outside the shop. "Get in, get in, or make way for some bugger who will!", their voices demanded. The problem was that the BA fireman was in as far as he could go. He had gone forward around two or three feet and immediately met with an obstruction. The obstruction was a brick wall. The branch man discovered this obstruction when he opened up the three quarter inch jet and found that most of the water bounced back onto his face. It appeared that this particular shop (unlike the one next door) only extended backwards approximately four feet and was in fact no more than a market stall or kiosk. There was a minor problem though, which was that this particular market trader had managed to cram in as much stock in his small unit as the larger one next door. The unit was almost floor to ceiling with stock. There literally was not any room to swing the proverbial cat, let alone a three quarter inch diameter jet.

This was not the major problem, however, the major problem was that I had just made pumps four on a fire that was burning in no more than an oversized kiosk. The London Fire Brigade (for all its bureaucratic systems and procedures to cover all eventualities) just did not have the capability for the message from a fire to read, "Awfully sorry, I seem to have made a bit of a faux pas, could you please cancel that last message of make pumps four?" Instead, the whole paraphernalia rolls on, and additional appliances, BA control units, Senior Officers even, all arrive to visit one's mistakes and duly tut, tut! "Happens to the best of us, old Wilson," said Assistant Divisional Officer Watson, who had by now arrived at the fire. I had the personal satisfaction of knowing that it had happened a damn sight more often to him when he was in the rank of Station Officer, than it ever happened to me in my entire career.

*

It would seem that I have prevaricated somewhat, for the moral of this chapter was supposed to be in connection to a visit I made to Brigade Headquarters Lambeth, many years after retiring from the brigade. I had visited there to do some research on dates and obtain some photographs for my first book: To Ride a Red Engine. I was standing in the drill yard and absorbing back into my memory all the old familiar sights and sounds. Whilst standing there, I noticed a very smart Range Rover car in the corner of the drill yard. I deduced from the activity around it that this was a very Senior Fire Officer's Brigade car. Two men worked around it; one was obviously the driver, and the other was the Senior Officer, although he wore no rank markings. As I walked into the appliance room, the Senior Officer approached me, saying, "Don't I know you?" I certainly didn't recognise him, so in return I told him, "My name is Wilson and I used to be the Station Officer at Hammersmith Fire Station." He then replied, "I thought so, I used to be the Sub officer at Acton Fire Station." I don't know why, as I did not recognise his face, but I got it in one, and told him cheerfully with a big grin on my face, "You were the Sub Officer that I rollicked for making up on my fire ground whilst I was in attendance. I told you that if you ever did it again I would cancel the bloody thing."

Sadly, very sadly, he snapped straight back at me, "Yes, and I still think I was right in making

up at the time." He then turned around quickly and walked away from me. I have used the word 'sadly' because this incident must have occurred ten to fifteen years previously but even now the Sub Officer, although greatly elevated in rank, still rankled at that small incident all those years ago. The man was highly intelligent and I believe he had received a university education. He had no doubt been marked as a high flyer in the Brigade from the beginning of his career. Academically, the man was brilliant, and career wise he had done magnificently, but in my opinion he wasn't succeeding too well in the university of life.

There was many a time that I beat neighbouring fire stations' machines onto their own fire ground, sometimes by a margin of minutes. It didn't matter what the fire was, if I knew they were on their way, I would only send messages in my name before their arrival in extreme circumstances. We would cheerfully set to and pinch their fire from them but not rub their faces in it by sending messages. On occasions when we had arrived first and the fire clearly warranted a make up to four pumps, I delayed the message but when the home fire engines arrived I would speak to the officer in charge. It would often be a spotty, fresh faced, young leading fireman but I would still tell him, "Right, send the make up in your name and then bugger off and get on with the fire fighting. I'm in charge of the fire now."

*

Allegedly, a one time Chief Fire Officer of the London Fire Brigade (who was not overly popular with the troops) was called away from a grand function to attend a twenty pump fire in the 'K' Division. The 'K' Division comprised mainly of ex-county of Surrey Fire Brigade Stations, amalgamated with London at the inception of the Greater London Council. This same Chief Officer allegedly liked his ale! Upon arrival at the said fire he was amazed to see a fireman clad in full fire gear, merrily riding around the fire ground on a bicycle, completely oblivious to his own exalted presence. He challenged the man, "What do you think you are doing?" The man's seemingly disrespectful and laconic reply of, "What does it look like I'm doing? I am riding my bike," only served to exacerbate his already foul mood. In the Chief's mind, this kind of behaviour could only mean one thing: the man had been drinking on duty! It was not an offence to drink on duty in those days, indeed the Chief had allegedly been doing so himself that very evening. Albeit he had done so in the line of duty, he was momentarily baulked. Of course, Chief Officers do not rise to their great rank without a modicum of deviousness. Turning to an aide, the Chief snapped, "Take that man's name, he is on a charge for stealing that bicycle."

Unfortunately, although he was the Chief Officer of the London Fire Brigade, he did not know all things. What he did not know was that the offending fireman had attended the fire on a hose lorry which originated from a 'K' Division Station. A hose lorry can carry up to a mile of hose, which when all laid out, can take a considerable length of time to walk along (to examine for leaks etc.). The Surrey Fire Brigade (unlike the London Fire Brigade) had very thoughtfully and considerately provided a bicycle to be carried on the hose lorry. The fireman could then use the bicycle to peruse the lengthy hose lines. Thus, it came about, that our bad tempered, bacchanal Chief Officer was intending to have the man charged under the discipline codes for riding an official fire brigade bike for an official fire brigade purpose - 'hose lines the perusal of'. Again, this was hearsay but apparently the intrepid cyclist was heard to have said cheerfully, "Laugh? I nearly fell off my bike!"

*

Assistant Divisional Officer Slow was a man of the old school - very sergeant major-ish in both appearance and deed. He was a man who, in the days when firemen were responsible for cleaning the fire stations, would appear on the station and run his index finger underneath some cornice, or table. He would then raise his finger in the air and say disparagingly, "Look! Dust, Mr Wilson!" Unfortunately for him, I was slightly irreverent by nature, and wise even, to sergeant major-ish ways. I would then repeat the operation with my own digit, saying, "Good heavens Sir, so it is! And what's more, it appears to be defying the laws of gravity, how amazing!" Initially, he would address me as Station Officer, and I would address him as Sir. As time went by we both mellowed; he began to address me as Mr Wilson, and I began to address him as Mr Slow. However, on the odd occasion that he would annoy me, I would then revert to calling him Sir again - only with a capital 'C'. Although Assistant Divisional Officer Slow had this unfortunate rigid and outdated manner, I forgave him his sins because on the fire ground he was a very useful and capable officer, unlike so many of his peers. I know that he himself would never admit this but on one occasion, I probably saved his life on the fire ground.

It was around five o'clock on a pleasant summer's morning, in the back and beyond of the D Division (somewhere in the vicinity of London Airport) that somebody had made pumps fifteen on a fire at a very large biscuit factory. Hammersmith's Pump and Pump Escape were both ordered onto the fire. Whilst we were en route, another droll voice came over the appliance radio to make the fire a twenty pumper. Due to the distance involved, we were probably amongst the last machines to arrive at the fire. This meant that all the exciting fire fighting jobs would have gone and we would merely fill the roll of support troops. The fire mainly involved a huge packing department in the middle of a vast biscuit/cake producing bakery. When we arrived we found that Hammersmith's main task was the laying out and extending of hose lines and providing ladders and equipment from the many fire engines there. This was considered a rather boring and mundane task, especially in the early hours of the morning.

After we had been there for around an hour or so, I happened to be making my way across the factory complex with a crew of firemen. We were passing through a long passage just on the edge of the fire area when I glanced upwards and saw to my horror that one brick wall of the passage (approximately twenty to twenty five feet in height) was leaning dangerously inwards. Dangerous walls are a major life hazard to firemen and as a rule I had a pretty keen eye for this sort of thing. I myself must have passed through this passageway at least twice previously, as must have countless other firemen. I can only surmise that on the other occasions, smoke must have obscured the top of the walls from sight. The passageway ran between two main buildings and was around twenty five yards long. For one third of the way along its length, the top of the wall was bowing dangerously inwards and I do mean DANGEROUSLY! The reason for this bowing out was perfectly obvious to the trained eye. It was one of the classic causes for collapse of walls at fires.

All metals expand when heated, although this expansion is not normally perceptible to the naked eye. For example, when a thirty foot long metal beam is heated in a fire, it may only expand approximately three to six inches in length. However, when this metal beam is anchored firmly at one end to a brick wall, the forces of expansion are so great that it will effortlessly push the wall out of perpendicular. The end result is that the wall will fall over. Thus, with regard to the wall in the cake/biscuit factory, I took immediate action.

I called over one of the younger Hammersmith firemen and stationed him by the doors to this passageway, instructing firmly that on no account was he to allow anybody to enter this passageway. Then, very quickly and apprehensively, I passed through the same passage myself. It would have taken far too long to have made the circuitous journey all the way around. Once at the other end of the passage, I delegated yet another fireman to prevent access to the passage.

I went back later on to check that the young Hammersmith fireman was still doing his duty, and he told me an interesting story. Some ten minutes previously, Sergeant Major (no, sorry, Assistant Divisional Officer Slow) had approached him and attempted to go past him through the forbidden doors. The young fireman had boldly told him, "Sorry sir, you can't go through there." Mr Slow was not in the habit of taking instructions from very junior firemen and duly challenged him, saying, "Really? Who says I cannot go through that door?" The young fireman nervously informed him that it was Station Officer Wilson from Hammersmith. This incident had occurred in the time before Mr Slow and myself had reached our understanding and accommodation. The Assistant Divisional Officer Slow drew himself erect, saying, "Hurrumph! We shall see!" He then walked past the young fireman and pushed open the door to the passageway. He paused at the doorway opening for only a matter of seconds, and it was at this precise time that an enormous thundering sound of falling masonry was heard. The brick wall had come crashing down. Mr Slow, still standing in the doorway opening, was enveloped in a huge cloud of brick and plaster dust. The young fireman informed me, "You wouldn't have believed it Guv, he just hurrumped and coughed! Then, without saying a bloody word, he buggered off!" Without a doubt, if the exalted Mr Slow had not been detained for those few critical seconds by the fireman at the doorway, he would have been in the centre of the passageway when the wall crashed down and we would have all been subsequently polishing up our best bib and tucker for another grand Brigade funeral.

*

I need to remind myself that this chapter is about Senior Officers. They don't come any more exalted than the next story. At the same biscuit factory fire, some time after the brick wall incident, myself and Hammersmith's crew were swanning around, trying to avoid the irksome duty of making up hose and gear. I then espied a most unusual sight - the Chief Officer of the London

Fire Brigade no less. This was a sight one didn't very often see in the middle of a burning building, so I foolishly stayed to watch. This gentleman was Joe Milner, probably one of the last of the great Fire Chiefs, his successors merely being chief administrators. The great man (the Chief that is) suddenly looked in my direction and said, "Ah, a Station Officer!" He pointed to the top of a high wall, where it joined the roof of the building, and said, "There are still some pockets of fire up there, we need a ladder to gain access to extinguish it. Will you fetch one please?" It was very nice when the Chief Officer said please, but nevertheless, if the Chief Officer wanted a ladder, he got one. The only problem was that it was a very high wall and a thirty foot extension ladder was not long enough. The next size up was a fifty foot wheeled escape ladder, which might not fit inside the building. Off we set, however, as I was determined that by hook or crook, a fifty foot escape ladder would somehow be manhandled into the building.

On our travels to the outside of the huge factory to find the appropriate ladder, I was met by Assistant Divisional Officer Slow, who enquired of me brusquely, "What are you doing, Wilson?" I cheerfully informed him: "I am off to get a ladder, Sir." "What do you want a ladder for?" he snapped back at me (remember this was the chap whose life I had just saved). "I don't know, Sir," I replied breezily. His face broke into a scowl, and I came up with the punch line, "It's not me that wants it, Sir. It's the chief officer." A puzzled look came across his face and he said, "Not the Chief Officer? He wouldn't have asked you to get a ladder himself, it must have been someone else." I cheerfully replied once more, "No, Sir, it was definitely the Chief Officer that asked for it." Still bemused somewhat, he came back at me, "What? The Chief Officer, Mr Milner, personally asked you to get him a ladder?" This made me wonder whether protocol had been breached, in that only Assistant Divisional Officers could fetch ladders for Chief Officers. Again, I glibly replied, "Yes, Sir, that's the man. The Chief Officer, Mr Milner, personally asked me to get him a ladder. There's no doubt about it, he chose me over all others to fetch his ladder for him." I walked off in pursuit of the Chief's ladder, leaving Mr Slow puzzled and scratching his head. I was equally puzzled, wondering what the big deal was in having to go and fetch a ladder for a Chief Officer. He was probably not going to climb the bloody thing himself anyway. At the back of my mind I felt sure that Mr Slow had found a particularly nasty and irksome job for me and my crew to do and had thus been thwarted. Chief officers, however, carried too much clout for even him!

We found our ladder, a fifty foot wheeled escape, sitting on the back of a Southall fire engine, which was unattended outside the factory on the perimeter road. We removed the ladder from the back of the machine and lowered it out in the carriage. With two men at the head of the ladder and two men at the heel, we made our way back towards the factory. Fortunately, because this was such a large factory complex, all the doors we had to negotiate were around ten foot wide with about the same headroom. Nevertheless, it was a struggle at times to get the big ladder through. After a meandering journey to the approximate centre of the complex, we duly presented the Chief with his ladder. Sadly, he seemed to have lost interest in the proceedings somewhat. Another Senior Officer told us to pitch the ladder to the top of the offending wall, where another member of crew would squirt water on the fire there.

On its own, the above story might not appear very exciting. It was some time later that that this episode became more interesting (as indeed I thought it might). At long last, we got the order 'Hammersmith's pump away', which meant that we should pack up our kit and go back to station. As I was meandering back to our machine, I passed D29 Southall's appliance. As I had half expected, the Southall crew were lounging disconsolately around their fire engine. Breezily, I asked them, "What's up lads? You don't look too happy." The Sub Officer in charge of the crew (who I knew from way back) replied dejectedly, "No, we are not!" He added, "We were ordered back to station forty minutes ago but some bastard has nicked our escape ladder and we can't go until we find it." "Stolen it? Surely not?" I queried, "A fifty foot wooden wheeled escape ladder? You must have mislaid it. Have you looked for it?" "Looked for it?" snapped the totally exasperated Sub Officer, "We've been round the outside of this bloody great big factory twice! We've checked every escape ladder on every fire engine here and there's no sign of it, so someone has definitely nicked it."

Warming to the theme, I smugly asked him, "Have you tried looking inside the factory?" "Don't be daft!" he snapped back irritably, "How would you get a big, fifty foot wooden escape ladder inside a building?" Feigning all innocence I told him, "Well, it was only about an half an hour ago that I saw an escape ladder right in the centre of the factory. Could that possibly be yours?" A look of total disbelief came across his face, as he stammered, "What? where did you see it? How did it get there?" He called across to his crew, "Come here lads, you are not going to believe this!" He then turned to me again, growled menacingly, "The bastards! How did it get there, do

you know guv?" Not wishing to tell direct lies, I ignored his last question and simply said, "Well, I was told that the Chief Officer was seen at the top of this ladder, squirting a hose reel jet onto the fire." The charade began all over again, with the Sub Officer saying incredulously, "What? NOT the Chief Officer?..." etc, etc, etc. Once back at Hammersmith Fire Station I was tempted to telephone Southall Fire Station and enquire as to whether it was indeed their ladder that I had seen, but then thought better of it.

CHAPTER 9

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 1.

The fourteenth of November, nineteen seventy-seven; 14/11/77; one, four, one, one, seven seven - just a jumble of numbers, an obscure date. To me though, and to many of my ilk, it was a date seared into our minds. The 14th November, 1977, was the date that the first ever British Fire Service strike took place; a strike which the vast majority of serving firemen had voted in favour of and yet were convinced would never take place. How naive we all were at that time, what did we know of national politics and public sector wage restraints? What did we know of 'D' notices (press censorship notices), the workings of the fourth estate, spin doctors and the like? We knew nothing of these things! All we knew was that we did a dirty and dangerous job, which happened to give a great deal of personal satisfaction in every aspect except the remuneration.

At the time of the strike I was a serving station officer with the London Fire Brigade, and a very proud one at that, with one minor exception. As I subsequently found out during the strike, my salary was such that with three young children and quite a large mortgage, I apparently qualified for free school dinners for my kids. If being good at your job was directly linked to monetary remuneration then I was a far better window cleaner than I was a station officer, as my hourly rate for shining windows was far greater. Prior to the strike the average fireman's routine would be: go to work, go to work, go to work, and go to work. One would go to Fire Station night duty, followed by a part time job (to be repeated twice on days off duty). During the strike, the average fireman spent more hours being a truck driver, or a carpenter, or plumber, or what have you, than he ever did being a fireman. It was no wonder firemen needed to be fit! My own philosophy at this time was that if I had any spare energy I would not waste it on games of football and the like; I would sell it to the highest bidder. This makes me sound rather like a workaholic, which I most definitely was not! I only came close to being a workaholic because I liked my pint of beer and thus kept on working until all the bills were paid and I could afford my pint.

That is what being a fireman meant in those days. In my book, 'To Ride a Red Engine', I tell the story of a fire at a large London hotel. Some seventy persons were rescued from this fire. For my own part, I rescued people using hook ladders and extension ladders and was then involved in extensive and quite dangerous fire fighting. I was at the scene of this fire for a hectic five hours of hyper activity. On return to the Fire Station after this fire, I got washed and changed and had a quick cup of tea. After a total of sixteen hours on duty, I then set out for my part time job as a hotel maintenance man. If I was to tell you that I was due back on duty at the Fire Station at six o'clock that evening for another fifteen-hour shift, it would sound just a little too far fetched - wouldn't it? Perhaps, just perhaps, this was one of the many reasons why that during the nine week period of strike, the fire engines were green in colour.

Now, despite the foregoing, please do not think (according to your political persuasions) that this is either the rantings of a rabid revolutionary or the tale of a hero of the under classes - BECAUSE IT IS NEITHER. This is simply the story of a period of nine weeks at Hammersmith Fire Station, following the 14th November 1977, and a great deal of it is very, very funny.

*

Hammersmith Fire Station was a five storey, fairly imposing building, built with old London yellow stock bricks. It had a three bay appliance room with double varnished timber doors to each bay. The ground floor of the building (on the side facing the street) was clad in handsome white stone, having been built in 1914. It was situated on the busy Shepherds Bush Road, just twenty or so yards from Hammersmith Broadway itself. Many times in the past when I had told people that I was stationed at Hammersmith Fire Station, I was invariably asked where it was. I always replied with the same question, "Do you know where the famous Hammersmith Palais Dance Hall is?" Invariably the answer was yes, to which I replied, "Hammersmith Fire Station is right next door to

the Palais itself. It is the building with the three large timber doors." Thus, it transpired that half the people in the land actually did know where Hammersmith Fire Station was!

Hammersmith had originally been a London County Council Fire Station. Upon the formation of the new, grander Greater London Council in around 1964, Hammersmith Fire Station (along with its sister Fire Station at Fulham) became part of a newly formed 'D' division. This newly formed division, with the exception of Hammersmith Fire Station and Fulham Fire Station, was comprised of all ex-Middlesex County Fire Brigade Stations. Thus, the Hammersmith and Fulham Stations were unwanted additions to an otherwise happy family. This was the status quo for quite some years. The station was adjudged by the divisions, mainly ex-Middlesex Senior Fire Officers, as being unruly and retaining its old and 'nasty' London ways. However, it had one redeeming feature that could not be denied; it was by far and away the busiest Fire Station in the whole division. It was in fact, approaching the top end of the league of the Greater London Fire Brigade in terms of numbers of fire calls and make up fires. Also, Hammersmith's remoteness on the far edge of the division was considered a blessing by some of the senior officers who were not yet au-fait with the problems of inner city fire fighting: five and six storey terraced buildings of high multiple occupancy which were divided and sub-divided so that even a rabbit would get claustrophobic in them. If the senior officers played their cards right and looked at their geographies long enough before departing, in order to choose a suitable, circuitous route, they would find that by the time they got there the fire would be out or at least under control.

As far as the Fire Brigades Union were concerned, the 'D' division was considered to be a militant division. Although Hammersmith had its own branch of the union, its activity was usually at a low level. The quandary arose that the problems the ex-Middlesex fire stations encountered were not always suffered by inner-London Fire Stations and vice versa. For example, a resolution by one of the outer division stations to 'do away' with hook ladders was voted in unanimously because most of the properties on their fire grounds were only two stories in height. They no doubt considered hook ladders to be nasty, dangerous things. This same resolution did not get a single vote in favour at Hammersmith Fire Station. What other ladder can be taken through a long range of terraced buildings to carry out rescues on upper floors at the rear? Quite a few of the divisional union motions/resolutions went against the grain with Hammersmith firemen. Fortunately, we were blessed with an understanding and accommodating divisional union secretary. A protesting telephone call from the Hammersmith Station Union Representative would usually result in the offending resolution being annulled, or watered down somewhat, or simply given the Nelsons eye - at least as far as where Hammersmith Fire Station was concerned.

There was another factor in the equation as Hammersmith drifted along unconcernedly towards the month of November, 1977. This was, in my opinion, the large numbers of quite young firemen with less than three years service. In 1974, the London fireman's working week had been reduced from fifty-six to forty-eight hours. This had necessitated the recruiting of large numbers of additional firemen, hence the large numbers of junior and younger firemen present.

As November approached, the industrial dispute with the employers deteriorated. The National Union Executive decreed a ballot for a national Fire Service strike. At local level this entailed a station branch meeting and the vote was taken by a show of hands. The branch meeting at Hammersmith Fire Station had one of the best ever attendance records, with around fifty firemen being present. There was some discussion once the motion had been put but I think the majority had decided weeks ago which way they would cast their vote. The result was only two against the motion, with no abstentions; a fairly decisive vote in favour of a strike.

*

In addition to myself, there was another Hammersmith Station Officer present at the meeting: Peter Elliot, who served on the Blue Watch. We were both members of the FBU. We did not cast a vote on this occasion but would do so at a later officers' branch meeting. It was shortly after this meeting that I stayed behind after day duties to discuss station routines etc. with Pete Elliot. When the subject of the approaching possible strike came up, Pete asked me what I intended to do if the strike came about. As we were Station Officers (i.e. management) in theory we had the option not to take part in the strike. Membership of the FBU was only mandatory up to and including the rank of Sub Officer. I had already given this question a great deal of thought. Like every other fireman, I abhorred the idea of an emergency service withdrawing its labour. The question was though, what would I do if it became inevitable.

