

CHAPTER 5 - 3, COMMERCIAL STREET, CINDERFORD

ANOTHER NEW HOUSE

What a day of excitement that was moving into another new home. I should think it was the most inconvenient house I have ever been in, but at the time it seemed to us children so different and so exciting. The front of the place was a double fronted shop with plate glass windows and dad's name in raised gold letters across the top.

Going through the shop you came to the main living room which had a black-leaded cooking range, table and chairs for meals, two armchairs and a sofa. Behind this again was a scullery with a wash boiler, sink and cold-water tap. Behind the scullery the ground rose steeply and to get to ground level again you had to climb seventeen stone steps. The lavatory was at the bottom of the steps and the fuel store at the top.

Our shop was one of the middle ones of four shops and to get to the back entrance you had to climb a steep ash path at the end of the row, open a tall gate and go along the path until you found your own steps. The roof of the scullery was of glass and the light coming through this roof also lighted the living room through a window in the scullery wall.



[No. 3 is the one after the shop with the awning. The Empire Cinema, mentioned later, was built next to the flag pole – an unusually quiet day for Cinderford. The Soldiers and Sailors Club is the triangular building on the corner, next to the gas light. Victoria Street to the right. [Another photo c1925 looking from further along in the Triangle.](#)]

In winter it was not at all unusual for snow thawing on the main roof to come crashing through the glass into the scullery. The main employment in the district in those days was coal mining and it was the custom to deliver the household's coal at the front door. When a load of coal was ordered it was delivered on the pavement at our front door. The only one of our household who was capable of moving the coal was my father. We would shovel coal into a wheelbarrow and Dad, guided by one of us, would push it along the pavement, up the steep path along the top path and tip it through the shutter hole into the coal shed. From here it had to be carried in pails down to the living room. Coal was our only source of heating and cooking, and there was also the problem of disposing of the ashes. These had to be taken to the top of the steps every morning and carried through once a week and put out for collection.

We did have gas lighting and we found it fascinating to see the delicate woven silk mantels that were fitted into the ceiling fixtures. You pulled a chain and applied a burning match. One they had been lit you had to be careful not to touch the mantel or it disintegrated like a moth's wing.

The first day was taken up putting in the furniture and there was a procession of men going up and down the stairs between the shop and the living room carrying bedsteads and mattresses. The novelty of having a broad pavement on our doorstep excited us and we ran across the pavement and up the lane, down the steps and out through the front door again.

The shop on our left sold groceries and the owner and his wife regarded us with frank disapproval. It turned out that they were also the owners and the people to whom we paid the rent. I expect they saw us as potential wreckers of their property. The shop on the other side was a dairy and the one beyond that, a greengrocer.

Up in the ground behind, one plot was fenced in and looked very respectable with soft grass, fruit trees and a few flowers. This turned out to be the landlord's plot. The rest of the ground was a haphazard collection of chicken cots and clothe-lines. When the domestic side had been roughly fitted out a start was made on the shop. Dad had been taught to make coco-nut fibre doormats and do shoe repairs at St. Dunstan's. A counter was fixed up at right angles to the front door. Behind it was a cobbler's bench complete with lasts. There was an interesting row of heavy iron lasts of all sizes. They seemed like little iron feet, small because, of course, they had to fit inside the shoes. On the bench was a collection of hammers, threads, needles and nails of all sizes.

The erection of the mat-making frame was left to the expertise of the instructor who came down from London. He was a very pleasant man, young with auburn hair, a mischievous smile and blue eyes. He often came to visit us after this and was a great favourite. The frame was secured to the wall opposite the street door. The coco fibre came in bales, very heavy and were delivered by railway wagon. The fibre was in skeins like giant hanks of coarse hairy wool. They were pressed so hard into the bales that it required some strength to tear them apart.

Standing in the corner of the shop was a windmill. Over this you had to stretch the skein of yarn and hand wind it into huge balls a foot or more in diameter. Several balls were wound up, then a strand taken from each and wound into another ball of about five strands each. A different yarn was used for the warp.

Dad would have to stand on a box to reach the top of the frame, wind the yarn around a hook at the top then down to the floor for the bottom hook and so on, until the required width was obtained. To make a start a wide smooth stick was pushed between the strands to separate them. Then Dad would sit on an upturned box with a very short sharp knife, ball of yarn and hammer. The yarn was threaded through the upright strand, cut off short, and so on to the end of the line.

A rope from the top was then pulled to change the forward, line of threads to the back so as to give an alternate line of tufts. Between each line a strand was threaded and firmly hammered down. This process was continued until the required length was completed. The mat was then cut free, lifted on to the counter and a plait of yarn stitched around the edge by hand. A large canvas needle was used for this purpose, pushed through the heavy edge of the mat by a metal thimble set into the palm of the hand by means of a leather sheath which fitted over the hand.

So began Dad's new trade in the shop. He worked regular hours and produced a large number of mats with an occasional break into the shoe-repairing business. Some of the mats were sold to private customers who brought in measurements.

Sometimes we would go to a house and measure a well set into the floor of the entrance and the mat had to be made carefully to fit snugly. On one occasion there was an order for a mat for a public house and the design of a draught board was suggested as a novel pattern. Dad worked this one out in his head, brought some black coco-fibre, and in due time produced the required article. To get a good finish he sent it to London to be sheared. It came back looking splendid and the Landlord was delighted.

In those days very few people possessed a car.

One man who bought one came to see Dad to ask him if it was possible to make a mat to fit in the car with holes to fit around the gears and pedals. This presented a real challenge and before long Dad was crawling around the limited space on the floor of the car with his measuring stick. I was writing down various details at his directions, this being transposed onto a large sheet of brown paper and a pattern cut out.



It seemed a very tricky business but turned out quite successful, if a trifle cumbersome. If the car is still around I'm quite sure the mat is. Dad always gave a guarantee of a lifetime's wear when he handed over the mat.

BACK TO MY FIRST SCHOOL

I started back in the junior department of the school where I had first been an infant, as did my sister next in age. The Headmistress was Miss Maddox who lived in the school house which was set in the school playground. The junior girls were in one school and the boys in the other, the headmaster of the boy's school living in the other house backing onto that of our headmistress. I was very happy at school except for the matter of 'tables' which sometimes got me into trouble. They were very keen on 'tables'.

I remember on one occasion coming into personal contact with Miss Maddox and having a great surprise. teachers in general and particularly the headmistress, were as beings apart. Many of the mats which Dad made were disposed of through St. Dunstan's, and were sent to London by rail. My eldest sister, Hetty, about twelve at that time, did the necessary clerical work. Mother had more than she could cope with looking after the family. The bales of mats going by rail would be picked up from the shop by the railway dray, while the local ones were delivered by hand. On these occasions I was very often the one to accompany my father. In this way I got to know many of the larger houses and institutions in the neighbourhood.

Now Miss Maddox had ordered a mat for her own front door. When it had been completed we set out one evening to deliver it. As was our custom the mat was rolled into a bundle, tied up with yarn, looked over Dad's walking stick and put over his shoulder. Off we went over the road, down Foundry Lane and eventually knocked at the headmistress's door. The mat proved quite satisfactory and, after paying for it, Miss Maddox asked Dad if he would like to come into the school. We went into the school hall, a long room used for assembly and music lessons. On the front wall of the room were two tall cupboards fitted with glass doors which were known as the museum. We sometimes had lessons about fossils and other objects which were kept in this 'museum.'

Miss Maddox opened the glass door with her key, told Dad to hold out his hand and, to my astonishment, took out and placed in his palm a model of a primrose which I had made in 'clay modelling' lesson some days before. I remembered having borrowed a pin from the teacher to put in the finer markings. Dad passed his hand over it and gave it back, whereupon it was replaced in the cupboard. Nothing had ever been said to me about it. As far as I was concerned clay modelling was a lesson to be looked forward to and to be thoroughly enjoyed, and it seemed somehow rather shocking that any adult had taken notice of it, let alone putting it in a 'museum'.

CHAPTER 6 - ARMISTICE

It was during the first few months of our new life that great national events were taking place. It was quite dark in the evenings and I was out in Market Street when the general humdrum noises took on a new tone. People came to shop doors and shouted across the street. Then others took up the cry. I ran back to the shop where Dad was busy hammering away with the gas light glowing cheerfully overhead.

“Dad!” I shouted. “It’s something called ‘The Armistice’. Everybody’s shouting and singing.”

It was indeed the 1918 Armistice, an end to the four years struggle, and the citizens of Cinderford, in common with the rest of the country, kept the streets alive far into the night.

Looking back it seems almost incredible that so much had happened to us in such a short time. It was in the battle of Ypres 1917, that a piece of shrapnel had pierced my father’s head and robbed him of his sight for ever. Now here we were, November 1918. What a wealth of experience had been packed in between.

ANOTHER LITTLE SISTER



A few months later another addition was made to our household, another girl. There was a great deal of argument about naming her and eventually we children had our way, and she was called Phyllis. She was not a very strong baby and cried a great deal. She was born in the front bedroom and an immensely stout nurse, dressed in flowing navy-blue skirt, billowing blue cape and a blue bonnet tied under the chin, seemed to fill the house every morning.

We had to boil quantities of hot water on the stove, and the big white ewer with roses on the side had to be carried up and down stairs. My eldest sister got fed up with all the work and vowed she’d never have any babies.

All the laundry and meal getting had to go on as before with the added work from the new infant. I suppose that being a few years younger I had escaped a lot of the harder chores, but certainly I had a less jaundiced view of babies than did my two older sisters.

When Mam came downstairs for the first time it was lovely to have a special tea and see the baby all new looking, with lovely new looking clothes to match. She certainly didn’t look very strong and my sisters were all for putting her outdoors in her new perambulator to toughen her up a bit. It was February and a pale spring sun was shining.

My mother, on this occasion, stood up to my rather bossy sisters and would not let her be left outdoors. Then we had the churching ceremony at St. Stephen’s church when the baby was put in a new robe and bonnet and white shawl. [Phyllis was born 19th February 1919 – I can’t find any record of a baptism.]

I sat on the shiny pew next to Mam who was holding the baby. The vicar came in a read a few words over her head. Then we went back home.

THE Y.P.U. AND THE DRAMA

We always went to Sunday school and I, for one, always found a great satisfaction through some of the associated activities.

One was called the Young People's Union. We met one evening per week, summer and winter, and it provided me with the opportunity to pursue for the first time the diversion of amateur acting. I don't know if any of the voluntary workers who ran the class had any talent for it, but I always thoroughly enjoyed myself. The plays we did were mainly connected with a missionary theme and at any rate gave me scope for dressing up in National costume. I loved learning lines and imagining myself into another character and I suppose showed such enthusiasm that I was always given a good part.

My father made me very cross. He thought I was getting a bit above myself and used to think up inane puns to annoy me. On one occasion when there was a customer in the shop and he knew I was there, he said: "Why pee you, my child?"

I was enraged and disgusted by this vulgarisation of my important hobby. However all was forgotten when the day of the performance arrived. Quickly I changed from my school clothes and put on my best dress, and off up through the mesne to the church hall.

In the school room rows of chain awaited the audience. In the side room the stove glowed rosily as did the faces of the matrons busily boiling kettles and laying out plates of cakes and sandwiches so that they would be free to seat themselves for the entertainment. Then best of all everybody in place on the stage, the curtain drawn aside and the sudden hush and all eyes focussed on the platform.

Then nothing else mattered and I loved every minute of it. I don't think the rest of the family were too impressed with my hobby and I got very little support. But I was often getting a visit from one of the Sunday school teachers with a gift after one of these does. I remember once a lovely basket containing an Easter egg coming for me because I had such a long part and learned it so well. It was all pure joy as far as I was concerned. The only thing that did worry me was going to the meeting by myself on dark evenings. I used to run quickly by the entrance to dark lanes and try to keep my imagination in check.

SURBY'S COWSHED

Another entertainment we enjoyed very much was one of our own making and, in retrospect, extremely dangerous. The neighbour on our right, as I have mentioned before, was a dairyman. I hardly think he produced his own milk but he did have a stable where he kept the occasional animal. He had a daughter Violet...what a popular name that seems to have been...and a son Cyril. Cyril was about my own age.

The other side of our back lane was a butcher's shop. Two sons of the butcher were Ken and Ashley, twins but not at all alike. Charlie lived a little farther along the street. Now we all decided to form a concert party and Cyril generously offered the use of his father's stable. I don't suppose for one minute that father knew anything at all about it.

The stable was situated up the Lamb Lane, which led off Market Street, a couple of hundred yards along the street. It was a wooden structure with a zinc roof. It contained piles of bales of hay and straw. Cyril unlocked the padlock and we had come prepared with candles and jam jars. These were lit and put in strategic places. The bales were set to support some old doors for a stage and were also used as seating for the audience. I don't remember how many there were of us altogether, but we all had our special parts.

One of the boys was Charlie Chaplin. He would do a mime of Charlie with his twirling stick, his bowler hat and his turned-out feet, and we would all sing at the top of our voices:

"The sun shines bright on Charlie Chaplin.

His shoes are cracking for the want of blacking,

And his old baggy trouser they want mending

Before we send him to the Dardanelles."

Then we would all cheer uproariously.

Another great favourite was “Katie, beautiful Katie, you’re the only little girl that I adore.” The boys sang this and one of the girls mimed. The last line was always substituted... “In Surby’s cowshed last night.”

Cyril’s name was Surby and it all seemed so apt and so witty that we always roared with laughter. I had no singing voice but would sometimes be allowed to recite. This was not boisterous enough for the party, and they would all join in singing: “It’s a long way to Tipperary” and other favourites which originated during the war.

GOOD TIMES AT ‘THE GEORGE’

Another of my childhood friends was Gwennie who had the great advantage of living in a public house, THE GEORGE in Market Street. Her mother, a widow, was the licensee and there were two elder brothers who helped with the business, an old sister, and an older one still who was deaf and dumb. Gwennie was about my own age. [The George - Inn - Market-Street - Cinderford](#)

Gwennie’s mother was a stout good-tempered lady who let us have the run of the place during non-opening hours. The long smoking room was a wonderful place to play in with the heavy small tables with curly iron legs and polished tops, the long benches along the walls with padded leather seats which you could slide along, and the windows with semi-opaque glass where you could peep through the clear lettering and watch shoppers in the street.

There was an all-prevalent smell of beer and tobacco, but it was cleaned and polished daily by a good-tempered helper with straggly grey hair and a sack cloth apron who never scolded us. We were sometimes directed to a smaller room which I believe was known as the bar parlour.

There were numerous other rooms, stairs and corridors, and behind was a yard with a summer house, apple trees and orange-blossom trees. Here we used to engage in games of great romance and it was here in the ‘summer house’ that we decided to give a concert and raise money to be donated to Dr. Barnardo’s Home. I was given the job of writing a play with this project in mind. I accepted the job quite happily and had a wonderful plot in mind, and all the gang caste as various characters. Of course when I got to committing my ideas to script it was quite a different matter. For a start I couldn’t find enough paper to write on.

Upstairs in the ‘George’, ‘George’, among other treasures, was a spare bedroom with trunks of old dresses, curtains and all sorts of jumble. Gwennie was anxious to play the hero as she fancied herself as a man, and I saw myself as the heroine.

We tried out all sorts of effects with draped lace curtains, feathered hats now out of fashion, pintucked boned bodices, sashes of wide silk and altogether had a wonderful time.

Gwennie had a great desire to wear a pair of bright red bloomers which we found as the main article of her male attire, a pair of long silk stockings, a velvet evening jacket and a velvet tam with an ostrich feather. I can’t remember what I settled for amongst the wealth of material available, and I was getting worried about writing all that was in my head, and getting the others to seriously learn their parts. I knew that we had to include a duel with swords, and also find a way to bring in some contemporary jokes.

We had been given permission to perform in the bar parlour in the early part of the evening. Gwennie’s mother used most evenings to entertain her friends in this room. She looked quite grand in her long black skirt, black satin blouse with gold chain and brooches.

The company was all female and were mostly dressed in black with black lace trimming. Even the lady who was to be seen in the morning scrubbing and polishing was one of the company, looking completely different with her close-fitting jacket and black straw hat swathed in black satin. They would all sit around the fire with their skirts slightly raised, a small glass at hand and chatter animatedly away. Occasionally they indulged in a game of whist. The men of course were all in the smoking room and masculine laughter sometimes broke forth.

We had been told to start our entertainment at an early hour when such of the ladies who had arrived for the evening would be our audience. We arranged the seating to suit our purpose and rushed upstairs to put on our costumes. Some of the performers were affected with stage fright and kept asking me what they were supposed to say. I hadn’t any idea myself as to how it was to work out. In the event we all donned our respective costumes, came creeping down the stairs and along the corridor, and went straight into action. What we couldn’t remember we ad-libbed and the company roared with laughter. When it was finished Gwennie went round with

the collecting box and was even allowed to flit round the men in the smoking room. We had quite a substantial sum to send to Dr. Barnardo's Home, and were thrilled to receive a typed acknowledgement of our postal order.

THE BOYS ENTERTAIN

Another form of entertainment which we shared was instigated by the boys. About sixty yards up our lane at the end of the row, and opposite our own entrance, was the back entrance to the butcher's shop. They had a large shed which had a door opening onto the lane. I think Cyril's father must have got wind of the concert party in 'Surby's Cowshed' and put his foot down. Anyway we were invited to bring ourselves to Martin's shed instead where we would be allowed to watch the boxing exhibition. We were also told to bring a candle or a halfpenny by way of admission.

It was a fair-sized building and had a good board floor but no ceiling and you could see straight up to the slate roof. It seemed completely empty except for a quantity of sacks. The boys had rigged up a ring with rope, bowls of water and towels, and old chairs for the corners.

They also had sets of boxing gloves. It was extremely cold and draughty, the only lighting being the candles which we had brought and which were stuck around the walls in jam jars.

One of the boys announced the contest, holding up first one boy's hand, then the other's. They had all given themselves names of popular boxers of that time. We sat on sacks and watched them sparring around, being flipped with wet towels, being timed by a stop watch and returning to the fray. After a time one of them was announced the winner and we cheered.

I'm afraid we weren't very appreciative of the finer points of boxing and when invited to examine the muscular strength of various bare arm we were quite ready to accept everybody's claim to superior strength with no criticism whatsoever. Even the boys could see that they could not keep up continuous rounds of matches with such an unenthusiastic audience, so they had a meeting and told us they had decided to include competitions in recitation and song with prizes at their next boxing evening. We received this news with a great deal more optimism and promised to bring our candles along for the next boxing meeting.

When we arrived on the arranged date the boys acted as stewards and nobody was allowed in without their dues. A boxing contest was announced and away they went. The next item was a song and individuals stood in the centre of the boxing ring and rendered solos. Then came the second contest followed by the poetry competition.

After this, Ken, who was the tallest of the lads made the announcement that he would present the prizes. The winners of the boxing contest were given prizes. I think Ken was promoter, referee, boxer, adjudicator and main prize-winner. I was given a prize of a photograph album for my poetry and Lily got a pincushion. My album had heavy pages, a blue cover with purple page velvet pansies stuck on the cover. Inside were old fashioned studio photos of the Martin family. I thought it was lovely and kept it for years. I don't think Mrs Martin knew anything about it.

WE BECOME GUIDES BY PROXY AND JOIN THE BAND OF HOPE

One of Dad's friends with whom he had joined up had been killed in action. His window and family lived in Cinderford in a terraced cottage in Belle Vue Road, and were also our family friends. There were two girls and a boy near our own age. The one thing that I greatly envied the two girls was their membership of the local guide troop. Not surprisingly Dad had had a sickener of army life and he insisted that scouting and guiding were nothing more or less than the militarisation of the young. I only saw the smart blue uniform and the wonderful entertainment, and entreated tearfully to be allowed to join, but was always refused. All my knowledge of guide procedure was gained by proxy.

Lily and Doris would come to visit us and by dint of assiduous questioning I became a guide in spirit.

One of the projects they were engaged in at that time was entertainment in which one of the items was an excerpt from the Mikado. The Japanese costume and eastern make-up had instant appeal and we made paper fans, made-up kimonos, chrysanthemums and slant-eyed make-up. We then entertained the family with "Three Little Maids from School."

When I consider how much went on in that one living room I marvel how we all managed. Everyday living was carried on in this room and beside the stove on which all the family meals were prepared there were two arm chairs, a dining table, a number of dining chairs, a sofa, our newly acquired piano from Hickies of Gloucester

together with the smart piano stool with a box top containing music books etc, and very often a baby's pram and lines going from wall to wall on which the washed and ironed household washing would be left to air.

However, manage we certainly did and after constant practice a rehearsal we had Mam on the piano, the family sitting on the sofa and kitchen chairs, and gave a spirited rendering of this high-class entertainment.

One other source of evening entertainment that comes to mind was the 'Band of Hope' This was run at the Baptist Chapel, by far the most important institution in the town.

This stood only a few hundred yards from our own front door, but was a huge forbidding building running to eight or nine stories at the back where it rose from the steep gradient of the green at the rear. The main entrance was at street level but the schoolroom where we went for our meetings was at the lower level and arrived at by a sharply descending path with a high wall on one side, and a small graveyard inside iron railings on the other. In the street was a street lamp of gas, but immediately you started to go down the path you descended into darkness with tree shadows waving around ghostly tombstones. I was always convinced that there were furtive figures flitting around in the shadows, but I kept turning up just the same.

In the schoolroom we seriously took the pledge not to drink intoxicating liquor. As I had never tasted any this was no great hardship. We sang songs such as 'My drink is water bright from the crystal spring,' and had talks about the evils of drink. The boys secretly made paper darts and whizzed them among the pillars. We sometimes had lantern shows but as I have forgotten the contents I don't think they made a very great impression on me. We were allowed to adorn ourselves with sashes on which were inscribed mottos and this enlivened the proceedings, and there was also the inevitable 'bun-fight' at the end of the year.

THE GREATEST ENTERTAINMENT IN THE WORLD

In these various ways we entertained ourselves during the evenings all those years ago. But the one thing above all that had never to be missed whatever happened was the Saturday afternoon matinee at the Cinema. I don't know at what precise date the cinema opened but as far back as I can remember after coming to Cinderford we went to the matinee. I should think that every child within a radius of several miles queued up with their two pence at two o'clock on Saturday.

cinema was at the lower end of Bell Vue Road and the queues would reach round the corner and up Woodside Street. These were the days of the silent films, and the lady who played the piano was let in first. Clutching our pennies and our bag of sweets we shuffled along until we achieved the ticket office, then inside were the velvet curtains. The first comers were seated in the stalls under the balcony, then you filed in strictly in order of admittance until the last comers were in a crick-neck position almost on top of the screen.

Until the film commenced there was a terrific noise of whistles, paper tearing, nut cracking and a constant barrage of high-pitched children's voices trying to communicate with friends far and near. Then the lights started to dim, a great outburst of shushing, a beam of light illuminating first the curtains, then as these magically parted, the full screen appearing. Oh those wonderful films. Every child knew exactly in what breath-taking predicament the heroine had been left in on the previous Saturday and, as if the intervening week had never happened, we held our breath until the crisis had passed and the handsome hero and beautiful heroine pursued their eventful way once more.

The film star I remember most clearly was Pearl White. She was always being rescued from precipitous cliffs, chained to the railway lines while an express roared implacably nearer, wringing her hands in a top storey window while flames mounted from below, or tied by ropes to a tree while a lion snarled and padded in her direction. The story never palled and we looked forward each week to further perils in store.

Harold Lloyd and Dick Turpin were two favourites but of course it was the hey-day of Charlie Chaplin and there was no one like him. 'The Gold Rush', 'Sunnyside Farm' and other films that are now recognised as classics, we saw at their first release in those days. Many of the films were sickeningly sentimental by present day standards, but we were entirely uncritical and revelled in such pieces as 'The Silver King' and Shirley Temple and Jackie Coogan films. All the time the little lady in the orchestral pit kept up appropriate musical accompaniment on the piano. She had a short rest during the interval, when sweets were on sale and advertisements appeared on the screen, then on to go again until the King's photograph appeared when she obliged with the National Anthem.

Out we trooped into the streets of everyday life, but now it was the streets and people and shops that looked unreal while the real and vital world remained behind us, closed in until Saturday afternoon came around once more.

CHAPTER 7 - SISTER HETTY AND COUSIN VIOLET GET PROMOTION

When we returned to Cinderford to live my eldest sister had been promoted to Double View School. This, as its name implies, was at the very top of the hill and looked towards Gloucester in the east and over the Forest to the west. It was in those days a senior elementary school for the district, and took senior pupils from the surrounding district, although village of a few miles distant still educated children from five to fourteen. It was with some dread that the date for promotion approached. Mr Emery, who was then headmaster, was a name to be conjured with. The other school which was located below the junior school was the 'Higher Elementary School.' We knew vaguely about this school but took it for granted that one progressed from Bilson to Double View.

It was therefore some considerable shock to us one Saturday afternoon when Aunt Charlotte arrived on a visit accompanied by Violet who was wearing the smart uniform of the 'Higher Elementary School'. It seemed that this time Aunt Charlotte had exceeded herself in her ambition for Violet. We all stood around in awe while Dad and Aunt Charlotte discussed the 'whys and wherefores' of secondary education. Apparently Aunt Charlotte was paying well for this privilege, but considered the superior social standing and career possibilities well worth the outlay.

We eventually accepted it as one of those things that seemed to descend on Violet, like gold wrist watches and piano lessons.

DAD GOES SHOPPING

Meanwhile my sister Hetty entertained us with lurid tales of what went on at Double View school and my sister Lily looked forward with some trepidation to the time for her promotion. My mother battled away with the growing family and often looked tired and careworn. The baby still cried a lot and needed constant care. My father seemed fully to have adjusted to his disability, was always cheerful and outgoing and always planning outings for us.

He worked meticulously to his own timetable and made many friends of customers. On Saturday morning he and I would set out together to do the shopping. I can't imagine anyone being given much attention nowadays as we had then. Just across the street from our house was the butcher's, Church's.

This always seemed to me a very strange family to be living in this little mining town. The owner was a fine superior gentleman, a soldiery figure, fine close cut silver hair, a small moustache and a cultured way of speech. He was assisted by his son who also looked rather a public-school type, heavier in build and complexion that gave evidence of a liking for strong spirits. He was also frequently to be seen in the Soldiers and Sailors Club which stood opposite our shop in Commercial Street. The front door of the private part of the butcher's shop was at one side of the shop entrance and had a very clean step, a very shiny knocked, and a maid in cap and apron to answer the door.

