

DEDICATION

[from original edition]

To my mother, who was always there.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Original cover photo – as per my mother’s acknowledgement: - **a special thank you to Ben Ashworth for the cover photograph taken from “Last Days of Steam in Gloucestershire.”**

I believe the photograph was taken in the 1960s when the line was about to close. New occupiers moved into the cottage in the mid-1920s after the death of Aunt Charlotte.

Revised and annotated electronic edition made available for free download, May 2022 by Nick Duberley. Copyright reserved. I have made a few small corrections and alterations to the original version published by Douglas McLean at the Forest Bookshop in 1978.

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CHAPTER – 1

As soon as I awoke, I went straight downstairs in my nightgown, because it was going to be an exciting morning, but as I got off the stair into the living room, some peculiarity in the light held me to the centre of the room.

Half way up the window was a flat darkness, but a sort of bluish radiance shone on the ceiling.

Mam had dressed quickly and was almost on my heels.

“Look Mam,” I said pointing to the window and ceiling, “It’s funny!”

“That means work” said Mam, “and sharp about it too.” She ran into the back-kitchen, and I could hear her moving things around.

By this time Hetty and Lily, my older sisters, were down also fully dressed.

“Look!” I said again, pointing at the window and ceiling.

“What’s the use of looking?” said Hetty, “standing there in your nightgown and bare feet! Lil, go back up and get this kid’s clothes. Standing there freezing.”

“Hi you two,” called Mam, “Get that child dressed, and for goodness sake don’t dare open that door!”

“What d’you think I’m doing?” retorted Hetty, pulling my nightgown over my head.

By this time, Lily was there with my clothes and between them they hustled me into them.

“Don’t open the door!” I thought. “What was out there? It must be very big!”

Mam was still banging about in the back-kitchen.

I looked around. My rag doll was still flopping in her usual manner in the little arm chair. Mam had propped it up in the corner.

You had to do that or it would fall over. The two front legs were about two inches longer than the back ones, the result of being dragged over the flagged stone floor, by three little girls in succession

Inside it you could put your dolly with a scarf tied round her waist and round the back stave [of the little armchair]. Then you could drag her round the room or take her for a walk outside.

As soon as I had my boots laced up and tied, I ran and fetched Maggie the doll and held her tight.

Mam came out of the kitchen holding a garden spade. “It was right back in the corner, I had to move everything!” she said. “Now, let’s have a look.”

I grabbed hold of her skirt and held on tightly as she went to the door and slowly and carefully turned the key. Hetty and Lily crowded round too.

Slowly, slowly mam pulled back the door.

Snow was piled half-way up the doorway, presenting a clear, exact imprint of the boards on its immaculate surface. It was beautiful.

“Now, careful does it,” said Mam, inserting the edge of the spade and pushing it carefully outwards.

It was not so surprising that we got the brunt of the snow- drifts, living as we did on Littledean Hill, right on top of that high escarpment facing East. Nothing at all to break the full force of a gale sweeping over the Cotswolds, which lay blue and purple on the far horizon.

At that age I was unaware of these names, or of the beauty of the silver Severn lying in a great horse-shoe bend down there in the valley.

<https://satnavandcider.wordpress.com/2012/03/14/severn-valley/>

Farms lay in between, in the fertile Severn vale, and wood sweetly clothed the slopes of the hills as they ascended in varying shapes and heights to the top of Littledean Hill.

The village of Littledean itself lay almost vertically below us. Our town really was Cinderford, lying almost a mile down the other side of the hill.

Hetty and Mam soon destroyed the beautiful patterns that the snow had made, and Lily had taken a sweeping brush and cleared the window-sill. The sun was shining, and now the strange brilliance of sunlight reflected on snow crept further into the living room.

I suddenly remembered the treat in store for today. "Mam," I called, "You promised last night, you haven't forgotten the rug?"

Poor Mam, so small and delicate for the task, still clearing the flags across the front, turned.

"No love. It's all right, only I must get a fire started first."

She was already at the coal-shed door and was soon back with a bucket of coal.

First clear the ashes under the grate, and put them in an old bucket to stand outside. The kindling wood had been drying in the hearth all night and sprang to life with the first match.

Place the pieces of coal on the wooden lattice of sticks, and away it went giving almost instant heat.

The beautiful, shining, iridescent coal came from one of the deep mines in the Forest of Dean in which we lived.

"Now perhaps we can have a bit of breakfast. We're all behind this morning. One good thing, no school!"

Mam and the girls went into the back-kitchen. A flat pottery pan was on a wooden bench. Mam first filled the iron kettle and put it on the hob and the frying pan on the other hob.

The brown pan was for washing hands and faces. Soap and flannel were on a saucer. Hetty had soon got herself well-scrubbed and called me in. "Half a minute," shouted Mam, "I'll put a drop of warm in for her."

"Oh yes!" said Hetty, looking at me sideways

"Well, she's only three, said Mam, "She'll get older."

Mam topped up the kettle, and put it back on the hob. The fragrance of rashers of bacon beginning to sizzle teased the nostrils.

I went obediently in then let Hetty tuck a towel round my neck. Hetty was a very thorough washer. Just because it was exciting, with heavy snow and everything, didn't mean that you didn't get your ears nearly turned inside out.

Lily soon had the tablecloth on and milk in a jug and sugar in a basin. Cups and saucers, spoons and plates and a loaf of cottage bread. Mam had made a brown tea-pot full of tea and fried the bacon and we sat around on kitchen chairs.

I put Maggie on the chair beside me, and fed her bits in between eating myself. We talked about how deep the snow was, and how long it would take the postman to get round on a morning like this.

“Do you think there’ll be a letter this morning, Mam?” asked Hetty. “It would be nice if there was, wouldn’t it.” said Mam opening her grey eyes wide.

Her voice sounded a bit shaky. I couldn’t think why. But I knew what they were talking about.

Getting a letter meant only one thing. It would be from Dad. Dad was at the front fighting the Germans, and a practically unknown quantity as far as I was concerned. I was born in 1911. The last thing I really remembered about Dad was when Mam had gone to a place called Malvern, and Mrs. Wyndham across the road had looked after me.

Mam had already gone when she came and woke me up and got me dressed, and took me to her house. I did nothing but cry.

Mrs. Wyndman said “You mustn’t take on love. Your Mammy’s gone to see your Dad. It’s the last time she’ll see him before he goes to France to fight the Germans, so try and be a good girl.”

“I shan’t stop crying till my Mam comes back,” I thought. Nor did I.

But now of course we were all right. Mam was always there, and Hetty and Lily, who were a bit bossy but looked after me, and before very long I should be going to school and that seemed all right too.

The breakfast cleared away; Mam got on with the usual chores. The kettle boiled again and Hetty doing the washing up. Lily standing the chairs on the table, rolling up strips of cocoa matting, and putting them outside for Mam to shake.

Mam got the black lead and polished the stove, Bath Brick which she shook on the steel topped fender, spat into and polished vigorously. Then the hearth had to be whitened. What a lot of things to be done before we could get the rug out.

By this time Mam was looking quite hot, her fine brown hair in little damp curls round her forehead. She had a little white triangle of a face, a little pointed chin, but now her cheeks were faintly pink, and grey eyes sparkling.

Now she fetched the new rug from the box in the corner. This is what I had so looked forward to. All through the dark winter evenings we had sat round pegging that rug. Every scrap of worn-out clothing had gone into that box. Mam had drawn a design of a diamond shape in the centre, and bright red material only had been put in a separate box. The strips of cloth had all to be cut up, some of them very tough.

I just couldn’t get the scissors through it. Then one side of a gypsy clothes-peg was used to make two holes in the hessian through which to thread the strip of cloth. All the colours went in anyhow, but a dark border round the edge and the bright scarlet in the middle. I had done quite a lot of threading if one of the others made the holes. But it had gone on and on and on, and Mam had insisted that all the holes must be as close as could be, no shortcuts. But now it was finished and I just couldn’t wait to see it down.

Mam unrolled the rug, gave it a little shake, and spread it on the hearth.

Oh how lovely it was! The blazing fire, the shining black stove, the steel fender, the white hearth and now the beautiful new rug. I put my foot carefully on it. Everybody gave a big sigh. It was well done.

“Nobody is to upset anything on it so mind!” said Hetty.

“Can I sit on it?” I asked, “Please.”

“Yes.” Was the answer.

I sat down in the middle of the red diamond. It was simply gorgeous, warm and soft and springy and beautiful. But I couldn't sit there long. My face was getting burnt.

Sun shone all that day and the sculpted drifts had softened in outline. Next day was Sunday, and passed as every Sunday, with breakfast, roast beef for dinner and jelly for tea. Mam got herself dressed in her best clothes, a wide brimmed hat, a striped blouse with high neck, and buttoned cuffs, a narrow skirt ankle length, and a thick coat with wide sleeves and square collar. She was ready by half past five and was going to play the organ at the little chapel just along the hill. Before marriage, she had belonged to a family with a good income, her father being a master-plumber. In common with most young ladies of that class she had been taught the piano, and had passed examinations at a high level. But now playing the organ at the little local chapel was the nearest she came to any musical activity. It was certainly a change for her from the heavy work of housekeeping, necessary in those days to keep up a reasonable standard of respectability.

Monday morning brought a change, the wind now coming in from the west over South Wales. Hetty and Lily went off to school, and the days went quietly by.

Mam always did her shopping on a Saturday morning. At least a soldier's wages were regular and not subject to the unreliable variations in the miners wages.

Mam always brought a little treat from Saturday shopping. She had a way of presenting these small treats, which had a certain appeal to the small child. She went to Cinderford for the goods, about a mile downhill, so the same back up but carrying heavy baskets.

There were plenty of goods to buy, as losses at sea had not much impact on our food supplies. Later it was a very different story when the ration cards were issued

This Saturday, when we saw Mam coming, I jumped about excitedly shouting, "Guess what we've got today."

Mam put her load of goods on the table, and sat down for a bit to get her breath back. I helped Lily put the stores away. Horniman's tea, Sunlight soap, Hudson's Washing Powder, Recket's Blue, bag of soda crystals, sugar and best butter cut from the slab, rice and sago, ginger, pepper and salt. www.OLDandinteresting.com/laundry-blue.aspx

Hetty had taken over the joint of meat, wrapped it in a cloth and put it in the meat-safe.

Mam had had her cup of tea, and said, "Well, who would like some new hair-ribbon.

"Oh yes please! yes please! Can we choose?" "Well" said Mam, "You must stand in line, and I shall put my hand behind me. She had the ribbons already rolled to put in her fists. She made us close our eyes, and when we opened them, there were her two fists presented to us.

"Youngest first. Gladys, you must tap which fist you want!"

At last I made up my mind, and tapped Mam's left hand! Oh joy of joy's, a length of Royal Blue ribbon all crisp and new, sprang out and uncurled itself! Wonderful! wonderful! My favourite colour!

Lily got the red and Hetty the navy blue.

Winter gave way to Spring and Mam got letters fairly regularly. Everything seemed to go on quietly and normally.

Dad sent us messages and asked, how much had we grown? Were Hetty and Lily doing their lessons well? and helping Mam as much as they could? Then one morning - great excitement.

Dad was coming home in May!

[May 1915]

Great scrubbing and cleaning and extra washing, then one day, there he was.

Flat topped soldier's cap, khaki uniform with brass buttons, khaki greatcoat, puttees round the legs, very clean black boots, a very big kit bag, and what I learned was most important, a badge at the front of his cap saying 13th Gloucester Regiment.

I studied him very closely. After he had grabbed Mam and swung her round, he picked me up and threw me in the air. I wasn't quite sure whether I liked this hard tough person. He was always making jokes; his clothes were rough and hairy and his chin prickly.

When Hetty asked Dad what it was like in France, he said "Muddy, awful muddy country. Forget about it."

And when Mam asked him "what would he fancy for his tea", he said, "Anything except bully beef and jam."

The house felt so different. Dad made everything into a game.

When it came to bath night, Dad had everything ready in a jiffy. Zinc bath off the hook in the back kitchen in front of the fire. Cold water in bath. Two saucepans of hot water on the hobs. Towels warming. Had me in the bath in no time, water just right. Mam knelt down and washed my hair and while she was drying it, Dad disappeared, came back in in Mam's best flowery apron, a duster round his head, a large scrubbing brush in one hand, and a bar of sunlight soap in the other.

Lily and Hetty fell about laughing, but I didn't think it so funny. I determined I wouldn't be a baby and cry, and when it came to it, Dad was very gentle, dried me, put me in a warm nightie, and sat me on his knee by the fire.

Maybe Dad was all right too, but he had to go back to fight the Germans.

We were all tearful when leave ended, and I put my arms around his neck and cried into his collar when he lifted me up.

As summer came, we sometimes ventured out for Sunday walks, my sisters and I in our Sunday dresses. Going farther along the hill where the hard road came to an end and disappeared into footpaths going their various ways through the forest, you could turn left and go up an ash path. Here your way was barred by a stile, over which you climbed, and found yourself waist-high in tall grass ready for mowing. Here you could gather moon daisies and quaking grasses. They lasted a long time. There were also small pieces of herbage which you could eat. Sorrel which had tall red leaves with seeds on top. If you picked the tender leaves at the base and chewed them they were sharp and tasty. We called it 'sour Sally'. Another favourite had tiny white bell flowers and folded heart shaped leaves, very pale green. It was called wood-sorrel with a delicate acid taste. The stems were fragile and palely pink.



The briar roses were I think the most beautiful. They grew over the hedges in profusion, starring the hedge with single roses varying from delicate shell pink to deepest rose.

No good picking these, the stems were excessively thorny; but if you could find a young stem, only just spurted, you picked it carefully, skinned it and ate the centre - sweet and bitter at the same time, we called it sweet-briar.

The first fresh green leaves on the hawthorn hedge were also edible and tasty. We called it bread and cheese.

There were ancient legends connected with hawthorn shoots, and many children refused to eat them. We ate them and found them good, but were often told by other children. '

"If you eat those you'll have nits in your hair" or even more terrible things would befall.

Summer drew on into Autumn, and then winter was soon upon us, with snow once more piling up in front of our house. In early January, Mam had to be helped upstairs to bed, and Mrs. Wyndman once more came to our assistance.

After a great deal of activity up and down stairs, I was told that I had a new little baby sister. I was no longer the baby of the family, but instead would have another playmate younger than myself.

Mrs Wyndman was a big strong woman, with muscular arms and rosy cheeks. She had a brood of children herself at home, but did our Saturday shopping, and cooked our Sunday dinner. She hadn't been able to buy meat, but managed to get a large tin of salmon and lovely parsley sauce.

It was a delicious meal.

We called our new little sister Violet, but of course still more work and washing for Mam.

[born March 1915 – mum got her dad's visit and Violet's birth in the wrong order I think]

CHAPTER – 2

Baby Vi was toddling by the time I had to start school. Mam took me down the first time to have my name put on the register. After that I went with Het and Lily. The first bit of road was level, then it was downhill all the way. We carried our food for midday dinner.

Miss Watts was the Head Mistress of the Infants' Department. To see her was to know exactly the profession to which she belonged. She had lodgings in the upper part of the town. Bilson Junior Elementary School was half-way down Station Street, very steep. She was a tall slim lady, always - Summer and Winter - dressed in a variation of navy-blue and white. She had a very erect carriage, and a severe expression on her face, a round felt hat, or navy straw sitting dead centre on her head.

<http://way-mark.co.uk/foresthaven/livnhist/Oliked60.htm> [extract: -In July 1949 Miss Watts received her last delivery of "toilet goods value two pounds ten shillings" and "resigned charge of this School after 33 years' service"]

Her legs seemed to carry her straight down the hill, with the back kept in an upright position all the way.

There was never the slightest sign of misbehaviour in her school, nor did I see any child do anything but obey immediately any order that was given.

After the register was marked, we were put in a large room where we sang a hymn and said a prayer.

Then we all had to make a long tail one behind the other, older hands to the fore, new ones to the rear. The piano played and we sang 'The Good Ship Sails on the Alley, Allee-oo,' repeat twice, then again, 'The Good Ship etc. on the first day of September.' I had no idea what it meant, but round and round, in and out of classrooms, until a signal was given and the top class got into its classroom and sat. On went the others until the second class found their classroom, and at last 'The Babies' as we were called were shown their seats.