Although in my heart I knew the answer to this question, I hesitated to commit to it with words. At last, I said simply, "Pete, if it comes to a strike and the troops go outside the door, I will be with them." Peter looked thoughtful at this answer and I felt I knew what was worrying him. Although we were both around the same age, I had been a Station Officer for more than six years, whilst Pete had only recently been promoted to the rank. I said to him quietly, "Peter, I am not trying to persuade you what you should do come a strike but I have my reasons. I look at it this way - if it does come to a strike, it can't last more than two or three days, a week at the most. Therefore, the most we stand to lose are our wages for that period. Secondly, I have always made it a point of honour to lead from the front. It would be rather a shame not to do that during what will be a very traumatic period of time for the troops." Lastly, I said, "Peter, perhaps I am being selfish here but think about it - if we are out there with them it will make the coming back that much easier." This puzzled him, so I explained further by saying, "Pete, one of the biggest problems with a strike is not the strike itself but afterwards. Win or lose, the firemen will come back to work with a lot of bitterness and resentment still inside them. Can you imagine what they would think about us? They'll probably think that officers are not worth a toss, that when they are wanted they book gone because they are just worried about themselves and their careers." I finally summed up with the words, "So, Pete, for the sake of a few days wages it's just not worth the carrot. If it does come to a strike I will be going out the door with them."

I think Peter, like myself, had already given the matter a great deal of soul searching and most likely had already made his mind up. After a short pause he nodded his head and said quietly, "I think you are right, Dave, I'll be coming out the door as well." This simple statement was quite a bonus for me; it meant that at least two of the station officers at Hammersmith would join the strike and not, as I had first thought, just me on my little lonesome own. The conversation between Pete and I simply stopped; we had both committed ourselves to some drastic action in the future. We had perhaps ruined our future career prospects, so there was no congratulating each other on a mutual decision - instead there was silence as we contemplated what could be. This silence was broken by the door to the station office cum watch room crashing open. In breezed a smiling fireman by the name of Ray Hope. Grinning broadly, he said simply, "So, you are both with us then, eh?"

Pete Elliot was puzzled by this remark. We had both only just committed ourselves to join the strike, should it take place, yet here was a fireman who knew already. He could not possibly have been listening outside the door to the room because the watch room cum office was half glazed almost all the way round. Could the fireman be psychic, or psychotic even? If you had known Ray Hope, you would have known that he was neither of these; the answer was much more simple.

Hammersmith Fire Station was built in 1914. At the time of its construction it was fitted with a new innovation (for fire stations that is!). This was a speaking tube, which ran from the watch room Pete and I were now sitting in, up to the mess room on the first floor. With the invention and application of telephones, the speaking tube had been abandoned and had been more or less forgotten. All that remained of it was a piece of metal conduit sticking out of the walls in both the mess and the office. The older, senior firemen would be aware of its original purpose, although its main use now was to scare junior firemen on their first night on duty alone in the watch room. This was achieved by placing one's mouth by the open end of the pipe in the mess room, then making ghostly ghoulish noises down the pipe. These noises would echo around the watch room and would hopefully frighten the hell out of the junior firemen there. Well, it now seemed there was yet another use for the abandoned speaking tube that even I had not known about - eavesdropping on conversations between the office staff down below! This was how Ray Hope had known of our mutual decision so soon afterwards.

The month of November drew closer and we read in the Press that we were to come out on strike on November the fifth, Guy Fawkes Night. This was most unpopular with the firemen because it seemed to be rubbing salt into our wounds; our fight was not with the public but with our employers. A new date for the strike was then announced, this was the fourteenth of November. The negotiations between the FBU and employers continued, but to the firemen at Hammersmith a strike still seemed unlikely. Then it emerged that a majority of the Fire Authorities had agreed to a settlement. However, this settlement was being vetoed by National Government on the grounds that it would break a pay code invoked upon all public employees. Thus, inevitably and inexorably, November the fourteenth drew near.

In the weeks preceding the fateful day, the media was full of the Government's arrangements to mitigate a strike by firemen. The country at large was given a new word: GREEN GODDESS. This

was the name bestowed upon an emergency fire engine, painted in the dark green livery of the Home Office. It had been designed and intended for use at nuclear holocaust fires and the day of Armageddon, and affectionately named so by the firemen themselves. Now, after decades of lying mothballed and idle in Home Office stores all over the country, it was being prepared to play its part in an entirely different Armageddon (or struggle) than that originally intended.

*

At eighteen hundred hours (6-pm) on the thirteenth of November, the White Watch reported for night duties at Hammersmith Fire Station. The change of watches took place in the normal manner; I took the roll call parade and the appliances and equipment were checked, then all adjourned to the mess for the obsequious mug of tea. As a strike now seemed inevitable, normal night duty routine was abandoned and we simply talked. A couple of the firemen who had been watching the Six O' Clock News in the second floor television room came gloomily back into the mess room to announce, "It's still on." I myself had been mentally making plans in anticipation of the strike, perhaps selfishly on my own behalf, but nevertheless I had done so. From this point on, as I explained my plans, I stopped being a Station Officer in the London Fire Brigade and became in effect a member of the strike committee.

On the third floor of the Fire Station there was an empty flat. For a long time it had been the policy of the GLC not to re-let such flats when tenants moved out. Thus, this particular flat had remained empty for some months. I proposed that we occupy this flat and that some of the younger un-attached fireman claim squatters rights. We would then use the flat as a strike office, cum rest room, cum dormitory. I pointed out it would be very difficult for the authorities to deny us the use of the flat because the other existing tenants of the Fire Station would still need to come and go in the normal manner. I could see from the firemen's expressions that the thought of standing for hours on end on a cold draughty picket without respite did not appeal to them. With the prospect of a nice, snug, warm rest room being dangled before them, there could only be one decision.

So, instead of drills hydrant inspections or lectures etc., we spent the rest of the evening preparing 'Mon Strikers Repose'. Naturally, since it was my idea, and as I was the Station Officer (if only for another fourteen hours) and thus held the station keys, I took on the role of quartermaster. Firstly, the flat was cleaned and dusted, and the electrically inclined firemen re-instated the power supplies to the flat. Secondly, everything that could possibly be required was borrowed from station stocks and taken to the flat. The list was considerable: light bulbs, toilet paper, cutlery and other kitchenware, electric kettle, portable heaters, mattresses, easy chairs - everything required to make it a home from home. This, of course, had been my original selfish intention as I lived fifty miles away from the fire station. I could hardly commute backwards and forwards each day with little or no wages coming in, could I? I felt that coming out on strike was bad enough without travelling fifty miles to freeze my arse off for fifteen hours at a stretch.

The night shift wore on: it was just a routine night with nothing memorable in the way of fire calls. At both nine o'clock and ten o'clock the television room was crowded as we watched both the BBC and ITV national news and found out that the strike was still on. Each time the teleprinter bell sounded for a routine message, the firemen dashed down and would leave the watch room shaking their heads. At half past two in the morning we were at our usual vigil, watching the crowds from the Hammersmith Palais swirl away into the night. The Palais lights went out for an all too brief period and the London Borough of Hammersmith went to sleep.

At around six o'clock in the morning I awoke, the lights were on and the large chromium plated fire bell in my room was clamouring. On auto-pilot I arose from the bed, slipped on my shoes, and made my way down to the appliance room two floors down. Both the red and the green lights on the appliance room ceiling came on, indicating a two-machine shout. The duty man's voice rang out, echoing around the room with its high ceilings, "Fire, Thames Mall, D23 Hammersmith's ground." I was now fully awake; Thames Mall was a residential area down by the River Thames and was a fairly high fire risk. Six o'clock in the morning fire calls were rather ominous. This was the time the early morning milkman or postman spotted the smoke or flames of a fire that had been bottled up, cooking all night. Thames Mall was well known to the two appliance drivers. This was not because we got a lot of fire calls there - quite the opposite - it was simply because two rather delightful riverside pubs happened to be located there.

As we got close to the address, I could smell wood smoke in the air. As we turned left into the street that led down to the Thames Embankment and the Mall itself, the white and orange light of flickering flames brilliantly lighted the end of the street. There was very little smoke around, the fire was so fierce the upward convection currents swirled the smoke away. Viewed through the cab windscreen from a hundred yards distance, I could see human forms dancing by the light of the flickering flames. It seemed highly likely that we would be going out in a blaze of glory.

The two appliances drew up at the end of the street and parked opposite the public house in the centre of the road. Immediately I began to relax, I had drunk in this pub many times and so knew the house opposite (the one which was on fire), it was in fact a derelict house. Thus, there would not normally be any occupants, unless 'dossers' or 'winos' had taken up residence. However, even if they had there was not much we could do for them, judging by the severity of the fire. The dancing figures that I had seen from the appliance cab were in fact the landlord and staff of the public house, who were desperately trying to move their motor cars to stop them being damaged by radiated heat from the fire.

All was now activity; the firemen running out hose and the drivers setting into fire hydrants. I checked the terraced house next door to the burning building. This was also derelict, so there was no great worry about the spread of fire. One of the drivers approached me and queried, "Do you want to make up, guv?" He was asking if I wanted to make it a four pump fire, a quite feasible suggestion given the amount of fire. Laconically I replied, "No, sod it, this could be our last one for a while, let's not share it!" Fires in derelict buildings had their uses because they were good practise for the younger firemen. In such cases, myself and the other officers and senior firemen would simply act as safety officers to make sure nobody fell through the burnt floorboards or that the silly buggers didn't bring the house down about their ears.

Most of the visible fire was extinguished after twenty minutes or so. I was fairly confident that there were no incinerated vagrants lurking around undiscovered. I was in the front room on the ground floor, dodging bits of falling debris, whilst at the same time discussing the vagaries of the housing market. It amazed me how properties in this area could lie derelict whilst similar houses in good order nearby would sell for hundreds of thousands of pounds. Perhaps it was property developers wheeling and dealing for bigger and better profits which caused them to lie empty. Derelict houses were an eyesore, I thought to myself! I thought how much nicer it would be to demolish them and replace them with a high rise block of flats. It could even be that we were at that very moment extinguishing one of these entrepreneurial grand ploys! If so, I wished they could have effected their plans at a more civilised hour.

I had been looking at my watch for some time now on and off. It was now nearly eight o'clock and there was still an hour or so of work left to do, cutting away and damping down to fully extinguish this fire. There were still wisps of smoke percolating through fallen debris and out of window frames. I made a decision which I would have never, ever contemplated making at any other time. I judged that the remaining fire - if it did break out again - would not do so until after nine o'clock. I then cheerfully gave the order, "All right lads, knock off and make up the gear." The leading fireman, an experienced hand in his own right, looked at me with a puzzled expression. I simply grinned at him and said, "We don't want to miss our breakfast and be late on strike, do we?" Thus, it came about that The Mall at Hammersmith, shortly after nine o'clock that same day, saw the first green fire engine of the nine week strike.

CHAPTER 10

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 2.

We arrived back at the fire station around ten past eight, re-stowed the machines out of pure habit, had a quick wash and brush up, then made our way to the messroom for breakfast. There was a sense of fatalism in the air, in a biblical sense our last breakfast was a bit like the last supper. It was a standard fire station breakfast, fried egg, bacon fried bread and toast, washed down with unlimited cups of tea. Mary the cook was fussing, because the food had been in the warmer since 8 O'clock, our usual breakfast time. Mary hated it in a true womanly way, when her good food produced on time, had to sit spoiling in the warming oven, fire call or no fire call.

Whilst we ate our food and during a lull in the conversation, a fireman asked me "are we back on the run guv". "Yes" I replied almost with out thinking, for it was quite standard for somebody to check if we were available for further fire calls. The fireman spoke again, this time addressing no one in particular, but the group as a whole. "I was wondering, what would happen if we picked up a shout between now and nine O'clock". Warming to his theme he carried on "if we were still out on the call at Nine O'clock, would we be deemed to be on strike, and thus not get paid overtime". Then showing just how diversely his mind worked, he assumed his previous statement to be a fact, and began to attack it. "That would be entirely wrong, how could the brigade know that we were all on strike, there might be one amongst us who is not going to strike". He was brusquely told to shut up, life is complicated enough as it is, without you getting involved. All you need to know is, that you are going on strike, so whatever the answer to your little problem is, it won't affect you in the slightest. The fireman did indeed shut up, but the engrossed look upon his face told me, that he would not be happy until the coming of Nine O'clock, provided a solution to his little conundrum one way or the other.

Out of sheer routine as soon as I had finished my breakfast, I returned to the station office. I went to fill in the station handing over/continuity book, but realised what was the point, no one would read it. These book entries sometimes contain some devious witty remarks, so I simply wrote the message 'no more milk until further notice please' on the last page. I was later told but did not check for myself, that the dutyman in the watchroom below, of a like mind to me made a closing entry in the official station logbook. His alleged entry was couched in strong Anglo-Saxon terms, and bidding the Chief fire Officer adieu. Whilst at the same time inviting him to seek out the services of a taxidermist. I hasten to add that at the best of times this particular fireman would be considered to be a bit bolshie. Of course in normal times an entry like this in the official logbook would have been sacrilege, but these were not normal times. The bolshie fireman now being brave enough to put down on paper, and official paper at that. Opinions and views which he had always held anyway.

This would normally be a very busy time in the station office, preparing to hand over to the oncoming watch, but there was to be no oncoming watch! As a precautionary measure I did balance the petty cash accounts, that alone could save a lot of hassle after the strike. It is one thing to withdraw labour, but to misappropriate or not account for, fire brigade moneys, that's another ball game altogether! My very last action in the office was to open the safe, and take out what I thought was a suitable amount of postage stamps. These I attached to a ready prepared envelope, addressed to the Chief Officer London Fire Brigade H.Q. London S.E.1. Into this envelope when the fatal moment came, I would place the keys to the fire station. Old habits die hard, for it is the handing over of the station keys, at or before the change of watch, that signifies the change of command on a fire station. Whosoever has the station keys, is in theory if not in practise in charge of the station. This day at the ringing of six bells for the non-change of watch, I will abdicate my command to the Chief Officer himself.

With the relaxation of my normal hectic office routine, I suddenly remembered Mary the cook. At nine O'clock everyone else on the fire station knew what they would be doing; walking out of the door. Poor old Mary, who liked to worry at the best of times, would be remaining all on her own. I

had spoken to her earlier on, when she had told me that her instructions for today had been to report for duty as normal. Her wages would be paid by money order and posted direct to her home address. Her main worries it seemed, were that she was terrified at the thought of crossing a picket line, then being left all alone on a big empty fire station. I was able to reassure her that firemen are not bloody fools. We can make do without the Chief Officer for nine weeks, but the station cook, that's a different matter she's indispensable!. Mary had a son serving at Hammersmith fire station, also himself on strike, and so was very much in sympathy with us. She continued to come to work for the whole nine weeks, and cook meals at the station. We did of course allow her leave whenever she required it, and gave her the whole of the Christmas period off, without marking up her leave card. Thus with Mary reassured, it was my turn to ponder. For what devious reasons would the GLC, the fire authority, insist that the cooks should attend at what would in effect be empty fire stations. Did they intend that the servicemen, should move into the stations? Was it their intentions that the troops would man the red fire engine's, despite implicit denials of this in the national press.

With the time now fast approaching nine O'clock, I had no time left for apprehensive pondering. It would serve no useful purpose anyway, for the die was cast. The station was now full of firemen, for all three watches had attended for the formal walking out of the station. All were dressed in their best bib and tucker, their number one undress uniforms. Ironically, I had never seen some of them dressed so smartly before. As the on duty station officer, it fell to me to carry out the duties of master of (closing down) ceremonies. Even at this late stage we had been half hoping for a teleprinter message saying in effect 'all's well lads, its all been sorted, carry on as usual'. But of course from history we know that it never came. Instead at two minutes to nine O'clock I sounded six short rings on the station call bells, the signal for the changing of the watches. But of course there was to be no changing of the watches on this day. We waited a further two long minutes for the minute hand on the watchroom clock to reach nine O'clock. Then with the simple flick of a finger, I switched off the station teleprinter, and we were on strike.

We filed out through the small wicket gate set into the big appliance room doors, and onto the station forecourt. It took a minute or so for all the firemen to leave the station. We spread out about three deep along the face of the building. There we just stood, slightly bemused, somewhat embarrassed even. After five minutes or so, I heard somebody ask the question "right what happens next". A voice nearby replied "I dunno don't ask me I've never been on strike before". From the murmur of voices I gathered that nobody knew what to do next, including myself. Ironic wasn't it! forty or more firemen who between them could have coped with a thousand plus emergency situations, and nobody knew what to do next!. As we spilled out through the doors onto the Shepherds Bush Road, we found that somebody indeed knew what to do. There waiting for us was an inspector of police, and half a dozen constables. It seemed the police had better information than we did, they had probably known days in advance the strike would take place. Some of the policemen were our old drinking mates, and appeared a bit sheepish about the situation, but the inspector was a bastard.

He apparently knew exactly what to do next, for if he had not actually been on strike himself, he had clearly attended the course. "Move along, move along" said a loud strident voice "don't obstruct the footpath". I have never subscribed to the section of the community that call policemen Pigs, but this one now approaching, looked very much like a senior Porcine person. I'm sure my old policemen drinking buddies will understand and forgive me, if I say this man looked every inch a Chief Inspector of Pigs. From his manner and demeanour he made it quite clear, that in the space of a mere five or ten minutes, we had been transformed from public hero's to pariah's. He was engaged in a heated discussion with a group of firemen, as to what exactly what construed an obstruction of the footpath. I nudged Pete Elliot who was standing next to me saying "come on Pete I think we had better get involved in this, before we all get locked up".

I have a philosophy when dealing with bumptious people, attack by elevating their status, it tends to take some of the wind out of their sails at least. I approached the Chief Inspector, and greeted him "good morning Superintendent, is there a problem can we be of some assistance". He looked at us both keenly, he got it in one that we were both officers of some description. We were both wearing our Burberry raincoats, which do not carry rank markings, although our caps are different from a fireman's. It did distract him somewhat though, I think he was searching through his mind the treason laws, for the punishment for officers who strike. His arrogance did not leave him, for with a sweep of his arm indicating the firemen behind him he said. "These men will have to move on, they are obstructing the footpath".

Don't we just love it when authority gets it wrong, I think it must be inbuilt into the nature of the British people? Well this pompous git had got it wrong, as I was about to demonstrate to him. I said to him quietly "I think you will find, that they are not actually obstructing the footpath officer". He looked at me disdainfully "if I say that they are obstructing the footpath, then they are" he said loftily. I warmed to my theme "that all depends on what is a footpath, and what is not" I queried. Looking at his face I could tell that he had met hundreds of my type before 'Barrack room Lawyers'. He had no doubt attended a course, enabling him to eat the like's of me. Unfortunately for him, I knew something that he didn't know, that is, that the piece of land on which we were standing was in fact the station forecourt, and the property of the GLC. Although the public could and did pass over it, it was not a dedicated public right of way. I explained all this to him adding that the footpath proper, was some six feet from where we were standing. Then to rub salt into the wound, informed him that he himself was standing on private property. Well he Hrrmmpd, and he Harrahd, and he Ummed and he Aard, but he was not prepared to put his career prospects on the line, and he eventually buggered off.

This police reaction during the first half an hour or so of the strike was mystifying. We had noticed that some of the younger Police Constables, had been pussyfooting nervously past the picket line. This was quite understandable, whilst his nibs the VIP, (the Very Important Porker), was doing his party piece, but not so once he had left. It fell to one of the older senior Police Constables to explain. He stopped to talk to us saying "hello lads, I thought you'd like to know that we have been told not to talk to you lot, by the powers that be". Then going on to add cheerfully "so I just thought I would make a point of doing so, and keeping you informed at the same time". Needless to say this non-fraternisation order did not extend to the Laurie Arms, our joint convivial watering hole.

At around a quarter past nine we heard above the hubbub of constant traffic noise, what appeared to be a police car siren approaching Hammersmith Broadway from the Kensington direction. Then shortly behind that, rang out the unmistakable tone's of a fire engine hand bell. We all knew instantly that this could only be one of the Home Office's Green Goddess fire engines. As the noise of the bell approached us, obviously struggling in heavy traffic. It was again patently obvious that the soldier ringing the bell was not a true campanologist in the fire brigade sense, in fact he was making rather a hash of it. There is a definite art in ringing the hand bell on a fire engine, "he rings a mean bell" is praise in deed for an otherwise indifferent fire officer. It is quite possible to speed up or slow down a fire engine proceeding to a fire call, by varying the pattern or speed of bell ringing. With some appliance drivers it is almost as effective as the accelerator or the brake. Well, the music coming from the hand bell of that particular Green Goddess impressed nobody. My own thoughts were, that he was more likely to be meandering around the Broadway selling ice creams, that attending a fire call. I was convinced I could make a better noise myself, with an old spoon and an empty baked bean tin.

As the noise of the police siren and the bell on the engine receded in the direction of Hammersmith Bridge, I then knew their destination. Without doubt they were heading for the Mall, where we had been ourselves earlier, to engage in a bit of damping down and turning over. This not being amongst the most favourite of firemens duties, I was only too pleased to be able to delegate it to them!. I could only hope for their sake that they were not guardsmen or the like, with ultra high kit standards, for it is pretty mucky work.

Well the first hour went by, with us all feeling quite neurotic, we still felt at heart that we were letting our public down. We were actually quite relieved when we were not tarred and feathered, and nobody threw stones at us, indeed the public were quite happy to talk to us. It appeared that some members of the public had walked past this fire station, almost every day of their lives, and never before had the opportunity to talk to a fireman. They would want to talk about fires that had happened perhaps years before on the stations fireground, and at long last get the inside story from the horses (fireman's) mouth

*

At around half past ten, an hour and a half into the strike we at last began to give some thought as to the future. What would be termed wise heads and the union branch secretary (a relatively junior fireman), gathered in a group to discuss it. It was the consensus of opinion that it would serve no useful purpose to have forty plus firemen, all skulking around at once, outside the fire station. It was decided that we should break down into our respective Red White and Blue

watches, for picket duties. This meant the White watch just having completed two days and two night duties, would go off home, and return for picket in two days time. The Blue watch would be responsible for this day's picket, and the Red watch would take over at 1800 hours. From this moment on, we began to gently and unknowingly slide into a disciplined routine. Unbeknown to us at Hammersmith, this same decision on work or picket routines, I.E. to break down into our respective watches was being reached all over London, and almost certainly all over the majority of fire brigades in Britain.