Stranger still were the two Miss Churches.

We were told that they had been educated abroad and had been to finishing schools. They were rarely visible, but when they did appear they were immaculately dressed in tailored suits with cream collars, kid gloves, sedate hats, beautiful shoes and dark stockings and would be carrying umbrellas tightly rolled.

The maid would open the door and they would step out onto the narrow pavement and proceed along the street with very upright posture, side by side and speaking to no one. We understood they had had lessons in deportment. What on earth they did for amusement or social life one cannot imagine, for apart from these occasional sorties into the town they were never seen abroad and, as far as one could observe, never had a visitor.

My father would sometimes buy the Sunday joint at Church's, but not too often, as in keeping with everything else the meat was of very high quality and suitably well priced.

My father would always have a knowledgeable discussion with the proprietor about stock, markets, and meat in general. From here we would proceed to the next port of call. Our progress would invariably be stopped by someone.

Everybody had their own way of accosting us. One man would stretch out a hand at arm's length and touch Dad on the shoulder.

"How is it then, George?"

"Hullo there Ernie!" was the immediate response, and the man would roar with delight at being so readily recognised.

"What's the time then, old butt?" would be another gambit.

"Just on half past ten, Harry," would come pat from Dad as he fingered his pocket watch. Sometimes they would try it on just by putting out the flat of the hand and stopping him in his tracks to see what happened. But he always had a suitable retort ready.

When we reached the grocer's Dad took a full ten minutes sampling bits of cheese which were passed over the counter on the end of a scoop, before deciding which one was to be purchased. Then on to the fishmongers and a chat about the various offerings lying on the slab and staring from their bed of crushed ice. Next to the green grocer where often several apples were sampled before making a final choice.

We sometimes called in the market, but this was a more cut and thrust affair than the leisurely sampling routine of the staid shops.

The market was just behind the greengrocers, a large cement-floored, draughty building. One of the stalls was owned by Charlie's father...Charlie of the boxing partnership. Charlie's father made his own sweets and toffee and had a stall in the market on Saturday mornings. He was a fine tradesman and we often bought treacle toffee, mint humbugs and large pear drops at his stall.

One other popular stall was run by Mrs Jordan. She lived down Foundry Lane just opposite our house. A stout little body dressed in a wide black hat, black blouse and skirt covered with a voluminous starched apron. She could be seen emerging from Foundry Lane with a huge basket over each arm.

Her stall was set up and covered with a white American cloth. Several tripods over gas burners supported tins sizzling away filled with faggots and gravy, and another containing peas. On one side were large tins of spicy bread pudding. You could sit on a form and have a good meal seasoned with salt, pepper and vinegar, or you could bring a basin and take your lunch home with you. My mother would often send me with a large basin to fetch faggots and peas from the market. I remember I always had an insane desire to drop the china basin onto the broad flagstones of the pavement, but thankfully I never gave way to it.

I remember, on winter evenings, it was very exciting in the market. The lighting was by naphtha flares which flamed and spurted wildly in the frosty air. There was always a 'Cheap Jack' shouting in one corner, one time a visiting confectionary maker from Gloucester who attracted a crowd by filling a large paper bag and shouting: "What do you want for five bob?" and starting with a handful of toffees, added a stick of rock, a large block of chocolate and, while I stood spellbound, topped it up with bags of humbugs and sticks of liquorice until it was eventually handed over for two half-crowns.

THE DEPRESSION AND THE MINERS

The days of the depression were fast approaching and the citizens of Cinderford had little to spend on sweets. Further down the High Street the butcher still had a shop full of joints on his hands and many thirty housewives had waited until last thing on Saturday night to buy the Sunday joint.

The shops with perishable goods stayed open late...this of course was long before the days of refrigeration...and shop keepers auctioned their merchandise at ridiculously low prices.

Most of the men coming home from the front were miners, but work was on short time in the collieries and wages were low before that. I remember how on summer evenings a sudden hush would fall along the street. Women would come to their front doors and stand motionless looking out across the woodlands.

Then would come the piercing shriek of a hooter. "Crump Meadow" the murmur would go around, and several housewives would turn, their faces stricken, and disappear indoors. It was the signal for no work tomorrow. Each colliery had a specific time to give the signal. If the ominous hour passed and nothing was heard there was a physical lightening of the atmosphere, although sometimes they hung about to see if 'Lightmoor' or 'Crab Tree Hill' would also be lucky.

CHAPTER 8 - WASHDAY 1919

My father was a great one for organisation and timekeeping, despite his blindness. Every morning he would be out in the scullery, stripped to the waist, and having a good scrub down. Then breakfast in the living room where mother would be frying bacon and eggs on the black stove with which she had been wrestling from an early hour. We would be rushing around getting ready for school and having our breakfast, then baby in the pram also demanding attention. By the time we were out through the front door on our various ways Dad would be at the frame at work.

Monday was more demanding still on my mother as, in the time-honoured tradition, this was washday. The old copper in the corner of the scullery had to be filled with water and a fire lit underneath...an even more tenuous operation than the stove in the living room. Still one had to persevere with it as there was no hot water to commence the washing until the monster began roaring. A large tin bath was filled with blue water for the final rinse and kettles boiled on the stove for making bowls of starch, considered essential. My father had bought a modern luxury supposedly designed to lighten my mother's labours on Mondays...a mangle. This huge instrument was well above my mother's head, was built of cast iron with huge wooden rollers, a large wheel on one side with a handle to turn the rollers together or to loosen them when not in use.

The clothes were washed in a dolly tub in soapy water, dollied vigorously with a wooden dolly and white cottons boiled in the copper.

The garments were immersed in another container of cold clear water, well rinsed and put through the mangle.

My father would come in and help out with this operation. He would screw down the rollers and, as Mam had not sufficient reach to feed the clothes into the rollers while turning the wheel, he would do this for her.

Another zinc bath would be standing on the floor in front of the mangle to receive the flood of water which came gushing out while the garments, flattened into board-like shapes, came peeling out at the back. If the day was fine Mam would pile these into a washing basket, climb the high stone steps to the back garden and hang them on the line. Most of the colliers' wives would already have lines of washing flapping in all the back gardens all over town. Going back down she would take the whites which had been boiling merrily from the copper, start once more on the rinsing, blueing and starching routine, and Dad would be called in once more to lend a hand.

Incidentally, the baby would have been bathed, dressed and hopefully put to sleep. When we all rushed in, hungry for dinner, Mam would be glad if she had managed the bulk of the washing and had the cloth on the table with the cold Sunday joint, cheese and pickles. Every other day we had a hot dinner but everybody accepted that Monday was washday. I hated Monday dinner. I didn't like cold meat and hated pickles, not realising at this age how I added to my mother's problems, I complained bitterly.

My father had a hearty appetite, loved strong cheeses and a variety of pickles.

One Monday I remember he told me to shut up moaning and offered me sixpence if I would eat a pickle he would choose for me. I pondered the offer for a while, then thought of all the choice there was with a whole sixpence, and accepted.

My sisters were loud in their protests. Had they not eaten all their meal and had no reward? Dad merely grinned and told them to shut up. He then presented me with a large red peppercorn. [chilli pepper by the sound of it]

My sisters, more familiar with the varying taste of pickles than I, who had refused to sample them, gazed at me wide-eyed.

I bit the end of the red object. Not only did it smell and taste vilely, it was burning hot on my tongue. I swallowed it quickly and took another bite.

Eventually I ate the whole of it, rushed into the scullery and swallowed cold water.

Back into the living room. My father handed over sixpence and I said "Good afternoon" as we always did and went out into the street.

When my eyes had finished streaming I made my way along the street fingering my riches. I decided on a large block of Cadbury's Nut Milk Chocolate, the ultimate in luxury.

I went down Foundry Lane, breaking the squares, sucking the chocolate from the nut, then delightedly crunching the crisp kernel. Halfway through the afternoon I had to rush out and was violently sick, then had to sit in the corner with my head on my arms until closing time. I can't remember having any feelings of resentment. I had made a bargain and kept it and after all still had half a block of nut milk chocolate to be nibbled when I felt more like it.

When we came home from school we sat around the table for tea, the table being covered with a starched white cloth...one product of the mammoth washday session. When I say white, you could almost tell the day of the week from the appearance of the table cloth. Starting at Sunday tea-time when it appeared newly laundered, stiff as a board, sharp creases running longitudinally in the correct manner, it proceeded through stages of spots and dabs to a limp travesty of its former glory. Only when drama intervened in the guise of an overturned cup, or worse still upset gravy, was the cloth replaced by a clean one in the week.

It was not the lack of table cloths, we were well supplied with those, but the time-consuming labour of their maintenance.

Boiled with soapy water and soda in the copper, rinsed and rinsed again, put through the blue rinse and finally starched, mangled and dried, they still demanded attention.

My mother had to enlist one of us girls to take one end while she took the other. You had to gather the material levelly between your fingers, stretch the linen between you. from one end of the room to the other, and do a sort of jiggling movement to straighten the threads. You then opened the cloth to full width, folded corners together in time with your partner, same again, hold the now quarter width high in the air, advance to meet your partner. It was all quite like the measured steps of a dance. Then one would take over, see that the dampened spots were evenly distributed, roll up the long length in a tight tube, then leave it to become evenly damp all through.

Meanwhile the stove would have been coaxed into an evenly glowing read and the heavy flat-irons set to heat.

Table covered with blanket and sheet, bath brick and cloth at the ready to keep the iron surface well-polished, then to work. A large wicker basket piled high with folded laundry awaited.

Sheets, pillowcases, towels and underclothes all had to be ironed, but the most demanding, which had to have just the right temperature, the most polished iron, were the table cloth and Dad's shirts and collars.

Take the iron from the fire, hold it near your face, spit on it to see if the globule hit the surface squarely and immediately bounced off sizzling. A final rub with the brick cloth, a further test on a dampened material to see if the result was correct, then get going. The most shattering hazards of which to be wary were a too hot iron which resulted in a scorch, or a smoky smut which had slyly insinuated itself on your iron and resulted in a black blob on the pristine surface.

SUMMER HAS COME

Many and varied were the chores to be shared until one was free to have an hour off for play. Errands to be run for everyday supplies, buckets of coal to be fetched from the coal shed on top of the stone steps, wood to be chopped for kindling, Dad's boots to be polished...you got twopence for this...the baby to be kept amused and out of trouble, and make sure you had a clean pinafore and no holes in your stockings for school tomorrow. Then perhaps you could go outdoors and play ball against the smooth patch of wall of the 'Soldiers and Sailors Club'.

It was a never-ending involved contest of various catching gambits. Right hand. left hand, under one leg, under the other, turning round while the ball was in motion, clap in front, clap behind, all accompanied by a singsong rhyme and getting more and more involved until you were out. Then your opponent started and you stood with your back and one foot propping up the wall in a nonchalant attitude, but you were watching lynx-eyed for the slightest evasion or slip.

There was very little argument. You were both too familiar with the niceties and hazards of the game to try to get by with an error.

This wall and ball game, which we always called 'Ordinary', the first throw being just a throw, and the first word of the chant being 'Ordinary;' the second 'Moving', because you stood with your feet planted firmly together; was of course a signal that the light evenings had arrived and you could play outdoors.

We also played whip and top on the wide pavement in front of the shop. Dad who was a boy at heart stocked whips and tops among other small goods. He also sold leather laces and would replace the thin string in the whip handles with a leather lace to give more strength to the whip. It was just as well that we were girls and no great shakes at sending the tops spinning high along the street as the boys did in the school yard.

There were plate glass windows all along the street and it was no uncommon thing to hear a ringing shatter of glass and see a billiard cue suddenly appear through the great curved pane of the 'Soldiers and Sailors Club'.

The club was built where Commercial and Victoria Streets met at a sharp angle, the resulting acute corner being glassed in above the low brick wall. The window was painted dark green high up the glass, so you only had a glimpse inside when the billiard cues came flying through.

Dad also stocked balls. I remember when the commercial traveller first produced the newly invented sponge ball. These were preceded by the hollow rubber ball which was useless after a puncture. The sponge ball, as we called them, began a new era. What a delight to open the boxes of balls when the new stock arrived.

There they sat in their little cardboard compartments in a modern range of colours...brilliant reds, greens, blues and pinks. It almost seemed a sacrilege to bounce them on the floor. And how to choose the one you were allowed? It was only after an initiating period of careful games of 'ordinary' that the ball could be used for the more adventurous 'rounders'.

Adventurous in more ways than one. Opposite to our shop the Club's private accommodation extended along the street, then a long high wall decreasing in height until it met with the boundary of a small tidy house. The occupiers of the house were a small man and his wife, the man being an extremely keen gardener. Oh what groans accompanied the disappearance of the rounder's ball over Mr William's garden wall. We all quickly hid ourselves in the lee of the wall until the best climber was nominated to search for the ball among the flourishing potatoes and carrots. Lucky indeed if he was successful and hoisted himself back over the wall to continue the game. Otherwise it was a case of one of the girls knocking politely on the cottage door and using feminine wiles to wheedle the ball from (if you were lucky) Mrs Williams.

The worst catastrophe was if a small bearded very angry gentleman appeared, shaking his fist in the air and holding in the other the lost ball. None of us were brave enough to face this threatening monster, but all ran away to our various bolt holes.

It seems very strange at this distance in time to reflect that we were free to set up four rounder stops in the street with no fear of traffic, our only threat being of the dedicated gardener.

THE EMPIRE

Proceeding along Commercial Street the houses on our side receded several feet back from the pavement and had a little flagged pavement of its own. There were one or two shops, the rest private houses. The first shop was Martin's the butchers, the next Gough's sweet shop and off-license, then further back Horwood's the corn chandler's. You could buy bran here for your rabbit, mixed corn if you kept hens in your back yard and bird seed if you had a canary.

Then a row of cottages with lace curtains and geraniums, then the 'Empire'. The 'Empire' was to be the great new centre of entertainment and leisure in Cinderford.

When Dad heard our accounts of its building and grandeur he was scathing in his comments. Whether my views were coloured by Dad's opinion, or an instinct for what was fitting, I cannot say...but there was something about it I didn't like.

There were great flights of white steps ascending in groups of about ten, then a broad landing, then up again. There were plinths crowned with white balls. There was a great white dome like an Eastern palace, and there were windows of highly coloured glass...purple, emerald, amethyst and m gold. For weeks the workmen swarmed around the 'Empire' and muddy water streamed down the marble-like steps. But eventually the edifice was complete and a grand opening ceremony was enacted.

I don't think I ever went inside the grand portals but continued to attend Saturday matinee at the 'Palace.' The Empire would not have been open long when we were woken in the middle of the night by my mother. When we had gathered our wits at this unaccustomed hour, we were aware of noisy - activity in the street below and all rushed into Mam's bedroom and gazed through the window. Lights, people, police whistles and the fire engine. We all called back to Dad to keep him in the picture. [The Empire burnt down on the night of the 6th July 1919]

Roaring flames lit up little black figures dashing about the street. The gorgeous new 'Empire' was going up in flames, altogether a more impressive spectacle than had originally been intended. Mam was in a great flutter and wanted us all dressed and packed ready for evacuation, but Dad kept calm and told us we had all better get back in our beds because it would still be school tomorrow.

Next day I heard Dad muttering darkly about fire insurance, was and that was the only way they were going to make any money out of the 'Empire'. Such talk of high finance was beyond me but I do know that the 'Empire' was a greater source of entertainment to me when it had burnt down than it had ever been in its first glory.

For some time it was forbidden territory, then everybody seemed to forget about it and we children took over. What a treasure house of beautiful coloured glass, terraces to form realistic approaches to palaces, chunks of masonry with roughcast facing for rich iced cakes, and slabs of slate to sandwich with mud for ice-cream wafers. Many an evening we sat on the smooth sun-warmed steps playing 'Jacks', a ready supply of smooth stones always at hand. [remains of the Empire Cinema below]



Then the authority stepped in once more and levelling operations to the upper levels began. It seemed that tennis courts were now to occupy the site of the 'Empire', and before long tarmac was spread and high nets erected.

I do not know whose imagination had been behind the creation of an eastern palace in the unlikely setting of the little industrial town in the old Forest of Dean, but certainly in true eastern fashion it vanished like a mirage overnight.

The new tennis courts were more in keeping with the post war age and were soon to see the flaunting of short white skirts, shingled hair styles, and young hopefuls in Oxford bags.

CHAPTER 9 - BANK HOLIDAY WALK

It was always our custom in those days to have some sort of an outing on Sunday mornings and Bank Holidays in the fine weather. My father missed the physical exercise to which he had been accustomed as a sighted man, and used these days when the shop was closed to plan walks to various places of interest. One such outing, when I was about seven, stays vividly in my memory.

It was Eastertime, which meant a new dress for Sunday school and time to get out and about. On Easter Monday morning my mother cut some sandwiches from the cold Sunday joint. A flask was filled with tea and Dad and I set off across Commercial Road quite early in the morning. I wasn't told what the destination was, but as we had made an early start decided it was an adventure and that we were heading for pastures new.

The route followed the ridge of the hill right across Church Road lined with cottages and red brick villas, across White Hart hill, across Buckshaft with the great shaly mound of old-time workings and the view across the village of Ruspidge with its great stone quarries and woods hanging down the sides of the hills to the railway in the valley.

At the end of Buckshaft the road came to an abrupt end and we went through a wooden gate onto the ash path.

Soon we were under the giant beeches with their great roots protruding through the ground and the grey rocks rising like islands between them. I had once seen lizards darting about on those rocks on a hot sunny morning and was always expectant of seeing them again. The year was too early and I contented myself with exploring the little paths between the birch and larches. Dad sat with his back to the beech trunk and smoked his pipe. I crept to the edge of the scowl holes; ancient caves left in the earth where it was said the Romans had extracted iron ore.

Soon we set off a fresh and were soon off the 'Rocks' and going downhill where the timber had been cut and the great trunks lay ready to be wrapped in chains and attached to strong horses and to be dragged down to the road.

We reached the road which went through Soudley and were soon by the ponds that still lay calmly reflecting the tall fir trees. Over the gate and under Dad's direction started uphill by the path on the right. Quickly ascending went the path leading diagonally across the hillside. I caught occasional glimpses through the trees of Aunt Charlotte's house standing by the railway line and the black hole of the tunnel nearby. Dad said we must continue up the path until

I could see a white cottage. This must be the home of Maisie, the little girl with the shining dark hair who had once been my friend in the Infants school.

At last the white cottage came into view, as also did a substantial fence crossing our path and barring our way.

My father was much annoyed and after checking the fence with his stick, and feeling the substantial poles that held it in place, set up a loud "Hello" to attract the occupants of the cottage. A dog barked angrily and a woman in a white apron came out shading her eyes. A man came through a gate and came towards us. I was overcome with embarrassment and pretended to be looking for flowers in the grass.

A grown-up discussion took place about the legality of blocking a public footpath. Goodness knows how many years since my father had used that path, certainly years before the war. However the man agreed to take us around the fence and, sure enough, we soon found the path where it emerged on the other side.

From here it was downhill all the way until we came to another fence, this time a loose wire affair through which you could climb quite easily. I held up the top strand while Dad climbed through, and I followed after. As I turned I caught my breath.

"Dad," I said. "It's like fairyland."

"Aye," he said. "I thought you'd like it. Find me a place to sit and a trunk to lean against, and get the sandwiches out."

The sweet tea and meat sandwiches tasted marvellous. We sat and ate and I talked about the wonders that lay around us. The ground was a carpet of flowers laid each side of a gentle stream. The pale mauve of lady's smock lay in profusion everywhere. White and purple wood anemones tossed their fragile heads, and dark purple violets and pale-yellow primroses gleamed in the grass. Overhead hazel bushes were breaking into green

leaf over lacey twigs, and the sun shone through onto the dappled stream. It seemed we had climbed through a fence into a different country, a softer warmer country.

“We’re on Colonel Russel-Kerr’s estate,” said my father. “Private, different from the Forest.” [[Sir Russell James Kerr, KB DL JP.](#)]

It was no use to pick the ladysmocks and cuckoo flowers, which is what we called wood anemones, they faded so quickly. But I made a damp nest of moss from the edge of the stream and laid little bunches of primroses and violets in my basket. All afternoon I played in the Fairy Glen while Dad smoked his pipe in the sunshine. Then we set off back towards Soudley.

The walk was much easier down into the valley and we were soon onto the road and outside the ‘White Horse.’ Here we were to have some refreshment then catch the rail motor from the Halt next to the inn.

Dad went into the bar and I was shown by the landlady into the parlour where I sat in solitary splendour with a large bottle of pop and a tumbler. The glass marble in the neck of the bottle was pushed down and I sat on the shiny seat with the bottle all to myself. I drank the pop slowly, re arranged my flowers and listened to sounds of revelry coming from the room next door.

After some time I heard Dad call to me from the passage.

I went out and took his hand and we made our way through the kissing gate and onto the platform. Everything seemed abnormally quiet and it was soon evident that we had missed the train.

Nothing for it but to walk, a good three miles by road and uphill nearly all the way. Under the arch over which our train had gone, uphill by the white fence guarding the road where the ground fell steeply away and trees and rocks leaned from the other side, past the great red rocks in Staple hill quarry and into Ruspidge.

“Dad,” I said. “I don’t think my legs will go any more. D’you think we could have a rest?”

“Come to the end, have you? Well you haven’t done so bad. Is it getting dark yet?”

“Nearly,” I said.

“Stop by the first handy wall,” he said, “and I’ll give you a lift.”

Me... to be carried home! How shaming! But there didn’t seem to be much choice.

I climbed the handy wall. Dad bent his knees and I climbed on his shoulders. His grey trilby hat got in the way so I was told to wear it. Dad carried the little flower basket. “Put your hands around my forehead and don’t go to sleep, or we’ll both be in trouble. Just shout ‘right’ or ‘left’ if I’m getting off the road. I’ve got my stick so we’ll be alright.”

I put my hands around his forehead, carefully avoiding the deep scar where the German shell had penetrated. His head was wet with perspiration and there was a ridge around his forehead from the trilby hat.

Away we went and we got on fine. We chose to go down White Hart Hill and up Valley Road and Victoria Street. I suspect that Dad was as anxious as I to avoid the more populated Church Road area.

There were hardly any cars on the road in those days and beyond the occasional “A bit more to the right...to the left a bit,” there was nothing for me to do but to enjoy the ride.

I was glad to be deposited on my own feet at the top of Victoria Street, and take Dad’s hand and cross to our shop front door, all the world as if I had walked every step of the way.

WHITSUNDAY PARADE

Apart from the parties we made for ourselves, such as the ‘Surby’s Cowshed’ performance, most of our official entertainment was associated with Sunday school. The one to which I looked forward with the greatest anticipation was the dramatic performance which was staged in St. Stephen’s Church Hall, situated in the ‘Mesne’. All through winter and early Spring I was off to rehearsals, never missing, in spite of the fact that I usually arrived with beating heart, my imagination peopling the dark corners with ghosts and ghouls. The Lamb Lane was the worst.

The weather got warmer and lighter by Whitsun time and we usually acquired a white dress for Whit Sunday.

The main object of the Whitsunday Parade, as far as I was concerned, was to carry the best bouquet in my class. As things were this seemed an unlikely ambition. We had bought seed packets of gorgeous looking flowers during our residence at number 3, Commercial Street, but the results were abysmal failures.

Not to be beaten by this I had done a good job surveying houses with good gardens and owners who were susceptible to winsome little girls. I had found that the good class stone-built houses on the top left-hand side of Belle Vue Road to be the best hunting ground. Moreover many of them were patrons of St. Stephen's.

Their gardens lay behind the houses, no doubt with excellent aspects. Friday evening and Saturday I worked manfully, begging for contributions from the gay borders.

These were taken home and put in pails of deep water in the back kitchen. By the time Saturday evening came the back kitchen smelled just beautiful. I was not at all wise as to the names of these flowers but I knew that lupins had a peppery scent, delphiniums, hydrangeas had variations of celestial blue, and that Whitsun bosses roses were gorgeous and appropriate, but hopeless in making up a bouquet.

Whitsunday dawned. After dinner we changed into our new white dresses, tying our white sashes in a bow behind, brushing our hair and putting on our straw hats. Our bouquets being already prepared and firmly wrapped, we walked out onto the pavement and up Bellevue Road, three demure little maidens on their way to church.

CHAPTER 10 - WE GO TO CHELTENHAM ON THE VIOLET

I can't remember the exact date that 'The Violet' and 'The Vulcan' started taking parties from the Forest to unknown places further afield. The Violet, and the Vulcan, were the names of two open-topped charabancs that were run by an enterprising gentleman named Mr Palfrey. Mr Palfrey had a yard somewhere in lower High Street, Cinderford.

It was sometime in the early summer that the rumour started in afternoon Sunday school that we were to go for an outing in one of these new-fangled charabancs. What marvellous places were on offer! We could go through a strange place called Ruardean which had a steeple on the church higher than anywhere in the country. We could go from there down a very steep hill called Cat's Hill. It was so steep that Mr Palfrey had to have special brakes on the wheels, and if they didn't work you went hurtling down into the River Wye. This was a strange river and not wide and sandy like the Severn which we knew so well, but was beset with rapids and lots of stone bridges. If you survived the Cat's Hill, you proceeded on to Symond's Yat, the greatest wonder of all.

Here dwelt the Seven Sisters. I understood that these Seven Sisters were huge and made of rock. They were on the steep banks of the river Wye and although you could see them there was no way you could climb to the top. Nor if you were at the top, was there any way you could get to the roaring river that you could see far below. I was so confused by the description of this strange place that I added my vote at the ballot taken to go to the alternative destination, which was Cheltenham.

Now Cheltenham may for many centuries have been famed for healing hot springs, Regency architecture, stone Neptunes and Lions throwing marvellous fountains over the famous Promenade, but the commercial enterprise which drew everybody over a wide radius, especially from a less erudite class, was the first Woolworth's to set up its premises within a day's return travel. At this place called Woolworth's we were told you could buy nearly anything in the world, but nothing would cost you more than sixpence. Your vehicle would wait outside while you made your purchases. You then climbed back in with your full bags and were taken on to a place called Bishop's Cleeve.