It was very nice, little wooden chairs, little wooden tables. We were given slates and chalks, building bricks, plasticine, then coloured beads to thread, strips of leather and laces to thread through, so that you learned how to lace up your boots.

Soon we were learning our letters. Big cardboard placards with your letter for the day.

You wore it round your neck, and walked round and round till you knew it and could write it on your slate, and say the phonetic sound it made. It was very easy. Then you could put two letters together and make little words. Then you could put C H together and make ch... S H and make sh.

I well remember my joy, when I was at home and looking at a box in which Mam kept her letters.

Diagonally across the box was a long word which had meant nothing at all to me before. Idly I drew my finger over the raised letters, and suddenly found myself saying, CH says choc-0-l-a-t-e, and shouting out 'chocolate'. It says 'Chocolate'.

How lovely to be able to read!

When you had learned all your letters, you started reading properly.

There was a big chart which was thrown over the black-board. The first page had a large coloured picture of a cat looking straight at you, sitting on a red mat with a background of bright blue.

Underneath the uncompromising statement that... 'The cat sat on the mat.'

Teacher had a long, polished pointer and pointed it at each word. From there we went on to other details about the cat and the mat and a table, not exactly thrilling, but we were taught to read. One's progress was rated by how far one could read the chart.

Dinner-time at school, for those who lived a distance away, was not an elevating experience. As I had sisters in the Junior section, I was allowed to sit with them.

This meant sitting three in a desk, and opening packets of sandwiches. Nothing on the desk for drinking. Some of the children looked very uncared-for, and one boy brought thick pieces of white bread with syrup soaking through it. It turned me against my own food.

Drinking water could be drawn from a tap in the playground, with an iron cup attached to a chain hanging at the side. In winter the iron cup was so cold, it seemed to stick to your lips, and when it was hot you always seemed to be standing in a queue waiting your turn for a quick drink. I did not enjoy dinner at school.

Being in the 'Infants', I was released from school earlier than my sisters, and started off up Station Street, up by the Triangle into High Street, up Belle Vue Road then across the lane by Double View School, and so on to Little Dean Hill. Turn left here, and on towards my home.

Alternatively, I could have gone across the ash path, but it was impossible either way to get home without passing the mysterious little white cottage on the corner.

It was a very strong looking little house, one storey high, steeply sloping roof, very thick walls, a large chimney stack having its base right at ground level, and always a plume of smoke at the top. It looked strong, and it must have been strong. It had been standing there on that exposed site, ever since travellers had had to pay a toll to go on their way, an old 'Pike House.'

You didn't have to pay to go by now, but you ran past as fast as ever you could, because the Witch lived there! Even if you were tempted by such curiosity that made you brave enough to try and look inside, you wouldn't see anything. The door at the end was set deep back in a very thick wall, and the tiny windows were deep and dark.

Sometimes a neighbour would be talking to my mother but if the name of that witch-lady cropped up, they dropped their voices so much that you never could hear what was said.

A strange thing happened one day as I approached the witch's house. I was about to break into my usual run, when I saw a movement by the door. Afraid to start running I stepped slowly forward. Against the door leaned a small woman. She was wearing a dark blouse, a long black skirt dragged untidily to one side as if held by a safety-pin, and little black boots. A small white bob on the top of her head which had ragged whisps hanging round her neck. A grey and black shawl about her shoulders. There was something strange about the way she was holding a hand to her mouth.

As I came quite close, she moved her hand and took from her mouth a little clay pipe which she had been smoking, and parted her lips into a horrid yellow-toothed smile.

I was quite astonished - a lady smoking a pipe! I walked on a few steps, but just couldn't resist turning my head for a second look.

As I did so, I saw a man emerging furtively from the door, and holding his head low, started running up the ash lane. The witch had disappeared. The door was close-shut

Later in life I was reading a book about witchcraft, and a list of recognised witches was recorded. The lady in question living on Littledean Hill in the Forest of Dean was on that list.

Another afternoon as I was on my homeward walk, I had a different, more pleasant experience. I could hear heavy nailed boots following behind me, and soon the owner of the boots was beside me.

He had a very black face, with white patches around his eyes, a dirty cap on his head, over his shoulders a bottle and the strings of a checked cotton bag tied round the neck of the bottle, and balanced over the other shoulder. His dirty trousers tied below the knee, and, protruding from his one pocket, the top of a carbide lamp.

A stranger may have thought that this was a more fearful sight to a young child than the small white house. But not so, it was merely a miner coming home off the day-shift in his pit-dirt, a common enough occurrence. "Hello, old but," he said, "How d'ye like a bit of bread-pudding?"

I agreed to try it, so he untied the complicated knotting of the tapes, and gave me a piece of pudding wrapped in paper from his bag.

We walked along companionably while I ate the pudding. It was simply lovely, spicy and sweet and full of sultanas.

If you are accepted in the Forest, you will often be addressed as 'Old But.' It is a survival of the 'Buttying System' which was used in the mines.

There are a number of positions at which men are employed in the mining industry, but the miners who were actually engaged in 'getting' the coal, that is taking it out with pick and shovel and putting it into trucks to be taken up in the cages, were divided into gangs. At the head of the gang was a well experienced miner who was called 'The Butty.' He it was who was responsible for allocating the work and paying out the wages at the end of a shift's work. The system was open to abuse, one person could be given an easier place to get the coal than another, and so receive a bigger wage packet. Other forms of favouritism were possible.

I think it may have been a form of equalisation that developed, in that no one person was acknowledged to be of any more value than another. In the end everybody was addressed as Butty, or 'Old But'

However, the deep mines are now a thing of the distant past, but you may still be addressed as 'Old But', male or female, and consider yourself talking to a friend

During this time, the newspapers reported terrible battles going on at the front. Our country was suffering heavy losses. No longer could you go into Cinderford and buy joints of beef and pounds of butter. The Telegraph boy had sad messages to deliver to many a cottage and terraced house, and the citizens of Cinderford who had their menfolk still fighting went about with pale anxious faces.

One afternoon, we were all at home busy with our various tasks. Vi and I had recently acquired a kitten and were trying to persuade it to be tied in the armchair with a scarf, and sit like a doll. The kitten was not being very co-operative and a lot of chasing round the living room was going on.

All at once a Rat-a-Tat sounded on the door. Everybody stopped and gazed at the door! Mam had gone quite white! Hetty it was who opened the door, and there on the doorstep was the Telegraph Boy, holding out an orange envelope.

Hetty took the missive and opened it, taking out the flimsy paper inside, but Mam was trembling far too much to read it, and gave it to Hetty to read out loud.

'Regret to inform you...'

The message said Dad had had a back injury by enemy action. Mam signed the boy's paper and he went away. It was a great relief to know that Dad was wounded, not 'Killed in action' as many other people's telegrams had said.

However we had hardly got over this shock, when another tap sounded on the door. First telegram cancelled, second said '*correction.*'

The gist of it was that Dad had been wounded by enemy action resulting in the loss of sight in both eyes at Ypres, under heavy shelling. A splinter had pierced his temple at one side, and emerged at the other totally destroying both eyes.

[date of injury was 9th January 1917]

CHAPTER – 3

The hearing of the bad news was quite quickly followed by the arrival of Aunt Charlotte. Whenever anything called for urgent action and quick decision, there was Aunt Charlotte.

She was an amazing woman, completely illiterate, but immensely capable. She would find the best solution to a problem, and make sure it was carried through.

Strictly speaking, she was not my aunt, but everybody called her 'Aunt Charlotte.'

My father's parents had been born in the Forest of Dean and were connected with the Mining Industry. My Grandfather had moved with his family to Staffordshire Coalfield, and lived in the Pottery District of North Staffs.

During his teens, Dad had contracted an illness, and his mother had sent him to stay in the Forest with Charlotte, to whom she was related, in the hope that he would regain his health in the country air.

Dad as a young man stayed as long as he could with Aunt Charlotte, and came to love the land of his fathers. He quickly regained his strength, and roamed far and wide, familiarising himself with the woods and ways, the flowers, birds and wildlife around him.

He was a great favourite with Aunt Charlotte, but his own mother asking for his return, he vowed he would one day come back and make his home in the Forest which he had learned to love.

He married my mother in Staffordshire, and they had two children. Work was difficult to find and poorly paid. They moved south seeking work and finished up in Cinderford.

Employment was not better here, but at least he was in the part of the country which he loved. Dad found a cottage and work, and I was born in 1911. When war broke out in 1914 he was an early volunteer.

When in 1917 dad lost his sight at Ypres, and Aunt Charlotte arrived close on the heels of the news, she found my mother weak with the impact of the blow, with one under five child, and three girls at school.

"First thing" said Aunt Charlotte, "is give this place up - how much are you paying for it Hetty?" (Hetty was my Mother's name too.) "Robbery," she said. "We'll get your stuff packed up, and get the carter to take it down. We'll get your clothes up together, get the Motor, and you will all stay with me, till we see what they can do for George. Cheer up! He's not dead yet! He's not the one to give up easily. We shall manage. It'll be alright."

My mother handed over her responsibilities to Aunt Charlotte, indeed it would have had to have been a tough character to have been able to do otherwise.

Aunt Charlotte lived at Soudley, and to Soudley we went on the Rail Motor that ran down the valley, on a branch line of the Great Western Railway.

[The railmotors of the time were hybrids – a passenger carriage/steam-engine combined. I believe the train in the photo has one at either end. It is on the same line from Cinderford to Bullo, but in Lower Soudley. The other end of the Bradley tunnel to the cottage where my mother stayed with the James family.]



Littledean Hill and Soudley are roughly four miles apart, both in the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, but it would be difficult to find any two villages that had so little in common.

When we studied Geography at school, I was told that 'The Forest of Dean' was an example of a 'Plateau,' an isolated area of land, raised much higher than the surrounding country, falling steeply on the sides.

The word 'plateau' itself suggests a flattish surface at the summit of this raised area of land. The Forest certainly falls rapidly away from the heights. Roughly triangular in shape, it falls to the Severn Valley on the one side, the Wye Valley on the other, but as to the plain part at the top, you would be hard put to it to find an even acre of land that is tolerably level.

The village of Littledean Hill, which I first remember, is not strictly speaking a village at all. Littledean village lies directly below on the Severn side; it has a church, a school, a gaol even, several hostelries and farms lying on the edge of the forested area and verging on the fertile Severn Plain. But the road to Littledean is about two miles of very steep hill road, bending rapidly and steeply into the village. [They lived on Littledean Hill Road, now part of Cinderford]

Littledean Hill lies along the edge of the escarpment. The cottages at the top lie scattered along the edge, mainly facing the beautiful view. Gloucester Cathedral can be seen on a clear day. There were two public houses when I was a child and a small chapel. There was also one of the great Forest Lodges, Latimer Lodge. In other parts of the Dean were similar lodges, Danby and York for instance, all being named for Bishops of that era. They were hunting lodges for Royalty of that day, when wild boar and deer offered sport to kings of England and their followers. It has always been called the 'Royal Forest of Dean.'

Lying almost at the end of Little Dean Hill under the trees, was what we called 'The Water Works.' Tall circular containers painted green, and supervised by the water-engineer who lived in a private house attached.

A metal plaque on the front announced it as being the property of the 'East Dean Rural District Council.'

Turning your back on the Severn, and walking to an unimpeded spot, you could look over the town of Cinderford, Cinderford of the windy streets, and see acres and acres of green forest. Rising above the trees were occasional huge mounds. They were evidence of waste

from the deep mines which operated in those days. The waste was brought up in cages from miles below ground, and tipped above ground, gradually building into huge hills topping the trees by a good height.

To name but a few of the collieries, there were Crump Meadow, Foxes Bridge and Crabtree Hill. All miles away from the town. Beyond the wide green forests covering the coalfield, could be seen a range of the 'Black Mountains' of Wales, and the more shapely outlines of the 'Brecon Beacons'

Boarding the Rail Motor at Cinderford station, we were taken to Soudley. Cinderford Station was a terminus for a line on the Great Western Railway, and a very busy place in those days.

Many lines made their way through the Forest to the collieries, and long lines of trucks filled with Forest Coal could be seen standing in the sidings, ready to be taken to other parts of the country.

The line carried the Motor down the valley, going through several tunnels piercing great rock faces on the way. Soudley was the fourth halt on the line.

We got ourselves and our hand goods off the platform and came out on the village road by 'The White Horse Hotel.' Standing on the white road, we were in the bottom of the valley; the Soudley brook running the other side of the railway.

To see the surroundings, you looked upwards. Looking towards Cinderford, you could see a steep green field, and standing at the top of the field, a single house built rather on the lines of a Swiss Chalet with steeply pitched roof, the walls strongly built of cut stone. It was a small dairy farm, to which one could go for a can of milk.

Beyond that against the sky-line, a plantation of firs. An ash path ran up the side of the farm to the top of 'The Rocks' where giant beeches grew, brilliant green in May and carpeted with bluebells.

Facing the other way on the other side of the brook, the ground went steeply up, entirely covered with plantations of larch and conifers disappearing over the skyline.

Follow the road down to the village past several small houses and cottages on your left, then a wide cobbled entrance over hung with trees, was the entrance to the village school, with the square built headmaster's house adjacent. Next to the school the church in cut stone, clean and newish looking.

On the opposite side of the road, the village shop. The main things one could buy here were paraffin, candles and barest necessities in basic foodstuff, stamps and a small quantity of confectionery.

A little further down the road, a wire fence separated you from the railway line, which after a few hundred yards disappeared into the dark mouth of the Soudley Tunnel. [The Bradley Hill Tunnel]

Aunt Charlotte's house was on the other side of the line. Large white wooden gates on the side of the road gave access to a small siding in which one railway truck could be kept.

Foot access over the line was via a kissing gate, across the line then another gate in white palings into Aunt Charlotte's garden or yard.

The part of the village on the near side of the tunnel was known as Upper Soudley. It had the aura of a self-contained small village community protected on all sides by forested hills, a cosy, warm safe place to live.

The lifeline of the village was the railway. In the pre-railway era it must have been an isolated little place only accessible by foot or horse. [pre-steam power, horse-drawn wagons 'drams' used a similar rail route to the GWR from Cinderford to the Severn at Bullo Pill]

The road that ran through Upper Soudley continued round the hill through which the tunnel ran and wound its way over a bridge under which the brook continued its babbling way towards the Severn.

The road continued through open greens, sparsely dotted with occasional white cottages, and eventually reaching Blakeney on the Gloucester - South Wales road.



[Uncle Fred and Aunt Charlotte but, if the photo is from around 1903, not cousin Vi. It is the earliest photo of the cottage, built 1894, which I've seen. The later ones all have the porch around the front door]

Back in Upper Soudley, we were getting ourselves and our belongings over the hazardous approach to Aunt Charlotte's house. It was a well-built solid house, the property of the Great Western Railway. The tenant of the house was in charge of the level crossing gates.

But what a marvellous exciting house Aunt Charlotte's house proved to be.

It was an adventure in itself even to get into the house.

School, church, shop and public house, all lay on the road. It was inevitable that one had to cross the line in front of the yawning tunnel to get home.

First go down the steep bank by the side of the spare railway truck, locked in its wooden fence.

[There was a small siding opposite the Gatekeeper's house large enough for one wagon]

The occupants of the house had evidently found the shortest cut was to get between two strands of wire on to the line itself, the open-mouthed tunnel on your left, go through a wicket gate, and find yourself standing on a stone path. Up three steps and you were in a red-tiled court, a row of sheds on your left, and three more steps on the right into a kitchen.

Aunt Charlotte led the way and we followed, Mam carrying Vi, and Het, Lily and myself behind, all gazing round at what was to be our new home.

"First put your stuff down, take off your coats and find a seat, we'll see to them after. First a nice cup of tea, eh? Hetty." said Aunt Charlotte. "You sit in the armchair and nurse the little un. She folded mam's coat and put it on a chair.