Came eleven O'clock some of the firemen became slightly twitchy, this is stand easy time!. In a fire station routine, it is time for a cup of Cocoa and a Cheese and Onion roll, what are we going to do about it? The answer was patently obvious, no one had yet come along to take command of our empty fire station. Firemen had been wandering in and out of it all morning, needs of nature etc. It was decided we might as well use all of its facilities, and have our stand-easy up in the nice warm mess room on the first floor. Thus it came about, possession being nine tenths of the law, that we occupied the fire station for the remainder of the strike.

Much thought was later given to this occupation of the fire station at Hammersmith. The purist's or the militant, (note the singular) were of the mind that we were in effect saving the fire authority vast sums of money. In that they did not have to provide expensive security guards for the empty stations, and thus we should not occupy them. The majority, having regarded that it was the middle of November, a notoriously cold and wet month, voted with their feet that they should. Any doubts being cast aside with one fireman's laconic remark "if we don't occupy it, all the Broadway's bloody dosser's and wino's soon will". So it was around twelve thirty on the morning of the 14th of November 1977, that I finally left Hammersmith fire station for my home in Pangbourne. When I arrived home my wife was not expecting me, she had assumed that I would be picketing along with all the other firemen. When I explained to her, that I was now deemed a white watch picket, and the routine that I would now follow, I think she was a bit upset, She I believed, thought that pickets worked a nine to five routine, something I had never done in all our married life. Never-the-less she was not to know it, but she would see less of me over the coming nine weeks, than ever before.

Fortunately my wife, as did the majority of firemens wives supported me in the strike. That is not to say that she openly exhorted that firemen strike, but given that me her husband was on strike, she supported me. Firemen's wives perhaps even better than fireman, would know the spending power of a fireman's wage. Firemens wives would know that only a proportion of the family income came from the fire authority. The rest coming from driving lorries, window cleaning, or the many hundreds of part time jobs that firemen did to boost their wages at that time. I summed it up to my wife; the bad news is I am on strike. The good news is, I might now have a bit more time to earn some money.

Firemen at this time were probably their own worst enemy, they being masters of the understatement. A fireman describing his shift routine would simply say. We do two day duties, followed by two night duties, and then we get two days off. What he invariably failed to mention, was that on the first of his so-called rest days he had already worked for nine hours. Who else in the land would describe a day in which he had worked for nine hours, as a rest day! (from midnight to 9-am) This might have been so, in the gulags, or the nazi concentration camps, the Burma death railway even, but not Great Britain in the year 1977.

CHAPTER 11

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 3.

After spending my two days off working, I had to go back on duty, sorry slip of the pen, strike! at Hammersmith. I said my good bye's to my wife and children, for I was not expecting to see them again for at least four days. With no fire brigade wages coming in, I could not afford to travel backwards and forwards to London each day. Secondly I badly needed to find myself another part time job, this would be far easier to do in London, where the rates of pay were also better. I came out of Hammersmith Broadway tube station, and turned left for the Shepherds Bush Road. It was just before nine O'clock and the change of picket was due at nine. As I approached the fire station, I wondered humorously to myself would there be a formal change of picket. Oncoming picket attention! off going picket dismiss, oncoming picket for your duties fall out and such like. The thought made me chuckle, as I mused "I bet somewhere in the land some over officious union official could be doing just that".

It was a bright November morning, as I approached the fire station I could see that both oncoming and off going watches, OOPS sorry pickets, were gathered outside the station. At my approach I was greeted cheerily "Ah good we have been waiting for you to arrive". The station union rep then told me that the Trades Council for the London Borough of Hammersmith had requested a meeting with us that very morning. He then asked would I and another fireman, go along to meet them at the local town hall. Feeling somewhat flattered that my negotiating, managerial skills whatever, had been recognised and requested, I of course agreed. As the time of the meeting had been set for nine thirty, it required the fireman and myself to leave immediately. My recently inflated managerial ego was deflated somewhat, for the fireman accompanying me was a relatively junior fireman off of the red watch, who's nickname was Skanker. Who in my opinion was a rather immature young man, of a slightly reprobate character. I had not, and still have not got a clue, what the word Skanker means, but it sat well on this mans shoulders. It was also my opinion that he was not exactly the best representative of Hammersmith fire station. Needs must as needs do, for this was democracy at work, and off we both set for the town hall. A most unlikely pair I thought to myself, to be having tea and biscuits in the Lord Mayors Parlour.

Upon arrival at the town hall, we reported at the reception desk explaining the reason for our visit. The lady behind the desk made a telephone call, which resulted in us being met by a genial man around forty years of age. He introduced himself as I think, the chief convenor then conducted us to the meeting room. The room itself was a large room brightly light and well furnished, in the centre of which was a large square directors table. Seated around the table were around a dozen people, each of which was introduced to us in turn. I then realised exactly what a trade's council comprised, for these people were a representative of each trade or profession, at the London Borough of Hammersmith. Present in the room were Plumbers, Electricians, Administration, Managerial, Cleaning staff, Road menders, the full works.

After suitable pleasantries and cups of tea or coffee, the convenor explained why they had asked us to attend the meeting. It seemed that during the emergency (the strike) the London Borough of Hammersmith had asked them to carry out certain extra duties. They, the trades council wished to have our opinion, as to whether or not these would be deemed strike breaking by us. He then went on to add, but before we do that, the members of the council would like to ask some questions about the strike. In normal times when I would give fire instructions, lectures etc, to private firms, including town hall staff, questions would need to be encouraged or induced. Not here, they came thick and fast, mainly from what I would describe as the manual trades.

"What is a fireman's basic pay?" I gave it to them, rather Skanker did, for he produced a current pay slip. "How many hours overtime did we do a week". They found it very difficult to believe the only overtime we got, was when we were delayed at fire calls etc. They tried a different tack "right, what rate of pay do you get for Saturdays". The answer to that was simple "single rate", they were not to be put off "what about after one O'clock Saturdays then" same

answer "single rate". One chap, I think it was the electrician was becoming exasperated saying "all right then, but you must get at least double time for Sundays then Eh!" Again I was unable to accommodate him just shaking my head and saying "single rate". It was now my turn to be exasperated, for I knew well what they were about. They had seen and believed the firemen's basic rate of pay. Deemed it a non-sustainable wage, and were now busy searching for the icing on the cake, enhanced allowances etc which they could not as yet find. This was in all probability annoying them, for if they could find the hidden allowances, they might be able to screw the London Borough of Hammersmith for it themselves.

I could stand it no longer, I said to them "look I know what you are up to, you believe the basic wage is correct but very low, now you are looking for the extra's, let me give them to you". Upon hearing this they relaxed and the smiles came back to their faces, now they were about to let in on the secret. Briskly I told them "right we get time and a third if we are late back off a fire call". They nodded their heads sagely in unison, they had been told this already. I went on emphasising the next word "then, we get time and a half, and a day of in lieu if we work a bank holiday". This raised some eyebrows, for they would probably get treble or quadruple time plus a day off if they themselves were to work a bank holiday. They all waited expectantly but nothing more came forth. One man possibly the electrician yet again queried "yes and what else". With a grin of satisfaction on my face, shaking my head at the same time, I told them "that's it, that's the lot, there is nothing else".

Skanker and myself were ignored for around a full minute, as they talked busily amongst themselves. Then at last the convenor spoke to us saying "well lads if what you have just told us is the truth, no wonder you are on bloody strike, our lowest ranking cleaners get a damn sight more than you do". Carrying on he added gravely "we will support you in any way we can, just tell us what you want". "You had better start by telling us what Hammersmith council want's you to do during the emergency then" I told him. We listened with interest, but in fairness it was no more than any large forward thinking local authority or employer would do under the same circumstances. More fire instruction for staff, extra patrols and security, an increase in fire extinguishing equipment etc. Nothing that I would deem antagonistic to a fireman's strike. As we left the building on excellent terms, the convenor shook our hands and said to us. I'll tell you what lad's, some of our bloke's are going to make a bloody fortune out of your strike, what with all the extra hours work they are going to do". "Come pay-day I will make sure the hat goes around, and some of the money comes the fire stations way".

After bidding our new friend goodbye, I hurried back to the fire station. I had been away for two whole days, and I wanted very much to see how things were faring at Hammersmith. When I got back, I found it hard to imagine that so much had happened in such a short time. I found the station was well organised, and already slotted into a daily routine. Two of the appliance bays, were firmly shut with the fire appliances wedged up against them. The double doors to the third bay were both open, this was where the duty picket stood around a trestle table. On this table were blank copies of a petition, to be signed by the members of the public. In the centre of table was THE BUCKET. This was an ordinary two-gallon galvanised iron bucket, as carried on the fire appliances, and termed a chimney bucket. This bucket which was used in conjunction with the chimney fire equipment, had in practise many many other uses. In my time alone I have known it used as a container for such varied commodities as sewage, beer, and even pieces of human bodies. Now it was undergoing one of its most practical uses ever. As the receptacle (certainly in Hammersmith fire stations case) for bountiful unlimited donations to our strike fund.

Standing to one side of the table was the brazier, the seemingly obsequious requirement of every striker, in cold climates the world over. Ours was the standard adaptation of a forty-gallon oil drum and when I enquired where had we obtained it, I was breezily informed it was fire brigade issue. In that it was one of the drums that diesel fuel for the stations fire engines was delivered. It was but a simple matter to get the road traffic accident cutting gear from one of the machines. Remove the metal top of the drum, and punch a few holes in the side of it, and voila! one brazier, strikers for the use off. Although today was a relatively mild day for the month of November, those firemen not engaged in conversations with passer's-by were warming themselves around it. I think it would be fair to comment, that such was the concoction and variety of materials burnt upon the brazier, that some of the firemen during this nine week period. Inhaled more smoke and fumes from it, than if they had been actually working normally.

The fire station accommodation was fully occupied still, the drill yard was two thirds full with parked cars. The remaining third of the drill yard being taken up with a vast pile of wood, fuel for

the brazier. It seemed the fire authority had as yet no inclination to re-occupy the fire stations themselves. The on duty white watch had a strength of around fourteen firemen, whom were all present. Odds and sods of the other two watches were scattered all over the fire station. Some, who were long distant travellers like myself, were lying over between picket duties, others just passing the time of day. In fact there was more activity going on, than if the station been working normally. The mess room up on the first floor was as ever, the hub of social and political activity, for those not actually on picket. Unlimited cups of tea and cheese and onion butties, were provided with funds from the bucket. Mary the cook was now quite a contented lady, she had taken on the roll of mess manager, as well as cook. I think she enjoyed the new routine, instead of being incarcerated in her kitchen all day, Mary could now quite legally disappear off down the Hammersmith market for an hour or so, buying in the required provisions.

Before I had left for home on the first day of the strike I had posted off the fire station keys to Brigade Headquarters. This had not made one iota of difference on the fire station, for on my return I found every store wide open. This was not was not just acts of vandalism, but necessity, the stores had all been opened in true brigade style with minimum force and damage. Just because we are on strike, does not obviate the need for toilet rolls, soap, cleaning materials etc. How else are we to light the brazier each morning, if we don't have access to the derv or oil store. How can we publish our revolutionary propaganda, if we don't have access to the stationary store! Fortunately they drew the line though, at the safe in the station office. Not because they could not crack it, for I know damn well they could if they tried. Just because I think, that it contained other than a small sum of money, non of life's little necessities.

It was an old brigade adage that LFB stood not for London Fire Brigade, but London's Finest Burglars. This was not meant to imply that we broke into people's houses to steal things. Instead that by virtue of our trade or profession, we could gain entry to virtually any building in the Metropolis. Not withstanding that, at one time there was a fireman in the South of London, whose part time job was indeed that of a cat burglar. A merry old dance he led the police for a considerable number of years, before finally being caught only by sheer chance. They did not describe him as one of London's Finest, but they did grudgingly admit he was pretty good at his job, (cat burglar, that is). In retrospect I consider it was a pretty shrewd move on my part to have posted off the station keys. Otherwise it would have been quite feasible for me as the last holder of the keys, to have been held to account for all the missing stores, at the end of the strike.

My skills as a typist and administrator were much in demand, as was an old antique silk screen duplicating machine, I had bought at a jumble sale some years before. So much so, that I had to virtually demand to be able picket alongside the others down below. This was where the action was, it really was quite amazing. As I said earlier we were a bit apprehensive that the public would shun, or even stone us. Quite the opposite, it seemed that every other passer-by by, wished to stop and talk to us. It was possibly one of the best public relations exercise's for the fire brigade ever!. I don't think the Shepherds Bush Road has seen anything like it before or since. Some of the public would perhaps be politically minded, but the majority just wanted to talk about the fire brigade in general. I think we showed more people around the fire engines, let more kids ring the appliance bell, than in all the previous ten years.

As for the young and single firemen, we could have sold them tickets to be allowed to picket. From the outset it had been decreed that firemen on picket duty would be in uniform, and smartly dressed. Now for all the young ladies tripping up and down the Shepherds Bush Road, what a golden opportunity this was. If they fancied any of the parading handsome young bloods, they did not need a formal introduction. All they had to do was drop a coin in the bucket, and open up a conversation with the beau of their choice. Quite a few romantic liaisons were started in this manner. I think the younger firemens only regret would be, that it was a case of feast and famine. A feast of young ladies, at a time when there was a definite famine of cash.

It was whilst standing outside the station this day that I heard one of the most brilliant, spontaneous riposte's I have ever heard. Firstly you need to be reminded, that at this time the Government Home Secretary, and the arch villain of the piece as far as firemen were concerned was named Merlyn Reece. There was around a dozen firemen on picket duty, when on the opposite of the road heading towards Hammersmith Broadway was espied an immaculate late model Rolls Royce motor car. The car stopped in traffic opposite the fire station, one of the firemen called across "give us a toot on the horn", which the driver duly did. Then another firemen said that's so and so driving that Roller giving the name of a famous British comedian, (whose name

unfortunately I cannot remember). The same fireman then called across to the car "Hey, so and so, give us a joke, make us laugh". The car moved off slowly and the electric window slid down, and a voice came back across to us. This famous comedian, spontaneously using only two words only, both gave us a joke and made us laugh uproariously. The two words! "MERLYN REECE".

It was a most peculiar feeling this being on strike!. Here I was dressed in uniform, standing outside of Hammersmith fire station and for the first time for over sixteen years was not subject to Brigade orders, routines, or regulations. The other firemen and myself could do as we liked, I felt a bit like an outcast or Pirate. There was a lot of apprehension, about where would the money come from, and what would the future bring, but what the hell!.. Now this may sound very dramatic, but then I have always been rather fatalistic. Firstly I have always taken the view, that no matter what else the fire authority, the powers that be may do, they are not allowed to actually cut your balls off!. They can kick you in them, they can twist them, if they are clean, they can bite them, but gelding is definitely against the rules. Secondly, every day of my working life, I could face a fate worse than death, SEVERE burns. Strange isn't it, given my occupation, that that should be my worst nightmare scenario. Perhaps it is because, I know from other people's experiences, just how damn painful burns can be. So given that I am safe for a time from having my testicle's abused, and safe for a while from being Kebab'd, life goes on.

I think the one thing that could possibly have destroyed me, would have been a very strong adverse public re-action to the strike. I have always been very proud of being a fireman, and I think the greater the pride in the job, the greater would have been the feeling of rejection, had the public re-acted that way. I have never forgotten this public reaction, and in the years following the strike would do virtually anything for them. Whether they be locked out of premises, burst radiators, any minor emergency call whatsoever, don't argue. Don't quote regulations at them, don't tell them this is a plumbers job, don't tell them this is a locksmiths job, do it with a smile, remember 1977. I not only carried out this philosophy till the end of my career, but also instilled it in all others around me.

Even from this day, the first effective day of the strike for the white watch, characters began to evolve. In my mind they seemed to be evolving into two main groups. The Pirates and the Pontificators, the Pirates needed no explanation, they were even cultivating beards to look like their namesakes. The Pontificators, they tended to look on the gloomy side of life, with lots of what-if scenario's, and wished if we hadn't outlooks. Looking back over the years, I tried to assess whether it was the good practical brave firemen, that in the main became Pirate's, and vice versa for the Pontificators. In reflection it seemed that both types fitted into both groups, fortunately there were far more Pirate's than Pontiffs. The Pirate's though, would not have been out of place in the thin red lines of military history. Rourkes drift, the Alemo, anywhere where there were overwhelming odds. Throwing empty beer bottles at the Chinese in Korea, especially springs to mind. I wonder would Bill Speakman VC the famed thrower of empty bottles have made a good fireman. From what I have read about him, I am sure he would have been a Pirate, not a Pontificator.

One of the senior firemen on the white watch, normally a very staid man had found himself a new hobby. This man who to my knowledge had never shown the slightest inclination to artistic merit, now became the station artist. It started in a small way with a box of coloured chalks filched from the stationary store. At first it took the form of written graffiti only, on the front of the fire station. I HATE REECE'S TO PIECE'S being one of his earlier works, alluding to the arch villain, The Home Secretary. Then as they saying goes, he got the bit between his teeth, there was no stopping him. He was invariably to be found, perched on a scaffold board placed between two decorators trestle's, daubing his multi coloured art works all over the front of the fire station. It was quite amazing really, that when he first started doing this, I initially got quite cross. Defacing my fire station I thought to myself, it must have been the latent station officer in me. Then as time went by, and his artwork improved, and I became less of a station officer and more of a Pirate, I quite liked it! I became somewhat more knowledgeable on the subject of modern art, after looking at this fireman's psychedelic daubing's. In fact I became more and more convinced that Picasso must have been pissed most of the time he was painting his canvases. Although unlike Picasso this fireman did not earn vast sums of money for his artistic efforts on the fire station, it certainly did cost the brigade a shilling or two, to get it all washed off, after the strike was over.

My first day on picket duty drew to a close; it had certainly been a different, if not interesting day in my life. In these early days of strike the picket's had, dare I say it, almost a carnival atmosphere about them. So many people stopped to talk, so many hanger's on as they were

termed on the edge of the picket. These hangers on, ranged from the pretty girls hoping to score. Political activist's of all colours and shades, professing undying solidarity with us. The Broadway's itinerant wino's and dosser's getting a free warm at the brazier. Then perhaps at the present time, the most useful of the lot, those that sidled up to us to say, "psst, any of you lads want to earn some cash" doing a bit of painting and decorating or whatever.

The end of the days picketing came as a bit of an anticlimax. The problem arose what do I do next, for I was in effect marooned up in London for four days and nights. In one point I was fortunate, for on all London fire stations the station officer has his own bunkroom cum office. Although I was technically not a station officer at this period of time, I was long enough in the tooth, to hold on to this privilege. Only on very rare occasions when I was away from the station, was this privilege usurped for illicit nookey sessions. In the main, the evenings were quite bearable; there was a nice warm messroom on the first floor, a television room on the second floor. Hammersmith main central Library was but a hundred yards away in the Shepherds Bush Road. The Broadway abounds with exotic and some not so exotic take away food outlets, if you have the cash, the worlds cuisine is all within one hundred and fifty yards carrying distance.

As always it seems, I got into bad habits. At this moment in time the cash flow crisis was not too bad, the brigade paid its salaries in arrears, so we had one months pay in hand before the mire hit the fan. It is only possible to read so many books, and watch so much television, before the urge for convivial company overcomes. This of course is to be found in the Laurie Arms public house, but a mere fifteen yards from the fire station. Here the day's events can be discussed at length, not only with the firemen but the policemen as well, for Hammersmith police station is but twenty yards further down the road. Here the firemen can find solutions to never before encountered problems. Like the fireman who asked me "here guv how do I go about getting PH leave now that we are on strike". A PH is the term for a day or night off duty, in lieu of a public holiday day previously worked. I queried "what do you want a day off for, this is only your first full day on picket duty". At first he was somewhat nonplussed at my question, then with a grin on his face he told me cheekily "my grannies died". I entered the spirit of the thing and grinned back at him asking "which one's that then, your maternal or paternal granny". I could see his brain ticking away, the words maternal and paternal had him flummoxed for a brief while. His problem was that he was a white watch fireman, and that in normal times I was his watch officer. Also he was not overly sure of the meaning of the words maternal paternal!, eventually he settled for his maternal granny being dead.

Some aspects of being on strike I enjoy, I now at the present time have no authority over this fireman so I can tease him. "Do resurrections feature in your family history, I asked him". "What the bloody hell are you talking about" he said puzzled. I explained saying "well the mortality rate for grannies in your family must be pretty high, to my knowledge three have passed away since you have been at this fire station". A hint of a grin appeared on the mans face, as he realised he had been rumbled, and was now no doubt wishing he had substituted the demise of some alternative relative, other than his granny. I gave him some additional advice, telling him "if you want to save yourself all these expensive family funerals, get them cremated when they die, it makes resurrections pretty difficult after one of those". His face now broke into a full smile, he admitted his old granny hadn't really died, It was just that he had the opportunity to do some work, and earn some much needed cash, if he could get a few days off.

This then raised the serious discussion, of how did we get to take PHs and leave if we were on strike?. This was something we had not previously thought off, this could make life difficult! Being on strike could be more arduous, than actually being at work! Did we make out an application and submit it to the branch union secretary "please Mr secretary can I have a day off picket Cos me grannies died, whatever". It was also pointed out to the man, that if he didn't turn up for picket he wouldn't get paid. Which for a brief moment caused him some concern, until he remembered that he was not getting any wages in the first instance, thus the need to have a day off and do some work. This whole conversation was in fact merely good humour, for in true Hammersmith style, the necessities of life came first. Having cash in one's pocket was adjudged a necessity of life, how else could one pay for one's beer.

CHAPTER 12

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 4.

We were now some weeks into the strike, a strike which most of us thought would last only a few hours, days at the most. Sad to say, we had adjusted to the life and were already becoming hardened. The emphasis was now simply on survival: warmth, food, and a few pennies to jingle in the pocket. We still watched the television news and read the newspapers avidly but the high politics of the matter were beyond us.

The problem of PHs and leave had been solved. It became obvious that starving soldiers do not fight good battles so common sense prevailed. We had now broken down into half watches for picket duty, which meant in effect that one's attendance at the fire station was only compulsory for one day and one night in six. Thus, this gave the troops plenty of time for alternative activities. Even so, there were usually so many non-officially picketing firemen on the station that there were seldom less than a dozen men present.