Here there was a ground full of all sorts of entertainments which you could ride on free...swings, swing boats, see-saws, slides and a helter-skelter, which was a large circular tower.

You took a mat from the base, climbed the wooden steps which went up inside the tower to the very top. You were then supposed to put your mat on the slide, sit on it and go shooting down the slippery shoot with just a wooden wall between you and eternity. There was no time to be afraid. The queue pressed behind you. You just had to hop on the mat, fly to the bottom, pick up your mat, follow the climbers back up and on again. You soon achieved a bit of professionalism and succeeded in landing more gracefully on your bottom. The boys were soon going down on their backs head first and still contriving to land safely on their feet. Oh it was lovely on the Helter-Skelter, and we abandoned all the other entertainments.

The teacher called out: "St. Stephen's Sunday school, Cinderford!" And everybody came running. She led us to a large room where busy ladies were pouring hot sweet tea and offering plates of cakes and sandwiches. You could take as much as you liked and all for nothing.

But to begin at the beginning...this was to save up and take as much money as you could muster to Sunday school. Teacher gave you a card with your savings entered. As the weeks went by you frantically saved. You had at least to get your fare before you were allowed to go on the outing.

Excitement mounted as the appointed Saturday drew nearer. Always we kept looking at the westerly skies and prayed for fine weather. Many were the near panics that had to be overcome to see we all had good shoes, clean underwear, clean dresses, a carrier or string bag, and be ready at the appointed meeting place at eight o'clock, in the morning. Before we went Dad came round and gave us half-a-crown each to put in our purses. I can't really remember how many of us were sent on this particular outing, but I rather think it was Lily, Vi and myself, who came in the middle.

We all got on the Charabanc and were soon over the barn and pointing out the Cathedral in Gloucester which we could see towering high among the morning mist of the wide Severn plain. Then down through the narrow streets of Littledean, pointing out the great old jail which you could be locked up in if you stole thing. Little

white cottages dotted the lush green banks of Pope's Hill and we rushed from side-to-side spotting good apples and pear trees laden with promising fruit which would soon be ripe and looked accessible to the road.

Then we were at Elton corner and carefully joined the main road which went from South Wales to Gloucester. Quite a few charabancs, much smarter than ours, overtook us or were going the other way. We all cheered and waved at one another and sometimes tooted our horn. Some even had balloons flying.

The road ran along the Severn and we looked carefully at the water arguing whether the tide was coming in or going out. Soon we were through Westbury and soon on to Gloucester.

We became quieter as we left Gloucester studying unknown country side and discussed what we were going to buy at this great place called Woolworth's. We had no idea what it would be really like or what would be for sale. Lily, Vi and I, were as one in that the first things which had to be bought were presents for everybody at home.

Beautiful houses came into sight, all with fine lawns, ornamental trees, hotels and parks with well-dressed ladies and gentlemen walking dogs on leads and seeming to have nothing else to do. Just like a book come to life, I thought.

"Get yourselves ready, we are nearly there!" called teacher. "You must only take your money and shopping bag. Leave everything else in the coach. It will be looked after. Take great care of your purse and keep together as much as you can." [[Woolworths - Cheltenham](#)]

We got out, carefully helping Vi down the steps into a busy High Street. A great big shop with huge windows, the woodwork painted bright red, and holding Vi's hand we went through the open doors. My first impression was of light, mountains of pastel colours and above all...perfume. Beautiful scents came to you from all directions. I found a counter filled with soaps and scents and cosmetics of every description. My first thought was Mam. I would buy her some soap. But which? Big huge tablets labelled 'Bath'. You'd need a pretty big bath to use those, I thought, and how could you get your hands around it? There they towered, mountains of lavender, violet, roses, lemon, herbal, cream.

"Come on," said Lil. "If you're going to buy soap, buy it!" So I parted with one sixpence for a beautiful box containing three lovely oval tablets of lilac soap. Mam would love it.

We wandered on through displays of perfume. I pointed out to Lily that a bottle of lily-of-the-valley perfume would be lovely for her. Then I showed vi that there were little bottles of parma-violet scent, but she was not to be tempted.

So to the stationary department, still through highly perfumed atmosphere. Hetty was my next thought. Poor Hetty, either working in the shop or having her day off from typing in Lydney.

I bought a compendium of stationary for her, writing paper and envelopes tied with honey-coloured ribbons in a flowery box, beige coloured and sprinkled with trailing honeysuckle.

Now for little sister Phyllis. She seemed to catch cold very easily, and Mam would never let my bossy elder sisters put her out in her posh pram, if the wind blew chill. No doubt Mam was right. Love from the heart always knows best, I think. So to buy something which would please both Mam and Phil I decided on a dear little celluloid baby doll in a cradle, complete with nighty and bed-clothes. She could play with that under Mam's eye.

Now Dad. My acquaintance with the male world in the home was limited to Dad. Of course I knew Dad's friends about town but they rarely came beyond the shop. What could I buy for Dad? He loved his pipes but was very fussy about them and I never bothered to look to see if one could buy Stansfield tobacco in Woolworth's. But I had spied a possibility at the stationary counter and hurried back there. A brand-new pack of cards. Dad would print each corner of every card with his braille machine. These he could hold facing him with backs towards the other players. The best game to play with braille cards is crib. Everybody speaks clearly as he lays down his card and the one who turns up the top card of the pack must make quite clear what is in full view. Dad had his own crib board and scored for self and partner.

I was not a very numerate child but crib was the first grown up game I learned and could cry "One for his nob" with the best at quite an early age. So with Dad's pack of cards we completed our tour of Woolworth's and went on to Bishops Cleeve where we had an exhilarating afternoon at the amusement park, followed by an extremely generous tea in the catering department. It had been a long hot day and we were glad to get our belongings

together and climb back into the Violet, which patiently made its way through old apple trees to the road behind. Vehicles of a similar nature turned off onto the various routes to villages and town spread throughout Gloucestershire.

The sky was beginning to pale and as we bye-passed Gloucester and headed for the west little pinkish clouds were floating as W SS high over the Forest. We came to Minsterworth where we were to have a break at the 'Bird in Hand', a large brown-tiled hostelry lying on our left on the river side. Truth to tell I was extremely glad to get out and subside onto the lush blue-green grass. Helter-skelter, shopping and rich teas were not having a very good effect on my stomach and I was not too enthusiastic about the fizzy lemonade on offer. Some of the adults went inside and came out with foaming mugs and some children seemed to be made of harder stuff than me. They ate biscuits and lemonade, and chased one another around the green.

At last we re-seated ourselves in the coach and I was feeling cooler and glad we were on our way home. Mr Palfrey took a good breath as we climbed the steps. "Let's hope the old girl's feeling up to it," he said and patted the engine kindly, as if it was a living creature dear to his heart.

"Anyway we'll have a good run down Chaxhill, then you'd all better lift your voices and cheer her up a bit. The old girl's done a good many miles and doesn't get up Littledean Hill quite as well as she used to."

I hadn't thought about the Violet. Of course, she'd had a nice long rest in the old apple orchard while we'd been enjoying ourselves but I was quite sure I wasn't feeling fit to climb that great long twisting hill up to the top of Cinderford.

Mr Palfrey started up again and we chugged up to the top of Chaxhill and we saw the Westbury church tower in shadow at the bottom of the long sweeping hill. The wide Severn was silvery on our left and the bulk of the Forest was black against a flaming sky as we turned at Elton corner. Now it was the narrow road up Popes Hill gently climbing, a little rise, a little flat part by the Greyhound, past the banks where we picked primroses in the spring, chug-chug past the jail which we could hardly see, around the corner by the Kings Head and to the real killer past Littledean Guest House. Chug, chug, chug... We all leaned forward and encourage Violet on her way but half way up we came to a full stop.

"Sorry boys," called back Mr Palfrey. "I'm afraid it's women and children only up this bit."

So manfully the male contingent got out, laughing and joking, the big boys also anxious to contribute. There were several stout matrons, but they stayed put. Mr Palfrey started up and after some cajoling and a bit of pushing we were up on the Barn. A wait for the men to join us, then merrily down Belle Vue Road to the Swan, where we got ourselves together and were soon safely back in Commercial Street.

CHAPTER 11 - WE READ IT IN THE 'MERCURY'

Writing about my childhood I have tried to keep some chronological order, but at what date the road bus was introduced into our area I cannot remember. Certainly it added an exciting new dimension to outings and excursions.

We got all our information about local happenings from the Mercury. This was the Forest Newspaper which was published weekly. Friday evening was sacrosanct to the reading of the Mercury. Every Friday after tea I fetched a chair from the living room and put it next to my father's seat at the mat frame.

I started at the top of the first column and religiously read every heading, every advertisement, right through to the sports report at the back. Every so often I would have to stop while Dad hammered away at the coco-fibre strands that held the tufts in place. Sometimes he used unnecessary force if he disagreed with the Editor's remarks, or didn't agree with the way local politics were going.

Dad professed to being a strong supporter of the Conservative Party, mainly I think because he held Sir Arthur Pearson, the founder of St. Dunstan's, in such respect. He was jubilant when the first blind M.P. Captain, Ian Fraser, was elected to Parliament as a member of the Conservative Party. On the other hand, this district was socialist and always elected a member on the Labour bench.

Inevitably many visitors who came to the shop were of this persuasion. Loud and furious were the political arguments that were sandwiched between the hammered assaults on the coco-fibre.

Occasionally I gained some general knowledge myself from my close perusal of the Mercury, and never failed to question Dad about any unfamiliar word. The many funerals and weddings got short shift. The hearings at Littledean's Petty Sessions had to be read meticulously, and the lead articles were sometimes cut off with: "Pure supposition, no facts." or re-read more slowly to gain the full impact. The small ads sometimes yielded interesting information. I remember reading on one occasion:

"At Stud Greenway Farm BLAZE CHAMPION June 15th 30th only."

I paused. "Next," said Dad.

"Can we go?" I asked.

"Where?" said Dad.

"To Greenway Farm," I said.

"What for?" said Dad.

"Weren't you listening?" I said.

I re-read the advert.

"What d'you think you're going to see down there?" asked Dad.

"I don't know but it sounds exciting. What does 'at stud' mean?" I asked.

"It's just a notice for farmers and doesn't concern anybody else," said Dad. "Go on to the next.

I continued to be curious about 'at stud' but it was many years before I found out.

BREAD AND CHEESE AND SPRING ONIONS

It was via the columns of the Mercury that we had information of the new network of road buses that was opening up in the Forest. Rumours of their coming had been much discussed, but actual publication of Timetables was something to be acted upon. An outing was soon planned.

We boarded a bus in the centre of town, Dad and myself, and tickets were taken down the Soudley valley to Blakeney. We left the bus at Blakeney Square, and crossed the road to board the incoming bus from Gloucester which was going to South Wales. [Chepstow probably]

"Top of Nibley Pitch," Dad told the conductor, and we hardly seemed to have sat down than it was time to get off.

We stood on the side of the road, not nearly so wide or so traffic laden as in these days, but still very dusty. It was a very hot summer's day. I gave Dad an outline of our surroundings, comparatively featureless at this spot... just green hedges, green verges and the road. "I think we'll have to walk a bit further on and we'll come to a lane on the left," he said.

We came to the lane and turned down it. We were making for the Severn and the Severn Bridge Inn, I was told. The lane climbed for a while between banks of lush grass, meadow-sweet, pink campion, stars of Bethlehem and blue speedwell.

Then it started to descend.

Not a soul did we see, just occasional glimpses of cows standing in luscious pasture, their tails forever flicking through the hot air, their jaws constantly chewing. Did no one live down here, I wondered?

We came to a cottage built of reddish stone with little windows. It seemed about to disappear beneath the weight of overgrown shrubs, climbing plants, overblown roses that flourished unchecked from the rich soil. From the old brown chimney pot a lazy feather of smoke mounted through the languid air. No other sign of human presence manifested itself.

We continued between the flowery banks. Occasionally a little stream broke down a bank, made a wet track across the dusty lane, then disappeared through a hedge apparently on its way to the great river, at present unseen. The sun shone more intensely and presently we came to a parting of the ways. A large complex old farm buildings rose straight from the narrow verge where the road divided.

"Take the right road," said Dad, now on sure ground. we passed between several cottages and at last had a glimpse of a great expanse of water and the supports for a massive bridge standing amid the swirling current.

"That's the Severn Bridge crossing to Berkley," said Dad, when I had described what I could see. How wonderful it seemed. How brave and clever were the men who could make those great girders stand firm in that mighty flood and carry that fragile railway line safely to the other side.

"Come on," said Dad. "Not far now. I'm getting parched."

We soon saw the sign of the Severn Bridge Hotel stated clearly on a large stone building above us. There was a gate on the roadway through which we went and found ourselves on a garden path. A stoutish man was working in a well-kept vegetable garden. The plants all stood in well-ordered rows and looked flourishing. He crossed to us and spoke to Dad. They either knew one another or had some common interest for they seemed on confidential terms immediately. He took us right through the garden and onto a green lawn where tables and benches were laid out. Our guide turned out to be the landlord and soon came out of the house with plates of delicious fresh bread and cheese, with beer for Dad and ginger beer for me. "Back in a minute," he said, and once more disappeared down the garden, went into the house and reappeared once more with a bunch of lettuce and shallots which he had cleaned and rinsed under the tap. He also brought a foaming glass for his own consumption. "Just the ticket," said Dad. "The King couldn't dine any better."

I ate my bread and cheese and drank the pop. Dad and the landlord chatted about changes since the way and how the hotel business was going. I gazed fascinated across the wide horizon. Seagulls cried and swooped across the water. I asked the landlord how the tide was and he could tell to the minute the tines of high and low tides. He told me to watch a certain spot where the wet sand was peeping above the waves and try and guess how long it would take to cover. Always I found the tides fascinated me, and wondered how that great mass of water continued to flood up that river day after day, night after night, with no one to appreciate it.

I felt that someone should always be there to tell it how splendid it was to work so hard and never stop and never fail.

"Will a train cross the bridge?" I wanted to know.

"Well you might be lucky at that," said the landlord.

"Just stand over there and you'll get a better sight of it."

I did as I was told and before very long I could see tiny puffs of steam slowly getting larger and larger until I could also hear the engine and see great clouds of steam ascending in our direction. I couldn't properly see the Severn Bridge Halt, it was somewhere below the elevation of the hotel, but presently I heard voices as

passengers walked along the road below. Then a hoot from the engine and the train started its journey back. I watched it slowly diminishing in size until it completely disappeared and the swooping gulls took over again.

Dad had his timetable firmly in mind and reminded me of the very long lane still to be followed. He consulted his watch and we set off in good time. I just got permission to go near enough to the rocky shore to secure a piece of seaweed. I would bear this home in triumph and hang it on a nail in the back kitchen door to forecast the weather.

Often during the next weeks, for the first time, I saw the streets of Cinderford as inward and confining. I could still see the gulls and the great Severn Estuary calling me to strange new places, or the little train crossing the great flood to who knew what adventure. And always the tide rushing up and filling the banks, day and night without end.

CHAPTER 12 - HETTY HAS HER TONSILS OUT

Life still went on at school...my sisters Hetty and Lily at Double View, myself and younger sister Violet at Bilson School, the baby Phyllis still under school age at home. My eldest sister helped Dad in the shop with book-keeping, despatch notes for mats to be sent to London, and was always busy. My mother was continually at work with cooking, washing, ironing and cleaning, and sometimes when the work got too much for her Hetty had to stay from school to help with the Monday wash. This did not endear my father to Mr Emery the headmaster, and in those days a strict watch was kept on the attendance record and woe-betide any child who stayed from school for anything but authenticated illness.

My father had a great regard for education so did not lightly make a decision to keep Hetty from school. Besides, my sister was an excellent scholar. Some families were forever at odds with the attendance office, in those days a figure held in great awe. Often I have heard an angry housewife recounting personal encounters with that old so-and-so, and stressing how she had bettered him with ready tongue and superior wit.

Those were difficult days to keep the miner's children clothed and fed, and who can blame a hard-pressed mother whose son had a chance to earn a few shillings.

However our problem was a different one. Hetty came home one day very excited. Her thirteenth birthday was approaching and she had heard there was a way of leaving school at thirteen instead of the legal compulsory age of fourteen. The trick was to prove that you had put in a certain percentage of attendances since the age of five. I don't know how high this percentage was but Hetty was sure she could do as well as anybody else as she had never stayed at home until this latest emergency, except to have her tonsils out.

What a horrible thought, having one's tonsils out! In those days after the school doctor came around, you were lucky if you weren't packed off to hospital to have your tonsils out. It seemed the fashionable thing to do.

"Open your mouth. Say Ah. Oh yes, they had better come out. You'll be getting a paper." Nobody ever thought of arguing.

Nowadays you seem to have to go to a private consultant at vast expense if you want your child's tonsils operated on.

Hetty was at Soudley Junior School when hers was the name picked out of the hat. Mam duly got her instructions, for Hetty ready for the early motor on the Saturday and was off. We stayed with Aunt Charlotte. To get to Gloucester you had to get off at Newnham and change for the train with separate compartments which came up from South Wales, stopping at Newnham en route for Gloucester and Cheltenham.

When you arrived at Gloucester station you had to find your way to the Royal Infirmary situated in Southgate Street.

Mam wasn't too sure about the trams so she walked to the Infirmary. The children were taken off in a batch and mothers told to wait in the waiting room. They did this for several hours, then were called in by name at irregular intervals. They were all very tense and nervous, not knowing what to expect.

At last Mam's turn came and she went in fearfully. At first sight she thought Hetty was dead. She was deathly pale and still. But then she moved her head and wanted to spit out. She was given a basin and spat out clots of blood.

She'll be quite alright,"

"You can take her home now." Mam was told.

"It's a long way, faltered Mam. "I have to go on two trains. Then a walk at the end."

"Oh she's perfectly all right," said the buxom nurse.

"Keep talking to her and you'll soon talk her out of it."

Poor Mam. She was under five feet tall and very anxious. She half carried; half dragged the child the considerable distance to the station. She had been given some cotton wool which was soon sodden, and at Aunt Charlotte's suggestion she had taken a large towel in her bag. But the train journey back and the change at Newnham was like a nightmare.

When Mam, half carrying Hetty, came through the door both looked fit to drop. Mam was more concerned with the blood soiled towel which she had pinned under Hetty's chin than anything else.

"If I had known I could have taken some clean one to change at Newnham," she said. She had seen several ladies she knew on the Soudley run and had felt most conspicuous.

Aunt Charlotte was shocked.

"Fancy sending the poor child home like that!" she said. "They could have kept the both of you in overnight.

After all it is a hospital and they must have plenty of beds."

HETTY LEAVES SCHOOL

I have been diverted from my story of how Hetty got to leave school at 13. First she asked for a day's absence to visit the various schools which she had attended to obtain the figures she required. As it turned out that it was a fact that it was a bye-law of the education committee...the matter of accumulating attendances...Mr Emery could hardly refuse to let her have a day off. [Het was born in December 1906 – so I think this account relates to late 1919 – she was still living at home in Cinderford on the 1921 census, conducted in July of that year.]

First she went to Bilson School. I can hardly think she was very popular. The busy headmistress on [of?] the Junior and the head of the Infant department, had to sort out the totals from the various years' attendance figures. I'm quite sure they were all perfectly in order and correct. From my personal experience the Council School registers were kept with every bit as much care and perfection of detail as the Magna Carta. So proudly bearing her figures signed by Miss Maddox and Miss Watts, Hetty came home, read them out to Dad and left them in Mam's safe keeping. A hasty lunch, then off across Church Road on a four mile walk to Soudley.

It is downhill most of the way and Hetty was sure of the road. She successfully made her request to the Soudley schoolmaster, then set off home...a harder walk this time. She arrived home about five o'clock, out of breath and looking frightened. She said as she was crossing Soudley rocks, the place where the scowl holes are, a man started calling to her. She ran along the little paths, out into Buckshaft, and hadn't stopped running until she got to her own front door. Mam gave her a cup of tea and some bread and butter and jam, and she soon felt more cheerful.

Dad came in and the other numbers were read out. The combined totals seemed immense and there were still those from Double View to go on. Dad did some quick sums in his head and decided it was safe to assume that Hetty could leave school at thirteen. What's more he had made some inquiries and told Hetty what his plan for her was.

Dad had decided that the coming thing for girls was to get into a good office job. No girl that we ever heard of ever did anything but go into service in Cheltenham, or even further, serve in a shop which was regarded as socially superior, but not very well paid, or the very lucky one went on to the Higher Elementary school and trained for a school teacher.

Now apparently, Dad said, if you could write a good letter, do your sums properly, you could learn shorthand and typing and earn very good money in an office. He had already made preliminary enquiries and Mr Smith, who was a very clever man, would take Hetty on as a pupil. No mention was made of the sum to be paid, but it was a very serious matter and difficult exams for which she would have to study.

So Hetty presented her attendance record to the school authorities, proudly left at the age of thirteen and was soon deep in the art of shorthand and typing. And now I had another job of reading aloud to her pieces from the paper while she dashed and dotted all over her shorthand pad and rattle around on Dad's typewriter. Soon she was coming home with certificates of rapidly increasing proficiency in the art of typing and writing and transcribing shorthand.

The next question was what to do with it?

CHAPTER 13 - GRANDAD COMES TO STAY

During the time that I was a school child in Cinderford, there was one point on which I always felt to be at a disadvantage.

This was the lack of blood relatives apart from Mam, Dad and sisters. Every other child I knew seemed to have a great number of aunts, uncles, grannies and grandads, cousins and second cousins ad infinitum. Aunt Charlotte was vaguely related to my grandmother and, as I have said, she had only an adopted family of whom all but Violet were grown up and married. Besides she lived at Soudley and could only be visited in the holiday, Soudley being all of four miles distant.

My friends always seemed to be going to Auntie Somebody's to tea, and always had someone to call on in family emergencies.

But all my relatives seemed to be far away in Staffordshire. I can remember visiting them on a few occasions and Mam and Dad had letters regularly. One morning we had a letter saying that Grandad was proposing to visit us and stay over for a few days. It was not the first time Grandad had made the journey and I had also made his acquaintance when we went to Staffordshire.

He was my Dad's father; Mam's parents having died earlier.

In spite of my desire to have aunts and cousins within easy reach I viewed the imminence of Grandad's visit with mixed feelings. Dad was quick to notice that I was no overjoyed at the prospect of entertaining Grandad.

"You've got nothing to be ashamed of in any of your forebears, he would say. "We come from a well-respected Gloucestershire family and your mother from a well-known Shropshire family. Very good stock."

That was all very well but I could see little sign of superior breeding in Grandad as I knew him. In fact it was more than likely that if I had to be in his company in the streets of Cinderford I should be terrified of meeting any of my friends.

For one thing he had a very strange taste in dress. My own Dad was very particular in his apparel, from the skin outwards. It was well aware of this as I always accompanied him when he went to Mr Preece the gentleman's outfitters in Market Street to order his clothes. Fine merino long-sleeved vests and long pants for the winter, carefully chosen and compared with other merchandise. Thick striped all wool flannel shirts with separate collars, in Luvisca I remember.

Little books of cloth samples had to be carefully fingered, and Mr Preece's advice taken on suitable shades, before being measured for the new suit. Ties matched, and the trilby hats were tried on.

Then as the season altered exactly the same garments in slightly lighter weight materials. You couldn't call Dad a fine handsome man, as he was short of stature and inclined to put on weight, but he always looked well turned out and scrupulously clean.

When Grandad arrived on our doorstep, complete with huge tin trunk, he looked a completely alien being. He too was small of stature, but rather on the thin side. He was clean shaven but wore a long droopy moustache. His suit, in heavy thick tweed, was in a rather startling check and his trousers finished just below the knee and buttoned around the leg. His brightly patterned socks were in heavy knit with turned down tops and boots of a rather violent brown, which looked too big for him, always pointed outward. [James Worgan 18 Oct 1854-1929 m 1875 to Emily Allen 1857-1922 – the lived at 120 Heathcote Rd, Longton. They visited London in 1917 to see their son after he was blinded.]

His cap, of the same fabric as the suit, had a large peak, and a very large handkerchief, brightly patterned on a red ground, drooped prominently from his breast pocket.

Grandad spoke in a broad Midlands accent. Of course in those days I couldn't put a name to it but it certainly sounded strange. However, there were compensations. Having got Grandad and his trunk indoors you could be sure it would contain a great deal more than a change of clothes.

It would have to be opened immediately because some of the goods were perishable. First came a round flat parcel wrapped in white paper which was placed on the living room table. This we knew contained several dozen pikelets, a delicacy peculiar to the pottery district and completely unlike the crumpets found in more southern counties. When visiting the Staffordshire in Grandad's locality there seemed to be a pikelet

establishment on every street corner. The custom was to send a child out for the pikelets while breakfast was being prepared.

A buxom lady in a large white pinafore would be pouring a sort of batter onto a hot flat stove, flipping them over and keeping them warm until she had enough for the customer. They were carried home steaming and eaten with sizzling bacon and eggs straight out of the pan.

Grandad's pikelets were, of course, not hot from the stove but had been purchased at the last possible moment before the train's departure time. He also brought a supply of oatcakes, a similar confection but based on oatmeal.

Next in the box were layers of clothing which were carefully removed and set aside. Now came a quantity of odd shaped objects copiously wrapped in newsprint, mainly of the comic cuts variety. Each piece was carefully unwrapped and revealed an article of china which was placed on the table while the wrappings mounted on the floor. When I say 'China' that is what I mean. Nobody I ever met from the 'Potteries handled a piece of ware without turning it upside down and studying its credentials. Only bone-china was ever acceptable; every and each trade mark bore its own personal message to the handler. "That'll be number seven potbank at Beswick's... always tell Nancy's work," would be the sort of comment you would be likely to hear.

Out of Grandad's trunk would come a whole tea service, all separately wrapped, including the teapot. All beautiful examples of the potter's craft. Many of my relatives worked in the potbank, as it was called.

All woman and my one cousin did beautiful hand painting for a world-renowned firm of Potters. Out came mugs with special messages, plates with sentimental slogans and decorated with lifelike violets and primroses, plates of great delicacy with a border of what looked like lace, with slots through which to thread ribbon, in and out round the edge all in fine china...a present for Mam.