The rest of us did as we were told, while Aunt Charlotte, like a whirlwind, got rid of her hat and coat, moved the iron kettle over the fire which burned brightly in the stove.

Everything needed for tea was soon on the kitchen table, including bread, butter, jam and cake, tea was put in the pot, cups, saucers and plates on the table. She had a large apron on in a jiffy, and was pouring boiling water into the pot "I'll pop your things on your bed, Hetty, and you three can choose your chairs at table."

Aunt Charlotte was at the table, rapidly cutting slices of bread and butter and putting them on a large plate.

"Now carry on." she said, "Help yourselves."

"Two slices of thin bread and butter for you Hetty an' a good cup of tea?"

Mam was leaning back in the armchair with the red cushions, Vi was nearly asleep.

When Mam had first sat down she was paper-white. She took the steaming cup from Aunt, and began to look a deal more lifelike, and daintily began eating her bread and butter.

We were on kitchen chairs round the table and began stirring our tea which was very hot, and eating our bread and butter and jam.

I was trying to take in my surroundings. The chair in which Mam was sitting, was a Windsor armchair. A large bellows hung on the wall by its side. a rocking chair was on the other side of the fire, a shiny steel topped fender and similar fire irons rested on the hearth, and a zinc coal scuttle full of shining coal stood by.

There was a dresser stacked with tea and dinner services of different patterns, and a door to a roomy larder.

High on the wall near the larder was a strange contraption. It was a well-polished box with bells on top rather similar to alarm bells. Little dials inscribed with numbers and quivering pointers. One of the round lights on the one side was glowing green.

I longed to ask the function of this strange piece of equipment, but decided that it was not quite the right time.

After we had eaten, Aunt Charlotte told my sister Hetty to show us where the lavatory was out in the court, and while we were out there we explored a bit.

Lavatory in the corner shed, next door piles of coal and blocks of wood, then a wash-house with a copper in the corner, and cold water tap where you could wash your hands.

Across the court from corner to corner, and crossing and recrossing, a maze of washing lines.

We went back into the kitchen. Mam had managed to get Vi's coat off and lay her on the sofa against the other wall, and spread a blanket over her.

The table was cleared off, and china put back on the dresser. Mam was back in her armchair, looking relaxed and considerably better.

The door opened and in came cousin Vi, straight from school. I can't remember when I first met cousin Vi, but she usually went up to Cinderford with Aunt Charlotte, and had no doubt accompanied her since I had been born.

We all accepted the fact that she was the apple of Aunt Charlotte's eye. Aunt Charlotte herself was childless, but I was aware that she had fostered a number of children during her time legally adopting only one of them, cousin Vi, who was the youngest. All the others, except Edwin, were now married and had families of their own, and lived in various houses about the district.

Edwin was now in his teens, and working at a small dairy farm in the village.

Cousin Vi was a good-looking girl, soft fair skin, pink-cheeked, with long blonde curls. Prettily dressed, and with a very well-groomed air. She was a little older than Hetty, but there was something about her that gave her a more worldly-wise impression.

As she came in she said, "Hullo" to us, went over to Mam and put her arms around her, she was nearly crying.

"Dear Aunt Hetty," she said, "I can't really believe it, about Uncle George. Will he be all right?" she said. "My love, we can only hope and pray . . . They've taken him to St. Dunstan's, a place in London, for blinded soldiers. At least he's away from that terrible bombing."

It will be lovely to stay with you all till he gets better."

Aunt Charlotte came in and put saucepans of vegetables on the hobs and meat in the oven. "That's right" she said to Cousin Vi, "You talk to your Aunt Hetty, and tell her where you've got to in your music. She knows a great deal more about it than any of us."

Now you girls, you can come upstairs and I'll show you where you're sleeping. I've hung your hats and coats on these pegs, that's your everyday ones, so you'll know where to keep them.

First wipe your shoes very well, and all you have to remember is this.

When you get into this little lobby." This was at the bottom of the stairs, "Everything must be kept extremely and absolutely clean. If you go in the front parlour, if you go upstairs, if you go in the bedrooms, everything absolutely clean. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Aunt Charlotte" we said. Carefully we followed her upstairs. The paint on the side of the stairs was gleaming shiny white, the stair carpet was thick and luxurious to your feet, patterned with roses and green foliage, a little landing with the same carpet.

She opened a door, still the same sort of paint. We stepped behind her into the room. Two beds were in the room.

Aunt Charlotte said, "this bed is for you and Gladys, Lily. This one for Hetty and Vi."

The ceiling of the room was flat and white for a few feet then slanted sharply to the top of a window.

The first thing I did was to look out of the window. It was near my bed.

We were overlooking the railway-line, and I could see the line shining below and the steep bank going up to the road.

"I seem to be almost over the line." I said.

"That's right," said Aunt Charlotte, "You're the nearest. Don't worry if the bed shakes a bit, when the train comes through, but you'll hear the signals down below first."

"Signals?" I said, "Is that the little box on the wall?"

"Oh you've noticed, have you?" she said.

"Yes, what does it all mean?"

"Every bell, every flashing light means a signal. Tells you what part of the line the train is on. When it leaves Newnham, coming through Bullo, entering the tunnel.

The only part that is a bit noisy, is when it comes out of the tunnel and goes by the house. No need to worry. It is all to keep everything safe."

"I think it's very exciting," I said, and looked with closer observation at the room. I could see why we had been warned about keeping everything clean. Practically everything in the room looked crisply white, and newly starched and ironed.

Both beds were covered with white counterpanes, frilled pillowcases, and had starched lacy curtains running round the lower part. They were called valances. The wallpaper had little roses and the curtains were cream with sprigs of flowers.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's a commode," said Aunt, "I'll show you how it works, and I'm sure you'll take care."

It was like a square box all covered with flouncy, lacey white starched curtains.

She parted the curtains and put her hand underneath and took out a beautifully gilded chamber pot covered with roses.

She put it back in and lifted a lid at the top, still covered with white embroidery. In the centre was a hole, a white skirt drawn round it.

I looked at Het, and Het and Lil looked at me. It was quite obvious what this was for.

The words were running through my head.

"Everything must be kept absolutely clean."

I could see my thoughts reflected in my sister's eyes.

"Where's Mam going to sleep?" said Hetty.

"She's sharing a room with cousin Vi, the room at the front is for myself and Uncle Fred, and Uncle Sam and Edwin have the room up the little stairs.

"Do they all have valances and commodes and counterpanes?" asked Hetty.

"All except Sam and Edwin, they're not bothered about finery."

"You must have an awful lot of washing," said Hetty.

"Yes" said Aunt Charlotte, "Mondays, wash-days," as though looking forward to a treat. "Lots of drying too."

I thought of all the clothes lines all over the outside court. A mammoth task indeed.

When we got downstairs, we could hear a man's voice. Uncle Fred talking to Mam.

Vi had woken up, and quite refreshed, was sitting on Uncle Fred's knee listening to his watch

"So Charlotte brought you down here, did she, good idea that. I hear that St. Dunstan's is a wonderful place," he was saying to Mam.

"Hullo then you three, had a look round eh? My goodness you're all growed up, all got sweethearts eh?" We all started laughing.

"This is my sweetheart tonight," said Uncle Fred and jiggled Vi on his knee.

"We'll all have a meal together tonight," said Aunt Charlotte.

"These children haven't had much inside them yet. Tomorrow they'll be having dinner at dinner time.

"See if you can find enough chairs to go round, girls. Don't forget Uncle Sam and Edwin.

We started fitting chairs round the table. We could hear Uncle Sam splashing water in the wash house.

"Hello, Uncle Sam," I said as he came in, "We've come to live with you for a bit."

"G-G-Good" said Uncle Sam, "V-V Good." Uncle Sam was a very small man with white hair sprouting from a tanned bald head, and white whiskers.

He had a hump on his back, a brown weathered face and rosy cheeks. He had a stuttering way of speech and I suppose considered not very bright.

He was Aunt Charlotte's brother, and was expected to do all the rough jobs about the house.

He was employed by the Forestry Commission and always went off to work very early in the morning.

After he had his tea, he would be out in the yard chopping yet more wood with the axe he had been using all day.

I always saw him as a little gnome, off to the woods with his chopper over his shoulder.

But always when he saw us about the house, his face would light up.

Sometimes he would scruff my face with his stiff beard, as if we both were little animals, I thought. He found it easier than talking to show his affection this way.

Putting the seats round the table, we found we wanted ten seats, Edwin having joined us after his wash over the yard.

He was a slim dark lad, not very heavily built but lithe and handsome. His eyes were very dark, and he sometimes had a very knowing air. He had been brought to Aunt Charlotte as a young child, and he was now sixteen.

[Edwin would have been just over 14 back then –he'd only recently have left school.]

I ate my dinner which was passed round the table. Everybody seemed to be enjoying their food. The kindness of the atmosphere could be felt like a blessing around us.

Cousin Vi went into the front room to practice her piano. Hetty helped Aunt with the washing up, and Lil and I helped Mam sort out some of our clothes.

Uncle Sam and Uncle Fred went to do their evening jobs and Mam had a bowl of warm water on the table, and started getting Vi ready for bed.

“We’ve had a very tiring day,” she said, “but we’ll all get to bed early, and have a good look round tomorrow.”

While Mam got Vi into her nightgown, Lil and Het and I, got bowls of warm water, and standing in our petticoats, got rid of most of the dirt we had accumulated over the day.

“Best leave your boots down here tidily. Put them where nobody will fall over them.” she said.

Taking our dresses over our arms, we called ‘Good-night’ to Aunt Charlotte who was tidying the room.

“Good night my dears, God Bless,” she called back and we went up the stairs.

Our nightdresses lay folded on our beds, and we began undressing.

Mam had drawn the curtains, and I gazed round the dainty befrilled room.

Mam lit a candle in a stick which stood on a little chest by the door.

She had got Vi into bed, tucked her in and, kissing her goodnight, said, “Come on now girls, you seem to be taking your time!”

I got up and kissed Mam ‘Goodnight.’

It’s all right if you’ve got things to do, we can manage.” So Mam kissed the other two and went downstairs.

I fiddled about with my clothes, determined not to be the first to sit on the commode. Hetty folded her clothes, put them on a chair, put on her night dress, and used the commode, banged down the lid and got into bed, sitting up and plaiting her long hair.

I heard Lil follow the same pattern. I was folding my stockings extremely neatly, then pulling my nightdress over my head, I heard the lid bang.

Now, I thought, if there’s anything wrong with that commode, it had better not be my fault.

Very carefully I approached the commode, lifted the lid and looked. It was spotless. I sat rigidly on it. As I did so, I noticed tissues, cut in squares and hanging on a hook at the side. I breathed a sigh of relief. This simplified things enormously.

I climbed into bed. Everything seemed very quiet. We seemed past excitement for that day. Things had happened so quickly.

It was lovely to be living with Aunt Charlotte, she seemed to know what to do about everything. I began thinking about school. Not so far to walk. Would we come home for dinner? I was drifting into sleep, when

DING! DING

Down in the kitchen the alarm sounded.

Lil sat up “Did you hear that?”

“What happens next,” I wondered, and sat up. Nothing for a while, then

DING! DING! DING!!

even more insistently.

“I’ll bet those lights are flashing in that little box” said Lil

Then a faint ‘Tooo....t getting louder TOOOT!

Then a trembling seemed to come through the floor and the bed started rattling.

Whoosh Whoosh Whishshsh! as the steam escaped from the tunnel.

Jig-a-jig, Jig-a-jig went the beds under us getting more violent, and rattle-rattle-rattle while lights flashed across walls and ceiling. Then dark and rumble, rumble receding into the distance, and the bed began to settle into a strange silence.

The bed was quite still.

“Oh! Wasn’t that lovely.” I said with a sigh.

“Yes, jolly good” said Lil, “Better than being in the train.”

“D’you think it’ll come like that every night?” I asked.

“Most every night, I should think. Aunt said they always had to be on time.”

We pondered this in the darkness.

Then squeek---squeek, strange squeaking sound across the window.

“Whatever’s that?” I said.

“I think it must be bats,” said Lil, “They come out at night.”

Then faint but clearly audible, a thin high-pitched scream, far away in the high woods, then another.

We couldn’t think what that was until the next day, when I asked Uncle Sam.

I tried to make the strange sound that I had heard, and he knew at once what it was.

“Foxes,” he said “come out in d-dark, night time. Foxes.”

Then he made the exact eerie, high-pitched sound that we had heard.

“Vixen” he said “Them be. VIXEN!”

Next day was Saturday, a lovely day, and after breakfast Aunt Charlotte said, “Now don’t bother yourself too much, Hetty. You take it easy, my girl.”

Mam said, “But such a lot of work for you Aunt, having all of us at once.”

“Don’t you worry. I’ve got the place up together pretty well. You want to get over that shock a bit first. Then you and I can work it together, you’ll see. Your young Hetty, now, she’s a handy girl who likes to get on with it. All good girls. Now if so be you’d had a bunch o’boys, a bit more mischievous like, eh?”

We went out into the sunshine.

A triangular lawn was at the front of the house, a stone path to the gate at the corner of the triangle. Little evergreen trees with an aromatic scent were set at intervals, and rose trees were growing in the border, and heavy bunches of pink roses climbed over the arbour near the gate.

Built out at the front of the house was a porch.

Always it seemed full of sunshine. The sitting room window was also on this side of the house with a cream lace-edged blind, often kept drawn to protect the furniture and treasures kept in an immaculate condition of cleanliness within.

From the gate at the end of the path, you could turn right through a white kissing gate, and cross the line over boards and so on to the road.

Inside the garden, the heady perfume of Snow-on-the-mountain was extraordinarily strong. Looking over the fence, Lil and I could see that the ground on that side was very far below us. We went through the gate, and turning left, ran down a steep stony path. Down - down it went, very steeply.

We stood at the bottom and looked up. The white scented flowers covered the whole of the wall - a drop of fifteen feet or more.

We went lower down the path, and found the brook running under flagstones and sparkling away on down the lowest part of the valley.

Sheep were cropping the green up the steep hill before us, and high above us stood a good-sized building, which we were later to find was a chapel.

We kneeled on the flagstones, and dappled our fingers in the water. Lil said she could see a fish lurking under a stone. "I think if I tried hard, I might catch that fish," she said.

I could see it might be possible.

"Don't try too hard," I said, "Because if you caught it we might have to kill it. We couldn't do that, could we?"

There were so many new things to do at Aunt Charlotte's, that Mam seemed to get much brighter, and by Monday she said she was able to help Aunt with the washing.

Uncle Fred filled up the copper, and lit a fire under it before going to work. Soon steam was billowing out, and Mam and Aunt Charlotte were dollying away at the dolly tub, and scrubbing with the scrubbing board. Aunt Charlotte showed Hetty how to strip out the commode in our bedroom, which by now had become more familiar. A clean set of hangings had been put in place.

"I like a nice bit of fine ironing," said Aunt Charlotte, "comes up a treat."

Soon sheets, shirts, underwear and everything washable was blowing about the court.

Aunt Charlotte took the soapy water remaining and scrubbed out the lavatory with a hard broom, the steps into the kitchen on hands and knees, and poured the rest on to the tiles, and sent them whooshing round the court and out onto the path.

Uncle Fred, Aunt Charlotte's husband, stoked the boilers on the engines, those monsters that spent their time dragging carriages and trucks several times daily through dark, dark tunnels, bursting out clouds of steam, hooting loud hoots: creatures to be both feared and welcomed.

Sometimes if we were about the house, and the little bells started dinging, Aunt Charlotte would say, "If you want to see Uncle Fred, he'll be on the 4.35 from Bullo, just coming through now."

Lights flashing madly, we would dash out over the court and take our stance on the lower rung of the white palings, gripping the pointed slats at the top. Only this fragile barrier separated us from the cinder-track and the shining lines.

Then my heart would thump at the sound of the approaching roar through the tunnel. First to escape, clouds of hissing white steam; then rattle, bang, clang and the smell of hot oil, and there would be Uncle Fred, white teeth grinning in his hot, black oily face, and hand waving as the train went through. If you wanted to get a glimpse of the passengers, you had to lean right back, the fence was so close and the carriages quite high above you.