I had found myself a job working in a warehouse. I was now staying up in London for five days and nights at a time, going home only at weekends. When it was my turn for weekend picket duty I would not see my family for two weeks at a stretch. The warehouse that I worked at was part of a major high street shopping chain. They had taken advantage of the excess of casual labour on the market because around a dozen of the Hammersmith firemen worked there also. So, now I was surrounded by firemen for twenty four hours per day.

In these early days I was still carrying out my station representative duties. We had a request from a trade union official to address the workers on a large building site in Hammersmith. I was duly required to attend the site, which was a large shopping mall in the course of construction. By coincidence we had rescued one of the workers from a tipper truck that had fallen down an excavation some weeks before the strike. Upon my arrival I was led into a very large wooden hut that served as the site mess room. There before me, down each side of the hut, were trestle tables with bench seats against them. These tables and seats were crowded with what seemed like hundreds of site workers. The trade union official called for silence at the top of his voice and announced: "This is Mr. Wilson from Hammersmith Fire Station and he is going to talk to you." The problem here was that I had not prepared a talk or speech, and even if I had, I would have without doubt suffered the same fate of a rubbish comedian on a Saturday night at the Glasgow Empire Theatre.

The inside of the hut reminded me of dinner-time at a Siberian labour camp. There were seemingly hundreds of mud splattered site workers and ground workers, all squeezed together in a warm fug of steaming bodies and cigarette smoke. They were all busily eating, drinking, talking, playing cards, farting and belching, and I was supposed to talk at them. This was their thirty-minute respite from the muck and mire of the November building site, the last thing they would want would be myself waffling on at them for half of their lunch break. I nervously muttered that I was NOT going to address them and that I would be available for any questions after the break instead. This drew enthusiastic applause from the two nearest tables, they being the only people able to hear me above the hubbub of noise. I then accepted the offer of a cup of tea from the union man, which I immediately regretted. Although this might be classed as a three star building site, hygiene levels were still pretty low, for the tea was served in one of the grottiest mugs I have ever come across to date. Suffice to say, that it was a bit like drinking out of an Elsan toilet. As we stood and talked he told me that he would be taking the hat around on pay-day for us. Subsequently, this turned out to be one of the largest donations to the strike funds that we received and it continued throughout most of the strike. In retrospect, I realised how wise I had been not to interrupt their hard-earned meal break.

We were now into the month of December, only so many striking days left to Christmas, according to the wags. The picket had now taken up a position of semi-permanence in the

Shepherds Bush Road. I think the local inhabitants enjoyed their respite, warming at the brazier as they went about their business. The station yard was half full of wood, the sign saying 'Wood Wanted' had long been taken down. The reaction to this sign had been most unexpected; tipper lorries had reversed back through the appliance room to discharge vast quantities of the stuff, so much so that we had problems getting our motor cars into the yard.

In my mind, the life and centre of the picket was always the brazier. So much occurred around it, so much humour was invoked by it. At Hammersmith Fire Station we had discovered a source of new fuel for the brazier. A local, sympathetic coal merchant had a large stack of best Welsh nuts (a type of coal) that had been contaminated with diesel oil, thus rendering it unsaleable. The coal was offered to us free of charge, all we had to do was collect it ourselves. Unknown to us at the time, a recipe for super heat was best Welsh nuts soaked in diesel. When the brazier was well stoked up with this stuff, it would glow white-hot. On a windy day it seemed like we had our own private nuclear reactor, it got so hot on occasions that it spalled the stonework off the front of the fire station. Any person standing closer than three feet would suffer their clothing being singed. It caused minor problems with the police because members of the public warming themselves had to stand so far back that they obstructed the pavement.

There was a down side to the warmth and comfort the brazier emitted. As time went on, itinerants, vagrants, vagabonds, and winos and the like became accustomed to its comforts and tended to hog the best spots around it. Some of them seemed to think that a measly five pence coin thrown into the strike bucket entitled them to a prime spot for at least an hour. We discovered that one of the requirements for being a vagrant vagabond etc. must be a thick skin because no amount of caustic or sarcastic remarks would make them move on.

One cold, rainy, December night, a fireman named Earl thought he had a solution to the problem of these thick-skinned itinerants. On this particular night, one tenacious individual had been hogging the best spot for a considerable time. Not only was he obnoxious but as the fire warmed the many layers of his clothing he became extremely malodorous as well, which aggravated the problem all the more. Earl, who was not the most patient of firemen, was having to get wet in order to get warm because he was forced to stand out in the rain. This smelly gentleman did indeed have a thick skin, as not only did he resist all sarcastic comments and remarks but he even ignored Earl's direct, abrupt, request that he "Piss off and let somebody else see the fire for a change."

When the idea first came to Earl, there was no jubilant cry of Eureka (!), just a low, hissing mutter of "I'll soon shift the bastard." He did a swift about turn and stalked off into the gloom of the unlighted appliance room, only to re-emerge from the dark some minutes later with a satanic, sinister grin on his face and clutching in his hand a pint beer glass filled with a blue liquid. Standing back from the light of the brazier, he indicated by signs that what he held in his hand was a pint of paraffin and that he intended to liven up the brazier fire a bit when the malodorous gent wasn't looking. Now, whatever his detractors may say about Earl (and there were many!) he was a good, practical, brave fireman. Unfortunately, his knowledge didn't extend to much with regard to the scientific side of fire fighting. For example, he obviously did not appreciate the effect that a pint of neat hydrocarbon would have when applied to the white-hot coals of the brazier. The movement by some of the other firemen away from the brazier indicated that they certainly did!

The malodorous man blithely basked in the warmth from the brazier. With it being such a cold, wet night, the brazier had been well stoked up. The sides of the oil drum glowed white with the heat. The man had just turned around to toast his back, when Earl applied hydrocarbon to the white-hot coals. The effect was quite spectacular, far more spectacular than Earl could ever have hoped for. In fact, it was so spectacular that Earl himself crashed into the fire engine behind him as he leapt backwards to avoid the flames. For one brief moment it was like looking up the tail pipe of a jet engine, not to be recommended from a close distance. Firemen scattered this way and that, nothing like this had been seen since the thirteenth of November this year! Fortunately for all concerned, the flames roared directly upwards, reaching a height of about twenty feet. This may not sound excessive to some seasoned firemen but rest assured it is quite exciting when it happens in the middle of Hammersmith Broadway and you are standing only feet away from it! There were only two options: to be singed by the flames or run down by a number eleven London bus whilst trying desperately to avoid them!

Calm and order was finally restored and an only slightly downcast Earl was communally

admonished. He agreed that he would never pull that particular stunt again. Only now was it realised that nobody had noticed what effect it had had on the malodorous man, such had been the urge for self-preservation. Earl's little wheeze had obviously worked because the man was not there any more (and subsequently never ever came back again). For a period of around twenty to thirty minutes, we were all rather nervous and on edge. However, as no policeman came along to accuse us of the heinous crime of igniting itinerants, we relaxed somewhat and life around the brazier carried on as abnormal as ever.

Of course, it was not long before we were copying another breed of fireman and cooking our food on the brazier. Like the railway foot-plate men of old, the trusty shovel was acquired from the fire engine and our meat pies and sausage rolls warmed up over the fire. As time went by there was a never-ending supply of chestnuts to be roasted on the shovel (purchased with money from the bucket).

One dark, rainy night, around six o'clock in the evening, we were all huddled around the brazier. I had finished a hard day's work at the warehouse and was now settling in for a night's picketing. For the past ten minutes or so, a stranger had stood alongside me, warming himself by the brazier's heat. He was a young man in his mid-twenties, with long, shoulder length hair. He was wearing a long, dark, military style greatcoat. He turned to leave and as an afterthought he said quietly to me, "Would you like a chicken?" I thought this a rather unusual opening line for a conversation because he was not carrying any bags or luggage and obviously did not have a chicken with him. He seemed a pleasant enough chap, so I humoured him, "What sort of chicken did you have in mind?" I asked. This in itself was not an unreasonable question. Remember, this was Hammersmith Broadway and chicken in this part of the world tends to come in many varieties: Madras, Vin de Loo, Nuggets, Kentucky fried, just to mention a few. "No, No," said my quasi military friend, "A fresh chicken." Now, to my mind, fresh chicken also comes in two varieties: those that are still galloping around and those that are freshly dead. I now began to see the young man in a different light; country poachers tended to favour the very same type of coat that the man was wearing. Could he be one of that very rare breed - a Metropolitan Poacher?

I was clearly puzzled and the man obviously decided that a picture was worth a thousand words. He delved down deep into the pockets of his overcoat and produced a chicken wrapped up in a polythene bag, which he duly presented to me. I stammered a thank you and as I was curiously examining the package he wandered off into the night whence he came. Now, I really was puzzled. Why should this man be walking around Hammersmith with an unwanted dead chicken in his pocket, I thought to myself? After much deep thought, I could only guess that he really was a poacher of the metropolitan kind and had stolen the chicken from the local supermarket. The chicken was indeed a fresh chicken, as opposed to the frozen variety. At first, I wondered what to do with it because this sort of food gift was deemed to be the property of the on duty picket. Having seen whence it originated from (deep in the bowels of the gentleman's greatcoat pocket), they all declined it. As I would not be going home for some days and therefore could not make use of it, I placed the bird in the back cab of one of the fire engines.

By nine o'clock in the evening I had partaken of my refreshment break and was feeling suitably refreshed after three pints of best bitter in the Laurie Arms. I was now feeling somewhat peckish but fed up with a diet of take-away donor Kebabs from the emporium a few doors along from the fire station. I was too tired to walk to the fish and chip shop, which was right around the other side of the Broadway, and so I wondered what could I eat. The thought then struck me - barbecued chicken would be nice! We had the fire, the brazier, and we had the chicken (compliments of the man in the military coat), so all we needed now was something to cook it on. What we needed was a spit; a long iron bar to suspend the chicken on over the fire. As it happens, every fire engine carries a spit. In fact, they carry two of them; it is just that they are called hydrant bars. These are metal bars which measure around three-quarters of an inch in diameter and two and a half feet in length. They are used to turn on street fire hydrants, in conjunction with hydrant keys.

I re-emerged from the appliance room, clutching the chicken in one hand and the hydrant bar in the other. I was by now getting quizzical looks from the other picketing firemen. This soon solicited the enquiry, "What are you going to do with that then?" Still feeling refreshed and mellow, I told them, "I am going to stick this iron bar up the chicken's bum." I paused for effect after this remark. This did not unduly surprise them; one or two firemen had been acting strange of late due to domestic and financial pressures. After a suitable pause I informed them gleefully, "Then I am going to put it over the brazier and cook it." It must be remembered that this was

1977; home barbecuing had yet to become en vogue. I think they were more taken aback by the thought of my cooking a chicken over an open fire than by my initial comment.

The other firemen looked on distastefully and somewhat aghast as I suspended the hydrant bar with the chicken skewered upon it over the top of the oil drum/brazier. After a few minutes it began to roast quite well on one side. I twisted the bar in order to turn the other side of the chicken to the fire, the bar turned easily enough but the bar revolved inside it and the chicken stayed put. Stung by the group's ribald remarks, "Of course the poor thing can't perch on that iron bar properly, it ain't got any feet," I decided that a modification was required to the brigade standard issue hydrant bar. It was a design that had served perfectly well in its present form for around a hundred and fifty years, however, I dashed back into the station again and returned triumphantly with possibly the most innovative repair kit known to man: two wire coat hangers and a pair of pliers! It was but a couple of minute's work to have that dickie bird well and truly perched on that hydrant bar. Alas, in this modern technological world, such inventive genius is sneered upon. I was tersely informed that super glue would have done the job equally as well.

As time went by, the chicken began to cook and delicious odours emanated forth from it. I then noticed the subtle difference in the words used by the group. The chicken was not being spoken of as MY chicken any more but as OUR chicken. As more and more of the group returned from the Laurie Arms, a form of ad-hoc committee had taken command of the proceedings. This committee was ultra authoritative and somewhat dictatorial, the term CCCP sprang to my mind - Committee for Cooking Chicken Properly. It seemed that I was not even allowed to turn the thing on its hydrant bar any more without calling for a vote of approval. It was then decided by aspiring chefs that it needed to be basted with fat to improve the browning and crispiness. I, as a practical fire officer, knew that this would not be a good idea because firemen tend not to do things by halves. After they had liberally applied a half pound or so of fat to the chicken, it began to melt and run down onto the hot coals below. It ignited and it was just like being back at work! Two brave firemen endeavoured to rescue the victim from the dancing flames, whilst a third dashed away to get a fire extinguisher from one of the appliances. In normal times I would have had no hesitation in sending the informative message "chickens reported, efforts being made to rescue". The great moment arrived when the chicken was deemed by the gathered CCCP to be ready for eating. Unfortunately, this happened to coincide with another great British tradition - pub turning out time. Thus, it came about that a somewhat scorched and smoke blackened, diminutive chicken was to suffice as supper for a dozen hungry firemen.

Great interest was now being shown in the chicken and much advice offered. Hickory wood apparently imparted the best flavour to meat but since we didn't have any Hickory wood some well-seasoned timber pallets were broken up and fed to the fire. I now know what people did before television was invented, they used to watch and listen to their dinner cooking. It was very therapeutic.

When the chicken was finally cooked, all the doubting Thomas's (who by now had consumed several pints of beer) were having second thoughts. The chicken had cooked beautifully and when taken off the bar and placed onto a plate, literally fell apart. It was devoured inside the space of ten minutes, the firemen tearing off pieces with their fingers and placing it straight into their mouths.

The news of this gastronomic feast soon spread throughout the station. Henceforth, the fire was not simply something to keep warm by but to cook one's dinner and snacks on. All kinds of delicacies were experimented with; sausages on sticks, kebabs skewered on straightened metal coat hangers, fish and meats cooked in tin foil. At one period, any passer by putting money in the strike fund bucket was presented with a hot chestnut that had been cooked on the fire.

What that chicken lacked in quantity it had obviously far exceeded in quality or panache, for this form of cooking subsequently became de-rigour on the fire station. So much so, that the official Christmas dinner for the White Watch family and friends was planned to be cooked a là oil drum. Of course, some allowances had to be made for the delicate fads and fancies of the wives and girlfriends. Plates, knives and forks were provided as a matter of course. Unfortunately, the ladies did not much fancy the idea of their steaks etc. being cooked on rusty shovels, despite assurances that they had been well rubbed down with emery cloth or steel wool. In fact, the ladies really had no sense of adventure at all and they rather put the mockers on the entire proceedings. Most of the food finally wound up being cooked in the station kitchen on the first floor. One lone,

token chicken was cooked with due ceremony, perched on the hydrant bar over the fire in the brazier. Since the completion of the cooking of this chicken once again coincided with pub closing time, I personally enjoyed it very much.

As time went on, the picket and brazier became a major focal point of the Shepherds Bush Road. Local residents, passers by, and shop and office workers all became friends and acquaintances. Upon reflection I have often thought that if only we had shown a bit of savvy - we could have made a fair living in the fast food game! We could have sold cups of tea, sausage or bacon rolls, baked potatoes and hot chestnuts etc. to a sympathetic and hungry public. The possibilities were limitless; the spare bay in the appliance room alone had room enough for at least half a dozen tables. We could have served a-la-oil drum sit down meals even! Although, upon further reflection, perhaps I should not mention these things. With talks of a possible privatisation of the Fire Service in the future, who knows what could happen?

*

During the first days of the strike, the only means of communication with the outside world was the station coin box telephone. This was a pay telephone provided for the firemen to make and receive telephone calls to family and friends whilst on duty. On around the third day of the strike, this telephone line was cut off, no doubt on the instructions of the Brigade. I made some telephone calls to the local telephone exchange using a nearby public call box, which resulted in a sympathetic telephone engineer re-instating the pay telephone facility. Into the second week of the strike, I arrived for picket duty only to be told somebody had broken into the cash box on the telephone and stolen the money. I was on strike, considered an outcast and ruffian by some of the national press, but I was outraged. Somebody, a fireman, had broken into the station telephone coin box and had stolen the money from it. I threatened that if I found out the name of the man, I would go down the police station and report him. Soon, one of the senior firemen came up to me and said that it wasn't like that. He explained that the coin box had become full; they couldn't get any more money into it and so they could not make calls out to their families. They couldn't get it emptied because officially it wasn't working, so they had emptied it themselves and all the money went into the strike bucket. I calmed down and began to see the reason behind it. He then uttered the words, "Ces les strike." This was the first time that I had heard these words but I was to hear them many times again. "Ces les Guerre," or "It's The War," was a common saying during French war time, due to hard times and lack of commodities etc. As always though, in the best Tommy Atkins style, it was bastardised and pronounced "Kay ler Strike."

I drew the line at the station safe and vetoed the proposed attempt at this, which rather disappointed them because apparently they had always fancied having a go at it just for the challenge but had feared the resulting consequences.

There were many different things to get used to because of 'The Strike'. One of the strangest of them all concerned sleeping patterns. Over the past six years (not to mention the ten or eleven years at stations before Hammersmith), every time I had laid my head on a pillow in the station officer's bunk room, I had done so with the greatest apprehension. Having got warm and comfortable, and having just dozed off, I would then be turfed out of bed by the clamouring of a bloody great fire bell! Certainly at the busier fire stations, the men never seemed to get into a deep sleep. At home, the ringing of the alarm clock invariably rouses my wife long before me but on the fire station I was always up and running within seconds of the fire bell ringing. When the fire bells ceased ringing at Hammersmith during the nine weeks of strike, there was the opportunity to sleep uninterrupted. However, I still could not sleep soundly! The problem was that we were still in the familiar fire station environment. To say the least it was bloody annoying! Here was I, NOT being paid and I still couldn't sleep.

On the plus side, I was actually beginning to enjoy my current life style a little. Few people can appreciate the nature of a station officer's role and duties at a busy inner London Fire Station. I assure you that it could be very, very hectic and frustrating. Can you imagine a manager with responsibilities for the day to day supervision, welfare, and training for up to thirty personnel? Imagine that this manager also had responsibility for the maintenance and fabric of a hundred-year-old five storey building and for the equipment and stores on site. In my case, the equipment could range from diesel oil to toilet paper. On top of this, I was also responsible for countless fire inspections and staff instructions on the fire ground area. Can you imagine a manager with these responsibilities, and countless other responsibilities and duties as well? Can you also imagine that

this same manager had to stop whatever he was doing and whenever he was doing it (including calls of nature) at the ringing of a big chromium plated bell, five or six times per day? At the ringing of this bell, this manager had to then screech off down the road in a big, red, noisy motor lorry, not knowing how long they would be gone, albeit for ten minutes or ten hours. In my early period as a station officer, I used to mentally plan my day on the way into work. I soon gave that up as a bad job!

All I had to do now instead was make cups of tea, make money, and take my turn on the picket. Picket lines can be the most interesting of places; you get to meet all sorts of people, from the local rent-a-revolution committee to the rabid right wing (hang 'em all high, bar you and me) mob. They all seemed to think that firemen would naturally support their society, cause, or whatever. After a couple of days we soon got wise to this and if they didn't bung at least a fiver into the bucket we simply told them to piss off! For some local residents, this would be the first occasion that they had ever had the opportunity to talk to a local fireman (they obviously did not use the same pubs as us). Then there was the (tongue in cheek!) Hammersmith Broadway Local Residents Association, comprising mainly of winos, dossers and layabouts, who would stop by for a chat and a warm, and anything else that was going. They would invariably bung five pence in the bucket and after telling us a good sob story leave with fifty pence in their own pocket, their need was apparently greater than ours. For some inexplicable reason we seemed to know all these winos and dossers. They had always given us a cheery wave and raised their cans of Tennants Export when our fire engines had passed by in happier days.

In many ways there was a certain element in my character of living for the day - the manyana syndrome! A fireman must be fatalistic to a degree because a lot of the tasks which need to be carried out could be fatal! I will now give an example of /sum up my lifestyle during the strike. It is a fairly pleasant Friday in November, I have enough money in my pocket to see me and my family half way through next week and the brazier is burning well, although the wind is in the wrong direction and the smoke is getting in my eyes, so I suppose if the wind doesn't change direction soon I will have to eventually move around to the other side. Christmas is still three weeks away, although approaching at a fast Reindeer gallop. Paul McCartney's hit song Mull of Kintyre is wafting from the radio and echoing around the high appliance room ceiling. This was a song that was to become forever indelibly stamped on my mind and would remind me of this nine weeks. I have just been informed that I'm having pizza and chips (again) for my supper tonight. I've had a most interesting conversation with a complete and utter stranger, who purports to be something of an anarchist. He has just enlightened me, amongst other things, about something-called 'Press D notices'. Did you know that the government in this country still has powers of censorship over the national press? Unfortunately I had to tell him that I could not 'anarchise' tonight because my presence was required on the station picket. So, there we have it - most of the requirements to good living: food, drink, warmth, and intelligent conversation! With a little more practise I could have got used to this life! Ah, but there's the rub! As a pessimistic optimist I just knew there had to be one. Unfortunately it didn't have a pension scheme attached to it.

CHAPTER 13

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 5.

You cannot spend years serving on fire stations, living in close proximity with other men, without observing and noting little quirks of human nature. You would have observed that some men, whilst not considered overly good firemen, more than compensated by their cheerful nature and disposition on the watch. Conversely, some men considered to be excellent, practical firemen would be deemed miserable b*****ds on the station! Some firemen thrived on extreme stress situations, others did not. Nine weeks of strike would be considered by most as an extreme stress situation; some thrived, some did not. I think on the whole I survived quite well, but it certainly helped to have a well-developed sense of humour!

During the strike there occurred one of the most humorous incidents of black comedy I have ever experienced. The station was running more or less unsupervised; the men's behaviour was regulated by consent of the majority. Certain young ladies had begun to appear on the fire station, attracted by handsome, young, virile, unsupervised firemen. One of these young ladies went by the name of Snake Charmer, she was well known in the local pubs and the Hammersmith Palais. She was also a part time strip tease dancer, who performed her act with the aid of a live snake, hence her nickname. She was also a bit of a 'rough, tough, diamond of a lady' and under normal circumstances would not have been allowed on the station as a bona fide girlfriend. She had been invited onto the station by a junior fireman on the red watch, nicknamed Skanker, who had been running a little bit out of control during the strike. For example, he had recently taken to wearing weird clothes and was currently adorned with multiple safety pins pierced through the flesh of his ears. How he got the nickname Skanker, I know not, only that the term 'Skanker' was usually applied to reprobates and the like, and was a derogatory term, thus, currently ideally suited to the man.

