

DIRTY DICK'S

(A crew layover)

Old Tom the doorman of the Kensington Palace Hotel in London, dressed in his working uniform of quasi-military elegance complete with medals and top-hat, had told me that a very nice place to go for lunch was Dirty Dicks' pub near the Underground Station at Liverpool Street. He had told me that the pub served typically British food from a huge buffet and that I would not be disappointed. Just take the number 9 bus and ask the conductor to put you off at Dirty Dick's.

There was a bus stop on the High Street, just across the road from our hotel, and in no time at all a number 9 bus came along. I had no difficulty in finding the pub which from the outside looked not much different from any other, except as you approached, you could hear the buzz of friendly conversation interspersed with laughter and cheerful bonhomie. I would much rather have been with one or two friends as I preferred company in this type of situation. It was a bit of a surprise to me as I entered to see the enormous buffet, along the left side of the very large dining room and on the right side of the room, resting on trestles, was a row of huge oaken barrels of a variety of sweet wines from Spain. These sheries I later discovered, were of the finest quality and aged in oak had an aroma and taste not usually found in an ordinary pub. At the far end of the room were a few small tables and chairs but most of the large crowd of customers were enjoying their lunch standing at high tiny tables.

Many of the foods on offer you would not find in a buffet in Canada. There were, spread out on this twenty foot long counter, the usual boiled and baked hams where a server dressed in white cover-alls would carve you your portion; further along great joints of cold roast beef, leg of pork, geese, turkey, capons and game, then next, were a selection of pies; veal and ham pie, steak and kidney, pork pies with various flavors and many more. There was an array of salads and pickles, piccalilli, pickled onions and chutneys like I had never seen; the sea-food was typically British, great pans of jellied eels, smoked eels, winkles, cockles, clams, mussels, buttered shrimp, crab, lobster and some I could not recognize, all displayed on a table of crushed ice.

The luncheon crowds pressed up to the buffet, when served they passed along to the interior of the room and paid for their meal, found a free spot and ate their meal and all the while the loud hum of cheerful chatting and friendly banter. I tried a little of many of the choices and was pleasantly surprised at the modest price. I think that was the finest meal I had had up until that time, though the jellied eel was a bit too gross for my taste. In the line-up I had struck up a conversation with one of the locals and I found myself at his table having my lunch. As he was leaving, he said with a wink, "Have you had a drink at the downstairs bar?" I was about to ask him details when he left with a smile on his face. I had finished my meal and as I was feeling a bit thirsty, I started for the narrow stairway which led to the lower level. The downstairs bar was a long narrow room with a bar at the far end. The ceiling and walls of the room were covered with folding money, letters and postage stamps from every country in the world. I spent a few minutes looking at this amazing graffiti and discovered stamps from tiny countries which I had never heard of, there was even a postcard from Tonga.

As I neared the bar my eyes were drawn to a board about two feet square beside the bar, on which was fastened the stretched and desiccated, snarling body of a dead black cat. A small sign was attached which said, "stroke the cat for luck". There were other dried out small animals about the rafters of the ceiling, which appeared to be rats and mice. They had been there for a long time. I observed the barman in conversation with an unusually attired black man, with a scotch and soda in his hand. The customer was dressed in what in some circles might be thought of as posh, upper middle-class formal wear. His shoes were black patent with yellow spats; black pin-striped pants and a black city jacket; white starched shirt with an air-force striped tie. A furred umbrella over his arm and a bowler topped off his outfit. One foot was resting on the brass bar-rail.

As I approached, the barman continued to encourage the black person to stroke the cat for luck, while he told the story of Dick the tavern owner in 1798, on the eve of his marriage to a beautiful young girl thought he had been jilted only to find to his horror, that his bride-to-be had died in a terrible accident and from that time had never washed or cleaned up his bar. He had also kept the bridal chamber exactly as it was, where a glorious banquet had been arranged to celebrate the nuptials. The cat, a symbol of bad luck if crossing your path at night, had crossed Dick's path when he was at the height of his suffering, had viciously clubbed it to death and stretched it's carcass as it appeared to this very day. As everybody knows however, touching a

“dead” black cat often brings astonishing good luck. It struck me at the time that Paddy, the barman, was a very persuasive storyteller.

The stranger may have been oddly dressed but he was no fool, and it took quite a while for Paddy to convince the customer to stroke the cat. The crowd in the pub had been listening to Paddy’s line and sensing a laugh had gathered closer to the bar. The smile on the man’s face was a nervous one and now it was obvious that he must have wished he was somewhere else. He had reached the point where he could no longer vacillate and must be a sport. What on earth harm could there be in a dead cat, a bag of bones two hundred years old. He leaned forward to touch the cat while at the same time the Irishman pressed on a little switch beneath the bar. Suddenly the cat gave a leap from its rack and at the same time a fearful scream came out of the cat’s jaws, followed in a split second by an agonized scream which came from the black mans throat. The African stared and I could swear he paled but quickly he gained composure and joined in the general laughter of the crowd at the bar, most of whom had been caught at one time or other.

Well we ordered more drinks and still tittering realized that paddy had more wisdom to dispense. “Yes Gentlemen” he said, and pointing to a small door in the wall, continued, “Behind that wall is the bridal chamber, exactly as it was all those years ago, and if you want to have a look at that beautiful chamber, it will cost you only one shilling which will be donated to the RSPCA, cat division.” He continued to tell us more history of Dick and the London of the late eighteenth century. He kept us all entranced as he held our attention as only an Irish storyteller can. The little door in the wall looked more and more fascinating and, in a while,, I found a shilling and putting it on the counter said “Paddy, I’ll have a shilling’s worth”.

Paddy took out the big brass key and unfastened the lock. I stood in front of the door and opened the trap. The door flew open and on the shelf was an old porcelain chamber pot, a thunder mug, a piss pot dirty and cracked and a sign which read “Don’t tell the others” I stared for a few minutes muttering “very interesting” then closed the hatch.

There was an immediate clamour from the others while they plonked down their shillings.



*P.S. the dead animals were in fact clever fakes which in the subdued lighting
looked very real. T. T. (1420)*