When Uncle Fred had finished his day's work and got back home, he would have apples, nuts, and other goodies in his pockets for us.

If ever we attempted to lark about or quarrel when we were sitting having a meal in Aunt Charlotte's kitchen, Uncle Fred was always cited as an awful warning. When, as a young boy, he and his brother had quarrelled at table, a fork had pierced his eye. The result of this was that Uncle Fred had one twinkling blue eye, and one milky white one, sightless.

I think that Aunt Charlotte's philosophy of life was to keep working, and to keep everybody else working as well.

We certainly thought that she was a bit hard on Uncle Fred, who sometimes went for a drink at the 'White Horse', and got into trouble for it.

To us Uncle Fred seemed to be working all the time, for when he had finished his stint on the railway, he was off to his vegetable garden, another prerequisite of a railway employee.

It always seemed to me a strange place to have a garden, for it was along the railway embankment, a few hundred yards from the house. Evidently I was no judge of this subject for the fruit and vegetables flourished in great profusion. Cabbages, peas, beans, potatoes all followed in due season and ended on our plates.

Cousin Vi would sometimes take me with her up to the garden, and we would gather large baskets of strawberries, which Aunt Charlotte boiled in huge pans with sugar, and poured into large stone pots to fill the shelves in the larder.

Aunt Charlotte warned us during the week that next Sunday was an important day for her. The vicar from St. John's in Cinderford was coming to tea.

We should all get into our best clothes on Sunday morning, Uncle Fred would take us for a walk while Mam helped Aunt Charlotte get Sunday Dinner ready.

In the afternoon we would go to Sunday School, after which we would all have tea in the parlour, an extremely impressive occasion which called for the very best behaviour.

We had breakfast as usual, bacon from the flitch on the wall, eggs from the hen-coop below the chopping block. Uncle Fred was dressed in a decent grey herringbone tweed suit with stiff white collar.

I was sitting on the matting in front of the fire lacing up my high boots.

"Where are you taking us for the walk? Uncle Fred." I asked.

Surprised, he answered. "Where d'you think? Down the line and through the tunnel. You'll be surprised when we come to the other end."

I looked at him with horror. My legs were not long enough to span from one sleeper to the next, I knew because I had tried. If you fell on the sharp stones in between, they cut your ankles and knees.

"I don't want to go walking in the tunnel," I said "Tunnels belong to engines."

"Not on Sundays" said Uncle Fred, "Not allowed on Sundays! See here my love, you don't have to be afraid of tunnels. To me it's just like an open road. D'you know that men work in the tunnels, and if an engine comes through, there are lots of shelters where you can get out of the way. I know every one of them."

I was not consoled. I did not fancy the chances between myself or Uncle Fred with one of those great monsters bearing down on us.

Het and Lil were already in the court waiting to be off.

Lacing these boots called for concentration, and I had already made several mistakes.

Come on now, Glad", said Uncle Fred, "I'll be out waiting in the sunshine.

I thought, I suppose I'd better go. Aunt Charlotte's got it all planned. Again I got the laces in a muddle. All at once, some lithe brown fingers had taken over the laces. Edwin was kneeling on the matting beside me.

"Let's try this pattern," he said, and in a twinkling he had nimbly made an entirely different pattern and the boot was perfectly laced and tied at the top.

“Now let’s have the other one.”

“Over here, through there, pull that one through there.”

Then he said under his breath. “Don’t you go down those old tunnels if you don’t want to.”

“But what will Aunt Charlotte say?”

“Go a bit of the way, and come back. You don’t have to get under their feet”

“There, that looks smarter,” he said in a louder voice, “Ups-a-daisy, they’ll be fed up waiting.”

So I went out and joined the others on the line.

We all stepped smartly out, down the line and into the mouth of the tunnel. I found I could manage fairly well by stepping from a sleeper, one step in the middle, and one on the next sleeper.

Lil wasn’t doing all that well, but she wanted to go as fast as Uncle Fred was prepared to take them.

I glanced over my shoulder, and saw the light was fading, we were round a slight bend. Before us was darkness. Het and Uncle Fred’s feet were smartly striking the sleepers, with Lil doing a skip every now and then to keep up. A few more yards and the light had practically gone. Something ran by my feet.

“Uncle Fred.” I shouted, “I don’t like it. I’m going back.” I started as fast as I could towards home.

Cousin Vi was sitting on her front lawn, wearing a white pinafore over her best dress. It had blue ribbon threaded through the insertion on the bodice.

She was busily shelling peas.

“Can I help you do the peas, Vi?” I asked.

“Didn’t you like it in the tunnel?” she said.

“No. I think there are things in there. Something ran over my feet.”

“I don’t blame you.” she said. “Dad and his old tunnels! Here have a few peas,” and she gave me a handful of tender green peas.

They tasted sweet and fresh. Then I sat by her and helped her finish the shelling.

We sat in the sunshine.

Sunday morning smells came out and mingled with the scent of roses, aromatic pines and snow-on-the-mountains, the Sunday joint roasting in the oven. No sound of work, no hammering, no chopping, everything said Sunday.

Vi and I tidied the pods, and she told me I could take them down for the hens. We then took the colander piled high with green peas into the kitchen.

Cousin Vi made a quiet remark to her mother who nodded. I hung up my hat, and helped lay the table for dinner.

After some while we could hear the others returning. The gravy was just being made.

Lil and Het were quite excited about their walk.

They had walked to the end of the first tunnel, then by some farms, and had come to the mile tunnel. It was so straight and true that you could look through the one end and see a pinpoint of light which was the other end.

You kept walking and walking, and the little hole got larger and larger, then all at once you could see the Severn but quite far away. Then they had to come home.

I did not doubt their word. I thought, "they're much braver than I am," but dinner was ready and we all sat round and were served. Absolutely delicious.

Sunday School was at two o'clock. Mam looked us over, saw that we had all sponged our faces and fingers, and dusted over our shoes, and off we went with cousin Vi, carrying a book with words and music for Sunday Hymns.

Out through the front gate, and over the line through the kissing gate. No scrabbling through wires on this occasion.

When we neared the church, Cousin Vi met her friend Margery from the little general store, who also helped at Sunday School.

They fell on one another like bosom friends, and took no more notice of us.

A great deal of giggling - comparing of gold wristlet watches, whisperings about boys ending in bursts of merriment.

Although only a couple of years parted us, they seemed light-years away in spirit.

The schoolroom had shiny varnished seats. Other children sat on the pews, their legs dangling, hardly recognisable in their Sunday best as the children we had seen about the village.

Vi seated herself at the harmonium and announced the number of the hymn we were to sing.

We found the number in the books laid out for us, and sang "All things bright and beautiful."

We then divided into two classes, Vi taking the one, Margery the other. We had to repeat a text, then sit and have a bible story read to us. Children who had attended before were asked to come to the front and repeat last week's text, which many of them did. If they did it correctly, they were given a stamp depicting a biblical scene to stick on their cards.

We joined classes for the last hymn, standing together and singing, "Now the day is over, night is drawing nigh, shadows of the evening steal across the sky."

This was the end of Sunday School. Cousin Vi told us not to go dashing off, because the Vicar would be walking with us back home.

As we walked out of the schoolroom, my mind still full of shadows of the evening stealing across the sky, I blinked in the blazing sunshine.

Wide eyed daisies, golden buttercups, and fuzzy grasses softly green covered the bank bordering the wooden room, belying the statement that night was drawing nigh.

We stood uncertainly on the grassy edge. Het straightened my hat, and Lil scuffed her feet in the dust, but Het told her to wipe them off with her handkerchief.

At last the Vicar came out of the schoolroom with cousin Vi.

She said, "Vicar, these are my cousins Hetty, Lil and Gladys, who are staying with us."

The Vicar said, "How very nice. 'Three little maids from school, eh!" and laughed and shook hands with us.

I felt very shy, but gave him my hand. His voice sounded strange to me, almost as if he spoke in a foreign language. The Vicar and Vi started walking down the dusty road together, Het, Lil and I behind.

We walked sedately down the path to the kissing gate, over the line and through the other kissing gate, and opened the white gate into Aunt Charlotte's front lawn.

"What a magnificent perfume," said the Vicar.

"Yes, isn't it?" said Vi. It's the snow-on-the-mountain."

"Now, I wonder," said the Vicar, "I believe that's ---the name eludes me---it will come, it will come!"

Aunt Charlotte had opened the front door, and was standing in her best dress.

"Come in, come in," she said.

"Now let me take your hat" She gave it to cousin Vi.

She introduced the Vicar to Mam, who looked very smart in her best dress, long to the ankles with velvet collar and cuffs, and white lace in the 'V' at her neck, and a black velvet band round her throat. Her fine hair made tiny curls round her face. She was holding Vi by the hand who was trying to keep out of sight.

We were told to take our hats upstairs, wipe our shoes, wash our hands and come back into the parlour.

Glad to be released for a few minutes, we went into the lobby.

I popped into the kitchen to see what was going on in there. Uncle Sam looking very smart in a heavy navy-blue suit, his bristly hair shining like silver.

"Hello Uncle Sam," I said, "Are you going to sit by me in the parlour?"

"N-n-no!" he said, "Got to k-k-keep the k-k-kettles boiling. Drinks a l- lot o'tea them do."

"You don't mind?" I asked.

He laughed and shook his head.

"Not me, no," he said, "G-good job, that is. K-keep k- k- kettles boiling."

He winked and waved his pipe at me, took a deep puff and tapped it on the stove.

I laughed too. Uncle Sam was happier having a smoke and looking after the kettles. I rubbed the back of my hand against the silvery beard.

Back in the sitting room we were all sitting round the table. Rays of sunshine made patterns of lace over china ornaments on the window sill as it filtered through the blind.

Everything in the room shone with a high gloss: the piano with its brass candleholders, the superior brass fire-irons in the hearth, the polished surrounds of the dark wood on chairs, sofa and armchairs. They were upholstered in crimson velour with regular woven matching patterns. The top of the piano carried family photographs with polished silver frames. There was one of my father holding a rifle in a posed position, also in a silver frame. Even to me he looked young. Small, and slight of build, with puttees wound round and round his legs, highly polished shoes, clean-shaven, flat-topped cap with a deep peak.

I remember how I had cried when Mam had gone to see him at Malvern where this photograph was taken. Across the mantelpiece, a highly embroidered mantle cloth was draped and fringed.

<https://www.malvernremembers.org.uk/the-13th-gloucestershire-regiment>

Aunt Charlotte went into the kitchen. Mam and the Vicar were having a conversation about music, to which we listened. The Vicar still sounded strange to me, but so did Mam for that matter. She retained her Midland's accent with which she had grown up.

We were always having minor arguments about 'spools of thread' as opposed to 'reels of cotton'; and 'books' with the double 'o' pronounced as in 'boots.'

Aunt Charlotte came in, proudly carrying one of her most valued possessions: a highly decorated teapot, one of a full set which normally sat in the china cabinet by the side of the fireplace.

Full, now, with steaming tea, she placed it among its fellows on the stand on the table.

Coming from the Potteries, we were all familiar with fine china, but even so, this particular set impressed me with its rare and regal quality.

Often had I admired it behind the glass of the display cabinet. Now here was the pot actually being used for pouring tea into cups.

Here was the dainty sugar bowl, filled with cubes of white sugar, which one transferred with silver tongs to the cup of tea.

Tiny sandwiches were passed round and placed on the beautiful little plates.

I studied the pattern carefully. Perfect in every detail, it repeated itself in accurate proportion from impressive teapot to tiny cup.

A deep royal blue, shading to purple, formed the main background of the design on a pure white surface. Fine lines in shining gold outlined the larger pattern, and flecked and crossed with black to embellish the design.

Edible trifles of teatime dainties were passed round the table, the pot was replenished.

For once I did not pay particular attention to what I ate, but was absorbed in shape, colour and design.

The Vicar and the rest of us made a good tea. After tea, the Vicar shook hands and set off to make his preparations for evening service.

We were sent out of the room while Mam, Aunt Charlotte and Cousin Vi hastily put the sitting room back to rights, and the tea service, having been washed and dried with extreme care, was back in its place in the china cabinet.

Mam, Aunt Charlotte and cousin Vi were to go to the service, but Hetty, Lily, Vi and myself were to stay in the kitchen with Uncle Sam until they returned.

Uncle Fred was nowhere to be seen until the church goers were on their way, when he suddenly appeared, put on his best trilby hat and was off, I suspect, in the direction of the White Horse.

Then Uncle Sam sat back in the armchair with the red cushions and produced his Jew' s Harp. This was the first time I encountered this instrument.

Basically it was a pronged instrument, a piece of curved metal which was pressed against the teeth. A piece of wire, thin and very flexible with a knob at the end, projected at right angles from the main part. While the player hummed through the metal prong, he would strike the knob sharply, so varying the vibrations and the pitch.

I always found the sound it made pleasant and lively, a more cheerful accompaniment to the Sankey Hymns he often played than the gloomy harmonium.

By eight thirty Uncle Sam would be in bed. He seemed to really enjoy his Sunday evenings with us children gathered round him and the music of his own making.

Always, he would be up very early in the morning, to get the fires going, fill the kettles, and be off like a little gnome to his labours in the forest.

CHAPTER – 4

Once we had settled down at Aunt Charlotte's, the next matter of urgency was - school.

We were up bright and early, Uncle Sam long gone off to work, as had Uncle Fred. Cousin Edwin, just in his teens, had a job on a local farm. Sister Vi was not yet old enough for school.

We always had bacon and eggs for breakfast, rashers cut from the home cured side of bacon hanging on the kitchen wall, eggs from the chicken cot inside the wired chicken run down past Uncle Sam's chopping block.

My short curly hair was easy to deal with, but both Hetty and Lily had long straight dark hair, which had to be plaited into braids and tied with ribbons at the ends.

We also wore black stockings, with wide black elastic garters above the knee.

Cousin Vi had her dresses made for her. Aunt Charlotte brushed the golden locks lovingly, and twisted them in ringlets round her finger. A bow of pink or blue satin ribbon was tied round one of the locks.

For Sundays she had a beautiful dark blue silk velvet dress, with a sash round the waist, and a fine lace collar.

Mam took us to the school to be registered. Mr. High was the headmaster, and Mrs. Parker the headmistress of the Infants' school. She too was tall and slim but not nearly so severe as my former headmistress.

We were entered on the appropriate registers - quite a stir for the little country school, having three new pupils from one family. We had morning hymns together and I eyed the headmaster with grim foreboding. Contrary to his name, he was a short, stout, bald-headed man, with a pale, unhealthy-looking skin. He wore a tweed suit with knickerbockers and thick hand-knitted socks to below the knee.

I can't think where I got the idea, but I was quite sure in my own mind that he was a German.

In the Infant's room next door, all was sweetness and light. First I was brought to the front to read the chart. Same old cat, sitting on same old red mat with bright blue background.

Nobody was going to catch me out on that one. Page after page was flipped over to the back, and I fluently read every one. Teacher made a note and I was exhibited to the rest of the class as a good pupil from a very good school and my contemporaries urged to emulate me. This did not seem to make them hate me on the spot, for they became my very good friends. Maisie, who lived in one of the Keeper's cottages way up the hill in the middle of the forest, had a smooth darkish complexion and black hair, and was one of my closest friends.

She and her older sister Evelyn were always first for school, neatly dressed and with black hair in braids.

Emily, another friend, by contrast had lots of gold blonde hair, pink and white complexion, and blue eyes. A tall strong girl for her age, she lived about two miles the other side of the village on the Ruspidge road.

We played the same games we had played at Bilson school and followed a similar school routine. Again we were released before the older children, but we had to go through the main classroom to get outside.

One day just as we were lining up to go out, an outbreak of shouting and shrieks penetrated our room. As we filed out one behind the other, there sat Mr. High on a chair; a large boy, face downwards, over his knees, and Mr. High wielding a cane with a swishing sound across the boy's bottom.

Mr. High's face was suffused, and a tide of red went right over his bald head. The boy was yelling and kicking.

I was extremely shocked, arrived home in tears, and took a great deal of persuading to go to school the next day.