I had returned from a hard day's toil at my part time warehouse job and was due on picket duty that night. As soon as I walked onto the station it was obvious that something calamitous had happened that day. Nobody knew quite what had occurred but the end result was that Snake Charmer had threatened to stab the union representative with a knife. Now, it was generally agreed by all that something had to be done about it, as we just couldn't have people going around threatening to stab union representatives, especially not in the middle of a strike.

A branch meeting was duly called for that same evening, and as with all union meetings during the strike, it was well attended. Upwards of forty firemen crowded into the first floor mess-room under the harsh glow of the fluorescent lights. Tobacco, and of course my inevitable pipe smoke, filled the expectant air. The union representative informed us of his unhappy and dangerous experience with the young lady called Snake Charmer. Then, he went on to propose the motion that, "Henceforth, no lady guests be allowed onto the fire station." This surprised me somewhat, not that I am pro-feminist or anti-feminist or anything, it was just that I considered a man wielding a knife a much more dangerous adversary than a lady, so why not ban men as well! A lively discussion took place on the proposed topic, with most of the participants agreeing that the availability of ladies on the station had been getting a bit out of hand of late and should be curtailed.

The main opponent to the motion was a fireman nicknamed Soupy, who was getting quite agitated in his opposition. Now, Soupy was a big, physical man and had in fact a second nickname, although it was never, ever used to his face! This second nickname was Stocking Head. I found this to be one of the very few nicknames used in the brigade that was in fact descriptive of its bearer. Soupy's alias was bestowed upon him for that very reason: his appearance, even when he wasn't wearing a stocking over his head, was that of a man who WAS. He had a big, toughened, flattened nose and features of a prize-fighter or pugilist, a man not to be trifled with.

The proposal that ladies were not to be allowed on the station caused me much amusement and

I chuckled at it. Had I not spent years as the station officer in charge, trying to achieve the same object with only limited success? I was now sitting in on a union meeting where the firemen were proposing the very same thing themselves.

The debate seemed to be moving in the general favour of the proposed motion, when suddenly, without any prior warning, Soupy let out a roar of rage and flew across the room, crying, "This is all your fault Skanker, for bringing dodgy crumpet onto the station!" He then grabbed hold of Skanker and began to pummel him with his fists. At first, the shock of this sudden outburst paralysed the gathered firemen into in-action. Then, they began to move in very cautiously to separate the now violently struggling pair, for Soupy was a big, powerful man. In the ensuing hubbub and whilst Soupy was being prized away from Skanker by half a dozen brawny firemen, yet another man was filling me in with the lurid reason for his sudden outburst. Soupy, who was a married man, was in love again and currently enjoying an illicit liaison with a pretty, young lady he had met whilst on picket duty. What is more, Soupy was making full use of the station's facilities to consummate this liaison. It seemed now that this beautiful arrangement was being threatened by Skanker's inconsiderate choice of girlfriends.

Once physically restrained, Soupy made a final, desperate plea to his mates, saying that it wasn't him who had brought this situation upon the station and that it wasn't his (Soupy's) bird that threatened to stab the union man, so why should he have to suffer the consequences? Calming down somewhat and shrugging free of his restrainers, he went on to speak, "I would therefore like to make an amendment to the motion." I chuckled to myself, somebody had obviously been priming Soupy for he had never before shown the slightest interest in procedures at meetings! In fact, I don't think Soupy had ever heard of an amendment to a motion in his life before. To him, a motion would be something you leave behind in a toilet pan. When I heard the proposed amendment my thoughts were confirmed and my giggling became hysterical. His proposed amendment to the motion was as follows: "FROM NOW ON, ONLY CLASS CRUMPET SHOULD BE ALLOWED ON THE FIRE STATION."

I found myself convulsed with suppressed giggles. I knew these firemen, one man's 'class crumpet' would be another man's 'scrubber'. The class rating of 'crumpet' would be in direct ratio to the number of beers consumed. As the number of beers went up, the 'crumpet' rating would go up in direct proportion. A girl that rated zero when they were sober would rate ten after ten pints of beer. There was even a saying on the station, "Cor, look at that bird, she's eight pints beautiful." This meant in effect that she was pretty ugly. The gathered firemen were now all looking at me and wondering what the guvnor was laughing about. My mind was running riot, were we to hold up cards and mark them out of ten as they came on the station? The possibilities were limitless!

I considered adding an amendment to the amendment, to say that all 'class crumpet' should be issued with a card which stated: "THE BEARER OF THIS CARD IS CLASS CRUMPET." Then, there could be no doubt what was and what wasn't, but I couldn't get it out for laughing.

After much serious debate, the amendment to the motion was accepted and voted upon. It was now official, henceforth only 'class crumpet' would be allowed on the fire station. This was unbelievable! I looked forward to after the strike with eager anticipation. Would the rule still apply when the official wives and girlfriends came back onto the fire station? Would they or wouldn't they be 'class crumpet', and would I or wouldn't I let them on the station?

Finally, the meeting broke up and around twenty or so firemen adjourned to the Laurie Arms, just along from the fire station. As they all trooped into the pub, the landlord dashed from the front to the rear off the bar, to join the staff already serving. He had apparently heard that there was to be a union meeting at the fire station and had laid on extra staff for the 'après les meeting drinkies'; he knew his firemen well.

The conversation in the bar was a continuation of the union meeting, with the men discussing what exactly compromised class 'crumpet'. Henceforth, every lady that entered the pub was scrutinised by twenty or more pairs of eyes. "What about this one then?" was heard on many lips. "That is definitely class crumpet," said one voice. "Nah, only three pints beautiful," said another disparagingly. Then, a very pretty and sexy lady entered the pub and was unknowingly scrutinised. She was ravishingly beautiful, so much so, that a formal vote was called for. The young lady was puzzled and somewhat embarrassed by all the men in the pub holding their hands up in the air

and looking at her.

I thought inwardly to myself that if she had but known she had just been unanimously (and with no abstentions) been voted definitely 'class crumpet', would she feel flattered or offended? If this beautiful image was to be the yardstick by which we were to assess 'class crumpet', I was now definitely all for the motion.

Later in the evening, the young lady was informed of the firemen's decision by a fireman on the make. She was indeed flattered!

*

Before reading the next story, it might enlighten things a bit if I explain. When I joined the fire service in 1961, the minimum height for firemen was five feet and seven inches. After being refused once for being under height requirements, I was finally accepted at an adjudged height of five feet seven and one quarter inches. Thus, by fire brigade standards and in fire brigade parlance, I was quite a short arsed person!

Two to three pints of beer later, the pub was in a very jolly mood and all were laughing and joking, except that to my mind everyone was laughing and joking a bit too much. I seemed to be missing out on the fun. I looked over my shoulders and around the pub but I saw nothing amusing to explain the laughter. My doing this just increased the giggles and laughter. I was puzzled as there was something amusing happening in the pub and I could not see it. I decide to ignore it and leaned up against the bar with my pint in my hand. It was annoying as for a full five minutes everyone had been giggling and laughing (some were now beginning to go into convulsions) and I could see no reason for it.

I began to suspect that somehow the laugh was on me and I was determined to find out what it was. I turned fully around with my back to the bar, and there immediately in front of me and below my line of sight, was the reason for all the hilarity. A young fireman called Lee Finnan was doing an impersonation of me and had been doing so for the last five minutes! It happened to be a particularly amusing impersonation, even I must admit, for it made me laugh also. Lee had removed my pipe from the bar (a distinctive, curled briar pipe called a Peterson) and had put it in his mouth. He had taken his shoes off his feet, placed them on the floor, and kneeled down and placed one knee into each shoe. For the past five minutes he had been stomping up and down directly behind and underneath my line of vision, like a demented dwarf, smoking my pipe. Everyone in the pub was apparently aware of this, except me.

Lee was chancing his arm really; a junior fireman taking the piss out of station officer, albeit one on strike, was sailing close to the wind, but even I, the butt of the joke, had to admit it was funny. I grinned at him and said, "Ces les strike." Lee grinned back, I then went on to say ominously, "But après les strike, Finnan..." Lee panicked, "Oh, come on guv, you must admit it was funny, everyone's laughing," he pleaded earnestly. I had to admit to myself that it was indeed funny but I did not tell him so immediately. I let him sweat for a bit but I did forgive him his trespass against me. Therefore, let it not be thought that I am a vindictive man. In fact, I am quite forgiving. On another occasion, when a wag stuck a matchstick down the end of my pipe, rendering it un-smokeable, I forgave him immediately. I did impose a small penance though; I smoked his cigarettes for the rest of the night!

*

Lee Finnan's humour could be described as irrepressible. I had once caught him out with a pub joke that involves borrowing a box of matches from the victim and setting up a World War Two scenario. Seven matches are removed from the box; one is pushed into the box itself and left protruding to represent a German tank at El Alamein (a famous World War Two battle). The other six matches are set a short distance away in the form of three crosses. These represent British anti tank guns. With a great deal of drama and bangs and crashes, the German tank (the matchbox) fires twice and destroys two of the British anti tank guns. The victim is then asked his opinion as to what happens next. What happens next is that the remaining anti tank gun fires and scores a direct hit on the German tank. This is vividly demonstrated by a clenched fist crashing down onto the box of matches, thus reducing the box and remaining matches to splinters.

This gag had obviously made the rounds on the fire station, for some weeks later in the Laurie Arms a member of the blue watch tried to catch Lee out yet again with this same joke. To my surprise, Lee surrendered his box of matches and sat avidly watching the scenario. The two British anti tank guns had just been destroyed, when gleefully and in anticipation of the punch line, the man asked Lee "what happens next". At this point Lee said, "Wait a minute, let me guess." Lee took up the tale saying, "Right, these two British guns are destroyed but in the meantime the last British gun has loaded, taken aim and fires at the tank." This had the blue watch fireman puzzled, if Lee had already seen the gag surely he would not destroy his own box of matches?. With great drama he carried on, saying, "Unfortunately, his aim is bad and he misses the German tank altogether." He paused for effect, then with a quick movement of his right arm, his fist crashed down onto the table. With a big grin on his face he carried on: "Instead, the British shell scored a direct hit on this packet of cigarettes over here." Needless to say, the packet of cigarettes belonged to the blue watch fireman, who was by now very disgruntled! Over the period of the next ten minutes or so, as he endeavoured to straighten out and salvage his battered cigarettes, he kept complaining, "Somebody might have told me Lee already knew that joke, this packet of cigarettes was nearly bloody full."

*

Lee's sense of humour was very finely honed, par excellence; it was both devious and patient. At one time he used to tell a joke that was known around the fire station as the 'lamb chop' joke. This particular joke had its effect from the fact that he told it in two parts. It was the custom of the white watch at Hammersmith Fire Station to repair to the pub after the first day's duty. On the first occasion, Lee announced that he had a new joke to tell us. At the end of the story, which somehow involved a lamb chop, the effect on the gathered firemen was dismal, it was marked two out of ten! Six days later, again after a day duty and in the pub, Lee announced he had a joke for us. At the end of this joke, which involved a dog and a man's pipe, the dog came running up with something in its mouth. We, the audience were invited to guess what the dog had in its mouth; the logical answer being 'the man's pipe'. With great glee, Lee informed us that it was not the man's pipe but a lamb chop in the dog's mouth. This was utter gibberish and made no sense at all until he informed us that it was the lamb chop from the joke last week. The joke was then hilarious and every body burst out laughing. The joke did not end here though, for unless you had heard the story last week, the punch line was still utter gibberish! There were at least two in the gathering that had not been present last week but they were also laughing uproariously. This in itself was a sub-joke, which caused a bit of a chain reaction; the more they laughed, the more we laughed and so on. It would not be until Lee told them the first part of the joke again, in six days time, that these two men would realise that the joke was in fact on them. Then, hopefully when he re-told it, there would be fresh faces and more fodder for the joke once again.

This particular night, Lee was especially good humoured. He had previously run out of funds and had no more beer tokens to spend! Earlier in the evening, he had chanced his arm and asked the pub landlord if he would cash a cheque for fifty pounds for him. The landlord was a very shrewd and worldly man, wise to the ways of Hammersmith firemen. He quietly asked Lee, "If I cash it what will happen when I take it to the bank?" Lee grinned weakly and said resignedly, "It will bounce, Colin." "I thought as much," said the landlord, "nevertheless, for you for being honest, I will cash it and present it after the strike." Quick as a flash, Lee retorted, "Couldn't make it a hundred, could you Colin?" I think Lee got his hundred, but in due course Colin got it all back over the bar!

*

Later on in the evening Snake Charmer made a grand entrance into the crowded pub, apparently to find out whether or not she was 'persona non grata' on the fire station. There now arose another little problem, by this time most of the firemen had consumed around four pints of beer. Was Snake Charmer 'class crumpet' or not? This was the conundrum! The beer had once again clouded their judgement. One third seemed to think she was beautiful, another third thought she was passable, and the remaining one third could not forget her dangerous ways with cutlery.

*

Firemen had bestowed nicknames on their work colleagues and associates for generations. Some of these nicknames were standard and traditional, such as Dusty Miller, Timber Woods, or Tug

Wilson even. However, the latest tradition in the brigade was to devise a nickname more suited to the appearance or character of the individual, and these were rarely considered complimentary. An anti-tobacco smoking fireman, whose surname was King, was dubbed Nosmo King (No Smoking) and henceforth always called Nosmo. Also, at Hammersmith, there was a fireman whose alternative nickname of Stockinghead was seldom used to his face. This was for the simple reason that he was a huge, burly man, whose pugilistic features did give the appearance that he was wearing a stocking over his head. There was a fireman called Fanny Rat (English use of the word fanny, not the American) which I feel does not need any further explanation! Another fireman was called Badger because he had a white streak in his hair, a fireman named Finch was called Budgie. We had a Sub Officer nicknamed Jesus, I know not why, although I would hazard a guess. Jesus could allegedly walk upon water and this particular Sub Officer seemed doomed to sink into the mire. We also had a Station Officer called Captain Flack; I think this had some connotation with the Trumpton Fire Brigade, whatever that was.

Over the years, I myself, had been called Tug (an old navy term), Little Legs (self explanatory) and Poison Dwarf (shortened to PD). This was not the Poison Dwarf of South Fork or Dynasty fame but instead referred to some rather pugnacious Scottish soldiers, who served in Germany during the late 1950s. At a previous fire station I had a Sub Officer called (not to his face) Brass Band. It was only during an after duty drinking session, when the firemen had mellowed somewhat, that I was told the reason why. The fireman scathingly told me, "Oh, him? He's always blowing his trumpet (boasting) about something or other!" As I have explained elsewhere in this book, great care had to be taken with these dual names. This was because it was quite possible that during the change of watches, a fireman could be (on paper at least) riding both the pump escape and the pump at one and the same time under his different names.

These nicknames could be destroying and vicious at times. During the strike, a young lady began to appear on and around the fire station, and the firemen addressed her as Juanita (pronounced as wun-eater). I did not give this any thought and addressed her by this name myself, this was cosmopolitan London after all, a melting pot of all nations. In a casual conversation with Lee Finnan on the picket one day, I enquired whether 'Juanita' was of Hispanic origin, due to her name. "Dunno Guv," he laconically replied, "I think she's from Shepherds Bush actually!" He then added, "Anyway, that's not her real name, it's her nickname. Her real name is Pauline." I know from experience that I should never ask how people get their nicknames but foolishly I did so, asking: "Why is she called Juanita then?". Lee replied with great surprise in his voice, saying, "What? Can't you guess?" I replied, "No, she does not look at all Hispanic to me." Lee was by now beaming with delight. "Its got nothing to do with religion," he said, "It's to do with her Gnashers (which he pronounced Gernashers) Haven't you noticed?" "Noticed what?" I said, becoming a bit agitated by now. Lee explained it with a big grin on his face, "Instead of having two incisor teeth in the centre of her upper jaw, like most people, she only has one large single one." He paused here for effect. "Yes, yes, go on!" I said impatiently. He replied, "What do you mean, go on? That's it! One tooth - ONE-EATER."

I was shaking my head because I still didn't understand it. I was still hearing the spoken word as 'Juanita'. Lee had to explain it further before the penny finally dropped and then the enormity of it all struck me! All of the firemen had been going around calling this poor girl 'One-eater' in reference to her single tooth and she had been cheerfully answering to the name all this time. I told Lee how cruel I thought this particular nickname was but Lee shook his head saying, "Not really Guv, they had originally thought about calling her CENTRAL EATING (one tooth in the centre of the mouth) but thought that perhaps it was a bit over the top."

Some weeks later, 'One-eater' stopped all conversation in the Laurie Arms with the simple statement, "I think I now know why you firemen all call me Juanita." All went quiet and everybody waited with bated breath, some even backed away a little. She then said, "It's because of my dark complexion, you all think that I look like a Spanish lady don't you? And Juanita is a Spanish ladies name, isn't it?" The tense atmosphere cleared like top ventilation at a good, smoky fire. "Yeh, Yeh," said a voice, "That's right One-eater, you definitely look like a Spanish bird to me! What do you want to drink, love?" Thus, with yet another calamity narrowly avoided, we all bumbled on with our lives yet again!

*

During the period of the strike I was privileged to actually see a trick (or party piece) that I

had heard much about. It involved a fireman from one of the other watches at Hammersmith, whose name I seem to have diplomatically forgotten, but I shall call Gooney. This fireman was probably famous throughout the land, having also (allegedly) performed his little trick at the Fire Services College Morton in Marsh. What was Gooney's famous trick? Well, apparently he had such an inordinately large foreskin that he could fit twenty or more ten pence coins inside it! You might say this is a deformity rather than a trick. However, it was not the fact that he could do this that made him famous, it was instead the manner in which he did it, which had to be seen to be believed.

Gooney was a bit shy at performing this trick, so it usually took around seven or eight pints of bitter and a lock-in at the local pub before he would perform it. I am sure I don't really need to explain this but just in case - a lock-in is the term for an after hours drink in licensed premises and it is illegal. On one particular night there was a lock in at the Laurie Arms pub, just along from the fire station. There were thirty or so people, including Gooney, all cheerfully and happily drinking illegally after closing time. Upon reflection, there might even have been a policeman or two present.

The first I knew of Gooney having been persuaded to perform his party piece was due to sheer intuition. I had been standing by the bar when one of Gooney's mates was seen in earnest conversation with the pub landlord. Then the landlord nodded his head, went over to the till, rang up No Sale, and proceeded to grab handfuls of ten pence coins from the coin tray. I then thought to myself that it was definitely on. I was going to get to see Gooney's party trick at last. Shortly after this, Gooney was seen disappearing into the men's toilets, clutching a little plastic money bag, which contained the ten pence coins. He reappeared five minutes later, accompanied by one of his cronies, with his right hand stuffed down the front of his trousers. In a loud, strident voice, his friend called for silence in the pub. He then announced, with a Barnum and Bailey effect, that his good friend Gooney was about to perform his world famous ten pence trick for the delight and delectation of all those gathered. After the initial hush in the bar the conversation level began to rise but it gradually became subdued again as those in the know sent the word round that this was something worth seeing.

Gooney was helped up onto a chair (still with his hand down the front of his trousers) and then onto a table. Once Gooney was ensconced on the table and in full view of all those gathered, his mates began to chant the classic strip dancer theme, "Di da dit da, di da dit da". Gooney began to gyrate his hips and body in tune to it, and then, in the manner of a good strip tease dancer, he began to tug down his trouser zip fastener in small jerks.

Now, a lot of the ladies in the pub did not realise what was in store for them. As we all know, when ladies have had a few bebies they do appreciate a good male stripper and this was what they thought they were getting. Gooney's hand suddenly appeared through his trouser flies, with his fingers tightly clutching the end of his penis. A grossly distended foreskin could be seen and there were screams of horror (or was it delight?). Much discussion has taken place concerning the attributes of the length of the penis etc., all I can add is that the circumference of this particular one most certainly qualified it for the Guinness Book of Records! Now began the piece de resistance! His crony called for silence in the pub and stood slightly to one side so that all could see, holding the ubiquitous pub tin drinks tray at a level with Gooneys crotch. Gooney gave a deft flick of his wrist and a single ten pence coin clattered down onto the tray. All close to him immediately shouted, "ONE!" There was another flick of the wrist and another coin clattered onto the tin tray, to an even louder shout of, "TWO!" By the time the fifth coin hit the tray, the whole pub was shouting in unison, "FIVE!" The shouting of number ten was at a slightly higher voice pitch because the ladies had warmed to the theme and were also jostling for a better view. By the time it came to coin number fifteen, Gooney had got carried away with it and flicked the coin onto the tray even harder, so that when the coin clattered down it sounded like the jackpot from a fruit machine. At coin number twenty there were expressions of amazement and incredulity with the even louder shout of, "TWENTY!"

Unfortunately, whether it was the alcohol or the atmosphere in the pub that night, I cannot remember the exact number of ten pence coins that clattered onto that tin tray. It was most certainly in excess of twenty, and I believe it could have even been approaching thirty. One thing I did notice though, even through an ever so slightly alcoholic haze, was that after the event the landlord gathered up all the ten pence coins and put them straight back (unwashed) into the till.

CHAPTER 14

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 6.

We had been on strike nearly a month now, with Christmas fast approaching. All the firemen on the station were busily engaged with their part time jobs to earn money to pay for the forthcoming Christmas presents and celebrations. Since the very first day of the strike, fireman had been approached on the picket line and offered work. The variety of work offered was quite enormous; including driving and security work, painting and decorating, and even work as firemen. Some of the major firms throughout London, deprived of the services of the professional fire brigade, were installing their own private fire brigades. They wished to employ experienced personnel as team leaders and advisors, and quite naturally approached the experts.

At Hammersmith fire station, a dozen or more of the firemen, including myself, were employed by a major mail order and department store company in their main London warehouse. It was quite an experience for me; I had never worked in such a warehouse before. To me, it was quite frustrating work as it seemed you spent the whole of one day putting heavy boxes up on high shelves or racking, then the whole of the next day taking them down again. Painting the Forth Bridge would seem pretty exhilarating by comparison. I felt it was also quite an experience for the major warehouse company, who must at times have felt that they had employed a bunch of rogues and vagabonds. Firemen up until the strike had been controlled by quite a rigorous code of discipline but during the strike they were under no such control. The warehouse manager, a most delightful gentleman, did not realise this and tended at times not to supervise the firemen strongly enough. Nevertheless, the work did get done. Firemen tend to work in short, violent bursts, doing one hour's work in thirty minutes and spending the next twenty minutes talking about it. This is a net gain to an employer of ten minutes, but of course, employers always happen by in the twenty minutes when the fireman are talking about work and not actually doing it.