Always something to appeal to Dad too. On this occasion a large two-handled mug bearing a relief pattern of bullrushes, irises and dragonflies. On peering inside you were confronted by a toad, eyes bulging, about to emerge from your drink. The mug was supposed to hold a quart of beer or cider and give your friend a jolt.

When all had been examined and put in safety, Grandad settled in. I think he must have slept on the sofa in the living room as the bedrooms were fully occupied by Mam and Dad and five girls.

The next day Grandad would sally forth in the town, feet stepping out in the quarter-to-twelve position, and always come back with several purchases. The most important to him seemed to be several comics, 'Chips' being the favourite and 'Comic Cuts' another. He would quite happily sit in the corner chuckling over the antics of 'Weary Willy' and 'Tired Tim'. Dinner over he would take another walk around the outskirts of the town.

After tea, chores having been completed, my favourite occupations were drawing and colouring and reading. I would reach anything from the 'Rainbow' with Bonnie Bluebell and her Magic Gloves, to travel books on the Highlands of Scotland.

I had recently had a windfall as the result of a small advertisement I read in the Mercury. I suppose in view of the poverty of the time a publishing firm in London had inserted small advertisements in provincial newspapers to get rid of their stock. It was only about two lines but offered twenty-four story books for a ridiculously small price of about two shillings and I believe a small price for packing. I drew Dad's attention to the item and was surprised when he gave me the money and told me to send for them. I copied out the address with care, bought a postal order at the Post Office, wrote a letter and sent it off. Within the week a substantial parcel arrived addressed to me.

Oh what transports of delight when I opened the parcel. Twenty-four completely new books all to myself. The paper was thin and the covers of slightly stronger paper, but real stories.

They varied from Hans Andersen through Black Beauty. I can't remember all the titles but I know my favourite was the one about the soldier who came marching back from the wars, penniless, and encountered an old woman by a hollow tree.

She persuaded him, by offering great rewards, to climb into the hollow tree which took him deep into the earth.

He was given a tinder box and told to rub it when he encountered the first guardian of the treasure...a dog with eyes as big as saucers sitting on a chest. On rubbing the tinder box he could lift down the dog and find the chest

full of copper coins. So it went on through silver and gold and dogs with eyes as big as cartwheels, and how he tricked the old woman and went home with his riches.

Every night whenever I had the chance I would bury my head in my treasures while Grandad came back from his walk and told of the changes he had observed. I sat in the corner reading until Grandad said: "Gladys, you want to stop that stodying...everlasting stodying. You'll have no eyes to stody with when you get to my age.

"You don't say stodying," I said, ever ready for an argument.

"You say studying, and I'm not studying...I'm reading a good story and I've got a lot to finish.

"I think you ought to come back with me when you finish school," said Grandad. "I've seen you drawing and colouring. They'd learn you how to do it properly up there and you can make a fortune on the potbanks with modelling and designing. You'd better stop reading that rubbish and put your mind to your future.

I was speechless for one Him, with his Weary Willy and Tired Tim...what a cheek! Still, it was an idea. I imagined myself among all those great pot-bellied chimneys drawing beautiful flowers to go on teacups. Still, I couldn't go yet...I was only eight.

CHAPTER 14 - WALKS WITH GRANDAD

At least this conversation established some sort of common ground between myself and Grandad, and when he invited me to walk with me saying he would show me a very interesting thing which he supposed I knew nothing of...I was a little more co-operative.

On Saturday afternoon we set off along Church Road and walked a fair way to the far outskirts of the town. We were well across Buckshaft which came to a dead end as far as a hard road was concerned. On our left the heights of Abbotswood ascended to the skyline, and the right bank ran away steeply to the railway line in the valley with a scattering of miner's cottages in-between. Grandad stopped and pointed with his stick to a large house built of red brick and partly obscured by trees, some ornamental and some that had crept out of the forest and nearly obscured the sight of the house from the road. Forest sheep grazed the large expanse of turf which separated the house from the roadway. It was a very smart house, well kept, with two flights of stone steps set into the bank. An ash drive ran from the road across the green towards the house.

"D'you know who lives there?" Grandad asked.

"As a matter of fact I do, I replied. "It's Mr Morgan. I've been in there and had a piece of cherry cake and lemonade."

Grandad seemed surprised at this. "What for?" he asked.

"I went there with Dad to take a mat they had ordered, I replied.

"Well I suppose that's how it is now," said Grandad. "But d'you know who ought to be living there?"

"No. Who?"

"You and your Mam and Dad," said Grandad.

"Whatever for?" I asked.

Grandad told me a long, involved story of the old days of mining in the Forest. How he and some more men were mining for coal and had struck it rich. How events had stopped them getting the rewards for their labour. It was all far too political for me to understand and I was not convinced that I should be living in the smart house with a maid in starched cap and apron to open the door.

No houses and We turned and walked back home and I was astonished to hear that when Grandad was a young man the woods and green turf covered all that part of Cinderford. cottages and tarmac roads...just forest. I was bound to admit that when he described how he had walked upon woodland paths along that very road where now stood a row of shops, including our own with a wide pavement before it, I could see it was nothing but plain truth. I then began to wonder about how much truth there was in Grandad's other story, but all his talk of railway and mining companies and big business was quite beyond me.

After tea we all sat around the living room and Mam was persuaded to play some pieces on the piano. In my estimation this was a thoroughly boring entertainment and I sat inconspicuously in a corner reading my latest book. As it was Saturday night I was hoping to delay bedtime.

Dad decided to go out for a drink. Mam was bathing the younger ones before the fire and Grandad said: "Have you ever been down to the old Grange, Gladys?"

"Well I know where it is," I said.

I couldn't exactly say I'd been to it. Not that I hadn't to made the attempt. Many a time we had planned go to the Old Grange. If you went down over the steep field on the top of the Barn by Sawney's Lookout, you inevitably came to the Old Grange, an ancient stone building and the remains of what must at one time have been a very grand house. The surrounding wall was high and built of cut stone. The gates now rusting were of elaborate design and still quite imposing.

Over all brambles and creepers and ivy spread unchecked. Whenever we came within touching distance of the Old Grange walls we turned and fled, probably along the lane that led back into Littledean. Everybody knew the old Grange was haunted and had been for hundreds of years. Or why else had it been allowed to get into that condition?

“I hope you’re not going to tell me we ought to be living there,” I said.

“Good Lord no,” said Grandad. “It was in ruins when I was a boy. Oh no. I wondered if you’d seen the headless horseman?”

Headless horseman! I’d never even heard of such a thing.

“And I don’t suppose you have either, I countered.

“Certainly I have,” said grandad.

“It’s a full moon tonight and I was wondering if you’d like to get a sight of it.

I looked at him with horror. Go down to the Old Grange in the middle of the night!

“I might go down there sometime, I said nonchalantly.

“But I want to finish this book tonight.”

“It’s no good going on your own because you’d see nothing,” said grandad.

“Whyever not?” I asked.

“You have to be the seventh son of a seventh son, which is what I happen to be,” said grandad. “As you climb up the field from the Grange you hear the sound of galloping hooves. Closer and closer and past you goes a beautiful white horse, his breath steaming from his nostrils. On his back a knight dressed in shining silver armour...but he has no head.”

“What’s the good of that if I can’t see him?” I asked.

“That’s why I’m giving you the chance,” said grandad.

“If we get there at midnight and you hold tight to my little finger you’ll be able to see him as well.”

“It’s no good,” I said. “Mam wouldn’t let me go.”

Which was a jolly good get-out and true. I wondered still more how was much was true and how much was make-believe in Grandad’s stories.

Much later in life I learned that it was indeed true that bands of miners in those days had produced large quantities of coal working their own small companies. The large mining companies already operating in Wales and contrived with the railway company to charge ever increasing tariffs for the transport of coal, and it was impossible to sell the coal within the Forest of Dean region the small miners were forced out of business.

This was why Grandad, among others, had taken his skills and his labours to fresh fields.

CHAPTER 15 - SAM PARRY THE PAINTER

Grandad went back home so no more strange stories came from that quarter. However there always seemed to be interesting characters about. One man I always found very absorbing was Mr Sam Parry, a painter and decorator by trade, who lived at the top of Station Street. He lived in a red brick house with a triangular garden before it, just opposite the police station. You could go that way to school. It always looked extremely tidy, a smart house with starched white curtains in precise position at the windows, laced-edged blinds, a white doorstep and a very clean fat tabby cat sunning itself on the window sill.

It was a tall house and high up the wall hung an immaculate sign announcing Mr Parry's vocation. The front door sometimes opened and Mrs Parry would emerge and make her way into town. I was often at Mr Parry's with Dad when we went into the work shed just inside the garden. I often saw Mrs Parry but not once did she speak to us. I thought this extremely strange and in fact she somehow didn't seem to belong to Cinderford at all. In cold weather she always wore a warm coat longer than was strictly fashionable, a large fur collar and a round fur hat. She looked extremely smart in an odd sort of way and had very pink cheeks and dark eyebrows. She was not very tall but walked very uprightly in black polished shoes and always wore gloves, sometimes a muff as well. I often looked at the sign on the wall and the carnation colouring on her face and wondered if her husband had given a hand with her toilet.

Mr Parry was very easy going, always called me 'Glad', and told me I could look around his workshop, but not to go near the glass which was stacked in one part of the shed or anywhere hear the blow lamp which was fiercely hissing on the table.

I needed no second warning about this. Dad and Mr Parry would sit on a couple of boxes chatting and I would search among curtly wood shavings and sawdust for bits of wood to make into doll's furniture. There were certificates in frames hanging round the walls, and on a bench I caught sight of bits of coloured feathers.

I was fascinated with these and Mr Parry showed me how he made flies for fishing. He had a vice clamped to the bench and could build up tiny scraps of feather and fur and make a realistic fly which was then mounted on a cruel looking hook.

"But where do you fish?" I asked.

"Oh in the Wye mostly," he said.

I had never seen the river Wye. It was all of six miles away. I imagined it must be like the Severn.

"Do you go there often?" I asked.

"Sometimes on a Sunday morning," he said. "Or I might do a bit of painting if the weather's good.

"What sort of painting?"

I was a bit suspicious of painting by a river, and I never knew if I was having my leg pulled.

"Would you like to see a couple?" Mr Parry said. "Don't know if they're much good, but you can see them if you're interested."

I was amazed and delighted when he pulled away some old sacking and produced some paintings, also an easel which he erected to support the paintings. Was I interested?

Next to my great desire to be an actress was my ambition to be a real artist. Now here was Mr Parry nonchalantly producing absolutely wonderful works of art.

"This is Kerne Bridge," he said, and placed on the easel this beautiful picture of an old stone bridge. You could almost feel rough stone, the dusty road and beautiful cool water swiftly flowing. "And this is Goodrich Castle." Another picture appeared of an ancient castle on a green hill. Then, best of all, a kingfisher with its beautiful glowing plumage balancing on a branch jutting over racing water.

"Oh how beautiful!" I said. "Oh I wish I could do it."

I almost wept. I never did go painting with Mr Parry but many years later I was talking to a young man, thirty years my junior, who mentioned that he had lived in that part of Cinderford when he was a boy and how a nice old boy named Sam Parry used to give him bits of wood to make into rabbit hutches.

“Did he ever show you his paintings?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “Did he ever show you his ears?”

“He never did,” I said. “As far as I can remember he always wore a cap, or sometimes a fur hat with ear flaps.

“Yes,” said the young man. “He usually had them covered up. He spent a lot of time in Canada as a young man and got the ends of his ears frozen off. I used to love to look at them and hear his tales of Canada. He had an interesting life.”

Talking one day to my daughter who settled in Canada and was on a visit to England, I was showing her some carpentry that the young man had done for me since her last visit and mentioned the coincidence of our mutual childhood friend.

“Mr Parry had a wife who always puzzled me,” I said. “She had a strange way of make-up that I suspected Mr Parry had taken a hand with, but she never uttered a word that I remember.”

“Did it never occur to you that he may have married a French-Canadian who spoke no English?” my daughter said.

“No, it never did, I replied. “But that must be the answer. And looking back I guess she felt pretty lonely in Cinderford.”

CHAPTER 16 - ADVENT AT BILSON SCHOOL

It was Christmas Term 1920. It would be my last Christmas at Bilson School but only occasionally did the ominous thought of moving to Double View crop up. After all there was Christmas, Easter and the summer holidays to go before that...it seemed a lifetime.

Monday mornings at school always started with a list of twenty spellings on the top left hand of the blackboard and the new week's multiplication table marching down alongside it. Miss Daniels was my teacher...tall, slim, straight as a ramrod, but with a pleasant smile. She was also very strict and anything short of complete obedience got rewarded with immediate punishment.

By Friday we were supposed to have spellings and tables off by heart. A test was given and twenty out of twenty was the result expected. Fall below a certain standard and the swishy cane was brought out of the cupboard.

I was not very good at memorising tables. "What do you think you're going to do at Double View if you can't do it now?" was Miss Daniels' question.

What did happen at Double View?

I shuddered and kept repeating my tables before I dropped off to sleep at night.

My sister Lily seemed happy enough at Double View. Always off early to school, her tartan Tam-o'-shanter with the big bobble in the centre crowning her shining dark hair braided in two plaits. If you got there early you could get a turn on the slides, she said.

Hetty had already left school and combined her job as shop assistant and mother's help, with her private lessons in shorthand and typing. She was soon making Dad's Remington proceed at a greatly increased speed and I was often pressed into service reading paragraphs from the Mercury at dictation speed. No wonder I knew the Mercury by heart!

Hetty now had her long dark hair dressed to the nape of her neck, hanging loose behind and a large butterfly bow of navy ribbon attached. She was very much the young lady.

How quickly my sisters seemed to progress from one world to another. I was always anxious to do well, to please my teacher and have her proud of my work. But I was in no hurry to enter this strange world of Double View. Learning how to lay a table and dust chairs, and always with that terrifying person Mr J.A. Emery lurking in the offing. His very name seemed to cause the cheek to bleach.

But now we had come to the last week of the Christmas term and the afternoons were pure joy. Rectangles of stiff paper to be coloured in whatever hue you liked, folded and cut, and so carefully, stuck with gloy and brush to result in paper lanterns. Self-coloured strips...stitch and thread, stitch and thread to make endless paper chains. A good firm piece of cartridge paper to indulge your fancy with your own Christmas card design. Everything named clearly before being draped across the room. It looked lovely. Mornings were a different proposition. It seemed to me that the whole morning was devoted to the making of the calendar. This was to be the 'Piece de Resistance' of our Christmas booty. Miss Daniels had made a collection of cut out pictures suitable for calendar and I got Melrose Abbey. She had also prepared a large number of small squares of paper which were ruled in pencil into smaller squares. A replica was drawn on the blackboard and we were instructed as to what to do.

At the top went JANUARY 1921. This was printed in block capitals. Then Mon... Tues...Wed etc. with capital first letter only. We wrote in ink with long thin nibs. No errors, no blots, and above all no rubbing with the finger. "Now watch carefully on which day of the week number 1 comes," said Miss Daniels.

"If you get that right it's impossible to go wrong."

It was remarkable how many of us accomplished the impossible on this occasion.

Only so many blank papers were available. At the first sign of error you had the cane and started again. At the second you got demoted...no calendar. It was a great disgrace not to be able to take a calendar home and I had the beautiful picture to go on mine so I wanted to complete it. I finished January without disaster, breathed a sigh of relief and was allowed to Start February.

“Mind you don’t leave the first R out,” Miss Daniels said. “And don’t forget there are only 28 days in February this year.

These instructions I kept repeating to myself. I placed the blotting paper under my left hand. I dipped the pen in carefully. I started on the right day and made beautiful round figures to fill the squares. I let out my breath at the end of the line, got another pen full of ink and continued.

It was going on. I carried on through the next line and the next until the end, put my pen down and sat back admiring my work. It looked lovely. I glanced at the board and suddenly the awful truth struck me. The last line said...26, 27, 28, 29, 30. There was no way out. I crept fearfully to the teacher’s desk, put the paper before her and held out my hand.

“I’m surprised at you!” said Miss Daniels, bringing down her cane. “Now don’t get crying all over everything and spoil the rest of it.”

She gave me another paper and I went back to my place trembling.

Oh what a long way there was still to travel!

How I wished there were fewer months in the year, fewer days in each month. Eventually the job was done, the pieces stapled together, the calendar mounted on the cards, the picture in place and the ribbon tied.

I packed all my things before going home but still had trailing paper chains and fragile lanterns to carry. It was blowing and raining slightly as we went home. All up Foundry Lane tatters of coloured paper streamers and bits of coloured lanterns clung sadly among the faded brambles and leafless hawthorns. I ran home with my coat about my shoulders, my treasures held closely from the wet. We would be helping Mam finish the mincemeat tonight, and soon it would be Christmas Eve. I had a plan.

CHAPTER 17 - CHRISTMAS EVE 1920

Breaking up for Christmas was certainly one of the high lights of the year, but getting everything ready for the great day was a major involvement for every member of the family.

Dad mainly concerned himself with making sure there was a reliable prime cut of beef for Christmas dinner. He also made himself responsible for getting the nuts of which he was extremely fond. Shops were vetted for best stocks of Brazils, walnuts and almonds. He also made sure the nut crackers were in good shape and under his control...in his own pocket.

Dad also bought the cheese. Mam hated the smell of cheese, particularly gorgonzola. Dad was also determined to have the best valerian almonds and muscatels on offer. I remember these particularly because the names enchanted me, hearing them repeated between Dad and the proprietor on Saturday morning shopping trips.

Mam of course still had the everyday chores to pursue. Properly laid out breakfast, dinner and tea every day, the everlasting washing, and more particularly drying and airing on these dark days. Bathing and hair washing in close conditions for one teenage daughter, three girls at school and one toddling around. Phyllis was still Mammy's girl and did not like leaving her side.

My two elder sisters were very conscious of keeping the home clean and conforming to the standard set in our community. They were tireless in their sweeping, scrubbing, turning out, mat banging, polishing the piano, and scolding me for my sluttish ways.

"When you get married, they would say, "I can just see you with your head in a book and your children all running about filthy dirty. Or you sitting in your best chair trying to paint pictures of them. Why don't you get a duster and finish the stairs off?" The last request on a rising crescendo.

'When I got married?' What were they talking about? Future at Double View school still haunted me like an unavoidable disaster area and that was two whole terms away. If I could push it further away still I would. But being grown up and even married was in a sort of never-never-land of the future. What I was concerned with was getting my sister to stop this everlasting ridding the house of invisible cobwebs and imagined dust particles, and get the new curtains hung.

I had all my paper lanterns and decorations in a large cardboard box and wanted to see them triumphantly draped.

"Oh no you don't...not until the curtains are hung," they said.

Hetty had finished sewing them last night on the Singer sewing machine and had to finish the cleaning, iron the hem and polish the window before they could go in place.

Little Violet was not old enough to be much use but played with her dolls and got Phyllis to play with her. I had a job for Violet. I tried to co-operate and get the jobs finished but kept a wary eye on the weather. dull, but it got dark before four.

It was still fine but Dad was at his usual job banging away at the mats. When the shop doorbell rang Hetty would drop what she was doing and go and serve a customer and Dad's voice would be heard in a cheerful exchange of news.

Mam was busying herself at the old iron range keeping the heat up, the pots boiling, the airing turned and replaced on the fire guard. The curtains were hung at last... cream ground with gold and yellow chrysanthemums scattered all over, and at last the hems hung in a straight line.

"Beautiful," I said ingratiatingly as privately I didn't care for the pattern.

"Now can I have the table to put up my paper chains?"

When it became obvious that I couldn't stand at two diagonal corners of the room at the same time they gave me a hand and Lily was just as enthusiastic as me in getting everything balanced and beautiful. Mam had to let us buy two sets of paper chains from Boltons the stationers and they were really fantastic. All links opening out with concertina-like precision... red, green, orange, lemon, deep blue, pink and white and purple, then repeat from the beginning. The best was a perfect bell which spread out its intricate folds, clipped firmly and hung in the middle. We hung our home-made lanterns and chains in between and looped them around the walls.

We laid the table for dinner and called Dad. When Dad had had his cup of tea and gone back to his box seat by the mat frame, I said I had to go out and take Vi with me.

“Getting out of the washing up again?” accused my elder sisters.

“No, honestly, it’s a secret, I said.

This would not have passed at other times but at Christmas time it was a good reason. You hoarded what spare pennies you could get and bought presents for everybody by hook or by crook. These had to be concealed some way or other to be presented on Christmas morning. I helped Vi button herself into her winter coat, put on her hat and scarf and fit on her gloves. She was only five, and quite pleased to be taken out.

“Don’t be too long,” warned Mam. “It soon gets dark.”

We set off along Market Street and up the side of the triangle where the soldier stood on his plinth in the centre. He had not yet stood there for two years, and the swinging iron chains that made a triangle around the steps where the poppy wreaths were laid were still black and shiny and new-looking. We crossed the road at the top of High Street and went up Heywood Road behind James’ the newsagent, where the posters were pasted high up the wall. Past the public house and the smelly oil place where you could buy paraffin or sell rabbit skins for a few pence.

The road was not a paved road, just black ashes, and the houses or cottages became few and far between. The road was also a long road, gradually rising, narrowed into Heywood Lane which rose still higher and was almost bereft of people. Violet began to complain. Where were we going to? There weren’t any shops up here. Her legs were getting tired. She wanted to go home. I had to stop telling her fairy tales and tell her the truth or I was going to have a screaming child on my hands.

“We’re going to get some holly,” I said. “Real holly with red berries on, big branches of it to put all over the house and in the shop window perhaps. Just think how lovely it will be. Perhaps even some mistletoe as well.

Now we were by Heywood where in summer we picnicked under the stunted oaks, made houses out of shoulder high bracken, and swung ropes over strong branches horizontal to the ground so making a swing. Now all looked bare and dismal. A fading greyish-green prospect with black trunks and fretted branches diminishing into a shadowy dark nowhere. This was why I had brought my little sister. I was suspicious that if I had confided in Lily she would either have been too enthusiastic, started bossing me around and taken credit for the whole proceeding, or told me not to be so daft and put me completely off the enterprise. I was not quite brave enough to come on my own. I had never been up this far after the autumn leaves had fallen. There is something about having someone smaller and weaker in your charge that gives you greater confidence.

I had planned to go up the causeway, a rough wide track, skirting the wood right up to the end of Littledean hill and a hard road which ran across the very top of the escarpment where my first remembered home had been. Next to the top of the causeway lay the Haine. This was an enclosed wood of tall pine trees surrounded by a hedge. It was lovely to come up here on a very hot summer’s day and walk in the pine-scented shade on the slippery brown pine needles.

And always there was a breeze coming across the valley of the Severn and gently sighing in the branches. Some of the hedges were made of holly bushes, glossy green and prickly all the year round. Now, at this time of year, holly always had red berries, didn’t it? You went to the beechwoods for bluebells, round the fields for cowslips and moon daisies, in the grassy hollow in spring for primroses, so it was only logical that you came to holly hedges for holly at Christmas time.

We came to the Haine. The tall pines stood dark and huge in the brown carpet, but their tops tossed angrily and noisily. It was easy to get in through the gaps already made by ranging Forest sheep. Scraps of their fleeces hung on every hawthorn twig. I knew where the holly hedge grew and holding my little sister’s hand went towards it. There was the tall dark hedge, grim and impenetrable covered with leathery thorny glossy leaves. But where were the cheerful red berries? Not one could I see.

“I can’t see any lovely red berries,” said Vi.

“Never mind,” I said. “We’ll get some little pieces and we’ll make some berries when we get home.”

This was easier said than done. The shoots were tough and refused to be torn from the branches. The wind was howling now through the trees and occasional frozen tiny snowflakes drifted in the wind. We managed to tear some strands of ivy from the bank and pick up a few sprays of fir cones.

“Come on, I said. “This will have to do. Let’s go home.”

We got back down the causeway a great deal faster than we came up and Vi needed no urging now we were on the homeward path. It was already nearly dark with a storm blowing up behind us and we could see lights in the cottage windows as we came down Heywood Lane. I was feeling a sense of failure at having so little to take home and the collapse of my fine plan.

Suddenly, as we came down Heywood Road, we stopped and listened. Surely that was a band playing carol tunes through the wintry air. My spirits rose and we ran down the road and sure enough there was the Salvation Army, their faces all scrubbed and red and shiny, their instruments shining too in the light from the streetlamp as they joyfully proclaimed the coming of the holy baby for all to hear from Hallelujah Tump.

Things weren’t so bad after all. We listened a little while and saw that quite a crowd were gathering round Tom Mason’s the butcher’s opposite. I knew what was going on.

Miners’ wives had so little to spend and were waiting their last chance to get a joint for Christmas as the butcher auctioned off his stuff. He had no means of storing it over the holiday.

“I want my tea,” said Vi.

I took her hand and we cross the street down by Jacobs, round the corner and stopped by Bonser’s.

My good friend Mr Bonser was doing a roaring trade, and had members of his family helping him.

“Let’s go in here a minute,” I said.

By waiting quietly I managed to corner Mr Bonser by the sacks of potatoes.

“Please Mr Bonser, have you got any holly left?” I asked.

“I think it’s all sold, said Mr Bonser. “But maybe I’ll find you a bit.” His bulky figure disappeared up the steps to their living quarters and soon he returned with a small bunch of holly in his hand.

“Hear you are, my dear. Hop off home quickly and don’t show anybody.

Wish Dad a happy Christmas for me, and all the others. No love, you keep your pennies...buy some sweets for sister.”

Vi and I ran the last two hundred yards to our own shop.

Vi ran straight through the other door with the glass panel covered with patterned translucent paper, and into the living room. I could see my father had a visitor, the reverend Mr Biddle, vicar of St. Stephen’s whose church and Sunday school we attended. The atmosphere was tense. The vicar was a tall well-built man with a pink friendly face and a fringe of silver-grey curly hair. My father stood facing him, a short square figure in his shirt sleeves, his canvas-bibbed apron with the roomy pocket in the front containing sharpening stone, hammer and a piece of sunlight soap. He used to soap to smear the vertical strands of fibre. [a little unclear at this point as mum rewrote it – I assume the soap made it easier to make the mats by reducing friction as the warp thread was passed through the wefts.]

He stood erect, the dents on each side of his head not unsightly, but a permanent reminder of the shrapnel that had taken his sight.