My sister Hetty had an admirer before we had been long at Soudley. He came from lower Soudley, on the road which gradually changed from forest to smallholding country. He began bringing her gifts to school, apples from his orchards. When you bit them they were tinged with pink right through.

Mr. High, the schoolmaster was doing temporary duty; the appointed Head, Mr. Hull, being at the Front - a commissioned officer. His wife still lived at the schoolhouse, with her three daughters of similar age to my own family. Their names were Kathleen, Marjory and Joan.

They had a large walled garden attached to the house, in places very overgrown and rambling. We were sometimes allowed to stay with the girls in the garden. I would lie on my back under the gooseberry bushes. The gooseberries grew huge and yellow, and almost dropped into your mouth of their own accord, they were so ripe. There were also red and white currants growing in shining bunches. When I think of that garden, the feeling of somnolence is almost overwhelming, the feeling that you could lie in the garden and sleep forever.

The curate from St John's sometimes came calling in the week, and decided to set up a game for our amusement on Mrs. Hull's lawn. He ingeniously set up a game of clock-golf, and invented several hazards from bits he found in the sheds. We were six girls. It was not often we had anything organised for us, and this was a real treat.

It consisted of standing in the centre of a large circle and hitting the ball with a mallet in turn through pipes, over little bridges, going from 1 to 12 round a clock face.

You were not allowed to progress until you succeeded in mastering each obstacle. It was a very ladylike game, reminiscent of large country house summer pursuits.

Cousin Vi rarely took part in any of our games. After school she often had to catch the railmotor back into Cinderford where she was taking music lessons, and she also spent long hours practicing in Aunt Charlotte's parlour. I never envied her.

A less ladylike game which we sometimes played with the young curate, was rounders on the camp. 'The Camp' was next to the school, and had a large green open space descending rapidly to the road on the one side.

At school we were told that it was genuinely the site on which the Romans camped, but I'm afraid at that age we had little respect for the ancient past. As it was, the all-invasive forest sheep kept the grass close cropped and green, a fine place for rounders if you didn't hit stunted oaks that grew at all angles in the bank, and you had a fine old chase to regain it.

Over the other side of the road, a very ancient yew grew out over rough pasture and swampy ground. It was so old that the trunk and branches grew horizontally in all directions, with tufts of green, still hardily maintaining life above and at the branch ends. One couldn't tell how many generations of children had frolicked about it. For several feet, it was impossible to separate road from horizontal trunk, for children's shoes had carried bits of gravel, with which the road was surfaced, and embedded them in the wood itself.

In the autumn little pinkish-red lanterns still decorated the dark yew, but we had been told that they were poisonous and left them severely alone.

Further along the road from the camp, you came to a large gate and stile, made of very substantial smoothed poles. Over the gate you could see the first of the great pools which continued in series right through the long valley, all the way to Littledean. [Soudley ponds]



These were dangerous and out of bounds. They were also very beautiful, and my mother would sometimes walk us up there on a Sunday evening. I loved to gaze at the dark water and watch the trout leap, breaking the glassy surface into ever increasing circles of ripples. The wooded banks came down steeply on both sides, and the trees mirrored themselves deep down in the shining water. Beneath the trees lay a thick carpet of pine needles. We walked along the footpath on the lush green grass. I kept urging Mam to let us go on to the end of the

first lake, but we never did go that far. Mam was a townswoman at heart and nervous at going too far afield.

You could, however, get over the stile and go right-handed up a wide cart-track which diagonally ascended the hillside. One day Edwin was with us, and boy-like immediately suggested a dangerous game. He climbed up the muddy bank at the edge of the track worn deeper and deeper from much use. Edwin wanted me to hang tightly to the bottom of this branch, and he would give me a very gentle push, and I could have a lovely ride over the ground which dropped rapidly away on the other side.

“Just like flying I,” he said.

“Can’t Lil go first”, I said, “Then I can see what it’s like?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Lil eagerly, “Push as hard as you like.”

“No! No! No!” said Edwin, “You know the rules. Any treats going, youngest first.”

“Treats,” I thought, “That’s not what I call it”

“For goodness sake, get on with it then.” said Lil, “You’re a real baby, Glad.”

“Oh all right then” I agreed. “But please Edwin, promise, a very gentle push.”

“What d’you think I was going to do? I’m not trying to kill you. For goodness sake I’ve been over hundreds of times, and how much d’ you think I weigh?”

I hadn’t the slightest idea, but I instinctively felt there was a flaw in this reasoning somewhere.

“You’ll be perfectly all right, just hold tight, that’s all.”

“I made sure I had a good grip of the thin end branches wrapping them round my hands.

“All right then - Push” A hand pushed the small of the back. I gasped as my feet left the ground, and I was in space. Tall trees came towards me, and a coarse carpet of dark green brambles lay far below.

“Don’t lose hold! Don’t lose hold!” I said to myself. I was hardly aware that the pendulum had reversed, until I felt my heels hit something hard, and Edwin’s arm came round me and was holding me back

“My turn! my turn!” Lil was shouting.

I let go my breath.

“You enjoyed that now didn’t you?” said Edwin, nonchalantly giving Lil a good heave.

I could see Lil’s black-stockinged legs wriggling about in mid-air trying to get more impetus. How brave she was!

If that was just a gentle push I’d had, whatever would a full-blooded one have been like?

Most likely I should have barged straight through the tree-tops, and landed in marshland around the brook; or maybe gone head-on into the main trunk and been knocked senseless, and my body draped in the highest fork where nobody would ever find me.

Aunt Charlotte knew her way about all the forest tracks, and when September came, she announced that we were to go on a blackberrying expedition.

Led by Aunt Charlotte in her stout boots, long black skirt, printed cotton blouse, close at the neck, straw hat on her head, large basket on her arm and holding a long crook handled stick, we all followed in line. All of us carried some form of blackberrying equipment, the two youngest jam jars with string handles.

Starting at the stile by the lakes, we followed the cart road for some way, then branched off on another path, then another, always upwards. We were making for the 'Bailey' where the best blackberries grew.

This was a large open area of ground, from which the trees had been felled several years previously, and allowed to lie fallow ever since.

We sat ourselves down on a mossy bank and were allowed to drink limited amounts of water from the bottle which we had brought with us.

The largest basket was placed in a prominent position, and the rest of us scattered around, picking into our various utensils, and tipping them when full into the main basket.

It was beautiful on the 'Bailey', the sun shone all day, the blackberries, large and juicy, spread obligingly all around, all over the ground at a reasonable height.

On one of the large bramble leaves, I suddenly caught a glimpse of colour. Putting my finger to my lips, I caught hold of Vi. We tiptoed as quietly as we could, a slight movement and Vi saw it too, and reached out her hand but I shook my head.

A large peacock butterfly, wings outspread, was sunning itself. The velvety wings were well camouflaged to blend with the purplish-brown of the briar leaves, but the beautiful blue and white eye-like markings betrayed it. I couldn't stop Vi. She had formed her hands into a cup, and tried to trap it, but the creature was wary. Languidly it flapped its wings and was away over the brambles, lost to sight in seconds.

Vi was almost crying. "Oh, it was so lovely, I wanted to take it home."

"No, it's no good," I said, "It belongs up here. No sooner you touch it than it crumbles to dust. Keep your eyes open, you may see another."

I was on my knees peering down through the brambles.

"Look down here" I said, "Can you see a great oak tree?"

"How can you see a great oak tree down there? It's silly" said Vi.

"Kneel down, and put your face near the brambles" I said.

She did so. "I think you can see things that aren't there," she said.

But as I gazed through the irregular gap in the foliage, I had a very strange feeling!

I could see a perfect little oak seedling growing from an acorn under the shelter of the briars.

I had learned that at one time, the whole of England had been covered by Primeval Forest.

Man had uprooted trees, cultivated the land and converted it into pasture and growing crops.

But up here in the ancient "Dene", it seemed the spirit of bygone ages had never been totally eradicated. Hugh rocks went deep into the land. I was sure that left alone, the tiny oak would reach its roots into the ancient past, and grow slowly, slowly, to a good height, but still be in contact with primeval forces.

It may still have contact with forces alien to man.

"I shall pull that little oak tree up" I said aloud.

"You'll scratch yourself to bits!" said Vi "Can't you see those great ugly thorns."

My dress had a rather wide elbow length sleeve. I pulled it down over my shoulder as far as I could. Then I took the hem of my dress and pulled it over the material. Kneeling over the

gap I managed to withdraw the little plant without too much damage. The roots came out freely. I put the plant on my palm and held it out

"It's nice" said Vi "but only tiny".

Two perfect oak leaves grew from a green stem, which in its turn grew from an acorn, still in its old form but darkened. A tangle of very fine roots grew from the other end and had brought life to the little tree.

"A long time ago," I told Vi, "A great oak tree grew here, and dropped its seed to the ground to start again. The oak tree takes years and years and years to grow. I expect we shall be quite old before this one would be ready to plant new seeds."

"No it won't" said Vi "because you pulled it up."

"I don't suppose it was so silly as to plant one seed, do you". I retorted. "Let's look round and find another sort."

We found a little hazel growing in the tiny forest at our feet

"At least this one won't take so long" I said, "Maybe you and I can come back and pick hazel-nuts right here...Where there's one, there may be hundreds. Now then, how can we mark the spot?"

Vi ran to where we had put our things. She found a biscuit wrapper in bright red. A young birch was growing near and we stuck it over a young branch at shoulder height.

"Now. How long shall we say?" I said, and we gazed at one another, trying to solve the problem.

"I expect it grows about one inch a year," I said, taking a wild guess. "So let's say ten years. That makes an easy sum. Now, how old will you be?"

Vi gazed at me. "I'm gone three." she said.

"That's right" I said, "You'll be thirteen and I shall be sixteen. Isn't that lucky?"

"Why is it lucky?" she asked.

"Well if this biscuit paper stays put, It will be ten inches higher, about here." I stood on tiptoe and pointed to the spot. "We'll both be tall enough to pick hazelnuts. Mind you don't forget."

I was on my bed that night when I suddenly realised that I had been thinking about birch trees, the infant Hazel seedling had to grow from about three inches!

All the better, I thought, the nuts will be easier to pick. After we had settled to come back in ten years precisely we picked with more vigour.

We picked and picked the berries and emptied our jars. Every time you filled your jar and went to the basket, others had been there before you, and the fruit had risen higher and higher.

Suddenly we heard Aunt Charlotte. "That's quite enough for this one, we'll move on a bit and start on the other one."

"Can we eat our biscuits now?" I called back

"Alright" said Aunt, "but follow us up here and bring your things with you."

We did so, and sat munching biscuits and drinking sips of water.

"I'm fed-up picking blackberries" said Vi.

"Me too, I know, I'll teach you how to plait." I gathered a handful of rushes that grew in a damp spot.

“We’ll start with three, that’s easy.”

Vi was able to pick out three rushes of a similar length. I tied a knot at the thick end, binding them together.

“Watch me first.”

She held the knot at the end.

“Hold it tight then this is how you go, right over left, left over right, right over left, and so on.”

I plaited a few inches, smoothed it down and let her take over.

I held the knot firmly while she tried to do as I said but after a short time we had both lost patience.

We started on another set. I plaited it right to the end till it came to a fine tail. Then I tied the knotted end to a small strong stick.

“Now you’ve got a whip.” I said.

She ran about ‘whipping the flies’ and making the feathery seeds of rose-bay-willow herb float over me in clouds. I started making ‘roses’ from the pith in the rushes.

“Can I make those?” she said.

“You can try, but it’s very hard to do!”

She sat beside me while I split down the smooth length of the rush with the sharpest of my nails. The soft white pith lay clear along inside. You had to be very deft pushing the pith like a soft worm up the centre, until it came out in a long strip. You put the long strips side by side to dry on the grass until you had enough.

Vi managed to get a few out and laid them along the side.

Now it was time to curve the pith into petals, and bind several petals together in the semblance of a flower. The flower-head was then bound with delicate strips of fine rush skin to a strong straight grass.

“It’s a lovely white rose,” said Vi in admiration.

“Yes, but it’s very delicate. I’ll pull it through the lace in your pinny, but if you’re not very careful, it’ll crumble away before you get home.”

We heard Aunt calling. “Come on you two. Time to be getting back.”

Time to go home with two large baskets of gleaming fruit. Aunt Charlotte’s plump cheeks were red and glowing, but she showed no sign of weariness.

She and Mam, Hetty and Lily managed the baskets between them. Before long we were down the road, over the rail, and back in Aunt Charlotte’s kitchen. It was tea-time. It was lovely to sit down on proper chairs and drink cups of hot sweet tea.

My face felt hot to the touch from being out in the sun all day.

Aunt Charlotte had still to see to the substantial meals that must be ready for the men as they came in.

Vi and I went and sat on the lawn where fir trees were throwing long shadows, and the pine scent was almost overwhelming. Red peonies scattered their petals in the borders and rose petals dropped from the arbour.

When Uncle Sam came back out after his tea, to split wood at the block, we ran down to him.

“Guess how many blackberries I picked today,” said Vi.

“H-h-how many b-branches did I c-cut down?” said Uncle Sam.

“Not so many blackberries that I picked,” said Vi, “I picked a hundred, so there!” (She could only count to a hundred.)

“You go all over the forest, don’t you Uncle Sam?” I asked innocently.

“Yes, a lot farther that y-you two do” he said.

“Tell me then - Where did I pick this beautiful rose?” pointing to the made-up flower.

But Uncle Sam had dropped his axe and had me by the shoulders.

“Come here, monkey” he said “and have a good scruffing.”

His arms were brown and strong and sinewy, and he rubbed his scratch beard all over my face and neck.

It really hurt, but wriggle as I might, I couldn’t get away.

Vi had her rush-whip and started beating him around the arms.

“Ho-ho-ho! you want one too, I see!”

But Vi was off as fast as she could go, shouting “Go away, old Sam! Go away!”

I outstripped her, ran through the court and into the kitchen, shouting “Save me! save me!” and hid in the larder.

Vi followed, laughing and shouting “Go away old Sammy!”

Aunt Charlotte was at the stove stirring, and a tide of frothy blackberries kept rising to the top of the pot.

Hetty was at the kitchen table filled with jam-jars, and had a jug full of jam, pouring a little at a time into jar after jar.

“Now you two just stop it!” Shouted Aunt Charlotte, “and leave that old fool alone. Might get more than they bargained for” she said to Hetty.

“They’re getting too excited,” said Hetty, “shouting in the night if we’re not careful.”

“You just come out here, Glad. What on earth have you been doing with that dress - practically torn off your back. You go and find an old one and take that one off. If I can get it washed through and dried, you can try and mend it. Do all right for the holidays.”

Oh gosh, mending! I thought. Our Het, never satisfied unless she’s washing something or somebody!

I went upstairs. The beautiful smell of blackberry jam in making followed me. How gorgeous it was!

I lay for a moment on my bed, and suddenly thought about the little oak tree, and the hazel and the birch. I’ll get a pencil from my box and draw it and do that sum properly, I thought and suddenly fell fast asleep, shoes on scratched legs, torn dress and all.

During this time, mam received regular letters from London S.W.1.

At first, a nurse or a Voluntary Worker wrote at dad’s dictation.

The Nurse always included a note of her own. It was friendly and intimate, such as,
“Dear Mrs. Worgan, I am very happy to report that your husband is making excellent progress. I’m sure you must be a very happy family, living in a lovely part of the country. Bodily, Mr. Worgan is in very good health, and the wounds are healing well. His cheerful disposition is a great help to himself and all the brave men around him. We all call him George, and he is popular with his friends and medical staff. All the same, his only wish is to be with you all again, and he does everything he can to regain complete independence. Your letters are his greatest joy. Best wishes to you all, Diana Goodman.”
When mam wrote back, we all wrote a note to go in Mam’s envelope.

Then one morning, after much planning and instruction from London, Mam got herself dressed in her best, and bravely set off alone to St. Dunstan’s. [22/2/1917]

Firstly by rail-motor to Newnham, then to Gloucester and from there to Paddington Station, where she was met by a representative of St. Dunstan’s and taken to the hospital.