If there is an easy way of doing hard work, then a gaggle of firemen will invariably find it. In the modern world it is called productivity, to firemen it is called 'using your loaf'. Within a week of the firemen being at the warehouse, most of them were self-trained in all the machinery available; electric trolleys, fork lift trucks and the like. I think the electric trolleys were called rolla-trucks, and were used for moving the heavy pallets of boxes. You were not, of course, allowed to ride upon them but the firemen invariably did. It was discovered that if you put an empty pallet on the forks of a rolla-truck, six firemen could ride off to tea break together. Also, two firemen could sit side by side on the battery compartment and glide electrically up and down the gangways between the storage bins. To a casual observer it seemed a virtual hive of activity and industry, with all these electric trucks screeching about all over the place. Most likely it was time to wash up for tea or the firemen were convening an impromptu meeting of the F.B.U. in some remote corner of the warehouse. Or equally as probable, it was simply a lone, bored fireman cruising the day away. God invented legs long before man invented rolla-trucks but rolla-trucks made legs redundant. The overriding opinion was why walk when you can ride?

As the weeks went by, some firemen were seen actually walking around the warehouse. Initially this was a bit off-putting, did they know something that we did not? Did dangerous rays emit from the battery compartment on which we sat, to damage our wedding tackle? As it happened, the problem was the staff canteen! It subsequently turned out that those doing the walking were not masochists at all! They were simply those that were inclined to put on weight when well fed and watered. Thus, they were endeavouring to lose it through exercise. The wages in this warehouse were not overly high, this was somewhat compensated for by the prices and indeed the quality of food in the staff canteen. If I remember correctly, in 1977, they charged two pence for a cup of tea and ten pence for your lunch. Remember, we were on strike, not living day by day but by the hour! With a lunch only costing ten pence, it was best to eat two while the going was good, for tomorrow could have been famine. Technically, we were only supposed to be allowed to purchase one lunch ticket at ten pence. Amongst our group were some handsome, virile, 'Don Juan' type, younger firemen and the lady who sold the tickets was a bit of a soft touch. I had been working

there for some weeks before I found out that we were only supposed to have half an hour for lunch break. It was just that we went in a few minutes early, fifteen to be exact, and came out a similar few minutes late.

On a more serious vein, when the work was there we did it, and at such a pace that had the firm been unionised they would no doubt have been out on strike in protest. The work detail was usually initiated by the manager or supervisor, when they managed to catch a stray, passing fireman. Details would be given of the job required; a lorry to be unloaded at number two bay or such like. The fireman would then report to a senior or dominant fireman. A fast rolla-truck would be despatched to winkle out all skivers and layabouts and work would commence.

As a group, most firemen share the philosophy that work is sometimes a necessary evil, best to get it over and done with as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, it seemed to us that lorry drivers did not always share this view. This would often cause a problem at the warehouse. Lorry drivers were responsible for moving their loads to the tailboard of their vehicle. With six or eight firemen all eager to get their job done, this caused a bit of a bottleneck. There we all were, anxious to get our job over and done with so that we could get on with the good life. However, we were being forestalled by a prima donna of a lorry driver, promenading up on his tailboard and being obstructive!

Firstly, it had to be ascertained whether or not the whole load was coming off the vehicle; in most cases it was. Then, some small technicality needed to be contrived, so the driver would seek out the manager of the warehouse. Of course, managers of busy warehouses are the most difficult persons to find and then engage in conversation. Thus, when a lorry driver got back to the unloading bay, we were already halfway through the job. The unfortunate lorry driver would then be accused of being a skiving, lazy b*****d, who was avoiding the unloading, and was told to keep out of the way whilst we finished the job ourselves. Some lorry drivers were only too pleased to have their vehicles unloaded for them! I think the main worry of the drivers was when they were only delivering a part load. In those strike days we tended to look like a bunch ruffians or pirates and the sight of six or eight of us hovering around the back of their vehicles worried them somewhat. They would take great pains to keep us from the tailboards of their lorries, lest we plunder the part of the load they were not delivering to us. It is nice to be able to say that when they discovered that we were merely striking firemen trying to earn a crust, they invariably relaxed and gratefully accepted our help.

*

Each fireman would drive and operate the rolla-trucks and other equipment almost by second nature. Most could and did operate the fork lift trucks; driving and operating these trucks became somewhat of a speciality. These trucks were designed for work in high bay warehouses and could lift pallets up to twenty feet high. They not only lifted upwards but also could move the load sideways and tilt it back. In brigade parlance I would be deemed a Ladder Man, in that I had been trained to drive and operate the 100 ft turntable ladders. Therefore, it was only right and proper that I should operate the nearest comparable thing to turntable ladders in the warehouse, i.e. the fork lift truck.

Strange to say, my brigade ladder training was of great use when operating the fork lifts, especially from the safety angle. These vehicles could be very dangerous indeed in the confined spaces of a warehouse. The danger did not only lie in being run over by a truck that weighs a ton or more. On one occasion, when I was concentrating hard and delicately placing a pallet of heavy cartons into the top bay of a high rack, I was astounded and initially frightened by a huge, crashing sound coming from behind the bay that I was working on. Hurriedly crossing through to this bay, I saw to my horror a whole pallet load of heavy cartons lying on the floor. The enormity of what would have happened had somebody been passing at that moment was not lost upon me. Initially, I blamed myself for being careless but in fact the incident was a combination of two things. Firstly, the pallet that crashed down was badly stacked and unbalanced. Secondly, there was no separation between the back to back bays, so the slightest of nudges when placing the fresh pallet in, sent the back load crashing down. It was lucky for me that there hadn't been an accident, and lucky for the warehouse manager that as only a casual worker I did not qualify to be on the warehouse safety committee. For sooner or later in my opinion, a bad accident would occur through this non-separation of bays.

A loud cheer from the far end of the warehouse announced yet another (thankfully) amusing forklift mishap. For ten or fifteen minutes a man had been unloading pallets uneventfully from a lorry using a forklift. All had gone well until he came to move a pallet stacked high with heavy boxes of bottles containing soft drinks and mineral waters. What the man had failed to notice was that between the loading bay and warehouse itself, there was a very slight rise or hump in the ground. This meant that when he drove up the rise, the high, heavy pallet on his forks leaned back towards the truck. When he reached the top of the rise or hump, the pallet was perpendicular. As he crested the rise and drove down, the pallet leaned forward with inevitable consequences. Broken bottles of lemonade and Cola; there were soft drinks all over the place. Forklift trucks have a device to obviate this type of accident, which tilts the load backwards. Instead, our firemen were blaming 'Sods Law' for the accident, complaining bitterly, "It would have to be bottles that fell off, and not tins of bloody dog food or the like, wouldn't it?"

*

Once, during one of the twenty-minute periods of thinking about work, I was busy watching a workman attempting to repair one of the large heaters suspended from the warehouse ceiling. The man was an outside self-employed contractor and working on his own. His problem was that he had to remove the heavy heater suspended from the ceiling by himself. He made surreptitious enquiries to me as to whether the firemen would be prepared to help him. In consideration. I sucked my gums vigorously in the time-honoured manner, before saying, "That thing must weigh a ton, it would take at least six firemen to get that down off the ceiling." I let him digest the thought of six firemen having to be considered, before telling him, "I have a better idea, wait there." Minutes later, I trundled back to meet him at the helm of my faithful forklift, empty timber pallet on the forks at the ready. Using the forklift, it was child's play to take down and replace the heavy heater. I must have saved the man half a day's work and a serious rupture at least. He was most grateful and I was considered to the amount of five pounds!

*

In the warehouse, a lot of the work involved climbing ladders to pick heavy cartons of clothing etc. from high, multi-bay storage racks, then to place them on trucks or barrows and wheel them away. This was a job that involved much effort, required two men, and not only was hard work but was exceedingly boring. Then, having done this job of picking the stock (as it was called) when the replacement stock came into the warehouse, the reverse was done. All the new stock was put back into the storage racks. There just had to be an easier way of doing things.

During one of our twenty-minute breaks when we were only talking about work, I had an inspiration! We could place an empty, wooden pallet onto the forks of a forklift truck, and use one fireman to stand on the pallet, and one fireman to drive and operate the forklift. The wooden pallet could then be raised up to the level of the high bays and the cartons simply lifted and stacked directly onto the pallet. The cartons could then be driven to where they were required, with the minimum of handling and effort. This would have the resulting double bonus that much strenuous physical labour could be avoided and one hour's work could be completed in fifteen minutes, instead of thirty minutes. This procedure was not without a slight element of danger, in that the wooden pallet was slightly unstable on the forks until a substantial weight was placed upon it. Without a doubt, the health and safety at work-people would have had 'kittens' had they but seen it in action. Unfortunately, being on strike and deemed redundant to society tends to make one a bit blasé. Besides, we had seen a classic example of health and safety at work NOT WORK back on the fire station before the strike. What we did now was considered far less dangerous than we what we did then.

*

The drill tower at Hammersmith fire station was of the old-fashioned metal girder construction and five stories in height. Up one side of the tower was a fixed, vertical, metal ladder, known as a Jacob's ladder. It was decreed up on high, by the health and safety at work executive, that these ladders were unsafe and not to be used unless fitted around with protective hoops to prevent a climber falling backwards. The brigade, as a good employer, enforced this rule. Unfortunately, there was no money available to fit metal protective hoops to all the drill towers, so they simply forbade us to use the metal Jacob's ladder. For fire drills and other evolutions, this was fine, as we simply used our big fire service ladders on the appliances. However, problems arose, for example, when

hoisting hose up the tower to dry and the hoist got tangled up on the fifth floor. Or, during a game of volleyball when the ball wound up on one of the upper floors of the tower. Did this mean that we then reversed the fire engine out of the station into the yard (this itself needed the permission of the officer in charge)? Did this also mean that we then shunted around all the parked cars to give us access to the tower, and have four men remove the big, escape ladder (which in any case only reached up to the fourth floor of the tower)? Of course we didn't! We went and got a hook ladder off the top of one of the appliances and use that to scale the tower. I felt it would have been most interesting to have heard the comments of the said health and safety at work executive. Having denied us the use of our nice, fixed metal ladder, we then found ourselves swinging about in the breeze five floors up, perched on the bottom of a hook ladder. Not to mention the exciting evolution of getting the hook ladder up five floors in the first place. This requires a man to have one leg only hooked over a window ledge and use both hands to punch the ladder up to the next floor. Do they not say that laws are for the guidance of wise men and the blind obedience of fools? If so, who are the fools in this story, the health and safety wallahs or us the poor bloody firemen?

*

The warehouse managers and staff were very tolerant of their motley crowd of itinerant workers and I remember those days fondly. We fed well in the subsidised canteen, where a good substantial meal could be had for around ten pence and we took far more liberties with meal breaks than their own staff. I would like to think that they missed us when we finally went back to work for the brigade after the strike. Although, I feel that if we had all worked there full time they would eventually have sacked, or possibly promoted some of us.

A month or so after the strike had ended most of the firemen finished working at the warehouse, but a few still remained. We heard from these men that the MANAGEMENT had invented a revolutionary new machine to increase productivity! It consisted of a machine rather like a fork lift truck, with a platform which went up and down, and was used to pick the stock directly from the racks without the use of ladders. They had improved upon the idea marginally though, because their machine could be operated both from the platform and the truck itself, thus requiring only one operator. Given time, we would have got around to that innovation as well; it always was my objective to achieve one hour's work in five minutes.

*

It was whilst working, or rather returning from work at the warehouse, that a most remarkable coincidence occurred. Pete Elliot (the other Hammersmith station officer on strike, who also worked at the warehouse) and myself were returning back to the fire station, both in our own separate motor cars. We were making our way through the back streets of west London, to avoid the heavy rush hour traffic, when Pete Elliot's car stopped at a road junction and then failed to move off. I was directly behind in my own car and could see him waving something around in his hand. The 'something' turned out to be his gearshift lever, which had become detached from the car's gearbox! Firemen, of course, are quite innovative and we were soon on our way again with a set of mole wrench grips substituting as a gear change lever. Five minutes further down the road, the unbelievable happened; my own gearshift lever came adrift. I sounded the cars horn to attract Pete's attention, and drew to a halt at the side of the road. Now, it is true to say that on my own car, which had a remote type gear linkage, this had happened once before. Nevertheless, what must the odds be against two motor cars driving down the road together having their gear shift levers detached within minutes of each other? Pretty astronomical, I would have thought! Once again, a few minutes work with a pair of pliers and an old wire coat hanger had us on our way once again.

CHAPTER 15

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 7.

Christmas was only a week away and a union meeting was called to discuss the picket arrangements over the holiday period. The mood of the meeting was strangely belligerent. The general feeling was that we had worked every other Christmas and that we would damn well have this one off. We had got to the point where we were taking this proposal seriously and discussing the wisdom of leaving the fire station abandoned over the Christmas period. In one corner of the room, a group of younger fireman, who were single or unattached (maritally that is) were engrossed in a huddle. At last one of these younger firemen stood up and acted as a spokesman: "We, the younger, non-married firemen, not having the same family ties of the rest of you, are volunteering to carry out the picket duty over Christmas entirely by ourselves."

Taken at face value, this was a most generous and unselfish offer. They were offering to forgo their own Christmas so that the family men might have theirs at home. I KNEW BETTER, for on the fringes of the station and on the picket line there was still lots of 'class crumpet' about. Also, at this period of time the public were being very generous with gifts, including numerous bottles of drink. All of this had the makings of one hell of an extended, lively Christmas party, so much so I almost volunteered to do picket myself! The youngsters appeared quite nervous whilst we discussed their most generous offer. Then, no doubt, they could not quite believe their ears when the offer was gratefully accepted, with the added bonus of being told they could keep any money from the strike bucket to divide amongst themselves. Just imagine it, the average age of these firemen was around twenty years! This in itself must have been the best Christmas present they had ever had, totally unsupervised with plenty to eat and drink, and the facilities of the station to enjoy whatever else their fancies turned to, and I'm not thinking about games of snooker or ping-pong! When I was twenty years of age I would cheerfully have paid good money for a ticket to an event like that, that's for sure!

*

In the week before Christmas the watches were holding their Christmas parties or drink-ups, which entailed the whole watch going down the Laurie Arms a bit earlier than usual and then drinking twice as much as on a normal night. On the night of the official Blue Watch Christmas piss-up, most of the watch were in the Laurie arms, leaving only a skeleton picket on the station. They were joined by a few of the white watch who had been on duty that day, and some that were staying over on the fire station for the night.

One of the skeleton picketers left on the station was a fireman called Nick - Nick the Greek, to give him his full nickname - (the pun was intended!). Nick was not Greek at all but he came from the island of Malta GC and was dark and swarthy, spoke slightly fractured English, and was named Nicholas. All firemen know that if you fit this description and are called Nick then you must be Greek, so Nick the Greek it was! Besides, in those far off days before package holidays extended beyond the 'Costa Whatsit', the subtleties of the difference between Greece and Malta were lost upon the average London fireman.

Nick did not at first seem to fit in with the Blue Watch, being neat, tidy and smart at most times and of a very polite nature. He very rarely went down the pub drinking with the watch. As soon as he finished duty on the fire station, he would be off on his motor cycle to get his ice cream van on the road. This was his part time occupation. "Very industrious is our Nick," his Blue Watch mates would say. He was saving up to buy a little island in the Mediterranean, called Malta.

Nick was quite famous at Hammersmith for a little incident that occurred in happier times some months before. Nick was duty man in the watch room one night when a call was received at the station in the early hours of the morning. The bells rang out, the lights came on, and the firemen slid down the poles into the appliance room. One of the appliance drivers called out, "Where are

we going Nick?" Nick shouted back in reply, "Washerdown Road." "Never heard of that one," queried the driver, "whose fire-ground is it on?" Nick called out again, "D23 Hammersmith's fire ground." It appeared nobody had heard of that particular road before. Men were poring over the big station map on the appliance room wall, fingers were flying up and down the index of the fire engines' Geographia. Nowhere, but nowhere, could Washerdown Road be found. At last a fireman decided to check the call slip himself, "You silly b*****d Nick, we haven't been called to Washerdown Road, but to wash down the road following a road accident." "Yes," said an offended Nick, "that's what I said." He repeated in his fractured English, "Called to Washerdown Road."

Nick was always a little bit wary of his watch mates taking the Mickey out of him. In truth, he was very much on his guard about anybody taking the Mickey out of him. Once again, Nick was on duty in the watch room in the wee small hours when the station enquiry bell rang out. Nick opened the small wicket gate set into the big appliance room doors and found a policeman standing there. The policeman was quite cool, calm, and civil, saying, "Excuse me, do you know your fire station is on fire?" Nick, who was quite terse to be woken up at this time in the morning for a little jape, told the policeman, "Fuck a da off, donta taka de piss." Fortunately for Nick, the policeman was adamant, determined even, and would not take no for an answer! He pulled him out onto the pavement and pointed upwards. There to his horror, Nick saw thick, black clouds of smoke rolling out of the first floor mess room windows. Nick put down the station fire bells manually and when the firemen came sliding down the pole he gave the correct call, "Fire in kitchen on first floor." I was not there but was reliably told the carnival started once again. "Which first floor is that then Nick?" "Yes all right, but where are we going to, give us the address first." Nick got quite excited, agitated even, repeating out aloud "Its inna da kitchen onna de first floor." Fortunately, a lone fireman who had decided for some reason to use the stairs instead of the sliding pole, saved the situation. He burst into the appliance and shouted, "F*****g hell, the bloody fire station kitchen's on fire." The fire was confined to a plastic rubbish bin and contents in the fire station kitchen. The smoke damage was confined to the kitchen and mess-room and was HORRENDOUS!

*

Meanwhile, back to the strike and once again we were in the Laurie Arms with three or four rounds of beer having been consumed. It was decided it was about time Nick graced the Blue Watch with his presence and he was duly sent for. Nick arrived in the pub, rather overwhelmed by the bonhomie that greeted him and the fact his presence was required, only to be informed that he was just in time for his round of drinks. Nick cheerfully bought a round of drinks, receiving little change from a ten pound note, and joined in the company.

When the pub closed, the whole company decided to adjourn back to the fire station to carry on the party, accompanied by the clink of many bottles of beer. All were seated around the mess table and amidst the general buzz of conversation Jim McAleese was heard to ask Nick, "What did you do before you joined the fire brigade, Nick?" Nick replied, "I used to work in a circus." "What, selling ice creams?" queried Jim. "No, no," Nick countered, "I used to work in the circus." The conversation around the mess table died down as Jim asked, "Well what exactly did you do in the circus?". Nick replied, "I used to eat glass."

There was now an expectant hush around the mess table. This was something different, in fact this was most unusual. We had met firemen with all sorts of previous and unusual occupations, from chiropodists to undertakers and even glaziers, but no one had ever before met a GLASS EATER! Jim held out his now empty pint glass and said, "Here you are, Nick, take a bite out of this." Nick said, "No, I don't eata da beer glasses, I eat light bulbs." "Fetch this man a light bulb," said Jim loudly to the room in general, "this I have got to see!" Most of the fire station was fitted with fluorescent light fittings, which Nick declined. Two firemen scurried away to find a light bulb and returned minutes later having located one in the men's toilets. They gave it to Nick saying, "It's only a 40 watt bulb Nick, that all right."

Nick took out his handkerchief and wrapped the light bulb in it, then wrapped the bulb sharply on the table to break it. He unwrapped the handkerchief, selected a large piece of the broken glass, placed it into his mouth and began slowly to chew. Now, watching people eat glass is not exactly the most relaxing form of entertainment. It made me shudder and my teeth went on edge as Nick munched away on his piece of light bulb. Nick finally gulped and swallowed, then after a communal examination of his mouth he was adjudged to have genuinely swallowed the glass. There was a big cheer. One fireman, obviously suitably impressed by this feat, then said casually but

aloud, "Bet even Jim McAleese couldn't do that."

*

Jim McAleese originated from Northern Ireland, he was around five feet eight or nine inches tall and was somewhat barrel shaped. This was not your 'rolly-polly' type of barrel, more like an orang-outange style of barrel shaped. He had served eight or twelve years in the Royal Marines before joining the London fire brigade and was considered a tough nut. If any task involved physical strength, or merely enduring excruciating pain, Jim could do it. To say that he could not was like a red rag to a bull, as was intended by the fireman's casual remark stating that he could not do it (eat glass that is). Anything a Greek ice cream seller could do, Jim could do too, if not better! He immediately took up the challenge. Jim sorted through the debris of the broken light bulb and found an even bigger piece of glass than that which Nick had found. Seated at the mess table, he popped the glass into his mouth and began to slowly chew on it. For around ten seconds, with his face set like stone, he chewed upon the glass fragments in his mouth. Then, his rate of chewing slowed down and he stopped; signs of distress appeared upon his face. From out of the corners of his mouth little rivulets of blood began to trickle down. Jim leaped up from the table and made a dash for the washroom, where he could be heard spitting out the broken glass into a washbasin. We heard noises not unlike an orang-outange gargling, as he endeavoured to wash the glass fragments from his mouth. The room once again resounded with cheers; Nick was the hero of the hour. Old McAleese wasn't so tough after all, he couldn't even chew on broken glass, what a softie!

Nick was now the centre of attention. "What other tricks do you do Nick?" he was asked. Nick was beaming, he had never been so popular. "I eata da fire," he replied. Whoops of delight filled the mess room, a bloody fire-eater was just what we had always wanted on the watch! Nick at first refused to demonstrate this skill, saying it was too dangerous as he might set fire to the building. He was persuaded by being told he had a room full of firemen and two fire engines sitting in the appliance room below. We told him that we could cope with a six-pump fire without any outside assistance, so get on with it man! Nick required some paraffin, so two firemen set off with a pint beer glass for the oil store in the station yard below. On their return they gave the glass of paraffin to Nick and apologised, "The barrel was nearly empty and it's a bit cloudy Nick." "Don't worry," said the wags, "that was probably caused by the little drop of beer left in the glass. If you die of paraffin poisoning Nick, we will claim it was the beer and sue the brewer!"

Nick set his stage; he made all the firemen stand back up against the mess room wall, or behind him. He had in his left hand a bundle of lighted wax tapers found in the kitchen and in his right hand he held the pint glass of paraffin. Nick took a gulp of paraffin from the glass, retaining it in his mouth, then blew it out in a fine spray whilst at the same time pushing the lighted tapers into the spray. The effect was astonishing, the paraffin ignited with a roar and sent a jet of flame twelve feet long across the room, accompanied by clouds of black, oily smoke. "Bloody hell fire, look at that smoke!" said a fireman, "I told you the paraffin was contaminated, didn't I?"