“Hallo Dad,” I said and smiled at the vicar. He knew I was only telling Dad who had come in. Dad hated being kept in the dark about who was around. The tension seemed to slacken a little.

“I suppose I’d better say all right and thanks,” Dad said to the vicar. “But don’t forget...I won’t stand for charity.”

Mr Biddle shook his hand and patting my head, he departed.

Dad took off his apron and rolled it up.

“Come on, he said. “There’s something interesting inside. And I want to know what you’ve been up to all afternoon.

Mam had opened Mr Biddle’s Christmas parcel and spread it out over the scrubbed table. The others were all standing around, chins or heads concentrated towards the centre according to height. In the centre was a beautiful iced cake, pink and white icing with loops and twirls all-round the edge. But something had caught my eye...a wonderful doll in a cardboard box. I fell in love with it at once. She was about twelve inches long. Her complexion was extremely healthy and even sun tanned. Her eyes were bright blue and would open and shut. A delicate dress of turquoise crepe-de-chine edged with lace. A frilled hat. Wrist joints and tanned fingers. Plump little legs with knee joints, and white sock and black shoes. She was the most beautiful thing I had ever desired. I called her Stella immediately.

Mam was strictly fair in sharing the spoils. Youngest had first choice so Phyllis got the rabbit. Violet, appropriately enough, for a doll with a mauve silk dress, and Stella became mine. But we were not allowed to handle anything until Christmas morning when Santa Claus would put them with our other presents, but all was well and my heart sang.

I put my piece of holly over Sir Arthur Pearson’s portrait which always hung over the piano. He was the man who had instituted St. Dunstan’s. And the first time I rubbed a spot off Stella’s face with a damp hanky some of her tan disappeared.

But I never lost my love for her. I had her for years.

CHAPTER 18 - LOVE AND MARRIAGE

I have mentioned before that in this clannish district we had no aunts or grannies close at hand to be popping into for the odd Sunday tea as did most of my school fellows.

Our own neighbours in Commercial Road, although pleasant, were not in the habit of being free with invitations and I, who was interested in everybody, never did get past the shop in either establishment. Mr Dee on our left viewed us all with the greatest suspicion.

His wife was small and dark like himself, gave us the occasional smile, but her life seemed to consist of cleaning, tidying and polishing and looking after Willy. Willy was her only child and now, I would think, in his late twenties or early thirties and a man of the world. We thought he was a commercial traveller, a very exalted profession. Beautifully turned out he left home every morning with his attaché case for the station, or sometimes stayed away for longer periods. He was a bachelor and as such, a subject of suspicious speculation by some visitors to our shop.

The Surby's on our right had a very different air. Mr Surby wore breeches and leggings and had a rugged outdoor appearance. Mrs Surby softer, more expansive, with a soft white skin, good looking and often wore jewellery and always perfume. Violet was the elder of her two children. Violet was a little older than my eldest sister and appeared to be one of the most sought-after young ladies of the place. She had a beautiful cloud of nearly black curly hair, soft blue eyes with black eyelashes, a smiling dimpled face and was always being waited upon by youths in Oxford bags carrying younger tennis rackets. Cyril was much younger more my own age. [I found a Cyril Thomas James Surbey - born in Steam Mills nr. Drybrook in 1911 - no record of Violet]

He it was who had made us free of Surby's cowshed until authority stepped in.

We heard that Violet had made her choice of her various suitors and a marriage was to take place. There was a great week of rushing about in the Surby household, boxes with masses of white tissue coming up their back steps, flowers glimpsed through their glass roof and Mrs Surby getting so excited that my mother was made a confidante for a short while. Cars pulled up to the shop door on the important day and a resplendent Mrs Surby and Cyril, even more brushed and unspotted than was his norm, got in. Bridesmaids decked in clouds of tulle, then lastly Violet more beautiful than ever in white, with Mr Surby in dark suit and tidied moustache.

I never did find out who Violet married, but the next day I had a mysterious small parcel handed to me via my sister Hetty. It was wrapped in pale blue paper with little silver horse shoes and pink roses, and had my name on the outside.

It contained a pink silk pin cushion, a little box containing a piece of wedding cake, and a note. The note said:

“Dear Gladys, I love you very much. Do you love me? Cyril.”

It seemed that Cyril, having been steeped in romance for the last few weeks, had succumbed to the bug and made me the object of his affections.

I decided it was my first brush with romance, that strange nebulous thing that seemed to permeate every weekly magazine that circulated among girls of Hetty's age, with advice that could have been summed up in 'how to get your man. The state of falling in love seemed to be the ultimate and highest pinnacle that a young girl was likely to achieve.

But my present problem was what to do about this love token I had received.

I tasted the cake, it was lovely. I read through all the answers to heart throb queries in my sister's books, but nowhere did it tell you how to answer a love letter, aged ten. I sat still to feel if I had any strange throbbing of the heart. I hadn't, but it seemed only polite to send a reply.

I had read every word of the romantic stories of beautiful girls and handsome men, as I had read everything that came my way even to stray copies of 'Chips' that Grandad had left after his short stay. Nowhere was there any inspiration and I could find nothing half so pristine looking as the pink silk pincushion to return. I finally found a scrap of pale blue baby ribbon in my sister's work basket which I begged from her.

I cut a small piece off my hair and tied it with the ribbon in a tidy bow. I rummaged through the chest of drawers and found a box which had contained a typewriter ribbon. And that was the best I could do. I cut out a rose and

a couple of silver horseshoes from Cyril's paper and stuck them on the box with flour paste. I wrote a note on lined paper and put it inside to half fill the space.

'Dear Cyril, Thank you very much for the cake and pincushion. They were both lovely. I am sending you a lock of my hair. I think I love you too so you must keep it forever.'

I gave the parcel to my sister to return the same way she received the other and overheard Mrs Surby saying to my mother: "Starting early, aren't they?" and they both had a good laugh.

I decided I would hide my first love letter in a place that would be secret forever. I hunted round the bedroom and eventually found a small hole in the floor board by the skirting through which I could get my hand. I ate a bit more of the cake, then put the box containing the cake and note down in the hole. I fetched it out a couple of times to look at it, then clean forgot. It must have been a months before I next thought of it and when I put my hand as far as I could reach all I found was a pile of tiny scraps. The mice had been there first.

CHAPTER 19 - GROWING UP IN FASHION

In my mother's daily round of family care and all the hard work this involved, she had little time or energy to make friends or interests of her own. Even her piano playing seemed to come to an end. My elder sisters were addicted to romantic songs and more or less self-taught they would sit side by side on the piano stool and practice pieces they found in the music stool. Soon the strains of 'Pale hand I loved beside the Shalimar' would be accompanied by honeyed voices. Both had good singing voices and they complimented one another.

My father bought a gramophone with a huge horn and the records were all of military marches... The Spreading Eagle March...Stars and stripes for Ever...the Bluebells of Scotland.

During this time the romantic magazines advertised new make-up preparations and exotic perfumes. Previously nobody had ever admitted to using any aid to beauty but a pair of curling tongs. I was once given, in secret, two thin little pages of paper. These came from a small book about 3 by 2 inches which had pages coated with powder. You lightly smoothed the paper on your face and received a romantic bloom over nose and skin which lasted about an hour or so. The first time I used it when I was going to Sunday school my school friend spotted it immediately.

"What have you got on your face?" she asked.

I felt terrible.

"Nothing, I said. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"My Mam wouldn't let me do that," said Doris. "It's powder and it's wicked."

Doris had a strong well-scrubbed face with shiny red cheeks and golden hair which hung in rigid ringlets achieved by putting her hair in long cotton strips after the Saturday night bath.

"It's all right for you," I said.

"You've got rosy cheeks and I haven't."

"My Uncle Fred and Auntie Florrie think you're all right," said Doris. "They like me being friends with you."

This boosted my ego remarkably. This particular Aunt and Uncle were childless and their house was a model of perfection. One was almost afraid to step through the door. It was just as well to be approved of by such people, but I could not feel I had anything in common.

My sisters sent away a coupon to an advertising firm together with some stamps and received a minute box of powder, a bottle of perfume and a large picture similar to the posters beloved of today's teenagers. It was executed in tones of romantic blue shading to purple. A silver crescent moon hung in the sky over an ornate balcony shaded by a dark tree with trailing sprays. On the balcony a young man in immaculate evening clothes bearing a striking resemblance to Rudolf Valentino, looked soulfully into the eyes of a golden-haired young lady. A peacock stood below in shadowed grass beside a stream full of water lilies in full bloom.

This romantic picture was hung by the piano and my sisters voices became even more vibrant and plaintive. They must have penetrated through to my father who countered with ribald song from the Victorian music hall. I found his efforts much more interesting and tried to memorise all the verses. There was one called Somerset fair which went as follows:

"We went in the morning to see the fat lady

Who sits in the side tent at Somerset Fair.

It were a penny to see her.

It were twopence to squeeze her.

It were fourpence to seize her

And kiss and canoodle her there.

There's four young fat bullocks of old Ebenezer's

As haven't come home yet from Somerset Fair."

So it went on describing the thrills of the swings and including a line about the Parson gazing up to heaven:

"The Parson said it was shocking what funny things women do wear."

[\[Somerset Fair\]](#)

This old song went on through many verses which I have forgotten. 'Any old iron' and 'Burlington Bertie' were also favourite songs.

We were in the 1920's but there were straws in the wind that showed that Dad was still in the Edwardian era of the days of his young manhood. Technical improvements he greeted with enthusiasm, and we had a wireless set with headphone's as soon as they became available. We took it in turns to wiggle the cat's whisker on the crystal until we could hear the light orchestral music magically coming all the way from London. The public transport now available on the roads was also fully utilised, but social changes Dad found unacceptable.

The great Post-war dancing fever sweeping the country also engulfed Cinderford, and hastily put together dance bands gathered the young generation in every available space. There were five girls in our family and Dad was completely convinced that young ladies and public houses were completely out of reach of one another. The problem was, as far as dancing went, the five ladies loved to dance and the only places available for dancing were public house clubrooms, the skittle alley at the 'Globe', an old garage in Wesley Road with corrugated metal doors and roof.

Every place in which you could park humans from the night air throbbled with the new beat. Skirts were going up. Artificial silk stockings were going on young ladies' legs. Hair was getting bobbed and shingled and even Eton cropped, and poor dad felt he was responsible for innocent young females let loose in this dangerous wilderness.

Hetty sometimes agreed to help me concoct something on her new sewing machine. We bought three yards of material and I had a fair idea of the shape of a pattern from watching

Mrs Adams at work. We cut it out with the idea of copying a latest style from a fashion magazine and at last got it together to look like a dress, fairly straight to the knees.

I had my eye on a suitable belt. Among Dad's stock he had some coloured elastic webbing. I told Dad that Hetty and I had made me a new summer dress and could I have some of the webbing for a belt.

"How much do you want?" Dad asked.

"I haven't measured," I said.

The only measure Dad had in the shop was a substantial two-yard wooden ruler studded with brass dots denoting inches, feet, etc.

"I'd better measure you myself," said Dad. "This stuff is too dear to waste."

So I got the roll of webbing, gave it to Dad and of all places he began to put it round my waist!

"I don't want it round there!" I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Where else would you want a belt except around your waist?"

"It's the wrong fashion," I said, nearly in tears. "I copied it out of a proper fashion book.

"But where else could you wear a belt?" asked Dad.

"About here," I said, pulling it towards my hips."

"Good Lord, girl! You can't wear a belt round your bottom!" said Dad, with memories no doubt of the wasp-waisted young ladies when he could see. But that was exactly where the current style was. Dad gave me a few extra inches and, having found a clasp in the machine drawer, I was soon right in the fashion.

CHAPTER 20 - I GO TO DOUBLE VIEW SCHOOL

I have strayed from my story through the hazardous world of education. I left it where I was looking forward with mixed feelings to the senior school at Double View. One day towards the end of the summer term we had a visit by a gentleman from the education office. He came into the class-room and the teacher explained to us that owing to some new laws which were coming in, it had been decided that only pupils whose birthdays fell between certain dates were now eligible to be transferred to the senior school. Those whose birthdays were after that date would be staying at Bilson for another year. The girls in this class were of mixed ages and only some would qualify for Double View. It was no disgrace, there was nothing to be done. It was just what the new law said and she could do nothing about it. I was horrified. Having viewed the prospect of life under Mr Emery with the greatest dread, I now felt I was being kept back, a disgrace beyond anything I could tolerate.

Teacher and the visitor scanned the register and picked out the names of those who came into the right age range. Then he said that as there were a certain number places available would the teacher pick out another four or five who she thought were forward enough for the transfer. This was my chance. I fixed the teacher with beseeching eyes, imploring her soundlessly to choose me. I knew I had a weakness

in arithmetic but ignored it. She kept glancing my way. I knew I had a good name in English and felt as if I was hypnotising her to call my name...and she did. My name was added to the list and I was scheduled to start at Double View in the autumn.

Having won this victory I forgot about my misgivings, but the reality of life at the new school was in parts more than I could bear. I have read account of Mr Emery which spoke warmly of his teaching guidance to scholars and student teachers. But I can only say that as a child I found him terrifying.

Mr Emery was the head-teacher. Mrs Emery was a teacher and daughter Mavis was a teacher, all at Double View school.

I had a number of class teachers whom I loved and got on well with. Miss Harris came from Cornwall which she loved and often told us of in her lessons. Miss Beddington was a local lady and I found her delightful.

The school was divided into a long central hall lined the one side with girls' classrooms, and facing them across the hall the boys' classrooms. These lines of classrooms ejected out into separate playgrounds. Although it was a school for boys and girls, in practice they never mixed.

Each day began with assembly when Mr Emery stood on the platform, an accompanist sat the piano and the teachers were ranged at the sides of the hall...girls' teachers down the girls' side, boys' teachers down the boys' side. After prayers and a hymn Mr Emery would harangue the entire school on some subject. One time it was on dangerous practices when it was brought to our attention that hence forward no girl was to be seen knitting socks or stockings in the school playground.

There was no chance of me being caught doing this...it was not one of my accomplishments knitting on four needles, turning heels, casting off toes, even less knitting gloves with separate fingers. But some of the girls were quite expert. However Mr Emery painted such a vivid picture of a girl running with her knitting, fall down and running the steel needles through her wrist that I was nearly physically sick on the spot.

However I could see the justice of the ban. But when he asked a girl of about eleven to come up on the platform and recite her name to the school, I felt deeply for her, and shrank for her embarrassment. She had about eight forenames including Eleanor May Edith...and ended with Williams.

"Don't you all wonder how she manages to carry all that lot up the hill in time for school?" the headmaster asked. But I could not see how she could possibly be blamed for the names given her at birth. Surely it was bad enough to carry that burden without having it spoken of as a shame in front of several hundred school fellows.

Sometimes the lecture would go on for what seemed like hours and if one of our weaker sisters collapsed, silently folding up on the floor, two boys were detailed to take her head and feet and lay her on the bare concrete in the entrance until she came round. The harangue continued.

One morning for each class after assembly we went into the hall for mental arithmetic taken by the headmaster. I believe that for this, a boys' and girls' class of similar age range sat in the hall, one each to one desk and one chair. I cannot be sure of this as I was shaking so much from fear of mental arithmetic that I was not quite sure of what went on around me.

A clean strip of paper sat on the desk before me. Name on top...numbers down the left-hand side...1 to 20. Quick off the mark was the order, with a quick run through first of the short cuts. There were of course 12 pence in a shilling.

What do you do if you have to find the cost of a dozen? Call the pence shillings, multiply the shillings by twelve, was the answer. It took me some time to work this out. What could they mean? Pennies were pennies, shillings were shillings and pound notes were pound notes and didn't come our way very often.

How many half-crowns made a pound? Eight was the answer. so if you had several articles at $2/6$ each you know how much it comes to. And if each article cost 1 penny how many things will you get for a shilling? Eight again. And if you multiply it by twelve what do you do? Call the pence shillings and the halfpennies sixpences. There it was again, calling a penny a shilling and a halfpenny sixpence! It took me days to think why. And after this revision, which obviously made sense to some children, the test started.

"No 1. And before I had got half way through that one came numbers 2, 3, 4...and so on to number 20. "Pens down.

Pass your paper over your shoulder without turning your head.

Last child bring your paper to the front. A paper landed on my desk. It was tick or cross and nothing in between.

You had to be quick off the mark even to get the marking done.

"Count up how many ticks. Put it at the bottom of the paper over twenty with a ring round it and give them back. Hands up those who have twenty out of twenty.

A few hands shot up, and so on down the list. I was always near the bottom.

"Next time anybody with less than sixteen out of twenty gets the cane. Dismiss."

My head went round and round. When I got home I told Dad some of my troubles. Dad had no problems with mental arithmetic and explained how some of these mysteries could be solved. I mostly managed to avoid the canings after this but I always had problems in cashing at random over the range of tables and acres and roods and perches, bushels and quarts and fathoms, furlongs, ounces and hundredweights, all of which gradually raised their ugly heads in the hall of Double View School.

But the one occurrence that really hit me hardest was over my best subject...English Composition. Even at this I was a little more used to the teachers and thought I detected some veiled glances of sympathy. The subject set for the whole school was, 'What I would like to be when I grow up.'

Now at this stage in my life I was steeped in the novelettes that my eldest sister read and had quickly absorbed the ingredients that constituted a happy life. Left to myself I would have said that I would like to be an actress but it was plain that I knew insufficient about the subject to write a full essay about it. So I started imagining myself into one of those fictitious characters that lived between the covers of Hetty's novelettes.

When I grew up, I wrote, I would like my eyes to turn the colour of pansies, my eyelashes to grow sweeping, black and long, my hair to be dark brown and curly with golden lights, and my mouth a dark red cupid's bow. I should marry a man with certain attractive physical features and we should live in perfect harmony in a beautiful white house in the country.

The garden would be banked with gorgeous flowers and weeping willows would bend over a tumbling stream. White bridges would reach over the stream. So it went on. a life of beauty and tranquillity in idealistic surroundings with never a thought of how it was to come about and no wisdom of experience to modify the picture. The essay was sent in.

A few mornings later after prayers Mr Emery took some papers from his table and addressed the school. "This morning," he said, "I will read you an essay written by one of you children about the subject set... *What I would like to be when I grow up.*"

He then proceeded to read my essay out word for word, just as I had written it, from beginning to end. I was petrified.

Well, I stood rigid looking at the floor. I knew this was no commendation. It was being done to discredit me, to make me a laughing stock. Well, I argued with myself, weren't we always told to tell the truth and not be influenced by other people? I knew in my heart of hearts that when the essay had been set we had been expected to write some desirable uplifting aim of benefit to others. The truth was that I could find no such lofty ideals longing to take shape and the sort of life depicted in romantic novelettes seemed infinitely preferable.

Mr Emery came to the end.

“Wonderful!

Marvellous!” he said. “A delightful piece of work.”

And I believe half the school thought he meant it.

But then he said, “I have never read such terrible rubbish written by a child in all my years of teaching. Don't you know, girl...you know who I am speaking to...that you should have your mind set on different aims, a nurse to help the sick and wounded, a teacher to help children?

Or if you can't aim at that you could learn to cook, to clean a house properly or even work hard in a shop. It is an insult to hand in such rubbish! And he tore it through the middle.

“I must say I am surprised at your teacher for not putting some more sensible ideas in your head.”

I was filled with a mutinous burning anger and followed the others back into the classroom without shedding a tear, or giving myself away to those around me.

CHAPTER 21 - LESSONS AT SENIOR SCHOOL

Apart from those taken by the headmaster the rest of the school lessons suited me, and I enjoyed the type of curriculum we were under. I overheard it said that we, at that time, were taught by the P.N.E.U. system. I repeated this at home but Dad said he had never heard of it. I learned later in life that this system had been tried in Gloucestershire for a time. [e.g. <https://fairfield.school/?id=pneu>]

I don't know if this applied to every senior school but it was found suitable only for the more able children and slower children fell by the wayside. Certainly we covered a wide range of subjects. Although I left this school when I was twelve I had a smattering of many things that other children of my age knew nothing of.

We went through the classic tales of Greece and Troy, French history to Louise XIV, Foster's History of England. We had a different copy of a great artist's work every week, printed in VanDyke brown, and had a class discussion and had to write an essay on it. One I remember was 'The Praying Hands,' [Drawing by Albrecht Dürer] which was certainly a bit of a tester to write about for a least two whole pages. We did quite a bit of world geography, with work on cloud formation and weather indications, and a good deal of natural history.

The written arithmetic I was not worried about. It was only the panic of the atmosphere and the short sharp answers and only half-understood direction of mental arithmetic that put my mind in a whirl. The masses of tables were learnt by rote, and the apparently unconnected measuring units were my downfall. I could learn hundreds of lines of verse and they meant something. We learnt and acted out a number of Shakespeare plays and even acted them out in the main hall when it was not in use for other purposes.

The mode adopted was a class reading and discussion.

Then we were all divided into groups of six or seven and went on reading, or could move out into the hall for acting. I remember one girl called Muriel who did a very convincing act of Richard the Second dying by poison very dramatically.

We did this over and over again when the opportunity arose. Lady Macbeth sleep walking was another great favourite, as was Macduff and Macbeth having the sword fight, and of course the three witches on the blasted heath.

I never noted how many our class consisted of, but certainly a large number as we divided into a good number of groups.

I can well believe the system was not suited to children of a less studious nature. I remember for a week or so having to join a group of which I was not normally a member. When it was grouping time you made yourselves into a self-contained unit by half the group turning to face the rear of the class and sitting on top of the desk and putting feet on the seat. The other half sat on their desk with their feet on your seat.

It must be remembered that in those days epidemics were rampant and many illnesses that are of slight importance now were deadly serious then. Several hospitals in the district were in use as isolation hospitals...one at Green Bottom and one on the top of the hills known as the Wilderness were in use for Cinderford and East Dean district alone. One epidemic that occurred while I was at Double View was diphtheria, and another of Scarlet Fever. One day a family would be at school and by the end of the week they could have been carried off to Green Bottom or the Wilderness. I think it must have been during one of the periods that we had to close ranks and I found myself in entirely different company.

Always there was a group leader who directed operations and who had to be first to read aloud, or who had to start the narration. When I asked who was leader they said Alice could do it today. Then one asked another if she had brought the things and I was horrified to see the things that were produced from various pockets for regular use in group reading time. Not that it was not perfectly innocent and innocuous, but it certainly had nothing whatever to do with the syllabus and the P.N.E.U. system. Today apparently was to be bathing. the baby day and they had managed to secrete about their persons a small celluloid doll, fully clothed, a small enamel pudding dish, a piece of soap, a piece of face flannel and towelling, a bottle of water and a screw of paper containing baby powder. A real ceremony of bathing the bay was enacted with me being cast as look-out to keep an eye on teacher's movements and see that all books were ready open at the section we should have been reading.

The celluloid baby was treated to elaborate mothering, turned and divested of its garments like a delicate child, cooed and patted and squabbled over in undertones as to whose turn it was to soap and immerse it in the bath. When I water was poured in the bath I had to read in a louder voice to hide the trickle. Another squabbled about drying and powdering with talcum in a pepper pot. A complete change of clothes with tiny garments held to the cheek to check for dampness, a final wrapping in a tiny shawl, manoeuvring of used water back into the bottle then production of a feeding bottle with milk which had been kept in the warmth and security inside somebody's chemise close to the immature bosom. Although the girls were merely copying what we all saw going on at home every day of our lives, I cannot say that the lesson which we should have been doing offered any attractive alternative to domestic joys.

French History! The blue green cover of Joan of Arc clad in armour, the Fleur-de-lys spangled banner waving above her seemed to promise drama and excitement. But the more chapters you read the duller it became, with Louis following Louis in boring regularity and absolutely nothing happening in court or politics to promise anything but more boring treaties and battlefields. Bathing the baby was a fair exchange for French History.

Another aspect of life with those not addicted to book learning was revealed to me in the afternoon session. Most of us were within reach of home and went there for our midday dinner. We had an hour and a half before the afternoon bell rang over town. My friends in my new group came in from lines giggling and rosy faced.

At the first opportunity after answering the register I found a furtive hand touching mine under the desk and heard a barely audible message through closed lips. "Here, take this, and don't look down." I gazed to the front and opened my hand, and found myself with a handful of large hairy gooseberries. By second playtime all the gooseberries had been distributed and consumed. I was full of curiosity about the origin of this unexpected bounty.

It seemed that the girls had found some good productive gardens in the cottages down Dockham Road, which was an unsurfaced road running parallel to Belle Vue Road, down into town. In those days we all wore long black woollen stockings with black elastic garters and navy-blue school bloomers with elastic above the knee. This had made a good convenient pouch to store the gooseberries, hence all the giggles.

CHAPTER 22 - NEW SHOES AND THE MINER'S STRIKE

It must have been in 1921 while I was at Double View, that the prolonged deterioration in the conditions of mining families culminated in the 1921 strike. The Forest as a whole was mainly dependent on coal mining for its living. The strike meant that family income was reduced from very little to nothing.

As far as I was concerned the strike meant reading longer and longer boring paragraphs of political argument and comment from the Mercury on Friday evenings, with dad banging harder and louder along the coco tufts going around the strands of yarn. I suspect now that he was troubled by divided loyalties.

Although having worked in the mines, as had his father, when young, he now professed to being 'conservative' in politics. He felt a great admiration for Sir Arthur Pearson who had initiated St. Dunstan's and whose portrait hung over the piano.

When Sir Ian Fraser won a seat in parliament under the Tory flag, and became the first blind M.P., great was Dad's rejoicing. On the other hand he had been a miner and certainly his companions of leisure hours with whom he had a drink or played dominoes or cards, were 'Labour' to a man.

Anyone who lived in a mining community had to be aware of privations suffered by colliers' families. Not only that, the shop trade went downhill rapidly and things happened completely out of character to the neighbourhood.

Articles vanished from the shop, and on one occasion a pair of child's boots waiting on the counter for collection after being repaired just disappeared without trace. Dad had not only worked for nothing but also had to reimburse the upset mother who came to collect the shoes. At school one morning Mr Emery came into the classroom, sat before the register at teacher's desk and called upon each child in turn to state their father's occupation. waited in dread. My surname starting with W came at the end.

My name was called. "Father's occupation?"

"Mat maker, sir."

Mr Emery paused. "What's that, girl? Map maker?"

"No sir. Mat maker, sir."