As evening came on, we waited anxiously for her return. Aunt Charlotte was particularly concerned about how the shock of seeing Dad sightless for the first time would affect her. She was very fond of our Hetty, as she called her, and I never heard a misword between them.

Mam arrived safely back, and except that she looked paler than before, she was her old self.

She was full of praise at the wonderful way that she herself had been received. As for Dad, she was a bit bewildered, that apart from wearing ‘dark glasses’, he seemed exactly the same as he had always been.

Dad had told her what a wonderful place St Dunstan’s was, and was himself amazed how marvellously the place was organised.

What concerned Mam most was that the great wards had so many patients suffering bodily mutilation, as well as loss of sight.

Dad considered himself one of the lucky ones. He was already finding his way about wards and corridors, and was most looking forward to getting totally proficient in braille reading. He was eager to take advantage of the huge braille library which was available.

He was also progressing well with the typewriter and would soon be writing his own letters home.

Mam could not get over the amount of attention she herself had received, ‘Just as if I was the Queen,’ she said.

Mam’s life was a continual round of domestic chores, her whole concern, the care of her children.

As for Dad, his disposition was such that it was impossible to feel that he needed sympathy. I have no doubt that he was exactly the same when Mam first saw him in his blindness at St. Dunstan’s.

CHAPTER – 5

When all the jam-making was complete, and the larder stacked with large stone jars, the darker evenings were not far away.

Even in the cosy Soudley valley, cold winds whipped up and down, making crisp brown leaves whirl and eddy against the sky.

The face of the tunnel and the ground above it was one of the places most strictly out of bounds. A wire fence went from rail-line level, slanted and curved over the tunnel, then slanted again to ground level near to the chicken run.

In the spring, it was tempting to disobey the order, for very fine primroses and wild wood violets had found pockets for their roots, and bloomed unmolested on the sheer stone face; beautiful mosses and delicate ferns also grew there.

But now as winter drew on, only brown beech leaves whirled, and bare slender branches gently whipped their tips over the fence. The forest sheep of course were always with us, and could be seen sure-footed as ever, grazing right at the precipitous edge. They never fell over.

There was a lot of indignant conversation going on at this time. An employer of local labour and owner of several cottages, was reputed to have turned a family out of their home as they were unable to pay the rent, and had no one to turn to.

No one seemed to know what had happened to the father, but there was a mother, a child in arms and some other children left homeless.

Aunt Charlotte, well forward with village news, was very angry with somebody about this shameful thing. She had found out that the only shelter they could find was one of the rock caves, somewhere on the hill above the tunnel. The ground was the property of the Forestry Commission. Aunt Charlotte had made a few pertinent enquiries, and had found out that the homeless family had already moved in with their few possessions. They would have approached the cave from the other side at Lower Soudley, where their cottage lay.

With a large apron covering her front, and occasionally uttering angry remarks, Aunt Charlotte had her large cauldron on the kitchen stove, and was stewing a quantity of chopped meat. Adding flavourings, and rapidly peeling vegetables from her store, she was saying.

“I’ll see they get one hot meal at least! - You, Lily and Gladys - Don’t go running off, You’ll be wanted presently!”

“I wish I had the Devil right here! I ’d show him ”—Chop-chop-chop! In would go a dish full of chopped carrots, onions and parsnips into the pot.

A fine aroma was filling the kitchen. “Yes. That’s all right for tonight! But what about tomorrow and the next day?”

Chop – chop - chop. “They can’t leave it like this. They’ll have to be found somewhere better than that.”

Potatoes sliced and into the pot.

“Mustn’t make it too full or they’ll spill the lot.”

“Let it simmer a bit longer, then you can get your coats on and listen to me.”

The cauldron simmered away, and was eventually put out on the tiled courtyard to cool.

I had my warm coat and woolly hat on. Lily wore her Tartan Tam to which she was very attached.

“Come here,” Aunt Charlotte said to me. She took a scarf, tied it over my head, round my shoulders, and back around my waist and tied it securely at the back.

“Now you won’t trip over anything. Both of you listen to me.

Gladys, you’ll see a loose wire. You get through the wire first and hold up the top strand. Lily lifts the stew over - try not to spill any.

You carry the pot between you. It won’t be too hot now, and go over to the right. Then you’ll see a little dirt path going slightly upwards. There are several caves up there. You’ll soon see where they are.

Tell the lady, ‘Mrs Fred James sent it and she’s very sorry.’

I expect she’ll have got herself a stone fire by now. She’s right if she’s treated fair.

Whatever you do, don’t forget to tell them, ‘Please be sure to send the pot back. It’s my best pot.’

“Now off you go, the evenings are drawing in. I’ll be watching out.”

We picked up the heavy cauldron, Lily and I. Aunt Charlotte had tied a clean cloth over the top. We had to walk very slowly. We could feel the liquid flopping about inside.

As we neared the fence, I could see where there were two loosely separated strands of wire. This gap must have been used before. I held up the top strand and climbed through and held down the lower one for Lily to lift over the big cauldron.

We picked up the cauldron each holding a part of the handle, and went carefully along the dirt path. The path turned slowly upwards. We came to the first cave, and putting the pot down, we peered inside. It was not very high. Brown leaves had blown in the entrance, and sheep wool clung to the rough stone. Where the stone roof touched the floors were piles of sheep-droppings.

We went back out and carried the cauldron further.

All at once we heard sounds. A large piece of sacking was hanging at the cave opening. A light flickered through the fabric.

“D’you think that’s them?” I asked Lily. “There might be lots of people, all living in rows of caves up here.”

“Don’t be daft.” said Lily “Only thing is, there’s no door to knock on.”

As she spoke, a corner of the sacking lifted, and a young lad looked out; he looked about thirteen, brown and thin. A nice-looking boy with brown hair. His wrists were growing beyond his sleeves, and his trousers were well above his knees.

“D’you want something?” he asked in quite an ordinary voice.

“We’ve brought a cauldron of stew from Aunt Charlotte.” We said more or less together.

“It’s Mrs. Fred James,” added Lily. “We’ve brought it in a pot so that you can put it on the fire.”

“Who is it?” called a woman’s voice.

“Come inside” said the boy, “It’s all right. I’ll carry the pot.”

In the murky, rather smoky air, a woman sat holding a well grown baby tucked in a grey Welsh shawl round her shoulders. A fire made of sticks burned between large stones, and a candle in a candle-stick wavered on one of the stone ledges.

“Please” said Lily, “Mrs Fred James has sent you some stew, and she’s very sorry. She said you could heat it on your fire, and please let her have the pot back when you’ve finished. It’s her best pot.”

“Thank you very much, my dears,” said the woman. She had a kind face but not very clean. Two little girls sat on some bundles and stared at me. They had smudgy faces, but how did you keep children clean in these surroundings?

How often had we played housekeeping in make-believe homes where you could imagine sofas and beds and everything you wanted!

The baby chortled. The boy looked a very nice boy. He looked at me with sad eyes. I wanted to comfort him, but couldn’t think how.

The cave house was the ideal place to play house in sunny days of summer. But what did you do in this, the hard world of reality?

There was nothing one could say. “Come on, Lil,” I said, taking refuge in Aunt Charlotte’s orders.

“We were to go straight back, remember?”

I tried to smile at the woman by the fire and the young lad.

Lil and I ran as well as we could down the path, and could see the warm firelight in Aunt Charlotte’s windows.

“I expect it’s tea-time” said Lil and we went into the glowing kitchen. In the days following, I often thought of the mother and children managing up there, especially when I climbed into my clean soft bed at night.

Aunt Charlotte seemed very preoccupied and was often from home. When we asked Mam what was going on, she said it was private business - nothing to do with us.

I did hear the words ‘Westbury’ and ‘Work-house’ once pass between them in hushed tones, but Mam looked terrified as she gazed at Aunt Charlotte. Aunt Charlotte’s face was hard and grim as she murmured, “Over my dead body.”

The iron cauldron appeared on the doorstep early one morning, but Aunt Charlotte took it in, wiped it over with a clean rag, and put it in its usual place without a word.

Aunt Charlotte came home one day looking more her old self, and told Mam that she had met the Vicar of St. John’s from Cinderford and the Vicar of Blakeney Church.

A small cottage for the homeless family had been found in Blakeney. The children would be going to Blakeney Church of England School. The tall boy would be helping in the Vicarage garden, and the mother would be helping in the Vicarage with the cleaning and cooking.

Blakeney was about two miles from Soudley down a long winding road. It was just a small village but it was on the main road between Gloucester and South Wales.

As far as I was concerned, it might as well have been a hundred miles away. It was most unlikely that I should be able to follow the fortunes of the ‘Cave Family.’

All our travelling was on the Rail-motor and Blakeney was not on the line.

One dark evening we were told that we were to be taken to the concert. I had never been taken to a ‘concert’ before. I vaguely remembered being taken to a Magic Lantern show at Littledean Hill Chapel, but I must have been too young to remember much detail except that it was about little black children going to Sunday School in a hot country.

Going to the concert started in a very exciting manner. To begin with, it was really dark, and instead of going over the line, we were to go down the path on the other side from the

village. I have already explained how the very steep path went down at the back of the house, so that in early summer you could see a mass of snow-on-the-mountain covering a solid stone wall, a sheer drop of about twenty feet.

First thing to make sure of was the lanterns. Aunt Charlotte first lit the candles in the lanterns. She took charge of one, Hetty another and Lily another. Mam had sister Vi safely with her and cousin Vi walked with Aunt Charlotte, and I could look after myself.

When we got down the stony path, the Chapel where the concert was to be held was about fifty feet above us, way up over the green. Square panes of glass, illuminated from inside the Chapel guided us to our destination.

Climbing up the green turf, one could see Will-o'-wisps sort of lights, dotted over the hillside. They were the lanterns of other villagers on the same errand as ourselves.

A concert party from a chapel of the same denomination, on the outskirts of Cinderford, had come to entertain the folk of Soudley.

When we got to the Chapel, it was well lighted and full of wooden forms for the audience. Before going inside we took our lanterns into the space provided for them, with a stone floor, the candles being safely extinguished and each lantern placed in strict rotation, ready to pick up for the return journey.

Going into the main hall, we found everybody looking very cheerful and looking forward to the evening's entertainment. A stage was across the one end, curtains drawn across the stage. It was very warm and noisy with people shouting greetings, much hand shaking, enquiries and hand waving.

Many busy people kept dashing up the steps, and disappeared behind the curtains. There was a good audience and we found ourselves all wedged on forms, and finding it very warm, took off our coats, folded them up and sat on them.

It took some time for everybody to get seated, but even so there were a number of men still standing at the back.

All at once I noticed a partial quietening, and the message passed around the room. SH--SH--SH--

"The Superintendent!"

All eyes drawn to the centre of the stage, where standing stage centre, but outside the curtains, stood a tall dark man, very clean and smart in a dark suit, a very white collar and curly moustache, holding a sheaf of papers and quietly waiting for silence.

He spoke first words of welcome to the visitors, hoped for a successful evening then announced the first performer.

The sound of a piano, curtains drawing back assisted by two strong youths on the main floor, and a strong, deep male voice began singing a song about the sea; the lady at the piano accompanied him, while a man standing at her side turned the music pages.

The strong male voice seemed to echo around the room, and when it ceased the applause thundered around the hall, a great clapping of hands from every corner.

Next came a recitation from another gentleman, word perfect, intense with feeling about a great battle. I marvelled how he remembered all those words.

Next announcement, "A Piano Duet by Miss Violet James and Master Henry White. "

Entirely unobserved by me, Cousin Vi must have been magically transferred from her place on the form, and was now sitting on a stool before the piano in her best dress, and by her side a very clean and smart young boy, shorter than Vi, sitting on another stool.

The piano had been moved diagonally across the stage.

Sitting up there, Cousin Vi looked very beautiful and very important. The four hands came down on the keys simultaneously and away they went, fingers tinkling away, high and low and sometimes even crossing, and all the time a running tune like water from a fountain. I was very impressed. The performance seemed faultless.

It slowed and came to a silence, four hands on the keys.

A great outbreak of applause. The two performers came to the front of the stage and bowed and curtsied very gracefully, but the clapping continued, until they reseated themselves and started on another piece.

An interval was announced. A great deal of activity in the hall with cups of tea and cups of lemonade being passed around, and glimpses of pieces of furniture disappearing behind the stage curtains.

Eventually silence was once more obtained, and it was announced that a play was to be presented by the Sunday School juniors. It was called, "Granny's Spectacles."

The curtains were drawn back.

The stage was transformed!

There before my eyes was a homely sitting room.

Granny was sitting in an arm-chair, knitting with red wool on wooden needles, a real Granny with grey hair, long skirt, blue slippers, and a big brooch and lace collar.

Mother, a real mother, was at the tea-table, with teapot, cups and saucers, plates of sandwiches and cakes.

Chairs around the table, girls and boys on the chairs, and even a small child on a high-chair, with a bib on!

I sat up and gazed with total fascination, and listened to every syllable.

Mother poured a cup of tea and one of the girls took it to Granny. who began drinking it!

The small child banged a spoon on the table and was given a cake which he ate!

All at once Granny said, "I'd like to finish this knitting, but I can't find my spectacles anywhere."

Mother and the children began hunting for the spectacles. They turned out Granny's handbag. They looked under ornaments on the mantelpiece. They picked up cushions and looked underneath. The audience were all laughing!

At last, they started looking under the hearthrug!

Then the child in the highchair shouted and pointed with his spoon straight at Granny.

"There they are," he shouted, "I can see Granny's spectacles!"

And sure enough, one of the girls went to Granny and found the spectacles on her head!

I thought it was simply wonderful.

The actors all came to the front of the stage, joined hands and bowed.

We clapped and clapped!

Now that they were standing still and smiling over the audience, you could see, now that they were back in their own skins, that not one of them was more than about ten years old!

To me it was so convincing, that I never wanted to do anything else but to be on that stage acting!

Complete and utterly stage-struck, I made a vow I would one day be up there acting, turning myself into someone entirely different.

At the back of Aunt Charlotte's house, after running down the bank, one could turn right and go across the 'Dram Road'.

Many of Aunt Charlotte's own relatives lived in cottages on the Dram Road, and we were very welcome there. Not one of these ladies were at all like Aunt Charlotte. Two of them at least were spinsters. Aunt Lucy and Aunt Alice lived together. Aunt Lucy was small, spare, neat and old fashioned with a thin reddish nose and steel spectacles. She was a dressmaker. She was always very clean and self-effacing and had a very clean black and white cat. I always thought of her as a character in a story book, very much like Miss Tabitha, a cat in human form.

Aunt Alice, was a very different lady, larger, pale and plump, light blue eyes, always smiling vaguely about nothing in particular, slow in her movements. I always seemed to see her wearing a hat. She didn't seem to have an occupation but just seemed to live with busy little Aunt Lucy. We were always given cups of tea and slices of thin white bread and butter - a very quiet tidy house. We often carried spoken messages from Aunt Charlotte.

Next along, a very different kind of household where we were sometimes invited to Sunday tea. The Burrows family; father away at the Front, a Commissioned Officer, the children all tall, clear skinned with platinum-blond hair. Two very tall boys who were at Higher Elementary School, and Edith about the same age as my sister Hetty, also tall and extremely silver blonde - a very handsome family.

The table had been laid by Edith and her mother as for a children's tea party. An abundance of fancy dishes confronted us. Jellies and blancmanges, tiny varied sandwiches, cakes, sponges and jam tarts, lemonade and cups and saucers for tea. We all sampled as many of these dainties as we could eat. There were some small dishes on the table containing some confection which I had never seen before, and which I very much fancied. I was asked if I had had enough and said, "NO thank you." When asked what else I would like, I had no idea of the name of the dish and it was rude to point, so I never did get to know the taste of that dish.

While the older girls cleared the table, I was told to sit in the corner of the sofa. A bookshelf carrying a number of books lay at my elbow, and I wondered if I was allowed to look at one. I turned my head sideways, and tried to read the title on the spine. It was quite a small book, and I thought I could easily wriggle it out if I tried.

I put my one finger under the edge and felt someone sit down beside me and the 'someone' said.

"Did you want to look at the book? I think it won't interest you very much, but look at it if you like."