Pleased with the result, Nick took another gulp and did it again. This time he directed the flame a bit nearer to the firemen backed up against the wall. They all immediately ducked and hit the floor, so that flames narrowly missed setting fire to the accumulated promulgations on the union notice board. This was becoming beyond a joke, for Nick was getting carried away with himself. The firemen were now escaping from the room in ones and two's, through windows and doors. McAleese was trapped in a corner and was heard to say in nautical terms, "Wait till the bastard is recharging his bunkers and we'll make a dash for it then." This he duly did, in between Nick's gulps of paraffin. Unfortunately for Jim though, there was a few settling of old scores going on. Thus, when he reached the door to the mess room to make good his escape, it was being held firmly shut. Jim McAleese had to make his escape ignominiously through the mess room window onto the flat roof outside in a very non-marine like manner, whilst being chased closely by a twelve-foot tongue of flame. Henceforth, Nick the Greek was known as Puff the Magic Dragon, who chewed bits of glass, and belched out smoky fire that scorched old big Jim's Arse. Needless to say, the words were sung to the popular tune of Puff the magic dragon.

*

Whilst all this had been taking place, at around twelve thirty a.m., the picket down below had been conveniently suspended. This hour tended to be a bit of a droll time in the Shepherd Bush

Road because the pubs had long since emptied. On this occasion, there was just one or two late-comers scurrying into the Hammersmith Palais, next door to the fire station. Once again, the fatalistic mentality of the firemen was displayed; what was the point of picketing if nobody was there to appreciate it? The brazier was slung with two wire hoops (the obsequious coat hangers) with a hydrant bar through them and carried out to yard at the rear of the station. The tables were pulled back into the appliance room, and the big timber doors shut. On odd occasions, a notice would be attached to the doors: GONE TO DINNER - BACK IN HALF AN HOUR. What a way to run a strike, I often thought to myself! Then again, in reflection, perhaps it was the only way to run a strike. Many never do today that which can be put off until tomorrow, since tomorrow may never come, and then look at all the work you will have saved yourself!

It may have been as a result of this lackadaisical approach to picket duties, that Hammersmith received a visitation of what was termed the Heavy Mob! One day, three motor cars pulled up onto the station forecourt and eight, big men got out of them. Mistakenly, the word had apparently spread throughout the metropolis that Hammersmith Fire Station were not picketing any more. These eight gentlemen had arrived, I believe, from distant east London Fire Stations to stiffen our resolve. It just so happened, by sheer chance, that on the occasion of their arrival we had them outnumbered by about three to one. So in the event, it was their resolve that needed stiffening instead! It was patiently explained to them that, unlike some other parts of London, Hammersmith Broadway in the wee small hours of the morning was a bad, dangerous place to be. They were told that it was a most unsafe environment for innocent, unsophisticated, picketing firemen to be at that hour. We explained that the station was not abandoned but instead we were safely ensconced; locked up behind our big wooden doors, out of harm's way! They believed our story and indeed were quite happy to believe it! Much good it would have done them, had they not, for we fully intended to carry on with our quaint Hammersmith ways.

*

Do not think that all was lapse and dilatory at Hammersmith, for not once in the whole nine weeks of the strike did the picket line fail to open or re-open for the turning out of the Hammersmith Palais Dance Hall! This happening usually took place at around two or three o'clock in the morning. Even in normal times, no healthy, heterosexual Hammersmith fireman would care to miss the event, albeit the late hour. I did at one time know a fireman (most unsuited to Hammersmith fire station) who would habitually go to bed at midnight on the dot. He missed all the excitement in the Shepherds Bush Road, but this man, even by fire brigade standards, had an exceptionally large mortgage to service and so badly needed his sleep.

For years we would watch the grand exodus from the Palais from our windows on the first floor of the fire station. Now, with the picket line down on the ground floor, we could be part of it. What was the attraction of watching the Palais turn out? Well, for a brief fifteen or twenty minutes in the wee small hours of the morning, the Shepherds Bush Road took on a carnival atmosphere. Hundreds of happy, excited people swirled out of the dance hall and onto the pavements. There were hundreds of pretty girls dressed in their best finery, all on a high from an evening in the dance hall. The heady smell of their perfume permeated the city night air. Mini cabs surreptitiously vied for customers, not wishing to appear to be plying for hire, which was the prerogative of London's black cabs only. Hot dog/burger vans vied with mini cabs for parking space and on occasions even parked on the station forecourt itself. Policemen nonchalantly grouped in pairs, not necessarily looking for customers, but always ready to accommodate. Of course, some of the highs were alcohol induced, such as the raised, pitched, excited voices and screams of the ladies. Some of the lows were also alcohol induced; the bloody affrays that on occasions the men engaged in. There was an old saying that if you stood on Piccadilly Circus for long enough, everyone you knew would eventually pass by. I am sure the same could equally be said of standing outside Hammersmith Fire Station. So many times when I have been endeavouring to explain the whereabouts of Hammersmith to friends and strangers, I discovered that every single one of them apparently knew the whereabouts of the Palais. Not one of them had ever noticed Hammersmith Fire Station, which was situated right next door.

CHAPTER 16

NINE WEEKS AT HAMMERSMITH 8.

From here on, I seem to have had a memory lapse. I think I spent the whole of the Christmas and New Year period at home in Pangbourne with my family; the first in the sixteen years that I had been in the fire service. Christmas came and went, New Year's Eve at Hammersmith Fire Station rivalled even the Hammersmith Palais itself, so I was told! Then, it seemed that in mid-January the strike was suddenly over. The resulting settlement was not to the satisfaction of everyone but we were going back to work. I believe only the London Fire Brigade and the Isle of Wight Fire Brigade voted against the return to work. To this very day the latter still puzzles me, as I had never imagined the Isle of Wight to be a hot-bed of revolutionaries! Still, life is funny like that isn't it? I think I over imbibed at the Laurie Arms on the last night of the strike, because I vaguely remember telephoning the Isle of Wight Brigade from the station call box, to console them. Of course, I never did get to speak to one of the striking firemen, but without doubt some control operator in their brigade control had an interesting conversation with some Piss-head from the London fire brigade that night!

The White Watch had been the last watch to leave work before the strike and would now be the first watch back on duty after the strike. On the first morning back, there was so much to be done as the brigade was to come back on the run as an entire unit, rather than in dribs and drabs. The fire engines had not been started up for nine weeks and the breathing apparatus sets were still in the hose store at the back of the appliance room. They had been stored there in case the police requested our help at smoky fires or rescues, which thankfully at Hammersmith, happened only once or twice. The outside of the fire station was covered in a psychedelic style graffiti, the work of one artistically minded fireman using official fire brigade coloured chalks. Had he not been perched on the top of quite a high ladder to achieve this, it would have inclined me to think he had been eating or smoke something weird. (The brigade subsequently paid to have this artwork removed by contractors) The ceiling of the appliance room was a nice matt, black colour, an accumulation of nine weeks soot and smoke from the brazier. Then, there was the redundant brazier itself! Some felt it should have been donated to the fire brigade museum but in the end the council refuse lorry carried it away to the local tip. The station drill yard was still one quarter full of timber pallets (firewood). Sadly, the volley-ball court was knackered. The glowing hot brazier had burnt deep holes into the asphalt when it was brought into the station at night .

*

On our first morning back on duty, there was not a little amount of chaos and confusion. Should the troops now call me Dave, or Guvnor? Strangely enough, this was not a problem because most of the firemen had still called me Guvnor throughout the strike. This was, I think, due to a little quirk of the English language. Certainly with Londoners, 'Guvnor' is a semi-affectionate term, not considered to be as sub-servile as the more formal 'Sir' might be.

During the last weekend of the strike, on the far wall of the first floor mess room, somebody had daubed in letters three feet high and six inches wide, the word 'SCAB' in scarlet paint. This was a little unfair in my opinion, for only two persons on the whole station had not been on strike. These were a station officer and a sub officer on other watches, who at this rank were not required to be members of the FBU. Also, as I mentioned in one of the first chapters, coming back to work for them would be that much harder! After nine weeks of striking, they could not expect the same complacent firemen to walk back through the station doors as those that walked out all those weeks ago. "Where were you when the going got tough?" was a question their own watch firemen would undoubtedly ask of them.

*

Here I am going to prevaricate a bit, for this is a subject that even today I have very firm

opinions on. The question of officers going on strike, or withdrawing their labour, or whatever, is still somewhat of a hairy chestnut - a nettle to be grasped! There are those that are of the opinion that such officers should be shot at dawn! This in itself does not unduly worry me, it sounds a far more pleasant demise than that of my usual occupational hazard - being kebabed alive!

Firstly, one needs to understand the loyalty system in the fire brigade (here, I am quoting mainly the London Fire Brigade in my time). A fireman's first loyalty was to his watch, or close workmates; this was paramount. His second loyalty was to his own fire station. Then, it diffused slightly since he then had regard for his own watch (Blue Watch or whatever) serving at surrounding fire stations. These were the colleagues that would serve alongside him and judge his actions at fires or other incidents. Next, came his loyalty to his division, or group of fire stations. Finally, there was his own loyalty to his own fire brigade. This is probably somewhat similar to the regimental system in the British Army. Here though, the simile ends, for the officer system was totally different. At station level, the officers not only led the troops (firemen) into battle but they ate, slept, shit, and dreamed with the troops ALL OF THE TIME. There was no separate officer's mess or other similar privileges of rank; in the main it was done by sheer strength of character. On the fire ground, they shared the same shell hole whilst the flak flew overhead. Never was the saying of the First World War cartoonist, Bairnsworthy, more appropriate, "If you know of a better hole, go to it!". Living together for long fifteen hours stretches and more, soon enabled the firemen to find out all the little chinks in the officer's armour and sometimes take advantage of it. Thus, long periods of service on operational fire stations was not necessary to the advantage of career minded officers. Leading from the front did not just mean being the first into a burning building, or whatever! In my humble opinion, it also meant leading, or at least being with the troops, where others might fear to go i.e. leading them out of the door to go on strike! In an extreme fire situation the worst that can happen is that one could be killed or badly injured, thus becoming a word that I hate to use, a HERO! Having the courage to lead on out of the doors could blight a whole career, loss of job even, thus possibly becoming a PARIAN - unclean, an outcast! Therefore, whilst I did many difficult and dangerous things throughout my career in the fire service, the fact that I had the MORAL courage to support that which I considered right and walk out of those fire station doors on the Fourteenth of November 1977, I hold way above (even now) some of the fire ground feats of daring do, that I might have or might not have done since before and after that day.

Right, having got that little diatribe off of my chest, I will continue.

*

At the time of the strike, in 1977, I was thirty seven years old. I had done many, many things in my life but one thing I had not done was to grow a beard. This was because the fire service discouraged the growing of beards by operational firemen. In the early days of oxygen breathing apparatus, a mixture of facial hair, pure oxygen, and naked flames was a sure recipe for a singed beard or facial burns. Latterly, with compressed air sets and full face masks, it was deemed not possible to get a proper gas tight seal with the face mask when adorned with a beard. So, it came about that within weeks of the beginning of the strike, almost fifty per cent of the firemen were now cultivating beards. This is where my description of them resembling Pirates evolved from. A certain percentage of the firemen never got beyond what I call the itching or irritating stage of beard growth, and abandoned the exercise. I myself persevered; I was determined for once in my life to abandon the short hair, clean shaved, military appearance, and become a bohemian, if in looks only! Secondly, and merely as an after thought, if my photograph should be reposing in MI5's files (labelled as an anarchist, revolutionary or suchlike) I would be suitably disguised! After a period of some weeks I was adorned with a full set of whiskers, just like the sailor on the Old Players cigarette packets. I really feel that this may have effected a slight change of character in me! Whilst I did not actually go around saying things like "Avast there!" and "Make way you landlubbers!" and suchlike, I certainly began to act in a more pirate-like manner. I was most certainly in favour of swinging the current Home Secretary from the yard arm.

The problem with the beard came some weeks after the strike, when the brigade powers that be realised that at least one third of its firemen were wandering around looking like, well, looking like Pirates. At first, they were a bit reluctant to confront these men, because there was still a certain amount of militancy in the air. Then, they invoked the good old stand-by, the Health and Safety at Work Act, decreeing that all personnel adorned with facial hair had to report to Southwark Training School and take a seal test. This entailed the wearing of the face mask of a breathing apparatus set and making sure that a perfect gas tight seal was obtained. Thus, I was duly summoned to

appear at Southwark and take this seal test.

The night before the test I trimmed my beard right back close and washed it a couple of times with Fairy Washing Up Liquid, in an effort to make the hair as soft and pliable as possible. At Southwark, a lowly leading fireman was conducting these tests (I think he had been on strike also). Thus, five of the six pirates being tested passed with flying colours, the sixth being advised to give his beard the Fairy Liquid treatment and apply for a re-test. I think I kept my beard for only a week or so after this, then promptly shaved it off. This was not just me being bloody minded or difficult! Unbeknown to the Brigade, or anyone else for that matter, whilst I had initially been quite happy with my macho beard, it had the one severe drawback that it made me look much older! Whilst at thirty seven years of age my head hair was still dark, the beard was heavily tinged with silver and grey, so off it had to come. Although I was prepared to defy the might and bureaucracy of the London fire brigade, I was not prepared to put ten years on to my appearance in order to do so!

CHAPTER 17

Authors Note.

After delivering this book to the printer, it was brought to my attention that I had actually repeated almost a whole chapter from a previous tome (Chapter 3). To make up for this oversight I have included one or two more of my favourite previously unpublished anecdotes.

This story takes place at Soho fire station around the year 1965.

It was around 2am in the morning there were still a group of three or four firemen seated in the recreation room come bar at Soho fire station. We had just decided that perhaps it was about time we got our heads down for the night, for tomorrow was another busy part time working day. The danger hour for the pyromanical rubbish igniters had by now passed. So with a bit of luck the next bells we would hear would be the six short rings on the fire bells at 6-45am the time to get up in the morning bells. In the fire service it pays to be a bit of a pessimistic optimist, because things never quite work out how you think (or hope) they will, and so it turned out this night!. As we uttered the words "Ah well then, time for bed byes" gathered up our glasses to wash them in the sink in the bar, the great big chromium plated fire bell, in the recreation room clamoured out. Ah sod it! No peace for the wicked!. At least we were still up and about, did not have to clamber out of our nice warm snug beds. Always a blessing this, its one of the advantages of being a night owl! One does not have to get out of bed for fire calls quite as often as the early morning larks on the fire station.

Down below in the appliance room the red green and yellow appliance indicators lights upon the ceiling were telling that all three of Soho's machines would attending this call. I was quietly rigging in my fire gear, the pole house doors on the floor above were crashing open and closed. The swishing noise's on the fire poles, then the thump on the pole house mat announced the arrival of the go to bed early larks. There was very little or no conversation, all were quietly rigging in fire gear, the drivers starting up and gunning the appliance motors. The duty man came out of the watch room then shouting above the noise of the road engines of the machines announced Pump Escape Pump and turntable ladders, fire at the Haymarket on Soho's fire ground. The officers in charge of each machine pulled down on the braided cords from the ceiling, each of the big double doors folded back and inwards. The big diesel engines of the three machines roared in unison, then billowing out thick white exhaust smoke, together off into the night we went.

Turn left into Shaftsbury Avenue, carry on down to Piccadilly Circus, here at this time of the morning we take a little liberty with London's traffic. The Haymarket which is a turning directly off of Piccadilly Circus is one way traffic against us, but the three machines swoop around the Circus and turn into the Haymarket against the traffic flow, saving a minute or so on the attendance time.

The address on the call slip was that of a well known national bank, which we found down on the right hand side, just past the Haymarket theatre. At first as the three machines ground to a juddering halt, it seemed that nothing un-toward was happening. The building was a large six storey building, double fronted, and the ground floor the main bank premises was lit up even at this time in the morning. There was no sign of smoke or fire, all were beginning to think just another Mickey call (false alarm), but never-the-less the routine search began. Banks are notoriously difficult to break into for obvious reasons. Nothing deters the LFB though (remember the derogatory acronym from previous stories) London's Finest Burglars. Our problem then arises, that if we simply smash the front door in, if there is then no fire situation, we would then have to wait for possibly hours whilst Mr Plod (the policeman) arrives to take charge of the unsecured premises. So thus we are very subtle, we like to go in and out with the least possible damage.

On this particular fire call I was driving the ladders (turntable) and thus had a certain amount of freedom to join in the search. Since there was no sign of smoke at the brightly lit front of the

bank, the firemen casually moved down the side (it was an end of terraced building) one of the more junior fireman approached me saying he thought he could smell smoke at a side entrance door. I joined him walking down the side of the building where he took me to a wide set of double doors set back three feet or so within the building. At first glance it was obvious that these were outward opening final doors exit doors to a means of escape from fire within the building (a bit like cinema exit doors). Then sure enough not only could I smell smoke, but small wisps of smoke were percolating around the door jambs. Although not an officer at the time, merely senior fireman present, I issued commands. Go and get the Guvnor, lay out a jet (hose line) fetch the breaking in gear. I have no memory of breaking in through this door, but since it was outward opening it would have been quite difficult, most probably we used a large axe on it.

Once we had the two double doors open, something happened which really should have warned me to be on my guard. There was no fierce blast of heat or anything like that, instead the smoke in the passageway wafted backwards gently into the building. Perhaps it was the time of the morning, or the seeming lack of heat in the building, but it put me a relaxed and un-worried mood. Then the large two and three quarter inch diameter main fire fighting hose being laid out on the pavement seemed a bit excessive. I still do not understand why, but even at this stage as we were about to make an entry into the burning building, there was still only myself and two or three junior firemen present at this part of the building.

Being the senior hand I commandeered the jet (branch/nozzle) and entered through the open double doors leading down to the basement. First there was a small landing of around four feet, then a flight of steps of around four or five feet in width leading downwards. Dragging the heavy hose and being assisted by the other fireman I made my way down them, to arrive at yet another landing. The stairs then turned to the right, another flight of around a dozen steps. I was now standing on the basement floor, in a wide passageway leading off away from me. The smoke was not excessive (by Soho fireman's standards that is) you could just about see your hand in front of your face, it was of the light grey smoke, not the nasty thick black stuff, you can bail out with a bucket. Then again by fireman's standards there was not too much heat. Unusually (remember this was two or three o'clock in the morning) there were some side wall lights on glowing very dimly through the smoke, probably because this was a emergency fire exit route.

So there I was alone in this smoke filled passageway, not overly worried, the other firemen were feeding the heavy hose around the two ninety degree bends on the staircase enclosure. I had gone forward ten or fifteen feet down the passageway, all on my own struggling with the hose, shouting back to the other firemen to lighten up the hose when it happened!. I think I was looking backwards at the time, calling out to the other firemen, when I suddenly became aware it seem to be getting brighter. Turning around I looked to my front, and there was the source of the light. Up at ceiling level rolling ominously towards me underneath the ceiling were bright white/orange flames.

In these modern days since the popular film 'Back Draught', everybody and his dog, now knows that this is a flashover, but it's a hell of a lot different when you are in one. By the way as a matter of interest, from my limited experience they (flashover's) don't come with the dramatic backing sound tracks as in the films, IE there is no whistling or roaring noises, they are ominously quiet. This one had taken me utterly and totally by surprise, by my standards there had been no excessive, heat or smoke, no taughtning of the face skin, no tingling of the ears from the heat of the fire, and yet there was the bloody thing rolling over the ceiling to bite me.

Here I am going to digress somewhat. All good firemen hate to retreat (despite what it says in the manuals). When things start to get a bit untenable, put a bit more water on it then wait and see, is (or was) the general rule. Then if that don't work, it is permissible to retreat in an orderly fashion. Another delightful old brigade saying is 'nobody will panic without permission' but upon hearing the word of command 'Panic, Panic like F*ck. On this particular occasion I was not given an option to panic, or get out quick, because the flames were rolling over the ceiling toward me, and my way out involved running up two flights of stairs in thick smoke. Once again another old brigade saying is 'stay low' the last place one wants to be in a situation like this is the staircase enclosure, because it will act like a chimney flue, the flames and hot gases all rising up inside it.

So not necessary by choice but through pure instinct, I dropped down onto one knee and opened up the hand controlled branch fitted with a three quarter inch nozzle, and aimed it at the ceiling about ten or twelve feet in front of me, then kept it moving from side to side and backwards and

forwards. In theory, if not in practise, when aimed at the correct angle, the solid jet of water breaks up then cascading back down from the ceiling as spray which should absorb the heat and cool the fire down. Fortunately for me on this rather precarious occasion it actually worked in practice. Meanwhile the two junior firemen above me had been driven back by the sudden surge of rising heat in the staircase enclosure, and had raised the alarm of a firemen trapped (myself). Unbeknown to me, outside the building in the street above was the scene of frenetic activity. A fresh line of hose was being laid out, men were rigging in Proto breathing apparatus all getting ready for the grand rescue attempt.

How long all this went on for, how long I grimly hung on and kept that heavy jet swinging backwards and forwards I cannot remember. Only that when I was eventually joined by other firemen, there seemed to be an inch or two of water all over the basement floor. This was I think deemed by them to be excessive water damage, but I think my emotional, hyper, and expletive rich comments, upon their absence when most wanted, warned them to keep quite on the subject. Instead they said sincerely and quietly "Jesus Dave we thought you was gonor", which I thought a rather apt remark at the time, being as I was standing on the top of two inches of water.

It would be interesting to talk to the learned doctors whatever on this subject, because I think that abnormally high adrenalin surges tends to affect the memory, because I certainly had one hell of a adrenalin surge that night. I can only now remember that the fire was in a storeroom at the end of the passageway, and that it had spalled most of the plaster off of the walls. It was in fact a very severe fire. The station officer in charge had actually classified it as a four pump fire, persons reported (the person reported involved, being myself). I do not remember much else about that particular fire, other than I was very fortunate to walk away from it practically un-singed.

*

At Hammersmith fire station one night duty we had insufficient riders to man both fire engines. This then entailed arranging with divisional staff for two firemen from other fire stations in the division having surplus riders to travel to Hammersmith to make up our shortage of riders, this is known as stand-by duties. IE to stand-by at another fire station. At 1815hours (6-15pm) we were informed via the telephone that two firemen had been ordered from Feltham fire station to stand-by at Hammersmith for the night.