Mr Emery frowned. "I can't wait here all day. Get some more details.

Next!"

I asked Dad that evening what I should say. "That old jackass!" he said. "He knows damned well what I do. Tell him tomorrow that I'm a totally disabled ex-serviceman, and see how he gets around that."

I said it all the way up Belle Vue Road and knocked at the headmasters door. "Please sir, my father is a totally disabled ex-serviceman."

He made no comment.

Later the object of this enquiry became clear. Miners' families were given tickets entitling them to free dinners. When we came down the hill from school at midday, delicious smells wafted from the Wesley Sunday school Hall standing behind the church, and children were hurrying towards it. I stood outside, savouring it, and longed to be one of them.

But I had no ticket. It smelled much more exciting than the dinner waiting at home.

Even greater was my disappointment on another occasion. In the matter of footwear I was totally at odds with my father. Dad had a friend who lived in Victoria Road and ran a cobbler's shop. His name was Mr Thomas.

The shop was at ground level with a small sitting room behind. The living room and kitchen was down a flight of steep steps to a lower level. Another flight of steps led from the sitting room to the bedrooms. Mrs Thomas was an invalid suffering from rheumatoid arthritis.

Mr Thomas's day started with taking water etc. upstairs from the kitchen for his wife's toilet, and carrying her bodily (she was a very slight lady) down two flights to stairs to the living room below. I believe she had a cleaning lady to do an hour or so during the week. Mr Thomas then returned to his shop and started work. I think it was partly owing to Dad's sympathy for Mr Thomas's hard life that Dad brought plenty of custom his way, but Dad also said he was a wonderful craftsman.

Be that as it may, I speak from bitter experience when I say that not only could you not wear Mr Thomas's shoes out, the problem was to wear them at all! I can still smell the tang of leather from Mr Thomas's shop. I can see myself standing by the counter on a Saturday morning, a mutinous witness to the ceremony of choosing the leather. Mr Thomas would reach up for a whole hide and spread it on the counter.

Dad would finger and bend it, rub his thumb along the fold. Several hides were treated in this manner until Dad selected one and bent it over his knee. This one having been chosen I leather for uppers went through the same procedure.

This having been completed I had to sit on a chair and have my foot measured, length and widths, round here and round there, all very boring and a complete waste of Saturday morning. What's more, I knew from experience that when the shoes were ready it would be my very painful duty to break them in. I didn't expect to be able to run for a week or more. There was only one gleam of pleasure in the whole experience...that was watching Mr Thomas cram handfuls of nails in his mouth. I never wished him any harm, poor man, but I can't say I ever appreciated his craftsmanship.

Imagine then going to school one Monday morning during the strike period, going into the classroom and being confronted in the front corner of the room by a huge pile of shoes...all higgledy-piggledy, but new and shining...black boots, brown boots, high boots with patent toes, all shop shoes and factory made. I sat gazing at them fascinated while the register was called.

Then the teacher spoke. "Now girls, I do not intend to waste all the morning sorting out shoes. Starting at this end you will go, a column at a time, and choose which shoes fit you. We will have no chattering or argument. When you have found a pair, as quickly as possible, the next ones will take your place. Right, that's simple, so get on with it."

I could not believe my luck. No nonsense about not being a miner's child. She had said everybody. I sat in the second row and was out of my place as if I was competing in a race. I had my eye on a pair of high black kid lace-ups with patent toes and, joy of joy, they fitted. I was happy as a lark and proudly bore them home.

"Mam looked at my booty dubiously.

"I don't know about that," she said.

"You'd better ask your Dad." I went dutifully into the shop and told dad. "What do you want with those?" he said. "You know jolly well we buy our own shoes. And what's this anyway? Factory rubbish! You take them straight back to your teacher and tell her you made a mistake. Free shoes are for the miners' children, not you."

CHAPTER 23 - BLUE BOOTEES

My mother gave birth to her sixth child at about this time and the baby was a boy. Great rejoicing and congratulations from everybody except my two eldest sisters who knew from experience the amount of work a new baby brought with it.

My best friend of this era was Audrey who lived opposite at the Soldiers and Sailors Club. She seemed to know a great deal more about these matters than myself, yet I had four sisters and she had only one, Florence, a good deal older than herself. Audrey tried to encourage me to knit baby booties weeks before the event. I was to knit in pink wool, she in blue...to be on the safe side, she said. I had no idea what she meant. Knitting baby booties, or anything else for that matter, had no appeal for me.

Audrey's mother, a well-built matronly lady, encouraged me as Audrey's friend. I often spent nights at her home. Mrs Pinchin bribed us with bottles of lemonade and packets of biscuits from the bar to keep to the private quarters. She told me I would make a good friend for Audrey as I didn't sniff. Agnes was a terrible sniffer, she said, and got on her nerves. Had I noticed?

Agnes was a young skinny girl, a miner's daughter about fourteen, who was paid to clean about the house. Another worker was a lady in a sacking apron who cleaned floor etc early in the morning and got our breakfast in the basement kitchen before we went to school.

Audrey was very disdainful about the food on offer and had to be persuaded to eat. I felt I was living like a queen. The table was laid, cutlery in place. The kitchen was long, dank, low and dark, with a short flight of stairs running up to the hall. The one outside wall had a French window leading onto a large expanse of lawn which lay between Commercial Street and Victoria Road. The higher elevation to Commercial Street had a high solid stone wall making the lawn extremely private. The Victoria Street side had various sheds and store rooms, their backs making a perfect screen. Laurel bushes and lilacs were in the borders.

Many were the sunny days Audrey and I spent working on the booties and trying to play tennis. I could have lost myself in games of imagination in this secret spot, but Audrey was of a more practical nature and a more sophisticated background. She had even lived in a foreign country before coming to England, and her father had some standing in the forces. I could never get anything out of her about these wonderful things. She was far more interested in various young men her sister was collecting, and Audrey's dimpled saucy looks foretold a great breaker of hearts if I had been wise enough to know.

Meanwhile I was living in the lap of luxury, Audrey's mother having been blackmailed to get us a wireless for the bedroom where we could lie and listen to the latest dance music and have blocks of chocolate xx smuggled to us to get us to keep the sound low.

It was the 18th of July [1922] when eventually my mother was brought to bed and the new baby's cry at last broke out in the front bedroom. I thought how strange it was that Audrey had a brand-new hand-knitted pair of blue booties all ready to present at the first opportunity with blue satin ribbon threaded through the ribbon holes. However the time for reception parties had not yet dawned.

It was on a Saturday morning that my mother was helped up the steep stairs to her room and the house became a hive of bustling activity. Our usual nurse, dear old roundabout Nurse Roberts, with her voluminous silk navy skirts, her cape and bonnet tied under the chin, was no longer in service.

Instead a very superior looking individual arrived on the scene. She was tall but well covered. She wore a navy-blue suit, black silk stockings and shoes with narrow heels. On her head a wide straw hat, rather severely shaped, but at the same time contriving to look romantic. I couldn't think why as she looked quite old, well over forty. Her plump cheeks quivered and her eyes were not clear. She had a swaying way of walking as she came along the pavement, but when she entered the shop the overpowering perfume of Parma violet enveloped her wherever she moved. She introduced herself to my father as the new nurse for the district. She was a Miss. Her face was thickly powdered and overall very matt flesh pink.

She spoke in a mincing tone with an affected high-class accent and referred to everyone in the third person. My mother was 'she' and the new baby was 'the little man', while my sisters as I were each referred to indiscriminately as 'the child.'

My elder sisters had the job of keeping the fire roaring, boiling large pots of water on the hobs, keeping various articles airing on the guard and carrying covered pails containing nameless contents into the back kitchen.

Pails of hot water had to be dangerously conveyed upstairs and soapy water, scented with Mam's special soap, carried back down.

In the meantime Hetty was trying her best to continue the usual daily ritual of cleaning the grate, a difficult task under the circumstances. She had opened a tin of ready-made black lead polish, quite a luxury as opposed to the mix-your-own variety. She carefully laid the tin on one side while she arranged the guard, fender, fire irons etc. I was standing behind her when signs were heard of a heavy footfall on the stairs. Nurse emerged like a ship in full sail, wearing a large white highly-starched apron, and carrying a small parcel. She proceeded in a straight line for the kitchen door, looking straight ahead without uttering a word. I watched her progress fascinated, and with a gasp observed the well shod heel descend squarely into the black-lead tin. She continued on her way without a glance or murmur carrying the black-lead with her into the back kitchen.

In a quick whisper I conveyed the news to my sister who, looking down, said I was telling nothing but the truth. We all dissolved into giggles until we heard the door knob rattle.

Nurse came back into the room, minus the parcel. We watched her return voyage, looking at her feet. The tin was still in place. As she ascended the stairs we heard the clatter and the tin rolled out forlornly.

Presently nurse was again heard on the stairs, this time going through the shop, and we could hear her talking to my father. As soon as the shop door pinged Dad appeared, without his apron, his face wreathed in smiles, and went upstairs.

Before long we were called and made our way up. Mam was lying looking weak but pretty in a cloud of lilac scent. I could only see the tip of a white blanket where the baby lay.

"It's a boy!" burst out Dad, unable to contain himself.

"What do you think of that then!"

"Lovely," I said, with only one regret. I had the pink bootees and Audrey still had the blue ones.

We all stood around Mam's bed for once speechless. thought it was just like being in church. I couldn't think why. Mam's hair curled in whisps about her little white pointed face, two tiny plaits on each side on her shoulders.

"Would you like to see the baby?" she said.

Phyllis was lifted up to see him first, then Vi. I carefully put a knee on the bed and leaned over. 'It looks just like a coconut' I thought, as Mam held back the blanket. All I could see was a dark hairy ovate object. However I forbore to voice my irreverent thoughts.

"What are we going to name him?" I asked instead. "Audrey Pinchin and I have got a lovely list of boys' names."

"And how did you know Mam was going to have a baby boy?" asked Hetty.

"I didn't," I answered.

"But Audrey seemed to. She's got a pair of blue bootees for him. My favourite name is..."

"You can all stop squabbling," said Dad. "It's all settled. He will be called George Arthur."

"But I haven't chosen either of those," I wailed. "What d'you want those for?"

"George is the name of our present King and it's also my name," said Dad. "And Arthur is the name of Sir Arthur Pearson, my greatest benefactor."

"I did think of naming him for my brother Henry, murmured Mam. "But I daresay your Dad's right.

"George Arthur is very nice."

CHAPTER 24 - TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATIONS

Of course we were all back at school the next day, secure in the knowledge that nurse with her perfumed aura would be attending to Mam and making our new little brother comfortable.

Vi had stayed at home too. She said she had a headache and anyway she could look after little sister Phyllis who hadn't started school.

I looked forward to the day as we got our breakfasts and climbed up Belle Vue Road. It was a golden morning. The rays from the early sun cast long shadows behind us. We leapt over the deep black lines which emphasised the sharp gradient of the pavement, and laughed as we went to the other side of the road and saw the moving cameos turn us into long legged prancing stick girl

As we reached the brow of the hill and confronted the golden profusion, we were nearly blinded. The normal world was gone.

Nothing but a mist of golden dots dancing and shooting across our vision. What lay behind the golden haze? What could I see. Clang...clang...clang...the harsh tones of the old school bell brought me back to reality and sent me running up the cobbled lane and into the world of school.

Today was free drawing in the afternoon and you could do what you liked...paper, crayons, paints and pencils, all at your command. You had only to get through the morning and run home for dinner, come back, then you forgot everything, and take yourself elsewhere.

Normal school routine began and we filed into our classes and began scripture lesson. We were reading the story of Ruth and Naomi, when I was suddenly aware that the teacher was calling my name. "Gladys, are you ill? I've called you to read three times. It's not like you to be inattentive.

I seemed to be looking straight through her. Where was I? I seemed to be coming out of a dark fearsome tunnel.

I felt shaking and cold. I started reading the passage before my eyes. A neighbour put her finger onto the word where I was supposed to take over. I did not feel ill...just very Perhaps I was in the wrong place? very sad. I felt I should be somewhere else. But where?

I went mechanically through the morning.

At playtime the teacher said I had better put my head on my arms and have a rest. "You're looking very pale and poorly," she said. "You may be sickening for something. Have a rest till dinner time, and don't come back after dinner if you're not feeling better."

I got myself down Belle Vue Road like a zombie, and came to our front door. I went into the living room and stopped. The first thing that struck me was a strange, strange smell. There was a confusion of people. Someone, a child, was lying on the sofa with white pillows, sheets and blankets.

Mrs Sutton, a friend of Mam's had on a big white apron and said "Sssh!" Phil was sitting on someone's knee. I couldn't distinguish anybody else but there seemed to be a lot of people there.

It was some time before I got the full story of that mornings happenings. Apparently the two little girls had been playing in the bedroom, both in flannelette nightgowns. Vi had naughtily struck a match and lighted a candle in a stick which she placed on the low windowsill. The flame had caught the hem of her nightdress. Apparently Dad had been at work at the mat frame when screams and shouts came from upstairs. He rushed to the bottom stair and shouted.

Mam stood on the landing screaming "Dad! Dad!"

Screams were also coming from the other bedroom. Dad at last found out someone was on fire. He took his heavy overcoat from the hook at the bottom and rushed upstairs.

It was Vi who was on fire, her flannelette nightgown blazing up the one side. Dad called Phil to come to him. Without ceremony he threw her to the bottom. He then called Vi to him and smothered her in the overcoat, rolling her until the flames were stifled. He told Mam to get back to bed with the baby and keep warm.

He carried Vi into the living room and laid her on the sofa. Phil was still crying with fright and was sent upstairs to get into bed with Mam and the baby. By this time neighbours were alerted and Mrs Sutton and the Doctor sent for. It seems strange at this distance in time to realise that although my sister was suffering from third degree burns, the worst wound being on her hip, no hospitalisation was suggested. The occupants of the house were at this time...my mother, who took a long time to regain her strength, my badly burned sister, a new-born baby, a child under school age, myself and Lily.

Life assumed some sort of normality.

Doctors and nurses visited the house every day, and I believe Vi's life hung in the balance for many weeks. I can remember we watched over her as a mother watches over a new babe, noticing every slight change in her development and progress. It seemed Vi was soon climbing and racing about, a tomboy by nature. But I don't think Phil ever forgot her casual treatment of being hurled from the top of the stairs.

CHAPTER 25 - CHORES AND POCKET MONEY

It was a good time before Mam was well enough to get up and have Sunday tea downstairs with us, with the baby dressed up in his day gowns. Up till then flannel nightgowns were the order of the day, together with the long black flannels, the flannel vests, the long binders and the thick napkins.

There were endless safety pins, tapes to tie etc before the baby was wrapped in the final shawl. For several days the invalid's diet was gruel and yet more gruel, until she progressed to light fish meals and mashed potatoes and custards. Neighbours were very kind. Mrs Gough sometimes sent around Sunday dinner of breast of chicken, cauliflower and white sauce, followed by egg custard.

Charlie's mother seemed a wonderful cook and her dishes were appetising and beautifully presented. Mrs Gough herself looked in need of loving care, being very pale and fragile. Her husband, it was, who sold the wonderful home-made humbugs and treacle toffee in the Saturday market. He also kept an off-licence store with his family living behind and above the shop. Mrs Gough always seemed such a lady and certainly the food she served seemed very much in the upper-class tradition. You hardly ever saw her outside the shop and one of the boys would come round at Sunday lunchtime with a tray, the meal with an overturned plate on top and all covered with a snowy white napkin. I think that was the first time I tasted chicken when my mother hadn't enough appetite to finish the meal.

At last she was able to come downstairs. We had aired the white embroidered day gown on the guard and taken it up. The baby was still enveloped in flannel underneath with the back flannel folded and pinned back up over the legs and feet in a kind of envelope. Over the top of this went the embroidered white day gown with a little blue bow of baby ribbon on the yoke. The booties would not come into use until shortening day when would be the first public appearance of the tiny legs.

Mam was in great difficulty trying to cope with all the work and my father had arranged for the main wash to be sent out.

A Mrs Weyman, a collier's wife, had agreed to take it on in spite of the fact that she had a large family of her own. We all had to take baths on Friday so that we could pack all the soiled clothes into a large washing basket.

Then sheets, towels, shirts, pants, vests, nightdresses were all packed in with a bar of sunlight soap and a towel spread over the top. Two of us would have to each take a handle and carry it across Commercial Street to Church Road where Mrs Weyman lived up a black ash path.

I don't know why we none of us liked this chore, nor why it had to be done so furtively. I knew why we had to get it done on Saturday. It would be terrible to walk in the street with a laundry basket on the Sabbath. You didn't show yourself on Sunday unless you were dressed in your best.

Monday was washday and always had been, and always would be, and nobody could alter that fact of life.

Later I think it was during this summer that I first got involved in a very remunerative but rather tiring side-line. I never did know why I was the chosen one. I have mentioned before how much of our play revolved around the street, particularly going away from the town towards Church Street. One of the attractions there was a small sweet shop which was past the Baptist Chapel and down over a rocky bank towards the green. We called the shop 'Stevensons,' and it certainly stocked the most varied penny or halfpenny worth anywhere within range, It was and believe me we knew where to get the best value. shopping at Stephenson's that sister Phyllis, when she was still a baby, first came to grief.

On Saturday mornings we got our pocket money...a penny off Mam and a penny off Dad. Baby Phyllis had a beautiful new pram, shape like a shallow boat, high on the wheels...a very splendid object. Taking the baby out was all part of Saturday if the weather was fine. We decided to go across the Stevenson's. There was a good pavement until you came to the Lamb Lane. We got the pram across the lane. The side walk from here was rough going. There was a small lock-up shop with curtains behind the window and a few sweetmeats on display. The lady who kept it lived in a cottage behind up a long garden path and rarely bothered to come to the shop.

Then came a row of a row of shops mostly very run down in appearance, except the sewing machine shop which was the height of spruceness and polish. I was often there on commissions for machine needles or to as Mr Phillips would he please call and look at Hetty's machine.

Next came the lane running up to three cottages where two of our friends lived. They were the Bonser girls, Ethel and Lizzie, who later both got scholarships to Monmouth High school and wore smart dull red gymslips and bloomers to match with red blazers and white boaters in the summer.

We crossed the road from here and arrived past the Baptist Chapel and the second-hand shop and could see Stevenson's at the bottom of the bank. We all wanted to go and have first look. We decided we'd better take the pram down to the shop.

We manoeuvred it over the edge, the pram shaking ominously and suddenly tilting at an alarming angle throwing the baby out on her face in the stones and grit. One of us gathered up the screaming child and the other two got the pram down to terra-firma. Baby was dusted off and cleaned up with a damp handkerchief. Her nose was bleeding. One of us sacrificed a penny to get a quick bar of Cadbury's milk chocolate that quietened the baby's howls and covered some of the blood marks on her bib.

Phyllis was quite grown up and working before our peccadillo came to light. She had gone to the doctor's with persistent catarrh which refused to clear up. "What have you done to your nose?" he asked. "You have certainly broken it at some time. This bone, which was broken, seems to have healed and sealed the one nostril. I think these colds will persist until you have had surgery on it. And as it happened such a long time ago it will be quite a nasty operation.

And so poor old Phil had to go into Gloucester infirmary. But I didn't get off scot-free. She looked quite ghastly when I went to see her. She came home to stay with me to recuperate. It had really been a painful operation. even when it happened I had plenty of time to repent my sins of taking the pram to the sweet shop, and the even greater one of hiding the evidence before we got home.

CHAPTER 26 - I FIND REMUNERATIVE OCCUPATION

I have taken you across Church Road and you have had a glimpse of the lock-up sweet shop where so little trade seemed to be transacted. One Saturday morning I was joyfully skipping across the same territory, no pram this time, baby George not yet having graduated to this hazardous honour, when the door to the little shop was thrown open and the lady in the doorway called and beckoned me. I stopped in my tracks and approached her.

“Would you like to earn some pocket money?” she asked. “You’re the blind man’s little girl, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Come inside,” she said. “I’ll tell you what I want you to do. It’s just a little errand. Do you know where Dockham Road is?”

“Yes, I said. “It’s up past the triangle, then by the Swan and up Swan Lane.”

“That’s right,” she said. “I thought you were a sensible girl. Now I want you to take this envelope to the man whose name is on the outside. There is a number on the house, you see. Just knock on the door, wait for an answer and bring whatever you’re given back to me. Don’t talk to anybody. I’ll give you something for your trouble when you come back. Here is the letter and here are some sweets to help you on your way. Good girl. Go straight there and back.” And she closed the door quietly behind me.

“That’s a bit of luck,” I thought. “A bag of sweets and I’ve still got my Saturday money, and some more money when I get back.”

It didn’t take me long to hop back through the town, up the Swan Lane and so up to Dockham Road. There were a series of little houses with ash lanes leading and branching off one another, very narrow in places. At last I found the number I was looking for. I knocked at the green door and a woman opened it. She took the envelope, eyed me up and down, just said “Wait” and went inside closing the door behind her.

I waited on the flagged path. There was nothing much to look at. The door opened and the woman pushed an envelope into my hand and quickly closed the door. I was soon back down the road and into Swan Lane, back through the town and across Commercial Street. I knocked on the door of the shop but nothing happened. I peered round the corner at the house up the garden path. A lace curtain moved and a finger beckoned I went up the path. The door opened and the woman said: “Come inside. me. Quickly!”

I went into a front room laden with furniture and ornaments. She took the letter from me and went into another room, came back smiling and said, “Good girl. You were very quick.”

And she pressed something into my hand. “Come back on Tuesday if you want to do another errand.

I went down the path with my hand tightly clenched and didn’t open it until I got past the Lamb Lane. It seemed like I had to keep it secret and wondered what sort of messenger I was. Somehow, try as I did, I couldn’t make an exciting story out of it. Surely it couldn’t be love tokens? The woman looked too hard faced for that. Only beautiful sad maidens sent love tokens.

I came to outside Mr Howes the plumber’s window, my hand outstretched before me and a shining new shilling in my palm. A whole shilling! It paid a good deal better than romance, whatever it was.

The woman had said, “Don’t speak to anybody.” I supposed that meant I was not to tell anyone about it. It felt very uncomfortable when I got home. I always wanted to make a big production about anything unusual. It was not at all in my nature to hide my light under a bushel. And how on earth to have spare pocket money without anyone knowing?

In the afternoon I went to Stevenson’s, this time crossing the road to the Soldiers and Sailors Club and so along by the Baptist Chapel. I seemed to want to avoid the secret shop. There was no need to stretch out my pocket money on four-for-a-penny goodies now. So I splashed out on two pink chocolate wafers. These were two wafers sandwiched together with a sticky white nougat, pronounced nugget by me at that time. The edges were sealed with an inferior milk chocolate, nearly my favourite sweet were pink chocolate wafers. They coast a penny each and didn’t last long. Then two pennyworths of marshmallows covered with toasted coconut.

Overcome with my own extravagance at this sudden venture into luxury living, I bought one pennyworth of chewing nuts...hard little round chewy toffees coated with chocolate, and one pennyworth of aniseed balls which were nearly everlasting but which I didn't like very much. I still had sixpence left. I wrapped that in my handkerchief until I could think of something to spend it on. It was very hot in the afternoon. The baby was fast asleep in the pram in the living room. I made a large jug of lemonade by dissolving lemon crystals in a little hot water, then filling to the brim with cold water from the tap. It made a good cold drink on hot days. I took an enamel mug and followed by Vi and Phil, my two little sisters, climbed the stone steps into the garden. We sat down on flat stones. Not much of a garden...stones and dirt and bits of grass. We were looking at the back of our row of shops. On the right Mr Fields had large sheds in various stages of repair, painted black. The air was filled with cluckings and coo-ings. Some hens were outside taking dust baths in the bone-dry ground. The dust would rise it a cloud around them, then sink lazily down again.

It was fatal to seek shade in the hen house. You came out covered in fleas and had bites all over and your mother grumbled at you. The two little ones had thin hats or bonnets and I made my handkerchief into a cover for my head. It had sixpence in the one knot, and my two pennies pocket money in two others, and a pebble in the fourth. The little girls after drinking lemonade contented themselves poking about in the earth. They would not consent to playing school, or sitting in line while I stood on a plank on two boxes and preached them a sermon. It was too hot, they said.

I gazed longingly over Mr Dee's fence where shady cherry trees with silver ringed trunks cast lovely blue shadows on the luscious grass. It was a no-go area, the fence was dark brown, strong and invulnerable, the gate was padlocked. Vi and Phil were contentedly quiet but I could think of nothing exciting to do. I found a fairly large piece of roofing slate and a sharp stone which I rubbed into a point. I started to write, first spitting on the slate and xxx rubbing it with my finger.

Dear friend, I wrote. "Today a great mystery has started. I have become the secret messenger of a worldwide society.

I carry important documents and valuables about the country. Do not tell the police. Leave a note for Miss G, at 3 Commercial Street. Hush!"

It took two sides of the slate. I had a plan. It was a tight squeeze but I managed to get between Dad's locked shed where he stored his bales of coco-fibre. The wall was crumbly and broke away under my feet. I knew the wall the other side was brick built and secure as befitted the important premises of the Midland Bank. A little scratched and bruised I got to the top of the wall.

All was peaceful in the afternoon glare. I leaned well over and dropped the slate, pointed end down, into the neat little border. It fell straight and sat upright in a very satisfactory manner.

As I looked over the wall and unusual noise diverted my attention towards the street which was visible from this elevation. What I saw brought me out from behind the shed regardless of my scratched knees, falling stones and bruised ankles.

"Quick, quick!" I shouted to the children. "Come on!"

Seizing Phil's hand I ran down the ground across to the big black gate, dragging the complaining child with Vi on my heels. So down to the street to stand and watch the most beautiful sight and smell the most sensuous smell that ever came to life in Commercial Street.

Heralded by ghastly creaks and groans came the water sprinkler. A rusty cranky contraption, the driver a skinny wrinkled man grinning under an ancient straw hat at the children who leaped and shouted and cheered him on his way. A real caricature of the Pied Piper. I dragged my sisters to the kerb to get a full view.

What beautiful arcs the water made rising from little holes in a long pipe, lying horizontally along the back of the horse drawn conveyance. The driver adjusted a handle and as he did so the arcs raised still higher and tell in tiny rainbows onto the dusty streets. A cool mist surrounded it. I lifted my face and felt the fine spray deliciously touching my hot cheeks.

