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# LONDON'S HOMELESS AND THOSE WHO PRETEND

BY ALEXANDER BARON

Recently I encountered two punks begging in the Charing Cross Road. They were accosting people and asking if they had 'any spare change.' There is a lot of this going on in London nowadays, presumably they and many others are masquerading as 'homeless and hungry with no Social Security.' I say masquerading because these two were both smartly dressed, one sported a haircut which must have set him back a week's benefit. Doubtless, others make more convincing mendicants, neglecting to shave, wash, looking generally unkempt and scruffy. Some bring dogs with them to work shifts on certain underground stations. Then there are the women who walk around the streets pushing snotty nosed brats in pushchairs. Invariably bare legged and sad faced they accost strangers asking for money to feed the baby. Some even have the audacity to prey on people sitting in cars. I say prey because beggars they may be, but down and outs they are most definitely not. One such creature spat and swore like a navy

when she heard me tell a woman she was about to approach not to give her any money. No, these are not down and outs. If they are hungry it's because they spend their food money on booze and fags. When darkness falls they disappear off the streets, returning either to their caravans in the case of the women, or to the pubs in the case of the punks.

Such lead swingers and parasites as these are growing in number weekly, cashing in on the generous nature of the ever-giving British public. No doubt Geoffrey Dickens and some other right-wing Tories would deal with them most severely, and for once I would agree. But the real problem of the punk beggars and didikoi con women is that they are in danger of eroding the public's growing awareness of the real and increasing problem of homelessness and destitution in the capital.

Likewise, walking around central London on a Saturday night one will encounter thousands of people roughing it, but

most of these are obviously either the worse for drink or stranded night clubbers. There are literally hundreds in and around Euston station, many with sleeping bags. This is one night a week, and at the height of summer it's no big deal. But come back at three am during the week when the night clubbers aren't around, and when the phoney down and outs are at home tucked up in bed. You'll see then that there is still a very real problem.

In a disused subway off Tottenham Court Road Underground Station I found several people sleeping in boxes. At ten to three on a Saturday morning I approached one such wretch. He was wide awake and smiled at me as I approached and asked him if I could take a few photographs. When I asked him if he'd mind talking, answering a few questions, he acquiesced incoherently.

He sat up cross legged, drinking beer from a plastic beaker. He had a carton of milk, some tobacco and rolling papers, but nothing much else. Cartons and bits and pieces of food were strewn about the floor, most of it stale, and all of it obviously scavenged from litter bins: bits of Macdonalds, water melon pips . . . the stench was sickening. He was naked, wrapped in a coarse blanket, and scratching himself all over. He was bearded and lightly tattooed. Although he can't have been totally out of his box, I was unable to get much sense out of him. He told me his name was To-rack, with the stress on the last syllable. "Tariq, Terry?," I asked him what nationality that was. I fancied he replied "Welsh," but couldn't be sure. I asked him how long he'd been living down here. He seemed to understand the question, but again I couldn't make out his answer. When I asked him who looked after him I received a half coherent reply: "Well, no \*\*\* looks after me." He said also that he drank a lot of beer, but that was all I managed to get out of him. Most people would not regard him as a wino. I spoke to him a bit longer, but soon conceded defeat.

Somewhat sheepishly I left him a pound coin, said goodbye and left. I didn't disturb the occupant asleep in the box nearer the main subway, nor venture up the steps to where others slept. In the main subway were a few dossers and regular winos. Across the road was a rastafarian who has taken to sleeping in a shop doorway. I



Nick, a 46 year old, who has been homeless for 15 years, pulling on a dog end. Photo by Andrew North.



have seen him walking about talking to himself.

The following Monday I met To-rack as I walked down Tottenham Court Road at ten past six in the morning. He was carrying two cider bottles. He recognised me, and where he had been incomprehensible on our previous meeting, this time he managed to string enough words together to tap me for some money. He was dressed in a scruffy coat and jeans, but wore no socks.

It is possible to argue that the winos have brought it on themselves, but the black man and To-rack are obviously not fit to be left on their own. Neither of them are dangerous, at least not to anyone but themselves. Indeed the rasta seemed quite lucid one night in the fish and chip shop, and To-rack was very friendly. They should neither of them be detained against there will in any sort of institution, but surely if they had access to some sort of shelter where they could bath and get a change of clothes, eat a decent meal and perhaps even get a bed for the night, that wouldn't be too much. Would it?

A recent survey estimates that there are some 120,000 to 130,000 homeless people living in London. Of course, the above are examples of extreme cases. Most homeless have a roof of sorts over their heads, but the fact that a mentally ill



Bedding down for a cold night's sleep. Photo by Mark Edwards.

man can be left to fend for himself in a stinking rat infested hole like the subway under Centrepoint should shame us all in an age when we are digging a tunnel under the English Channel and preparing to send a manned expedition to Mars.

The solution is simple - money. Of course, the money is never available, except for launching high powered advertising campaigns to sell off the rest of the family

silver or to give further tax cuts to the country's scandalously underpaid captains of industry. How much money would it take to give To-rack and the young black man a decent home? When the Chancellor has finished juggling with his figures and wonders how he can give away £8 billion without overheating the economy or stocking up inflation, he might spare a thought for these two unfortunates.

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