It was one of the tall boys - he looked huge to me. He helped me get the book out and I turned the pages. There were black lines going from one spot to another. I read the words printed on the top of the page.

'Tram roads of the Forest of Dean' it said.

The boy turned one or two pages, then put his finger on one of the lines.

"I should think we're sitting about there." he said.

I turned and looked at him.

"What's the name of the road outside," he said.

"The Dram Road" I answered.

"That's right," he said, "Dram Road or Tram Road. Little trucks used to go on little rails along here just for carrying coal. That was before the real railways came. When that happened, they pulled the tram-rails up and built houses along here. So here we are practically sitting on one of the old Tramroads.

"How very strange!" I thought, I don't think I like the thought of that.

I just couldn't imagine Soudley without Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Fred and all that went with the Rail-Motor.

I supposed it was a good job that somebody had written about it, for you certainly couldn't see anything to remind you of it now.

At the end of the Dram Road, a white kissing gate gave access across the rail-line to the Halt, which consisted merely of a platform and a waiting room of wood with a corrugated roof, all completely washed over with the sand-coloured paint which seemed to have been permanently adopted by the G.W.R. for all the country halts. An extended iron arm carried a glass, metal framed lantern, one pane of which was hinged to enable a lighted candle to be inserted in the dark evenings.

Another kissing gate led to the village road. The 'White Horse' stood directly on the road. The best thing that ever came from here in my opinion was the glass bottles of clear lemonade. The neck of the bottle was squeezed in, a glass marble magically prevented the contents from spilling out. This obstruction had to be forced down, and a glass held at the ready as the liquid shot out like a fountain and filled your glass to the very top with a white foaming head. It was quite delicious. One of these bottles sometimes came my way via one of Uncle Fred's pockets.

After the 'White Horse' the road bent sharply round and downwards, and overhead a bridge carried the rail onwards and upwards towards Cinderford.

Go down the road and around the corner and you came to the prettiest little rows of cottages you could wish to see. I loved to be sent on an errand to one of the families in these cottages. They were built of whitewashed stone set close to the railway embankment, and seemed to be always in full sun. The gardens were long and narrow and always full with every flower in season you could mention. The brook ran along the bottom of the gardens, but their most romantic feature was that every cottage had a little bridge spanning the brook which had to be crossed before you walked up the path between huge lettuces, rows of radishes, roses, lavender, everything flourishing with ardent life. All the occupants of the cottages seemed to be happy and contented too.

On more than one occasion Aunt Charlotte and I had a dispute about these cottages. On returning home one day, I was telling Aunt Charlotte of the remarkable colours of the pansies I had seen, and how the marigolds were the brightest gold it was possible to get, while the nasturtiums ran all up the railway bank with glowing trumpets of brilliant colour.

"You don't want to hang about down there," said Aunt Charlotte.

"Why ever not? I think it's the prettiest place in the whole world."

"What about that smelly old brook then?"

I gasped with astonishment.

"That's just what makes it perfect!" I said, "Fancy having your own little bridge over your own little river. It's simply perfect!"

"Well" said Aunt Charlotte, "That's not what I call it, but I can tell you one thing, some of those people are not all that particular. And damp! You want to see your brook in the winter. That'll show you!"

I chose to ignore the thought of the brook in winter.

On that beautiful summer morning with gardens packed with scented flowers, the high embankment cutting off winds from the north and the hills opposite full of green firs and larches marching in rows right up and over the horizon, the sparkling brook gaily moving below my feet, it seemed to me to be most protected and happiest place you could wish to be.

Saturday morning was the time when either Mam or Aunt Charlotte went to Cinderford to get our rations for the week. I looked forward eagerly for my turn to come round to accompany whoever was going. Baskets and string bags ready, we would start out from the rail-house in good time, hair brushed tidily, shoes shining, coat brushed and buttoned, and walk smartly up the road and on to the Halt. It was most important to have all the ration cards folded and safely tucked into the handbag.

When the Motor at last pulled in, a good number of other shoppers would have assembled on the platform. If I was with Aunt Charlotte, I always felt most important, for as the guard came round with his tickets, he always stopped for a little chat.

Aunt Charlotte had a free pass on the rail, and even went as far as Weston-Super-Mare sometimes in the summer, and stayed at a Hotel with cousin Vi! Such a thing was beyond my wildest dreams, but Aunt Charlotte seemed to take it in her stride.

She did not fail to point out however, how fortunate we were in our generation, that we could travel in such comfort to do the Saturday shopping. She had been the eldest of a large family, she told me, and every Saturday had had to walk in all weathers through woods and lanes for about three miles to Newnham with two large wicker baskets to buy provisions for all the family.

I, certainly, was quite in agreement with Aunt on this matter. It was lovely to ride on the Rail-motor. The seats upholstered in patterned velour in polished wood surround, framed views of interesting places to which you could travel; Castles in Wales, the Sands at Tenby, The Severn Estuary, The Cheddar Gorge, all made possible by the magic of the Steam Engine.

At this time however, I was quite content to study the country through which we were passing. I knew every feature of that line, and welcomed each new plant that came with the changing season.

After leaving Soudley, quite soon you were into a tunnel - quite a short one this time, but still exciting. Little lights came on overhead, and Snap- Snap as everybody pulled the leather belt and released a window to spring to the top. If you pressed your nose to the window, you could see ghostly forms of smoke and steam float eerily past you, or you could sit back and see passengers on the opposite seats gazing at you from the reflection on the shiny black bricks that lined the tunnel. The throb of the wheels changed in the darkness and I always held my breath until fingers of daylight began to filter in from the outside world. Then 'Whoosh!' we were out, but the smell of smoke still lingered in the carriage.

For a while steep rock face still clung to the rail, but with light came life. Delicate ferns where damp hung on the rock, sprouts of yellow broom in the spring, and always silver birch finding a foothold.

Soon we came to another halt at Staple Edge. Very rarely were there any passengers here, and opposite, huge slabs of red rock hung sheer down to the very edge of the line. It was Staple Edge Quarry but the quarry working lay above us, well above the sight line of a person sitting on the carriage seat.

Past the quarry the ground opened out to lines of trees misty blue at their roots with bluebells in May, and purple in July with armies of fox gloves.

As we crossed a level-crossing, we were into Cinderford bridge Halt, with Light Moor Colliery up the hill on the left, and St John's Church up a steeper hill on the right. Soon we could see the brook, now looking dirty and littered with rubbish, swampy, but in season brightened with golden patches of marsh marigold.

The line went round in a big arc which turned into the platform at Cinderford.

A steep hill lay before us leading into the town. One of Aunt Charlotte's fostering connections lived halfway up the hill, and we often called there. Today I was with Mam, and we forged right ahead as she had a quantity of shopping to get through. First to Eastman's in the High Street where a long queue of people waited to get their meat rations. Gradually we progressed up the queue, then we were inside the shop. We were surrounded by large bodies and the air seemed stifling. For a while I could see two men in white coats and striped aprons who seemed to waver about behind the counter, and all at once I was in a heap on the floor.

Someone picked me up and carried me into the fresh air. Mam got served immediately, and came out and said we would go into the 'Coffee Tavern' and have a nice cup of tea, and I would feel better.

The 'Coffee Tavern' was just down the road, and was a very ladylike establishment. Ruffled net across the windows, small tables with embroidered cloths. Two tall dark-haired ladies kept this establishment. You only ever asked for a plate of thin white bread or brown bread and butter, and a pot of tea all served very daintily. There were hardly ever any cakes or pastries now that sugar was so scarce. Mam poured the tea and I sipped it and bit into the wafer-thin triangle of bread and butter.

Other customers sat at the little tables, all ladies, some of them accompanied by well-mannered children. They were all served with similar refreshment.

All at once the door opened, and the sound of heavy boots and men's voices broke the quiet atmosphere. We all turned and looked at the three young men who seated themselves at one of the tables. All fresh-faced young men, smart in their khaki uniforms. The three of them looked very young, fresh-faced and healthy looking, probably on embarkation leave. They soon made their presence felt, and got the two middle-aged ladies confused and anxious. They announced that they were hungry and ready for something more substantial than thin wafers of bread and butter.

The two ladies went into the kitchen to consider the matter, then came out nervously, and told the young soldiers that the only thing they could suggest was hot dripping toast. This was greeted with loud approval, and soon the aroma of toasting bread drifted through the Cafe.

"Make it thick" shouted one of the young men, holding his finger and thumb about an inch and a half apart.

I ate up my bread and butter and drank two cups of tea stretching it out, to see the toast being served. And there it was, the thin tall dark-haired lady smiling and bearing a large plate with a steaming pile of thick toast, hot dripping melting over it. It smelled marvellous.

Mam was ready to go, and took my hand and sidled out of the shop.

"TCH-TCH-I-TCH. I never heard anything like it. Fancy hot dripping toast. The 'Coffee Tavern' if you please! Hot dripping toast! What are things coming to?"

We went into Mrs Morgan's shop, a drapery shop. It was quite exciting because Mam was to pay the last instalment on some goods she had ordered.

The practice was to select your goods and have them put on one side, as the expression went.

It really was quite exciting, because Mam had ordered four night-dresses for my three sisters and myself in our four different sizes, and in a completely different fabric that had just come on the market.

It was our first introduction to the new fabric. It was a sort of machine knitted stockinette in pink. The style had little laced edged collars, elastic at the wrist, and machine embroidery on the yoke. It felt soft and warm and cosy.

Previously we had always worn chemises and nightgowns made of bleached calico, very stiff, scratchy and unyielding until it had been through the wash a great many times.

But these were new and pretty and lovely to wear. Mam paid the last instalment, and we could take the parcel home.

Then it was up the High Street again to get the rest of the rations at the grocery store in Market Street.

Only a small shop-frontage. When you got inside it seemed almost dark, but the counter on the left and the passage for customers went on for yards and yards, a huge variety of goods on either side. It seemed quite a voyage of discovery to walk from one end to the other, peering at all the things that could be bought if only you could locate them. The wall behind us had tightly stuffed shelves from floor to ceiling. Bend down and look under the shelf and you would find tins of black treacle, let your eye travel upwards and you would find large glass bottles of every kind of spice.

In between large boxes of polishes; boot polish, black lead, furniture polish. floor polish, dubbin, some mysterious boxes unlabelled and of unknown contents. Hanging all on separate hooks, bunches of chamois leathers, washing up mops, scrubbing brushes, blacklead brushes, shoe brushes. flue brushes.

The counter opposite carried a bacon cutting machine, huge round of cheese. tubs of butter, likewise of lard, all equipped with cutting wires; butter pats some bearing particular designs for marking a brand.

Lower than the counter large biscuit tins with transparent lids so that the contents were visible, and on the floor itself, rows of sacks, the tops rolled back, so that you could see what you were buying. Currants and sultanas, raisins and orange and lemon peel in their natural shapes but preserved in sugar, butter beans, haricot beans, rice, sago, and dried peas, all with their own little scoops; behind the counter various brands of tea, coffee in bottles, coffee in beans.

Mam went first to the butter counter and produced her coupons. Sugar, butter and tea seemed the main things that were doled out in strict quantities.

Mam was well known to the assistant behind the counter as she had shopped there when we lived on the hill, and while we stood there, the owner of the store, Mr. Westaway came from the end of the store to talk to her and make enquiries of my father's progress. Then his wife, a dumpy little figure always pleasant and smiling, with rosy cheeks and shining silver grey, very wavy hair.

Mr. Westaway himself was of smallish stature but with an air of importance. He had very sparse hair brushed very carefully across his bald head. Very clean appearance with a large jutting nose, a gold pince-nez on a gold chain, and a large, deeply pointed, very stiff white collar over his striped shirt.

He wore a grey protecting overall, but this in no way diminished his air of ownership.

I think it must have been the combination of his name and the quantity of goods with which he was surrounded, from far romantic places, that made me see him as a voyager aboard a great vessel. A naval hat, pointed fore and aft with a gold fringe, would so well have suited his

jutting nose. I could see him in profile with a telescope, scanning the oceans for yet more strange and luscious products to load on his ship and bring to the shoppers of Cinderford.

Having filled another basket, we were out in the street and Mam was searching for extra goodies to take back for those left at home.

Now it was time to get ourselves up together, and start off down Station Street, for the return motor would be off at four o' clock and everybody at home would be waiting for our arrival.

Laden with bags and baskets, we joined the considerable number of shoppers making for the same destination as ourselves, the Railway Station.

An orange glow outlined the trees on the horizon, and gilded our faces, and the glass windows of the houses of Station Street. We turned into Station approach where Station Master and guard stood on duty, the guard with red and green flags tucked under his arm.

The train came round the bend, trailing clouds of white steam and soon we were climbing aboard, filling the seats and fitting in our purchases as best we could.

Then we were off through the woods. First stop Cinderford Bridge, after which we could expand ourselves a little. Then Ruspidge Halt, where more passengers alighted. Next stop Staple Edge, then into the tunnel. Out of the tunnel, over the bridge and into Soudley Halt.

Our tickets had been collected on the way.



When we had gathered all our purchases together on the platform, Mam said, "I think we'll go over the line and go down the Dram Road. It seems a bit shorter and we've got a lot to carry. Mind how you go, the rails will still be hot"

So very carefully we lifted our feet high, and crossed oily stones and hot rails and approached the kissing gate.

It was quite a trick getting baskets and bundles through the kissing gate. You pushed the gate forward until it hit the post, crowded yourself and parcels into the rounded end, pulled the gate forward, and went out at the other side. The next person did exactly the same. We were out on the Dram Road, our belongings around us.

"That kissing gate" I said. "I can see the sense of it for stopping people running straight on to the line. But I simply can't see why it should be called a kissing gate."

I asked somebody once, and they said you made a cross sign on the ground as you came through, first one way then the other, and a cross was the same as a kiss, I don't see that, do you Mam?

Mam started laughing, "No I don't think that's right"

"Why kissing gate then?"

"Supposing you were a young man and you had your eye on a certain young lady. Maybe she didn't give you any encouragement.

You kept your eyes open and you knew she would be coming off a certain rail motor.

It just happened that you were going on to the platform as she came off.

Now as she came towards the gate, you would have your hand on the gate the other side.

She might say, 'Excuse me but I am trying to get through this gate.'

He might reply, 'Well if you give me a kiss, I might let you through.'

"Oh yes," I said, "And it would turn into a great romance. I'll bet the man who made the kissing gate never thought of that but the young men soon found out what they could do with it."

"The young women, too, I shouldn't wonder," said Mam.



Photo]

[W. A. Camwell

**No. 3740 entering Upper Soudley Halt on October 15 on the 2.27 p.m.
Gloucester to Cinderford train**

Great excitement at home when we displayed all the new purchases. The nightdresses caused prolonged discussion. Aunt Charlotte viewed them with doubtful admiration. Certainly very becoming, very soft and comfortable but there was nothing like calico for washing and wearing ever since she was a girl.

"Very nice, mind Hetty, I'll not deny that, but if you don't mind me asking. However much did that little lot cost you?"

"Well I don't mind saying, I was pretty surprised myself." said Mam. "That smallest one, that 'll be for Vi, 1 shilling 11 and 3 farthings."

"God bless my soul" said Aunt, "I thought they'd be way beyond that. If only they'll wash and wear, I'll say that's a good buy."



It was Saturday night and we all hurried the men over their meal, and they were told to find themselves jobs out in back or thereabout. They were quite used to this procedure, and had already got the copper steaming away in the wash house.

Large tin bath in by the fire, one after another kneel down and have your hair washed with soft soap. A great deal of rinsing when it came to Lily and Hetty with their long thick manes. Mine and Vi's didn't take so long.

Then it was calling for help and a change of water and start on the bathing.

Same old calico chemises, thankfully not new but well washed, and then almost with reverence, the beautiful new nightgowns.

When all was complete, we all sat along the sofa, "A sight for sore eyes," said Aunt Charlotte, and Mam looked very proud.

Everybody was kept very busy this time of the year, all the outdoor jobs having to be completed earlier and earlier with the night drawing in faster and faster.

More loads of coal in the shed, more loads of logs in the wood shed.