Then a beautiful smell of dampness rose from the hot road. It must have been a chemical reaction but it was marvellous. I have only smelt the same thing years later when my brother George cultivated tomatoes in a greenhouse. I was in there when he sprayed the plants with water from a hose on the hot iron pipes sent up this nostalgic bonus.

As the water cart went on its squeaky way, little oily rainbow pools formed in the road and the air felt like spring. Years later I leaned over the parapet with my young son beside me, seeing my first sight of one of the wonders of the world...the Niagara Falls, in Ontario, Canada. [I get a mention – 1966 – I remember Tony, my sister Wendy's husband, watching England win the World Cup while we were visiting in Montreal.]

Representatives of all the world's nations walked casually by, the thunder from the gigantic waters falling from a great height filled the air. The promenade and refreshment area sizzled in temperatures of ninety degrees Fahrenheit. Near the parapet the air was filled with white mist and the pavement running with water.

I thought of the little mining town back in the Forest of Dean, an invisible point on the map in the almost invisible triangle of Great Britain, and me standing on the kerb watching the water cart go by with such joy one very hot August afternoon.

There were similarities. At Niagara too were dancing rainbows, but one thing was surely lacking...that delicious smell.

CHAPTER 27- A SWING IN THE WOODS AND FEELINGS OF GUILT

Back to Commercial Street with the heat wave still there and the prospect of another Tuesday errand and more money. I was not looking forward to Tuesday. No note had arrived for Miss G, and I had a feeling that this secret service business would not meet with Dad's approval. His attitude to everything was: "Let's have all the cards on the table and no jiggery-pokery."

So Tuesday morning saw me creeping quietly through the shop door and running to the little shop. No signs of life, so up to the private house and tap at the door.

This time I was sent down to Ruspidge, a good two miles, and a miner's cottage by Walmer's Colliery. It was very hot coming back. I chose the lower route coming up Valley Road, round by the Forge Hammer, over the green behind the Baptist Chapel and so through the lane to my destination. I went straight to the private door and was again given money.

I was told if I would go to Littledean on Saturday I could earn three shillings, and I had two shillings for going to Ruspidge. I had found a money box, an old tin post box among the toys and put my savings in there. I managed to hide it behind the shed in the garden and also climbed to the top of the Midland Bank wall. There were some tea-towels hanging on a line so someone must be using the back premises, but I could see no sign of the slate letter. I hoped someone would find it and rescue me. I felt I was trapped and didn't know how to get out.

The weather continued hot and Dad said that on Thursday, early closing day, he would take us for a picnic. Immediately we all started discussing the best place to go. All Dad would say was, "Wait and see."

On Thursday after dinner we set forth. Hetty elected to stay at home. She was getting quite the young lady, helping Dad in the shop, going to her shorthand and typing classes, and was always washing her hair and trying new styles. Mam thought Phyllis had better stay at home out of the heat.

Bonser's were still open so we called in there. We had sandwiches in the basket and enamel mugs, but Dad bought a large bunch of bananas, two bottles of fizzy pop, some apples which were barely ripe, oranges and one lemon. We had also brought Dad's Hovis bread and a good wedge of cheese.

Next stop was Mr Wilkinson's sweet shop, another of Dad's friends. Here we brought bags of sweets and a block of chocolate.

We made our way up Heywood Road to the open Forest. It was a long way up the road and it got hotter and hotter...Dad still dressed in a tweed suit and collar and tie. The only concessions to summer were short sleeved thin woollen vests and summer weight long underpants. He also wore black leather boots and a felt trilby hat. it.

The basket got heavier and we tried every way of carrying One carrying it about fifty yards and then another. Dad said we'd better have a sit down on the grass verge and share out the chocolate or it would be melted away. We needed no second bidding and were only just in time. Dad took off his hat and mopped his head with a handkerchief and sat having a smoke. We asked if we could have a lemon sherbet. These were yellow transparent ovals with a hard coating. When you cracked the coating the white sherbet frothed out. Lovely!

We made them last as long as we could, then were eager to get on. Dad knocked out his pipe, put his hat back on and we were off.

It didn't seem nearly so far now and we were soon past the Heywood Inn and under the trees. All oak trees here, not very large but shady.

"Now have a good look round and we'll settle down," said Dad.

We knew what we were looking for...a nice mossy spot with bracken close by, a strong tree with a good clear branch horizontal from the trunk. We found several. There were □□ acres and acres of forest to choose from. Dad would be led to the tree trunk, feel its girth and try and shake it, reach out for the bough with his stick, then guide himself along it. He had already unwound the rope he carried around his middle.

Then he selected the best tree, tied a good special knot at one end of the rope and again making sure of the bough he tossed it over. We quickly caught the knot on its downwards swing and gave it into his hand. This process had to be repeated several times until a satisfactory swing was made. Dad sat in its first, testing it and the branch to see if both would hold.

When all was finished we led Dad to the mossy bank. He settled there, took off his jacket and, having extracted his weekly magazine, he folded his coat into a cushion and took out his pipe.

“It keeps the flies away,” he said. His silver chain across the waistcoat with medallions attached was now in full view. We knew his watch always had the exact time of day. He sat there with the braille running under his fingertips.

Meanwhile we had stowed the food in a little hollow, fronds of bracken shading it from the sun. Youngest went first on the swing.

Vi said the rope hurt her bottom and we could find nothing firm to make a seat. I glanced at the thick braille magazine but decided a request would not be very well received.

Finally, with frowns of disapproval coming from Lily, I took off my dress. Seeing Lily’s face I walked in what I thought was a provocative manner, one hand on hip and the other posed in the air, all around Dad. I tried to twirl my petticoat but it was just a straight up and down cream flannelette affair. Vi soon did the same thing and her dress went flying off and she followed me as we went parading and leaping about the green turf.

“If you’re not going to use that swing I’ll take it down”, said Dad.

We folded the dresses together and made a reasonable cushion. We had a fair time on the swing and we all had ambitions for tree climbing, but nobody had any talent in that direction.

A few acorns fell from above but they were too immature to do much with. You could cut the tops off to make pipes for fairies but Vi and Lily said fairies didn’t smoke pipes.

“When are we going to get some tea?” asked Dad.

Dad got out his knife and ate chunks of Hovis and cheese. We had bread and butter and bananas and mugs of fizzy pop, red and yellow. Dad wouldn’t drink pop but sliced up the lemon and sucked the slices. The apples were new seasons, crisp and sharp. Finally we all selected half a dozen sweets each and had oranges cut in quarters. We decided to make a bracken house. Some dead branches provided a frame work and armfuls of bracken made a good roof. Lil wanted to play house. I was to be father, she mother and Vi her little girl. I found this a very dreary role, just being given breakfast and sent out to work.

So I set up in opposition, opened my own establishment... a school. The swing was in the playground. Under the far end of the branch was the schoolroom outlined with sticks of wood. I got out one of the bottles and struck it with the knife we had in the basket. It didn’t sound much like a bell. Lil ignored it and kept brushing Vi’s hair, fussing with her dress, sitting her down and telling her what a lovely meal she was cooking for her. I put Dad’s hat on, took his walking stick and marched up to Lil’s front door.

“Knock, knock!” I said, tapping the stick on thin air.

“Why are you back so early?” said Lil. “And why are you wearing your best hat and knocking at your own front door?”

I tried to adopt a gruff voice. “You are mistaken, madam. I’m the school attendance officer and you have not sent your child to school. Either you must send her or you can go to prison.”

In like manner the drama proceeded till Dad got to his feet and said we’d better be making tracks. He untied the reef knot in the swing and we broke up the dead branches from the bracken house. “Make good wood to start your Mam’s fire,” said Dad.

He laid out the rope evenly on the turf and showed us how to place the dry sticks and lay them across the double. When we had collected enough the rope was line of rope. brought up round and a manageable bundle was tied.. You could carry it in your hand like a case, or take the longer length and have it over your shoulder.

So having brushed ourselves off, tried to smooth our dresses, finished off the pop, we set off homeward...Dad with the bundle over his right shoulder and grasping both stick handle and rope loop, and me holding his other hand.

"I was going to take you to St. Anthony's Well today," said Dad. "But it was a bit too hot. It's a long haul back and I don't get the exercise I used to have."

"Oh how lovely," I said. "Shall we go there next week?"

St. Anthony's Well was magic. Everyone knew that. It healed all ills and always had done and it was very, very old.

"We'll see," said Dad. "We'll try to get it in before school starts."

One side of the road was better going back down. shady. I had banged my dress before putting it on but it still looked pretty crumpled. Dad took the bundle off his shoulder at the bottom of Heywood and carried it like hand luggage, to look more respectable going through town.

On Friday morning I tried to get all my Saturday jobs done and of course Friday evening was Mercury reading night. I sat by Dad at the frame and went through every word from beginning to end. I felt awful taking my twopence at the end. I already had two shillings and eight pence in my post box. Saturday loomed ominously ahead with three shillings on offer.

"What's the matter with you tonight?" asked Dad.

"You're like a bear with a sore head. Too much sun yesterday?"

"Oh no," I said, but felt like confessing all.

"Well something's wrong, he said. "You'd be better having it out. But if you won't, you won't."

Saturday morning I went with Lil to take the washing to Mrs Weyman's house. Then telling Mam I'd been asked to do a little errand, went quietly off. Again I was given an envelope and some sweets and told not to loiter. I was to go to Silver Street in Littledean.

The only places I knew in Littledean were the George, where I had once stayed with Dad, and Mr Parry's house, the one who kept the fruit shop in the High Street, Cinderford.

You had to go right up Belle View Road, across the Barn, down a very steep hill, round a wide bend by Sawney's look out which overlooked the Old Grange that was haunted, then downhill again past Littledean Guest House, which was very posh.

I enquired off a little girl which was Silver Street and she showed me where it was. Again I found a little house, was given another letter and started back up the hill.

Oh how hot it was, how steep the hill. I could see right over the Severn with fields and beautiful woodlands in between and a blue line of hills on the horizon. I sat on the bank a bit, then climbed further. It was terrible getting back up the top of the Barn, but better when I turned down Belle Vue Road. I at last got back to the little shop, went up the garden path and was let into the house and handed in the message. The woman didn't seem at all pleased to see me.

She took the letter, gave me the three shillings and said: "That'll be all for a bit. There's no need to come back."

"Oh thank you!" I said. "Thank you very much!"

I went skipping back home.

Weeks later I was reading the Mercury to Dad when I started reading out an item, the meaning of which suddenly penetrated my consciousness.

It was an article headed 'Littledean Petty Sessions', always a very popular column with Dad, but one that I found very boring.

"What have you stopped for?" asked Dad.

"I'll start that bit again," I said, trying to stop my voice from shaking.

The report told of a Mrs Emma G... who had made a second appearance in court after a serious warning for contravening the lottery act, section so and so. A report was given by a police constable, who upon information received had watched messages being taken and delivered at Emma G...’s private house in Commercial Street, Cinderford. Some of the messages were received at a lock up shop premises purported to be a a confectionary business.

Whatever is it all about?” I asked.

“That’s Mrs G... who keeps that little shop opposite the Baptist Chapel, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said Dad.

“But what’s she summoned for? Something about the lottery?”

“Taking betting on the horses,” said Dad.

“But why mustn’t she do that?”

“Because she’s supposed to have a license,” said Dad.

“I don’t altogether agree with it and I’m not a betting man myself, except for a bob or two on the Derby. But some of the poor devils round here haven’t got much else to look forward too except looking at the racing results and hoping their horse had come up. Not that it does many of them any good but it would cost them a lot more to get their money on if they went to a licenced bookie. I dare say Mrs G... does pretty well out of it, so I haven’t got a lot of sympathy with her.

Anyway it isn’t anything for little girls to get mixed up with. And by the way...bank managers aren’t really interested in romantic mysteries. They’re only interested in money and whether you’ve got a good balance on the right side. You’d better read that piece again. How much did they fine her?”

I was totally bewildered.

Nobody had said a word! Not to me anyway.

I turned back to the newspaper. “Mrs Emma G... of Commercial Street Cinderford...”

CHAPTER 28 - TEA IN THE CAFE

The summers of my childhood in retrospect were all hot and beautiful with endlessly long summer holidays, and even on schooldays while I was at Double View we seemed to establish a routine of the Thursday afternoon outings. Everything planned the evening before, even to a tennis racquet and ball in a string bag.

Lil and I would fly down Belle Vue Road after school, not bothering to wait for one another. Vi would be ready and Dad checking the time on his watch for strict timing on these occasions was of the essence. Lil hanging onto Vi, me holding Dad's hand, and we were off double-quick, down Foundry Lane into Station Road, eyes ahead to the bottom of the steep hill where Cinderford railway station lay. Past the High Elementary School, but keep your eyes scanning the woods up towards Crab Tree Hill and Crump Meadow. When you saw white puffs of smoke forming a fast, growing band above the trees you knew it was almost too late. And if, as on one sad occasion, you saw a few dark clad figures coming up towards you, you were too late!

[\[Cinderford Railway Station\]](#)

But mostly we managed to beat the clock, buy one and three halves return at the booking office and board the Newnham train. What a relief to settle back in the velour upholstery, watch the marshy lower Bilson fly by, then Cinderford Bridge station, then through the tunnel. Out again into sunshine and the red cliffs rising from the quarry, past the sewage works, by the fir clad hills and stop at Soudley with the old white kissing gate. Steam on again past Aunt Charlotte's of happy memory and, with a warning hoot, into the tunnel. See if you can see the little round exit growing larger and larger and suddenly out into the sun-bathed cow studded pasture and into Severn Country.

Now into the station at Newnham, a short walk down a dusty road and into the High Street. Watch for a clear passage then straight across the street into the cafe. I seem to remember it was Central Cafe, but whatever it was called it was always there and we were expected.

We sat around a table to ourselves and had a large pot of tea and a large plate of fancy cakes. The procedure was always the same...have your tea at the cafe, collect your belongings, set off for the little jetty at the bottom of the cobbled road, or go on through the town towards Gloucester and the large expanse of grass on the corner where public seats and wire baskets were set out. The choice was governed by the state of the tide. There was plenty of room for ball games with the racquet and a good seat for Dad.

One of these occasions stands out in my memory because of an unusual happening. We were all seated around the table in the cafe, the question of tea pouring and cake selection settled, and sitting there happily watching the citizens of Newnham going about their business from behind a plate glass window, when another party entered.

They were an elderly well-dressed couple, a younger man, an officer in Khaki with a limp, and a pretty young woman, probably his wife. The four passed us and settled at a table. On this occasion I seem to remember us being four children, so we must have brought Phil along.

All at once a hand reached over my shoulder and put half a crown by my plate. I raised my eyes in disbelief and saw The person the same thing happen to Vi, then to Phil and Lily. The person then went to Dad and whispered in his ear and pressed something into his hand. He then put his hand on Dad's shoulder for a moment, preventing him from rising. Then, smiling and nodding to us staring wide-eyed, he made his way back to his friends at the corner table. It was the young uniformed officer with the limp whom I had seen entering earlier.

I don't ever remember feeling embarrassment at being singled out on account of Dad's blindness. He wore his St. Dunstan's badge with pride and never showed any resentment, except when proffered help undermined his independence.

We clutched our half-crowns with joy and told Dad all about it as we made our way towards the green. We described the young man as best we could, in particular that he must have had a wounded leg. We were unable to give any information that described his rank, not knowing what to look for, but I could give a good description of the young lady's hat and dress. But this was not received with any great enthusiasm by Dad.

CHAPTER 29 - A VISIT TO STAFFORDSHIRE

The Thursday evening trips to Newnham were at that time the highlight of the summer weeks. But the longer journey by rail into a very different world is one that I well recall, but have no way of dating.

I have told how my Grandad came to visit us from the Potteries, but on this occasion Dad had made up his mind that he would make the attempt to visit them. Many letters passed backwards and forwards between 3, Commercial Street, Cinderford and 120, Heathcote Road, Longton, Stoke-on-Trent.

I have no idea what were my mother's reactions to being left to cope with the family for a week. It seems that in all questions of family matters Dad was the copybook Victorian father. When he made up his mind that was the end of the matter.

Dad wrote the outgoing letters on his typewriter, but I, I remember was privy to the contents of Aunt Ruth's replies. They invariably commenced with the words: 'I take up my pen to write, dear brother, hoping this finds you as it leaves me, in the pink!'

It was just Dad and I who were to venture forth to see our relatives in North Staffordshire.

I was not at all unused to going into Gloucester with Dad and by this time the bus running between Cinderford, through Westbury, into Gloucester was well patronised and made unnecessary the walk down Station Road and back up after a tiring day.

One of the annual occasions we attended was reunion meetings of St. Dunstanners in the Gloucester district. These took the form of a high tea at the Cadena Cafe in Eastgate Street. They had a large upstairs room where you had a really good tea, sandwiches and buttered scones, sausage rolls and meat pies, fancy cakes and a choice of drinks. Most of the men had an adult escort. I can't remember seeing anyone my age but it didn't worry me.

After the meal, piano playing, short speeches, and smoking, much shoulder slapping and handshaking and little confidential chats with superior officers. I was always rather glad to get away and enjoyed much more those days when we just went shopping, always calling into the market in Eastgate Street where Dad always had a dish of whelks and bought fish to take home. Then towards the coffee shop near the cross, which advertised its merchandise several hundred yards away with waves of a marvellous aroma of newly ground coffee beans as we approached it. The main at the counter ground the coffee beans of your choice, packed them and took your money. Then up the narrow stairway to the dining room above.

It must be market day for the room was hot, stifling, steamy and absolutely crowded.

"Must be having a good day," said Dad. "I hope you've got a good appetite."

I thought I had. A little aproned woman took the order. Dad had no problem of making himself heard above the racket.

"Two portions of steak and kidney pudding, potatoes and vegetables," he said.

"Anything to follow? Rice pudding or sago? Apple tart and custard? Sponge pudding? Treacle tart?"

"Better get through the first course first," said Dad.

When the helping appeared I was very glad he'd said that. A very large dinner plate was placed in front of me. On it a whole inverted steak and kidney pudding, literally bursting with goodness and rich gravy spready around the steaming white potatoes, peas and boiled cabbage. And even larger plate stood in front of Dad. The waitress poured a liberal helping of yet more gravy over each plate and went on to the next table where she placed huge plates of apple tart and custard, taking away their empty dishes.

I gazed in awe at the recipients, two large men with weathered shining red faces, tweed jackets, breeches and gaiters, smiling and chatting and attacking the outsize helpings of apple tart and custard with spoon and fork without turning a hair. The whole room seemed full of similar individuals. They must be farmers, I thought. I had never seen the species so close before.

I had thought I was hungry when I came in and the food was simply delicious. When I had taken a little of each, the suet crust which melted away anointed with thick gravy, a morsel of beef and a piece of kidney, a piece of potato, carrot and a few peas and a little cabbage, I began to think I should not eat half of it.

Dad was falling in manfully but even he did not want any second course, and a cup of tea finished the meal. Then it was over the Cross, down Westgate Street where the buses came in and so back home through Westbury.

We were set down at the Swan. I glanced with new eyes at the male population. What a contrast to the thriving farmers in Gloucester! Almost without exception they were pallid, lanky, painfully thin and decently but poorly clad.

The day came when we again boarded the bus for Gloucester early in the morning, en route for Longton, Stoke-on-Trent.

My Sunday coat and a new hat and a purse in my pocket containing a few shillings and pence. A very large case had been packed and forwarded several days earlier. It contained all the clothes Dad intended taking, all the clothes my mother had put in for me (I was not too interested in clothes), and a few presents.

Everything else required Dad carried about his person.

Arriving in Gloucester we made for the station. The nearest was the Great Western in Station Road and this is where we went. It was very busy on the station.

“Look for the Gents” said Dad. “And you’d better visit the Ladies. We’ve got a fair journey ahead. I expect there will be one on the train but better see to it now. Don’t worry, you’ll see me when you come out.”

I knew I would. I always did. I led Dad along the platform.

“Coming to it now,” I said. He reached out with his stick and touched the wall and, tapping it, disappeared into the entrance. I found what I required in the Ladies Waiting Room, all polished wooden backed benches with slippery black seats, an empty cast iron grate, and ‘Ladies Toilet’ on a painted door so hidden in a dark corner that you could hardly see.

Inside a basin with cold water and a white and red roller towel, several doors in which you had to put a penny for entrance.

No ladies had been seated on the benches but some of the locks said engaged. I at last got a penny in one and went inside it.

It was always at this point that my imagination ran away with me as I followed instructions and bolted the door. I should never be able to open it again. I should be too shy to shout out and nobody would ever hear me if I did with all those strangers rushing up and down the platform and all that steam hissing up to the roof and all those whistles blowing, train doors slamming, bells ringing and somebody yelling “Gloucester! Gloucester!” and “The train for Paddington is now leaving Platform One.” And as for Dad, he would be getting fed up and he wasn’t one to suffer in silence. He was quite likely to start shouting.. “Are you there Gladys?” and broadcasting that I was in the ladies’ W.C.

I quickly shot the bolt back and found my way back out. Among the people going every which way I could see Dad standing quite composed near the pillars. I suddenly thought: “He looks a bit funny standing like that.” I couldn’t at the time think why he should have looked funny and in fact gave me rather a feeling of embarrassment. However I have since discovered that why it was disconcerting to me was that Dad was out of period.

In other things I became aware that the world which changed so quickly with our growing years and of which of course we were a part, was visually a closed book to Dad. He was still quite a young man, in about his early thirties.

He liked clothes and could afford to dress in better quality materials than he would have had as a young working man of that era.

Now in the family albums we had at home we had photographs of Mam’s aunts, mostly school teachers, who wore long full skirted dark dresses, sleeves puffed high on the shoulders and skirts gathered over bustles behind. They had tightly fitted corseted figures with high busts, the hair frizzed on the forehead and always a hand

resting on the back of a chair. Among these relatives was the occasional male figure. All were dressed in a dandyish manner and adapted a pose. Perhaps the chest stuck out, the hat at a jaunty angle, the ankles crossed, the body supported by a silver mounted cane.

It was one such pose that Dad adopted while waiting in his best suit and new trilby hat.

But it was out of tune with the times. Well-dressed gentlemen no longer stood around station platforms making themselves conspicuous. Perhaps they never had and dad, a bit like his daughter, was half in the land of make believe.

No time seemed to have elapsed when I touched his hand, and he told me we should have to cross the line to the Midland platform. First though we would have some refreshment in the restaurant.

The restaurant was full and very busy. I managed to find a table for two. Dad sat and put his hat under the chair, his stick over the back. He gave me a pound note. I was to get a pot of tea with cups, saucers, and hot water on a tray, (Don't let them fob you off with mugs), ask for freshly cut ham sandwiches and bring a couple of cakes for myself.

I approached the counter. There were queues at both ends.

On the left cheerful looking men chatting to a very glossy looking lady, and filling glasses from an array of bottles behind her, some of them upside down. On the right the customers were mainly female. A few buns and curled up sandwiches on tray. The serving ladies looked harassed and hot, filling jugs from big urns and slopping it into overflowing cups on a tray. I did the same as everyone else and took a tray, put a few sandwiches and buns on a plate and approached the tea dispensing area.

I summoned my courage and said, "My father wants a pot of tea with cups and saucers and sugar and milk on a tray." I pointed to where he was sitting, hoping her heart would soften. She glanced across the room.

"We don't do pots, only cups. Pay at the end," thrusting two brimming cups at me. "Move along please."

Dad's remembered days of leisurely station meals seemed to have disappeared with the dandyish young men. It was as much as I could do to manoeuvre the tray and its contents towards the table. I gave Dad his change and put the cups in front of him. "They don't do pots, only cups," I said.

Dad started to go red, an ominous sign. The delights of travel, what with one thing and another, began to seem vastly over-rated. However he began stirring his tea and, not mentioning the stale ham sandwiches, we were back to normal.

Then it was up several flights of stairs at turning angles, across a long bridge with shining lines far below, then down the other side to the Midland line. The time of departure and platform number Dad had obtained after some discussion at the booking office.

We boarded the train and set off. It was not too crowded.

I began to get a bit fed up with telegraph lines keep rising and falling against the green and blue blur. It had a sort of hypnotic effect. It seemed an awful long way to Longton and nothing much to look at. You couldn't have much conversation with strangers listening, and having to shout because of the noise.

At last a uniformed man appeared and shouted: "please! All tickets please!" Dad got the tickets from an inside pocket.

"Thank you, Sir. Tickets. That's all right." He clipped the tickets and handed them back.

"Change for Longton at Burton-on-Trent."

"What's that?" said Dad. "What're you talking about man? I don't want to go to Burton! Complete rubbish!"

"Sorry sir. But that's the line you're on. Arriving at Burton in twenty minutes precisely. A wait for you at Burton of about two hours. Train direct to Longton. Your ticket's quite correct, sir. You're on the right line.

Dad looked dumbfounded, then started to laugh.

"Well, at least we'll have time to get a bit of decent grub there and a good beer," he said.

CHAPTER 30 - A LONG WAY FROM HOME

I was so glad to get out at Burton-on-Trent.

Either it was quieter or I was getting used to the hustle. Dad confirmed the time of the Longton train and we made for the exit. There was nothing that I could see here to stimulate the imagination. A long nearly empty very dull road with a narrow pavement and a very long rather dirty brick wall.

“Look out for a café or pub,” said Dad. The empty road and long brick wall continued.

We rounded a slow bend. A few featureless brick houses materialised, then a small shop with blinds drawn, then a shed with tools lying around, but nobody in it. A horse drawn station wagon trotted towards us, harness jingling, laden with heavy packages, clip-clopping up to the station yard.

At last I saw a sign, sticking out at right angles.

Dad studied his watch anxiously.

“Oughtn’t to be closed yet,” he said.

I fervently hoped so too. The place looked depressing and nobody was on the streets. “We’ll try it anyway,” Dad said and we went through the open door.

There was no one in the bar. It was dim and dark but clean and well ordered. Dad rapped his stick on the counter and shouted “Shop!”. A little man appeared wiping his hands on his apron. He had strands of dark hair neatly brushed across his bald head. He looked happy.

“Afternoon, sir. What can I do for you?” His accent was just like Grandad’s. Dad’s voice immediately reflected the same tones.

“Expect it’s a bit late,” he said. “Just come off the Gloucester train.