Now Feltham fire station is right on the periphery of the London fire brigade area. It is directly under the flight path at Heathrow airport. At times when the wind is in the right direction, to stand in their drill yard is not recommended for those of a nervous disposition, for it seems that the gigantic Jumbo jets, merely skim inches above their drill tower as they land at the airport. After a period of time at this fire station Feltham fireman develop certain peculiarities. They have this ability to suspend conversation, and carry on exactly where they left off minutes later, (aircraft noise) some of them could even lip read allegedly!. Also when engaged in conversation (even away from their fire station) they tended to intermittently look up at the sky and cover their ears with the palm of the hand, by sheer habit. So to sum it all up, certain allowances have to be made, for those firemen stationed at Feltham fire station. So as my tale continues it can be understood that whilst I was initially slightly perplexed by the somewhat peculiar behaviour of these two stand-by firemen, being as they were from Feltham fire station, I duly made allowances.

I was seated the station office at around 1915 hours (7-15pm) when there was a knock on the door and two firemen both in their mid twenties entered and announced fireman Smith, fireman Brown to stand-by from Feltham Guv. "Ok lads" I replied, "have you been told which machines you are riding" I queried, "yes Guv" and with that they wandered off out of the office. It was at supper time with the whole watch seated around the mess table, that I was able to view them fully. They seemed a couple of nice clean wholesome young lads, A bit overawed by the present company, Hammersmith firemen on the whole being a rather reprobate bunch. Then Feltham fire station being on the periphery of the brigade we did not see or socialise with firemen there much, so these two lads were amongst total strangers. They were pleasant enough and would answer direct questions, but otherwise kept their own company.

At around 2100hours (9pm) they came into the office and asked to be issued with their bedding, stand-by firemen draw bedding from station stocks. Now by Hammersmith standards this was definately an early night, but then these two lads were from Feltham fire station!. The Sub officer took them to issue their bedding and show them where to put down their folding trestle beds,

alongside the snooker table. From this point on, it began to get interesting!. There was a group of around four Hammersmith firemen playing snooker at the time, with total disregard to these firemen, the two Feltham blokes began to put down and make up their beds. It had already been observed that the two Feltham, guy's were not exactly yer run of the mill firemen. Everywhere they went on the station they went together, never more than six inches apart. Allegedly, and only allegedly they had been seen actually holding hands together!, but then again allowances were made for their quaint Feltham ways, two country lads up in the big city. What happened next though began to worry the hard bitten Hammersmith boys. They put down the two trestle beds in the corner of the snooker room, then with no embarrassment whatsoever patently and blatantly pushed the two together to make a double bed, and proceeded to lay the blankets over, also as a double bed.

The game of snooker was brought to a hurried finish, by the losers suddenly declaring that their opponents ten point lead, with only seven balls left on the table was insurmountable. (One needs to know the game of snooker, to see the humour in this remark). In the mess room even the inexorable game of contract whist came to a halt, as the snooker players bursting in saying incredulously "Here lads you are never going to believe this". One by one the firemen invented excuses to go into the snooker room to check for themselves. The two Feltham firemen by now lying side by side on the double bed said nothing, just giving gentle smiles.

A council of war was called, "I'm not having this" said a voice, "what happens if he gets fed up with turking his mate and wants to have a go a me instead, I won't be safe in my own bed at night". "Its disgusting" said another voice, who's renowned sexual exploits would probably extend as far as sleeping with a donkey, as long as it was female. Yet another voice was demanding "there must be something in Brigade Orders about not allowing two's up in a bed surely guvnor" Shaking my head I had to admit if there was, I had never seen it.

The war council arrived at a decision, Feltham fire station would be phoned up, to get the background on these two deviants. The one sided telephone conversation was avidly listened to by all in the mess and went something as follows. "Feltham, is that Feltham?, well its Hammersmith here, those two stand-by firemen you sent us tonight are they alright". "Yeh yeh", (pause for response) "no not that kind of alright, I mean are they straight". "No no, that kind of straight, not straight as a die! I mean are they bent?". (Pause) "For Christ's sake Feltham you know what I mean bent, bent as in twisted, a couple of perverts". (Pause) "Ok Ok then, I will make it crystal clear, are they a couple of f**king poofers". "No"? (pause) "well they must be! do they always sleep together in a double bed at your fire station". "They don't"! (pause) "yes they have just made up a double bed in the snooker room". "Whadaya mean, what have we done to them, we ain't done nothing to them". (Pause) "Whadaya mean, you've heard all about us deviant lot at Hammersmith".

Here there was a prolonged break in the conversation, the Hammersmith man on the telephone duly explaining and signalling to all gathered in the mess room, by pointing upwards with his finger and then at the telephone handset, saying "747 coming in to land".

Conversation is resumed

Hammersmith fireman "Listen mate we ain't touched em, couldn't even if we wanted to, cause they've been holding each others hands all night long.

(Pause) "How do I know about even when they go to the toilet I don't follow them in there do I? Anyway I wouldn't dare to, cause it would be two against one wouldn't it" Again a long pause, then the Hammermith fireman replaced the receiver onto the cradle saying resignedly "it's no good Feltham's just picked up a shout"

This as it turned out was without a doubt a superb wind-up (practical joke), the problem was that I was not sure who was winding up who. Was it the Feltham firemen putting the fear of god, into their two young stand-by firemen, telling them they had to watch their bums, because the Hammersmith lot were a load of deviants. Had the two young firemen, all on their own thought to put one over on the Hammersmith mob. Or was it a combined Feltham gag IE the whole bloody fire station were in on it!. I can only say whoever thought up the gag it worked a treat, the only problem was we had a pretty busy night (fire call wise) and I don't even know if the two young firemen slept together at all that night.

*

This story takes place in around the year 1964, whilst I was a fireman stationed at Chelsea fire station in London. I was still single in these days and along with the other un-married firemen at Chelsea I used to socialize in what was in those days the swinging Kings Road (Chelsea fire station was in the middle of the Kings Road). My own watch with one or two notable exceptions were married men, which curtailed their activities somewhat. Whereas I lived in Fulham a mere ten minute bus ride away from the fire station, and the swinging Kings Road was like a honey pot to a bee, the bee being myself. On my off duty days I would sometimes arrange to meet the guys from the off going day watch, and go for a drink with them. When I first began to meet them socially, not having known them for to long. The three of them and myself met at the fire station, and they suggested we go for a drink down at a pub called the Bunch of Grapes in the Kings Road. Whilst agreeing to go with them, I was somewhat surprised at the choice of drinking venue, for I knew the Bunch of Grapes to be a raging Poofsters pub. Never-the-less accompanied by three other strapping firemen, I should hopefully come to no harm.

In the lounge bar of the pub we stood as a group clutching our pints of beer. At that time we wore a type of blue uniform shirt under our civilian jacket that denoted to the public either policemen or firemen off duty. Since we were patently not policemen, the other three were definitely un-policemen like in appearance and manner, and myself being a bit on the short side. Now it is well known that those people of a neutral gender, do rather like men in uniforms, or conversely a bit of rough, which two of the other firemen certainly qualified as! So inevitably once again just like Bee's to a honey pot the Poofsters, were drawn to us.

Two of my new found firemen friends were now deeply engrossed in conversation with the Poofsters, I began to worry. From that point on we purchased no more beer, It was all purchased for us by the Bee's around the honey pot. I think around the third or fourth pint, and the time now being about eight thirty, I began to panic somewhat. George Grinham the biggest and allegedly toughest fireman had just agreed with the Poofsters, that we were all going back to their house for a party. I think my mind was fully occupied, I knew only to well how these party's finished up, was I not a street wise Fulham lad!. Lest any reader should get the impression that I lacked the spirit of adventure or was faint hearted. I should like to point out that these were not your effeminate petite mincer types, oh dear me no!. These were your mucho macho homo's and bloody great big one's at that! these guys don't receive, they give!. The star of the Poofster crowd was all dressed up in his biker gear, black leather jacket and trousers, black leather kiss me quick hat, with a silver skull and crossbones on it. I was not one hundred percent sure, but I was convinced he kept smiling at me! and I was long enough in the tooth to know what the implications of that were!

As I was mentally working out how I could get out of this without losing face or honour, or more importantly ending the night, with my posterior Virgo intact. One of the other firemen said quietly to me "Dave we are just going for a piss". As my mind was engaged on other more important matters to hand, I just replied "yes OK". Then very quietly and meaningfully he repeated saying "Dave we are all going for a piss, that means you as well". As my gaze took in the worrying sight of the Poofsters buying stacks of bottles of spirit and beer for the party, I merely stated "but I don't want a piss". Then as I turned to face him I could see him looking deadly seriously at me, whilst at the same time glancing over my shoulder. Then myself at the same time hearing in the background, the landlords voice telling the Poofsters, that will be one hundred and seventy five pounds please sir, or some other at that period of time, astronomical figure. I then suddenly realised that I really did need to urinate, quite badly in fact.

In the gents toilet the other three were grinning like Cheshire cats, saying to me "Jesus Christ Dave what are you thick or something", adding ominously "your not bent are you, wanting to stay there with that lot". Needless to say I was very relieved at this outcome, saying probably and quite unnecessarily "what happens next then?". To which I got the simultaneous and to them patently obvious reply "we all piss off out of the back way, and run like F*ck". In such idle pleasures and pastimes, did off duty firemen at Chelsea fire station, spend their leisure hours down the swinging Kings Road. Upon reflection all these years later, then looking back upon it, it seemed an awfully dangerous method of obtaining free beer!.

PS. The Chelsea and Knightsbridge Guards barracks being quite nearby, I suspect that quite a few guardsmen got up to this particular little bit of mischief.

*

George Grinham was a bit of an enigma, he kind of just appeared on the scene at the opening of the new Chelsea fire station. He was part of the additional manpower required to crew up the new hose lorry allocated to Chelsea at the changeover from the old Brompton fire station. Upon reflection he was undoubtedly what would be termed a throw out. Some station officer in some far distant station, upon being told he had to transfer one fireman to A8 Chelsea, without hesitation chose our George to go, banished from the station officers realm hopefully forever. Although the transfer increased George's travelling distance considerably, I think he also was pleased to go, to get from under in brigade parlance, put distance between all his previous crimes and misdemeanours. These transfers allegedly give a man a fresh start in life, a clean crime sheet. But of course the old jungle drums soon start beating, the internal telephone wires burn hot, with the result, as if we had not already guessed it, our George was a bit of a reprobate.

(Note. Get from under, derived from the brigade standard warning call when dropping an object from aloft. 'Stand from Under' an old navy term I think. Thus derived the saying 'Get from Under' IE. book gone, don't hang about, lest the falling sh*t hits you on the head)

George was always clean shaven and smartly dressed, he stood about five feet ten inches was of a muscular and trim build, in fact if viewed from afar would seem to be the ideal fireman. Unfortunately it was not his appearance that was the problem. George despite his winning smile was one of life's incorrigible rogues. It was not that he chose to be nasty or vicious, in fact he was quite benign and good humoured, it was just that things tend to happen to George that did not happen to your average fireman. His nature was such, that if you bet him a shilling he could not scrub out the appliance room with a toothbrush, he would do it!. Not because he wanted the shilling, but just to prove to you that he could do it. If necessary, and with the right incentive, George could probably even bear excruciating pain without complaint. He could and would be totally single minded, he would no doubt have made a good SAS soldier, if not for his peculiar ability of never knowing quite when to 'stand from under'.

George to my mind is the guy that always gets caught with the smoking gun in his hand. Like the time the whole watch was involved in hoisting the leading fireman's bicycle up the hose hoist, then when it crashed to the ground completely bugging it up, it was George that was in the frame for the dastardly deed. It was George that came up with the brilliant idea, he having acquired some flash powder, of frightening the sh*t out of the junior bucks by igniting the flash powder in an ashtray in the middle of the night in the dormitory. Then when the resulting conflagration, scorched a huge burn mark in the brand new carpet, it was George that was left holding the not so hypothetical smoking ashtray, when the defecation hit the fan. It was George that had the inspiration to unscrew the saddle off of the (unpopular) leading fireman's bicycle and fill the frame with sand, so that the not much liked individual would have to work twice as hard just to get to work in the morning. The theory being, that the leading fireman thus being knackered upon arrival at the fire station and giving us the troops some peace. It was George that was in the frame, when the sand bugged up the crank bearings and the bike ground to sudden and expensive halt.

George had I think a wife and four kids to support, therefore he was permanently short of funds. He also seemed to have at least one mistress on the side, although I do not think mistress would be the applicable word in his case, for mistress is normally associated with kept women. In Georges case this would deffinatly not apply, Gigolo springs more to mind. Although I never pried into his private life, he must at least been good at one thing, judging by his nefarious off duty activities.

A fireman on another shift who happened to live next door to George, they both living in fire brigade accommodation told his own story of George. It appeared that his weekly milk bill from the milkman, had soared considerably. When he queried this with the milkman, he was informed that he had ordered an extra pint of milk every other day. The firemen went on to insist that he had not ordered extra milk nor had he received any. Very assuredly the milkman informed him, "oh yes you did, Mr Grinham next door (George) most definitely told me, that you wanted an extra pint every other day". This somewhat gullible milkman who had refused to continue to deliver milk to George's house, because he had not paid his bills, really should have known better!. This little tale brought a smile to my face, I would not had been surprised had George carried out this little scam, down the whole terrace of the houses, thus avoiding irksome milk bills. He merely had to

wander down the street early in the morning picking up the extra pints he had ordered.

The watch room in the new Chelsea fire station, was vastly different from the one at the old Brompton station. Here it was part of the general station office on the ground floor at the front of the fire station, and looked out directly onto the Kings Road. It had large clear glass windows at the front, and looking out into the appliance room. The duty watch keeper (the duty man) instead of being ensconced all on his own in a little glass cubicle, was now part of the hubbub of general station life. As in all things this had its downside, instead of being left in peace to read his Beano and Dandy comics, or the vast library of illicit top shelf magazines invariably stashed away in fire station watch rooms, he now tended to get roped in for little mundane office routines. It also meant of course that the duty man being alone in the watch room/office all alone in the early hours of the morning. Thus the office staff had very few secrets they could keep from us. MI5 or MI6 whatever it is, had nothing on us, we could get the guvnor's desk drawer open quicker than he could, and he had a key to it.

It was one o'clock in the morning on a balmy summer's night, Chelsea fire station was still wide awake. In the brightly lit watch room, the Venetian blinds were up and the sliding windows open seeking a cooling breeze. In the watch room were around six night owl firemen keeping the duty man company, and watching the world go by in the Kings Road outside. George being the second duty man, and due to take over the watch room at three o'clock, was getting some sleep in an adjacent bunkroom. Into the hubbub of conversation, came an effeminate voice, with a speech impediment "hello lads how's ffings". There at the open window head and shoulders in view, was a small slightly balding man with a great big smile on his face. He carried on to say "wwhere's George, he told me he would be on duty tonight".

Immediately alarm bells began to ring in the other firemen's minds. It was known that George had been seen drinking in the company of this particular little shirt lifter, in the six bells pub opposite the fire station. Now on the face of it, it would appear that George had effected a liaison with him, in the wee small hours of the morning, when George was on his own in the watch room. "Which George is that then mate" came back the droll dry reply. The reply from the window confirmed their worst thoughts, "you know, George the good looking boy". "Oh that George" was the ominous response "is he a mate of yours then". "Oh yes" said the little shirt lifter, "me and George are very very good friends". Who would have believed it! we had all heard the rumours of various soldiers of the Guards regiments from the nearby Chelsea and Knightsbridge barrack selling their bums down the Kings Road, but a fireman and one of our own! this was beyond the pale.

From here on in, I think things got a bit vicious malicious whatever, because the next fireman's voice was saying. "Well George is asleep in bed at the moment in the bunkroom, would you like to go in and see him". "Oh yeth please" said our little man at the window, unable to conceal his delight. The outside door to the station was unlocked, and the little man led being firmly grasped at the elbow. He was led to the door to the bunkroom, and told George is in there asleep. The door was opened quietly and the little man pushed unceremoniously into the room. For a while all was quite, then a clatter as the little man crashed into an unseen something. Then a click, and a small bar of light appearing underneath the door, told that the room light had been switched on. Then, then, we cannot be sure of this because it was somewhat muffled. At first a voice was heard that seemed to say "hello Georgie surprise". Then a voice that was most definitely George's saying piercingly "what the f**king hell are you doing here". Then, and this opinion varies somewhat, a sound that sounded very much like a pound of sausages slamming down on a butchers slab.

At this point some of us were already beginning to think that we had seriously misjudged our George. We were now giving thoughts as to getting out from under, and being damn quick about it too!. As we scampered up the stairs back to the first floor mess room, the door to the bunkroom crashed open. The little man emerged from within clutching his nose with bright red claret trickling through the fingers of his hand. "You bathstards, you bathstards he was crying out aloud. "Heh Piffle what's he complaining about" said a voice, "it was nothing to do with us was it? we didn't make him go into the bunkroom did we? he went of his own free will". "Yeh" said another voice suppressing laughter, "that will teach you not to try and get your evil way, with our mate George"

We had just made the first floor level of the station, there to exit into the mess room. When echoing around the stairwell enclosure was heard Georges loud and extremely irate voice, in a tone that could only be described as demonic and hell bent for retribution. "Right you b*stards just you wait, who let that f**king little deviant into my bunkroom". I freely admit we turned off all the

lights on the first floor, then since I being the canteen manager held the only key to the bar, we all went in there and locked the door behind us.

Later, much later, when discussing the evenings events and it was agreed by all, that any doubts about George's sexual orientation had been fully dispersed. It was agreed with no dissensions that George was without doubt, a red blooded heterosexual male, just like Genghis Khan was. Some weeks later over the road in the Six Bells pub, George was to tell us. That if the sappy little poofster wanted to buy him beer all night long, that he George was prepared to sit there and drink it, but that's as far as it went, and as far as it was ever likely to go. Then laconically going on to add "anyway the birds do it all the time with the fella's don't they".

*

Finally and lastly, one of my very favourite little fire anecdotes, to leave you as the acting fraternity say you should be left, laughing and shouting for more.

Hammersmiths pump with myself riding in charge had been ordered on to a four pump fire on to neighbouring Actons fire ground. We did not normally attend calls this far onto their fire ground and had quite a considerable distance to travel, so unless a further make up message was received would expect most of the serious firefighting to be over by the time we arrived. As we expected on our arrival most of the flames had been knocked down, although the building which was a small semi-detached dwelling was still heavily smoke logged. I made contact with the station officer in charge, who informed me that the severe fire in the back room had been extinguished, and that he still had breathing apparatus men searching the building. I enquired if there were persons still involved, "no" he said shaking his head, "but those two young lads over there" indicating two boys about seven and eleven years of age "have told me that there is a cat and a litter of young kittens in one of the upstairs bedrooms, we are searching for those". Shortly after this conversation a trio of breathing apparatus wearer's burst out from the smoky building bearing triumphantly the cat and its kittens apparently unscathed, to deposit them in the two young boys arms.

Some ten or fifteen minutes later, after I had been into the building and inspected the fire damage and was again outside talking to Actons fire officer. I noticed the same two young lads standing subdued and to one side, waiting quietly as if wanting to talk to us. I spoke to the oldest boy saying "yes young man can I help you". He in turn replied "yes mister its our house that has caught fire, is it badly damaged?". I tried to temper the bad news as much as possible, but bad news it was. I explained to them that the back room had been virtually gutted, and that the kitchen and remainder of the ground floor damaged by heat and smoke. As I spoke to them their faces grew longer and grimmer, I assumed that their mother when she returned would most likely blame them for the fire. Then the older boy spoke up saying "what about the fridge in the kitchen was that alright". Now it became clear to me, their lunch or soft drinks whatever would be in the refrigerator, and that's what they wanted. So with a smile on my face I explained to them, that because fridges were designed to keep the cold in, they also served the purpose of keeping heat out, that if they told me what they wanted, I would go and check to see if it was still salvageable. The oldest boys face now beamed with delight as he exclaimed "oh thanks mister, me and my brother thought that being as the house has burnt down, we might as well go fishing, and that's where we keep the maggots (bait) in the fridge".

EPILOGUE

This is my very last book and therefore my very last epilogue. After more than nine hundred pages spread over three books, enough is enough! Even now, I don't consider myself so much an author, as a teller of stories. Early on in my fire service career, I became fascinated by the stories of earlier firemen when they were on continuous duty and allowed one day off in fourteen. I also enjoyed reading occasionally printed stories about the scrapes and mischief they got up to. Like many other serving firemen of my time, I was always going to write a book about my experiences when I retired, well I did it, not one book but three! Although my books are informative and somewhat humorous, I realise in retrospect that they are in fact chapters of social history. In one hundred years time, the name Dave Wilson could be renowned in fire service historic circles.

In fact, some of the tales I tell have a historic ring about them already. I remember early on in my career, standing by at Knightsbridge Fire Station in London and being very much bemused by the fact that on a Sunday lunchtime the station officer (pint of beer to hand) would play the piano and all on duty would gather round for a singsong. Later in my career, when a station officer myself, I would entertain all on duty in the wee small hours (can of beer to hand) by accompanying a singsong on the guitar. The same station officer (again myself) had been known to entertain the troops on boring relief's by playing his mouth organ. I very much doubt this would happen in modern times.

I believe that in the present day fire service, the likes of myself are called Dinosaurs. The problem with Dinosaurs is that they are extinct i.e. they just don't make them like that any more, especially ones that play the guitar and mouth organ. Neither can the modern fireman hope to emulate a dinosaur's workload (i.e. three four pumpers on a busy Saturday night duty) since central heating replaced open fires, oil heaters, and candle lighting etc. Then, there was the requirement of the old timers to be able to eat smoke! This by the way, was not a macho thing, it was just that it would take up to thirty-five minutes to service the old Proto (oxygen) breathing sets after use; doing this three or four times a day eats into one's stand-down time.

I think one of my minor regrets of being at Hammersmith for the nine weeks of the strike was that we never did get to build one of those nice little huts we saw pictured outside so many of the County Fire Stations. Being a bit of an outdoors camping man myself, I would loved to have built one of those. It would have been the best hut in the whole of London. I had mentally planned it all out. Sadly, of course, it was not to be; one just cannot build huts in the middle of Hammersmith Broadway, it would have been totally impracticable. Instead, I settled for my nice, warm, station officers room up on the second floor.

*

Finally, I must stress that my tales of the nine week strike apply only to my own experiences at Hammersmith Fire Station. Many years later, when researching for my first book, To Ride A Red Engine, I was talking to a station officer at Lambeth Headquarters. He told me that he had been a probationer fireman during the period of the strike in 1977, somewhere in the 'B' division, and that he considered that they were the WORST nine weeks of his life. So, please do not send any correspondence saying, "IT WASN'T LIKE THAT AT ALL"; because at Hammersmith IT WAS!