Could you knock up a bit of grub and something for the girl? We’ve got nearly two hours before we carry on for the Potteries.”

“I think we’ve finished with main lunch but I daresay Edie’ll find you a bite of something. Edie!” he shouted through a door.

A busy little whirlwind of a woman appeared.

“Come on through, luv, Sit in here,” and she showed us into a dining room empty of customers.

“Wouldn’t mind a pint of your regular and a bottle of fizz for my daughter while we’re waiting,” said Dad.

“Right you are sir, coming up,” said the man.

Dad took a good slurp from a creamy headed tankard.

“Eee lad, that’s good,” he said. “Nearly worth coming all this way to get a taste of the real stuff.”

I had a glass of white pop while the busy little woman put a plate of cold beef, cheese and pickles and a chunk of bread in front of Dad.

“What about you, luv?” she asked me.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t like cheese and pickles, thank you,” I said.

She went out and returned with some nicely cut small sandwiches.

“You eat that luv, and I’ll try and find you a bit of something nice for afters.”

I ate the sandwiches, which were good, and wondered what the nice afters would be. I soon found out. She came in with a dish bearing a good portion of fruit pie and custard.

“There you are,” she said. “You’ll like that. Bilberry pie and custard.”

Bilberry pie? I'd never heard of it. I tasted it. It was simply delicious. I plunged my spoon into the rich purple fruit, crisp pastry and thick custard. I scraped the dish. There were little roses and violets in the china underneath. It was really gorgeous.

After a while Dad consulted his watch and we were off to the station, with many thanks for the welcome refreshment.

I talked to Dad about bilberries as we walked back to the station. The road still looked grim, but not half as bad as it had before. Dad said you could pick them wild in the Forest but they didn't grow so plentifully there as in Staffordshire.

He called them whinberries and said he'd picked some near Crump Meadow Colliery. I resolved to go up to Crump Meadow and try and find some when we were back home. There was one snag. There were gipsies camping out by Crump Meadow.

We were on the train for the Potteries, stopping at Longton.

Dad told me to keep my eye on the window and tell him what I saw. For a while there was very little, but small houses got more plentiful surrounded by allotment gardens. Then all at once there was something strange in the distance...tall round black pillars rising high into the sky with igloo shaped constructions at the base. I told Dad.

"That's it," he said. "We're in the potteries. Can you see any plumes of smoke at the top? All going the same way?"

"No," I said. "No smoke."

"Ah, finished firing for today," said Dad. "Get yourself up together."

As we proceeded the distant pillars turned into forests of chimneys and our train rushing in between them, houses, churches, shops, streets, everything was dominated by the towering chimney's.

As we ran into Longton Station it became dark and forbidding under the station roof. We descended from the train and were immediately overwhelmed by hordes of relations, most of whom I had never heard of. Several of Dad's brothers were there. Uncle Jack, Uncle Elija, Uncle Jim and kind Uncle Alf, who was Aunt Ruth's husband. My cousin Louvain who was Aunt Ruth's daughter about my age. Much handshaking and shoulder slapping.

"Where are the lads, then Alf?" asked Dad.

"What? Bring that pair along here? Not likely!" said Uncle Alf. "What one doesn't think of t'other will. I'd rather do a turn underground."

Aunt Ruth, when her first child was well on at school had given birth to a pair of boy twins, Alf and Jim. Whether they were as mischievous as reported I very much doubt, but the tales of their prodigious behaviour had made its impact as far as Gloucestershire.

Longton station seemed to be half underground for we walked together, everybody talking at once, up a steep ramp. The walls at the side were black and shiny, almost like a stove that had been black-leaded, I thought. I don't think in this I was far wrong, for after my visit to the potteries it seemed perfectly possible that soot deposited over the years sticking to a surface could have a gratuitous polishing by passengers' coats as they came up and down that steep ramp.

We came out into the open air. The street was noisy with activity, not the least made by the trams clanging up and down the centre, sparks flying overhead. We reached Heathcote Road in a bunch.

Heathcote road, I had imagined as a pretty place with an attractive name. In reality it was anything but. We arrived at Aunt Ruth's who greeted us warmly and caught the twins under the table.

Under protest they let Dad lift them up and guess their weight. They were as alike as two peas except that one wore glasses. [the twins were born in June 1923]

The front room was entered directly from the street, the kitchen just behind. The welcome committee gradually left us to have our tea. I went into the kitchen to wash my hands and face at the sink. One thing that took my eye, a cup standing on the window ledge holding some small kitchen gadget. It was so pretty...gold around the

edge with little violets, scattered randomly over the bowl. The little handle pale green, ending in a perfectly shaped violet leaf clasped around the cup.

The lower rim was pale green and bright gold. Aunt Ruth came rushing into the kitchen in search of yet something else to lay on the table.

“All right love?” she asked.

“Yes Aunt Ruth. I was just thinking what a lovely cup. It might get broken out here.”

She looked surprised and did what everybody in the Potteries always did, emptied the cup and turned it upside down.

“Yes, she said. “It’s a good firm...Goodyear and sons, Hanley. I did that sort of work, lithographs. Not since the twins came along though. It’s bone china, not worth much unless you have the whole set.”

There seemed to me only two things that could be recommended in the Potteries...the beautiful china that you used everywhere, every day, and the cheerful, quick-witted, warm-hearted people. Nobody ever seemed to say an unkind word and nobody ever complained.

Outside the kitchen door was a cobbled back yard serving the row of cottages. Across the yard a lavatory and a wash house shared by two houses. Luckily Aunt Ruth’s neighbour was, I learned, great Aunt Emma who lived with her daughter and son-in-law. My own grandmother, who was dead, had been called Emma so Aunt Emma next door was always referred to as Aunt Emma Allen. It was very confusing, all this multiplicity of relations but I believe this Aunt Emma Allen was the connection with Aunt Charlotte deep in the Forest of Dean.

If anyone is wondering what my grandfather George Worgan’s link to aunt Charlotte was, here you go: -

His maternal grandmother was Emily Colclough b 1830.

Aunt Charlotte’s mother was Catherine Colclough, b 1845.

Emily and Catherine were sisters, with a 15-year age gap. Their parents were William Colclough b1805 and Ellen Wayne b1806.

The age gap between the sisters makes it a bit confusing. One way to look at it is that Aunt Charlotte’s aunt Emily was my grandad’s granny.

The wash house was certainly put to good use, for to keep any semblance of respectability in that soot laden atmosphere, Aunt Ruth did phenomenal amounts of washing. She told me the white lace curtains at the front window had to be washed every other day and the front steps had to be whitened every morning.

I was used to seeing colliers about the place but here the Florence Colliery was bang on the street, instead of hidden away in the Forest. You crossed the truck lines [for the coal wagons] when you went into town. The closest pot bank looked simply huge at ground level, but was enclosed by factory buildings and warehouses. [[View of Longton 1926](#)]

I understood the igloo construction was where the pots were fired. You never spoke of cups and saucers; everything was a pot.

Uncle Alf had worked in the mines. Aunt Ruth at the pot bank. Uncle Alf had a bad chest from his occupation and could not go to work any longer. He was a sweet kind natured man whose one love in life, apart from his family, was his allotment.

He took me down there in the evening. A great many of the inhabitants of those little cottages seemed to take comfort from their allotments. Uncle Alf’s speciality was dahlias, about which he was so enthusiastic and in deadly earnest that even I listened with interest. Truthfully I didn’t care much about dahlias but was more likely to be enraptured by the dainty miracle of primroses of anemones springing unattended in the wild wood.

After tea Louvain disappeared. She was going to sleep with a girl friend. I was shown where my bed was. The trunk we had sent was in the bedroom. I took a book and found a corner in the sitting room where I could curl up out of the way.

During the evening callers came in and joined the others in the sitting room. Drinks were poured and everybody kept firing questions at Dad. He was in his element being the centre of attention and there was much bantering and outbursts of laughter. I kept quiet, covered my ears and tried to concentrate on my book. I have always absolutely detested going to bed. I was vaguely aware that the laughter was getting more raucous although I couldn’t have told you what the conversation was about. All at once I heard dad’s voice above the others.

“Gladys?” he called. “Is that girl gone to bed yet?”

I was forced to come into the open.

“I was trying to finish my book, I said.

“Up to bed now”, said Dad. “You’ve had a long day. Say goodnight and up the stairs.

I was vaguely aware that Dad was getting rid of me with the best intentions. “Goodnight, Dad,” I said. “Goodnight Aunt Ruth, Uncle Alf, everybody.”

I went up the stairs and got ready for bed, finding my nightgown from the trunk. I said my prayers and got into bed, and was suddenly overcome by a great wave of homesickness. I didn’t recognise it as such but suddenly thought: -

“Oh poor Mam. I’m always such a naughty girl. I never help with the house work if I can get out of it. Oh my dear little baby brother, my big sisters Hetty and Lily, my little sisters Phyllis and Vi. Oh whatever are they doing now? I don’t like this strange town and those strange people all talking in queer voices. Oh what a long way it is from home. I wonder if I shall ever see them again.”

I sobbed and wept copiously.

Then I heard the door squeak and saw Aunt Ruth bending over me. “You alright luv?”

“Yes thank you,” I sniffed.

“I was a bit frightened. I smelt a funny smell. I think it’s gas. And I heard a funny noise outside.”

“Those cats again, I expect,” said Aunt Ruth.

“I’ll go round and make sure all the gas taps are turned off. You get to sleep, love. It’ll be alright. Uncle Alf’ll send the cats off.”

I turned over and strained my ears to see if I could hear any cats.

I sniffed hard to see if I could really smell gas.

I couldn’t. Sometimes I told awful lies. I was strangely comforted.

I was taken everywhere in the Potteries...to Trentham Gardens, the pride of the neighbourhood, a feast of well-ordered flowers and beautiful lawns...to the swimming pool where Louvain demonstrated her skills. She had a row of badges.

I went to Normacott, the supposedly classy part of town from which my mother came. To Stone to see Aunt Ethel and Uncle Henry, my mother’s brother. One of my cousins was Ida who went to ballet school and was going to teach ballet one day.

It was much nicer around Stone and the Wedgewood factory had clean walls and lawns about it. We went to Hanley where they had a good theatre and smart shops. The famous five Pottery town ran from one into the other, Longton into Stoke, Burslem into Hanley, Fenton into Longton. Buses and trams ran everywhere and you didn’t know where you were. out of one into the other.

Breakfast time was always interesting. I was sent to fetch the morning pikelets while Aunt Ruth fried quantities of sausages and eggs, tomatoes and cheese!

You went to the place on the corner and sat on a bench, your dish on your knees and awaited your turn. A stout old lady in a large apron poured batter from a large pan, a handsome one of course, onto the flat top of a large hot stove. The batter spread in a fascinating way, bubbled and got flipped over. Sometimes she put rings on the top and poured the batter in these. These turned into crumpets covered with dozens of deep holes. You could also buy hot muffins and oatcakes. You had them put on your beautiful plate with your cloth over and ran home to put them on the breakfast table.

It wasn’t so bad while you kept yourself busy with these tasks, but when you lifted your eyes and took a more general look you could see everywhere the result of generations of smoke being poured out into the atmosphere in a defined area.

Black deposits on every ledge, and the few green patches of grass were black if you touched it. Stoke Church, a lovely shape, was grey and black. Slag heaps behind the pot banks were made of clinkers and broken china. I was told that every firing that didn't come out perfect was smashed and shovelled on the slag heaps.

I went to visit another cousin. There was a high shelf around their sitting room about eighteen inches from the ceiling. Every inch of space was covered with samples of a master craft; a lot from Beswick's Nancy had painted herself. [The Beswick Works - Longton](#) [Mum kept up her links with her relatives in Longton. Arthur Gredington, mentioned in the Wikipedia article, came and stayed on a visit to Ruardean after WW2. At the time he was going out with one of our relatives I believe.]

One couldn't calculate the value. Across the street from Nancy's house a towering hill. It was composed entirely of clinker from the pot bank and broken pots. It was impossible to touch anything without bearing evidence somewhere on your person.

We came back on the train to Gloucester, parting from dear Aunt Ruth in tears. We made our way to Westgate Street bus station. I had always thought of Westgate Street as the scruffy part of town, many fish and chip shops, litter lying around, some revolting smells from the glue factory, a great many buildings in a state of decay.

Today the Westgate looked beautiful, lovely displays of coloured fruit, St. Nicholas' church clean and immaculate, behind it the Cathedral towers white and shining under a blue sky. The bus came in, clean and cheerful, the descending passengers pink and healthy.

I thought of Aunt Ruth's letters.

'Hoping this finds you as it leaves me, dear brother, in the pink.' I knew then who was 'in the pink' and it wasn't Aunt Ruth.



[Mum's aunt Ruth when young – probably taken in a photographic studio in Longton.]

CHAPTER 31 - FUTURE PROSPECTS

Life went on in Commercial Street. By this time Hetty was a fully-fledged shorthand typist, but could find employment no nearer than Lydney. She went backwards and forwards by rail every day from Cinderford to Lydney Town. She soon made friends among her colleagues and before long bravely announced that she proposed to go into lodgings. This of course promoted a family row with Dad but she held her ground.

At first she came home at weekends, quite the fashionable young lady. She bought many of her clothes at Geldart's in Gloucester and spent hours pressing pleats with the old flat iron on damp cloth on the kitchen table. Her blouses were all jap silk, I remember. I can still see the imprints of lace insertions on the hot ironing sheet.

Dad put a ban on the name 'Mrs Jordan' being mentioned in the house. Mrs Jordan was the name of the lady with whom Hetty had found lodgings and certainly the name was often on her tongue.

"Mrs Jordan had beautiful lace curtains at her front window and washes them every week. Mrs Jordan's doorstep is the whitest in the row. Mrs Jordan's front knocker is always shiny Mrs Jordan has a gentleman lodger...he's a real scream... he came downstairs with a chamber pot on his head. Mrs Jordan nearly died laughing.

The times of Hetty's weekends at home became more infrequent and Lily had a lot more work in the shop. More mats had to be despatched to London for sale as the shop trade was virtually non-existent. Dad and his next-door landlord were on even worse terms than before. Dad's strongest objections were on the grounds of paying rates when the premises were no more than a private house with a work room.

Lily began talking of getting a proper job. She would be leaving school and didn't intend to stay at home when she could earn good money elsewhere. I was as bad as Dad in that I felt my heart sink at the thought of anyone leaving the nest. Every night I continued, as I always had, to pray for every member of the family, complete with name and personal details. I had a great fear that something terrible would happen to anyone who went into the world outside.

On her infrequent visits home Hetty was living proof that my fears were unfounded. She simply loved her job at Watts. Mr Arthur was a marvellous boss. Lydney was a wonderful place to live. She had joined the tennis club and used to rush home from the office, change into her white pleated skirt and white blouse and go to the park swinging her racquet. She knew all sorts of young men and, don't tell dad, but she and her friends were going to a real dance with an orchestra at the Town Hall! I listened in awe to the stories of all these grand goings on from the big world, but envied none of it for myself. I could not have put it into words but always I felt there was something intangible, something more precious to me, that lay nearer home.

Meanwhile every Friday night I read to Dad from the Mercury, particularly examining minutely the 'Houses to Let' column. At last I read out an advertisement that seemed to offer possibilities.

It was at Newnham. So to Newnham we eventually proceeded on a pouring wet Saturday morning.

Our experiences there nearly put me off house hunting for good. Never in all my rosy memories of Newnham would I have expected to find such a terrifying character, stepped as far as I could see straight from the pages of an illustrated fairy story book. He lived down a little back lane in this riverside town of remembered delights. Dad, being blind, I could only look and remember every detail to recount when we escaped. A dark dismal hole, illuminated by one candle. The day was sombre enough but old sack bags were draped over the windows. Dad sat on a box.

I stood with my back to the door. A confused jumbled of old mattresses, rolled mats, half broken furniture stacked every space up to the ceiling. Piles of books filled odd corners. Framed pictures leaned cramped together, faces to the wall. A table seemed the only solid thing there. On it a jumble of ledgers, pieces of broken crockery, piles of smaller books, jars of nails, jars of paint brushes, a greasy piece of margarine paper containing a small piece of margarine, a jam jar with a knife standing in about one inch of jam, a candle with a flickering flame in a wax-congealed candle-stick, a pile of ledgers, one open, a jar on ink and holding a pen a long fingered yellow hand poised over the ledger.

My eyes followed the hand and came to rest on the wizened old face with straggly grey whiskers, a bony nose and small black eyes gazing at Dad. A small black cap clung to the top of the head. The man seemed to be

dressed in heaps of black rags and the old armchair in which he was seated had folded army blankets piled over the back.

When I came to I realised as conversation was coming to an end and we were to go out and view the property. For this Dad put his hat on and buttoned up his good gaberdine mack, turning up the collar. The old man put out the light, donned a wide brimmed round black hat and drew a blanket round his shoulders. We went out into the rain, now falling heavily and continuously.

As we walked up the lane behind the old man the rain gradually filled the brim of his hat and eventually streamed over his shoulders.

The house he led us to, up another steep ash lane with a dangerous gully in the middle, was depressing and utterly unsuitable. We came back down to the hard road and bid the old man farewell, promising to let him know the decision. He slunk back to his den hugging the wall, a bundle of old black rags with the weird black hat on top. I couldn't wait to relate to Dad all that I had seen.

"You won't take that horrible house, will you Dad?" I said anxiously.

"Oh I soon twigged him," said Dad. "No I won't take it. Whatever would your mother say? No, he's a Jew, a miser."

A miser? I thought. But misers sat counting piles of gold at dead of night and hiding it in locked coffers.

"I didn't see any piles of gold," I said. "Only piles of rubbish."

"Same thing as far as he's concerned," said Dad. "You go to Yorkshire one day, my girl. They'll tell you. Where's there's muck there's money and they know what they're talking about."

CHAPTER 32 - GOODBYE DOUBLE VIEW

It must have been early in the summer of 1923 when Dad typed a letter asking Mr Emery, the headmaster of Double View school, for an interview. On the appointed day I went racing down Belle Vue Road and before long was walking back up holding Dad by the hand. [story probably out of chronological order here – Mum didn't seem too sure herself when she wrote this.]

I felt somehow involved with this interview but was not at all clear what the point of the visit was. Up until now I knew Dad and Mr Emery had been engaged in a warlike relationship but had never before, to my knowledge, met face to face. It sounded rather exciting. Both were choleric sort of men and as to build seemed pretty well matched. Mr Emery always seemed to wear a lightish brown, small checked suit and had a shiny bald head and gold rimmed spectacles.

Dad in his second best dark grey suit and grey trilby and of course his stick and silver watch chain.

It was strange to go through the empty yard and see the only occupant of the great hall, the caretaker. The movement of his broom and bucket and dustpan echoed loudly round the high bricked walls and domed roof. Well I knew the metal suits of armour and cross swords hanging high on the walls.

Hadn't I seen those very swords buckled round the immature waist of Ivy Miles, the points dragging on the floor around her, while she paraded around the classrooms, tears running down her cheeks, her hands held aloft to display her unscrubbed nails and strike fear into the heart of every insufficiently washed pupil? However all the pupils, scrubbed and unscrubbed alike were now gone home and we must make for the headmaster's study. Dad was given the courtesy of a chair on the back of which he hung his stick while his trilby hat went underneath. I stood by him. It seemed the subject in hand was that Dad wished me to attend the Higher Elementary School, and wanted to know about a Scholarship.

Mr Emery pointed out that pupils sat for the scholarship in their last year at Primary School and I had come up a year early. He fetched the holy of holies, the school register, to illustrate the point.

"Yes, but doesn't that mean she's over a year in advance of children of her own age?" asked Dad.

"That would seem to be so, said Mr Emery and asked me what class I was in. I told him Miss Harris's and he extracted Miss Harris's register.

"Of course," he said, "if she had stayed at Bilson school she would have taken the scholarship automatically. As she's on my school registers I would have entered her if you had asked. As it is you know what it's like around here...half the scholarships offered to children are turned down by the parents. Can't get their children to work soon enough.

Dad began to get cross and said it had been Mr Emery's duty to see that children of good ability should be entered for the scholarship whichever school they were attending. Colour was rising in his cheeks.

Mr Emery retaliated by saying that he had had reason to complain of several absences from school by Dad's elder daughters. Did that look as if Dad was interested in education? And had he realised once a pupil went to the Higher Elementary they had to stay till they were sixteen? Had he realised that? Also if a child was awarded a scholarship what about the extra uniforms and games equipment?

Both men were on their feet shouting. I was remembering the day when I was called by Mr Emery to the front of my class and asked where my sister Lily was.

Being a truthful child I told him she was helping Mam with washing and minding the baby.

"Don't you have another sister at home?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"Why isn't she helping your mother?"

"Please Sir, she's looking after the shop and learning shorthand and typing."

"And I suppose you may stay from school next Monday to be the butler. I suppose you do have a butler?"

What could I do in answer to this witticism but stand and look sheepishly at the floor while the class roared its appreciation. Secretly I rather enjoyed the joke myself and imagined myself acting the part. At any rate it was quite an original way of looking at it.

I came back to earth with a bump to find my father with his hat on, his walking stick outstretched making wildly for the door. Quickly I grabbed his arm and pointed him in the right direction. Over his shoulder he was shouting that like it or lump it his daughter would be starting at the Higher Elementary next term. [[East Dean Grammar School - etc.](#)]

In due course Dad and I arrived at the headmaster's study of the Higher Elementary school in Station Street. The first thing that struck me was the very different atmosphere that prevailed. The head was a Mr Cockshutt, a captain in rank, recently demobbed from army service. I have never yet been in the company of any men who saw active service in the 1914-18 war, of whatever rank, between whom there was not an immediate aura of camaraderie. The meeting between Captain Cockshutt and Dad was no exception, and in fact the headmaster was indeed my idea of a real gentleman.

He explained that I had certainly passed the age when children sat for the scholarship examination. However there was an entrance examination which I could take and the fees were three pounds per term, and uniform and games equipment had to be bought. He thought that there might be some financial help available to disabled ex-servicemen. He told Dad the date on which the entrance exam took place and gave him a form which had to be filled in.

As we walked back home Dad was deep in thought and I could already see myself in a navy-blue pleated tunic and white blouse, long black stockings and the strange headgear that went with the outfit, a cap not unlike that worn by soldiers in the last war, but navy blue with red piping and red buttons holding down the corners. This cap was worn straight on the head with the corners one on each side and the badge in gold thread embroidered centre front.

During the weeks that followed delegations from the British Legion were often in the shop asking Dad all about his financial affairs and filling in forms. It wasn't long before Dad resented this intrusion and when it came to the point of altering his figures in order to make the income come below the level at which subsidies would be expected, he frankly refused to sign. High words passed on both sides and in the end the charitable gentlemen were shown the door.

"Good riddance to that lot," said Dad, as they went out. "If they think they're getting me mixed up with their jiggery pokery they've got another think coming!"

Dad signed the application form for me to be entered as a paying pupil. I easily dealt with the entrance test and soon found myself attired in the uniform of my dreams.

Mam bought the blue pleated gymslip from the Bon Marche, white blouses from the Miss Preeces in Market Street. Black stockings and navy bloomers from Mrs Morgan in the High Street and very fortunately Miss Margery Rowlinson, daughter of Captain Rowlinson who kept the big shoe shop, asked me if I would accept her cap as she was leaving school, and would I also like her hockey stick. [[Bon Marche](#)]

[I found a Sam ROWLINSON who was the battalion quartermaster of the 'Forest of Dean Pioneers', officially known as the 13th (Service) Battalion of the Gloucestershire Regiment. (He was the son of George Rowlinson, the miner's agent for the Forest of Dean.) Whether this is the same man or not, I can't say - the dates look a bit off for him to have a daughter older than Mum]

My leather satchel, needless to say, was hand made by the famous Mr Thomas. I printed my name in ink inside the front flap. Of course it went on forever. In my courting days my young man borrowed it to carry tools and a thermos flask.

He became my husband and I first had a son. He [my son] carried the satchel for his sports kit and was very attached to it. Last time I saw it, it held his fishing gear and he is past fifty.

I found the Higher Elementary school wonderful, in spite of my weakness in mental arithmetic. I gathered geometry, algebra and other mathematics closely to my bosom and loved them. My flights of fancy with words were highly acclaimed and although I never did come to terms with music I was a member of the hockey team.

As for school fees, even at £3 per term they were a constant nightmare. The beginning of each term was a time of evasion and excuses until a cheque was finally signed. Dad must have been a little like the character from his favourite author... always expecting something to turn up.

As the years rolled by the High Elementary turned into the 'Secondary' with a new head and a new uniform. Then it became the East Dean Grammar School with another headmaster and another uniform.

We also found another new home and I suppose I changed from child to adolescent. Not that anybody noticed. In those days teenagers did not strike a prominent note in the social scene. [EDGS school photos](#)

Of all the school heads Mr Emery is still the one most firmly printed on my mind. If I have maligned him I apologise. Recently in the Cinderford Library, among a collection of earlier inhabitants, there was a group photograph of school heads of that period. Mr J. A. Emery. was one of the names printed on the bottom. I counted along the line. The gentleman in the photograph bore not the faintest resemblance to the one in my memory.

Who can tell what is seen through the eyes of a child and how close it may be to reality?



Cinderford - Mr Emery and former pupils of Double View School - 30th July 1915 - Dean Forest Mercury

Notes – Nick Duberley - 2023

1. Aunt Charlotte died in August 1926, and is buried at St John's Church, Cinderford.
2. St Dunstan's history with photos - <https://rsars.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/blind-veterans-uk-review-2015-centenary-special.pdf>
3. Blind soldier making a door-mat - <https://www.prints-online.com/new-images-grenville-colliery-collection/st-dunstans-hospital-blind-soldiers-door-mat-18074264.html>
4. Kelly's Directory – Cinderford – 1902 - <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~cbennett/genealogy/cinderford1902.htm>
5. My mother wrote a later version of her memoirs covering this part of her life which I plan on making available as an add on. The only extra material in it which seems to add much is a brief account of how the family came to move from Cinderford to Ruardean. I also have a few pages relating to her life in Ruardean where my mother met my father Percy Duberley for the first time.
6. I think my mother wrote more than I have been able to find on the Ruardean period, but perhaps that manuscript might yet turn up – you never know. Updates as and when on my website - [Nick D's world](#)