In the kitchen, preparations for Christmas commenced well ahead of the festive day. Rations or no rations, the cupboards were always bursting with copious supplies.

Aunt Charlotte must always have been in the habit of keeping large stores of dry goods in stock, so that although we always went into town and fetched the meagre rations, there seemed little variation in our ways of life as far as meals were concerned. Several of the provision shops in Cinderford also made weekly rounds to the villages with horse and trap, and never failed to call with bread and a sack of flour.

Then of course it was pig-killing time in the cottages, and Uncle Fred was always there to lend a hand. Newly salted hams and sides of bacon began appearing and were hung from hooks in the ceiling.

Mounds of dried fruit were washed in the kitchen, rubbed dry between clean cloths, and we all gathered round the table picking out the stray scraps of sticks that had escaped the strainer. Then there were large pieces of suet to be separated from the skin and rubbed through the grater, nutmegs to be rubbed through a smaller one, and orange and lemon peel to be parted from hard lumps of preserving sugar that had accumulated at the centre.

Soon quantities of Christmas puddings were tied up. The copper got lit early in the morning and in went the puddings. Someone had to keep an eye on it all day, and keep replenishing and topping up the boiling water.

One day Uncle Fred came in and said, "Now then, what have I got under my coat? First one to guess gets first go."

None of us had the slightest idea what he had under his coat. It was certainly rather bulky and made his coat stick out. It must be for some sort of game.

Could it possibly be a kitten or a puppy, I wondered, but there was no movement.

"Is it alive?" I asked, which seemed to cause Uncle Fred considerable amusement.

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" he shouted. "Not now he ain't! Haw! Haw! Haw!"

"Oh my laws!" said Aunt Charlotte, "What a fool the man is! Here, take it out and let 'em have it a bit in the yard."

We were more bewildered than ever, but followed Uncle Fred out into the court then into the yard.

"Not many minutes mind!" shouted Aunt Charlotte after us, and don't get it on the line or there's an end to it."

Uncle Fred took the object from under his coat and held it out, drew back one of his long legs, and gave it a good kick.

A large white balloon-like object bounced and floated and landed on the chicken run, and set the chickens all squawking, just as they were going to roost.

We followed it suspiciously, and finally Lily managed to capture it from the top of the chicken run.

We touched it and poked it, but only Hetty was able to tell what it was.

It was halfway between a balloon and a boy's football, milky white, not quite spherical and a little nobble tied on the end.

"It's a pig's bladder," said Hetty, "When they kill the pig, they take it out and clean it and wash it out. Then they blow it up and tie it so that the air stays inside. It dries and goes hard, and the boys play football with it!"

"Well I don't like it!" I said.

We kicked it round the yard a bit, but I could not regard it as a plaything. It was impossible to detach the thought of something that had been part of a living animal a few hours ago, from something which you kicked around the yard.

Anyway none of us were any good at football. It was unfortunate for poor Uncle Fred, who delighted in giving us little treats, that he was dealing with a family of girls.

Of course, no such humane feelings assaulted my conscience when slices of delicious home-cured ham were in the frying pan!

As the Christmas Fare piled up in the larder, Uncle Sam started bringing in heavily berried holly from the woods, and Uncle Fred managed to get a bough of Mistletoe from a friend's orchard at Blakeney. We wanted to decorate all over the house right away, but we were told that this was the most unlucky thing you could possibly do. There was nothing worse for bringing ill-luck on a household, than letting holly and mistletoe in through the door before Christmas Eve.

I wracked my brains why this should be so, but could find no reason, but everybody else was of one mind, that this was completely true. There was no way of persuading anybody that this might not be so.

The last days leading up to Christmas had grey lowering clouds, and all the adults agreed that they could smell snow in the air.

The holly and mistletoe was brought in as far as the wood shed but no farther, and sure enough the night before Christmas Eve snow fell softly and noiselessly all night long, and by morning the world had been transformed.

It was not difficult to turn Soudley into a living Christmas card overnight. One fall of snow and the whole setting was there waiting for it. Dark firs climbed up all the hillsides, growing Christmas trees on every hand, all decorated with snow blobs and sparkling frost. The sun came out and made everything glitter. The fires in the house sent smoke waving up through the glittering air.

Forest birds came in from the woods and fed on bits shaken from tablecloths. Jays came and attacked a ham bone that Uncle Fred tied on the clothes line, raucous in their cries but breathtaking in their beauty. I thought there could be nothing more beautiful than a Jay in winter with a background of snow.

The cruel beak tore strips of flesh from the bone, and the bird proudly tossed the glistening tuft that crowned its head; like spun glass it shone in the glittering air. Soft feathers in shades of cream brightening to pinks covered its downy breast, and the blunt tail, in darkest blue and black, cleverly balanced the bird on the swinging line.

Sometimes it would preen and stretch, and display an outstretched wing. Now the much sought after blue and white covert feathers came into full view. One could only marvel how such a creature came to be haunting the tall dark trees of the deepest forest, and only make an appearance in the bleakest weather!

All the men had a few days off for Christmas. Aunt Charlotte told Edwin that she had an errand for him, and asked him to go up to the farm to get extra milk to make custards and blancmanges for the feast day.

Edwin turned to me and asked me how I'd like to go with him for a bit of fresh air.

It was quite a long walk from home to Miss Hull's farm especially in snow. I thought it would be a lovely adventure and begged to be allowed to go. None of the others seemed interested.

Mam doubted it would be worthwhile getting me dressed up for the weather, but eventually said "All right, then."

It was no easy task keeping yourself proof against snow, most of all your feet.

A warm coat was soon on, a woolly hat, a scarf tied over all, and a furry muff on a cord to keep your hands warm. Pull up your thick stockings, and make sure your laces were well tied, and I thought I was ready to be off, but Mam said "Half a minute," and went to her mending bag.

"Here's a pair of Het's stockings, really quite past it. They'll do." I had to sit on a chair, while Mam rolled them over my shoes and stretched them right over my boots and over my knees.



No such fuss with Edwin of course, he was used to all weathers. He just turned his tweed collar up, pulled his cap more firmly on his head. His strong breeches, leather leggings and thick boots were good things to wear in snow. He carried a large tin can with a lid on the top to bring home the extra milk. We went over the line and Edwin held out his hand and gave me a good tug to help me up the steep bank on to the road.

The snow on the road had not been much disturbed except by a few wagon tracks, but you could see clearly where tiny birds had left twig-like depressions. It seemed a strange and silent world under the bare trees.

We went up past the camp and silent school, the laurel hedge heavy with snow. Smoke rose from the cottages on the road. We turned right up the ash path that led to the Soudley rocks.

All at once Edwin bent down and examined the ground; I was struggling too much with my ungainly footwear, to take much notice of my surroundings.

"What do you suppose that is?" said Edwin.

I looked at the padded tracks. "A dog," I guessed.

"No, a fox. See where his bushy tail dragged the snow when he went under the wire; been having a sniff at Miss Hull's poultry is my guess!"

Sure enough, as we turned off the ash path, and went up towards the farmhouse, Edwin could trace the fox's trail towards the henhouse.

We went up to a flat court.

"Better wait here." said Edwin, "I'll have to go round to the dairy, and I'd better mention about that fox. Tell them to lock-up well tonight!"

From where I stood, I could see over the village. Snow showed up the pattern on the church spire, and smoke rose from every cottage.

I'd better do something about those stockings, I thought. They had partly pulled back over my shoes, and seemed more like to trip me over than to be of any use.

There was nowhere to sit, so I leaned against the porch and stood on one leg and tried to ease the wet slushy wool back up my leg. Then on the other. I didn't make a very good job of it, but my feet felt quite warm so I supposed the extra cover was doing some good.

I could hear the cows munching and shuffling about in the shed, and hens clucking and making contented noises, so I couldn't think the fox had been able to get in.

Presently I heard Edwin whistling and his boots echoing along the stone passage.

"All right?" he said

"Yes," I said, "I managed to get the old stockings on a bit better. I can walk better now."

"I've got something for you," said Edwin.

"What?" I asked. I couldn't see anything except the milk can, which I supposed was now full.

"Wait till we get down the lane" said Edwin. When we got under the hedge, he put his hand inside his coat where he must have had a concealed pocket.

"There" he said, "especially for you." and he produced the most beautiful apple I had ever seen.

"Take it," he said. I did so.

"Thank you," I said "Very much. It's a marvellous apple! I don't know what Het and Lil and Vi will say, we usually have all the same."

"Hide it" he said, "it's a present."

I put it in my muff, which it practically filled, and we walked back home, sliding with bent knees down the steep bank, and stamping my feet before going into the back kitchen.

Mam came out and said, "Well you have got some rose in your cheeks, that'll be the frosty air! Sit on this chair, and get those stockings off."

As she knelt down and started on the stockings, I took the beautiful apple from my muff and showed it to her.

"Look Mam" I said. "My goodness, what a beautiful apple," she said, "I don't think I've seen anything like it! Where ever did it come from?"

"I don't know," I said; "Edwin gave it to me. He said it was specially for me, a present! I thought perhaps it had better be cut in quarters."

"Hm. I think you're right" said Mam.

She fetched a plate and put the apple on it, and we finished getting off the stockings.

I took off my boots and my other stockings were snug and warm.

"Come and sit by the fire a bit to be on the safe side" said Mam.

Aunt Charlotte came into the kitchen and gazed at the beautiful apple on the plate.

"Lawks!" she said, "How did that get here?"

Mam told her.

"Did he give you anything else?" she said.

"No," I said.

She made a face at Mam. "I've been wondering about him," she said, "Can't be trusted. He's Welsh, you know. Never trust a Welshman."

"Besides, he's practically a man! He'll have to be going back where he came from."

She looked at Mam, "It won't be safe having him about with innocent young girls. I wouldn't trust any man for that matter, all as bad as one another. But as for Welshmen! That's asking for trouble.

I was dumbfounded. Was it my fault that Edwin had to be sent packing? I was not easy in my mind about the apple episode and certainly there was a hidden meaning somewhere. All the same I felt sad. Aunt Charlotte's word was law. Surely she wouldn't chuck him out in the snow, and at CHRISTMAS of all times!

"Better keep an eye on her, Huh?" she said to Mam.

Mam nodded.

They were talking about me!

It was hard to understand grown-ups sometimes.

The apple got cut into four equal quarters, and Hetty, Lil and Vi came in and had a slice each, and so did I.

It tasted as beautiful as it looked, but there must be more to it than met the eye.

"Where did this come from?" asked Hetty.

"Eat it and be thankful." said Aunt Charlotte, "Best class of apple I ever laid eyes on! Could do with a bushel or two of them myself. Hum-m. We shall have to see, shan't we?"

Now then let's get this bit of dinner over, and we can put the holly and mistletoe up."

No lack of willing hands with the prospect of putting up the holly.

Dinner having been cleared away; Uncle Fred trimmed the mistletoe bough with his sharp knife in the court. It was past twelve o'clock, so it was deemed safe to bring it into the house.

The place selected was the little lobby at the bottom of the stairs, where everybody had to pass at one time or another.

“No nonsense about catching people under it till tomorrow though,” said Aunt Charlotte, “Only on CHRISTMAS DAY proper.”

The scraps of mistletoe left over in the court were claimed by Uncle Fred, Uncle Sam and Edwin, and put in their buttonholes.

The lovely holly was cut into manageable sprays. Hetty, Lil and I took off our boots, and climbed about on kitchen chairs, sticking sprays on every surface we could find, tops of pictures, the mantelpiece, the grandfather clock and even on the side of bacon.

Mam and Aunt Charlotte went round the front room and put the best pieces on top of the piano and across the mantelpiece. Mam had had a lovely card from Dad, which was put in the middle of the mantelpiece, and there was one from St Dunstan’s with a badge embossed on the centre, and signed by Sir Arthur Pearson.

Everything looked lovely. It was almost impossible to get inside the larder for all the dishes, pies and bottles that were stacked in there.

At some time in the afternoon, Aunt Charlotte must have had a good talking to Edwin.

He went out without looking at any of us, wrapped up for outdoors and carrying only a lantern.

I felt very sad and got Mam in a quiet place. “Mam,” I said, “Has Aunt Charlotte sent Edwin back to Wales, without even saying ‘Goodbye’ to us, and only carrying a lantern?” I had a job not to cry.

“No love, of course not, but best not to be too friendly with him. Sometimes he’s tempted to take things that don’t belong to him. I expect it’s hard for him being so far from home.”

Well, I thought, all the more reason for being a friend, I should think. Still, if Mam and Aunt Charlotte don’t want to be friendly, I’d better not. Anything would be better than the poor lad being turned out.

It wasn’t long before Edwin was back, whistling away, and a sack bag full of something over his shoulder and his mistletoe stuck in his cap.

Aunt Charlotte took the bag off him and carried it upstairs, and Edwin seemed as merry as ever.

So now it was Christmas Eve and outside everything was sparkling with frost, and inside everything was decorated with holly, and the fire roared up the chimney. Mam and Aunt Charlotte had been turning out mince pies all day. Uncle Fred had killed a few fowls that no longer laid enough to earn their keep, and were now being boiled on top of the stove.

Aunt Charlotte had run out of space, and had been forced to violate the spotless sitting room with sheets of paper on the floor. No fire had as yet been lit in here, and jellies and blancmanges, boiled hams and pig’s head brawn sat on it in safe temperatures.

A cask of cider was on a little stage just outside the kitchen door, and bottles of wine and ginger-brandy on the floor at the back of the larder.

The kitchen was thick with aromatic odours mingling one with the other, spicy mince-pies, boiling chickens, sage and onion stuffing.

We were allowed a glass of hot ginger wine before we went upstairs with our candlestick to hang our stockings on the end of the bed.

Hetty blew out the candle. Every night we did the same. No speaking till the last train went through.

Presently, Ding--Ding--Ding-- down there in the kitchen, -- quiet -- quiet -- quiet, Ding--Ding--DING!

Then Rumble--Rumble--Rumble. Beds start trembling.
The Whoosh Whoosh, rattle--rattle--rattle, Toot-toot
The jingle, jingle Roar---lights flashing in squares all across the ceiling.
Presently our beds stood still once more and a deeper darkness lay about us.

"Glad" whispered Lil, "Did you hear a queer noise?"

"Yes, I thought I did." I said, "A sort of kicking noise half way up the wall."

"Is it a frightening noise?" asked Vi, "Shall we shout Mam?"

All of us except Vi had long been disillusioned about the reality of Father Christmas. We had abandoned him regretfully, but were determined to keep his presence near us through our youngest sister.

"There it is again - higher up." I said "Good gracious, It must be Father Christmas! He's early this year isn't he?"

"Is he here already?" said Vi.

"Well he's got more children to go round with us here." said Lil. "Remember we weren't here last Christmas."

"That's right." I said, "Of course, he's got to start out earlier. I believe I can hear him on the roof. Listen, slither -- slip. It's ever so frosty.

"If you two don't go to sleep you'll get exactly nothing in your stockings!" said Hetty.

"C-reak, c-reak." I heard, "Tip-tap-tap." Before I had fallen asleep, I had convinced myself that the knobby stocking I should find in the morning had been filled by the old man himself.

It was not yet light when we were all awake and scrambling for our stockings. Het had lit the candle in the candlestick, and sure enough, there were the knobby-back, queer-shaped stockings lying at the foot of the bed.

The first thing out of mine was a bag of sweets, then a whole bar of nut-milk chocolate. Vi was already scrunching sweets without looking any farther.

Next came various sorts of nuts all put in higgledy-piggledy, and these had to be sorted. Then something long and hollow, a delightful book for painting and crayoning, then a large orange, and a beautiful apple looking suspiciously like the one we had all the fuss about, but smaller; then a dear little pink and white sugar-pig with a curly string tail.

The pig came out like an old friend. I had had one like it every Christmas since I could remember. I kissed him on his nose and put him inside the elastic round my wrist.

Next came a mysterious parcel, not very large, but hard and with sharp corners.

This one is special, I said to myself, and put it on one side.

Then a toy watch, which I put on my wrist, then a different bag of sweets and more nuts; then right in the toe, something hard and round, wrapped in paper with something written on it. It was typewritten: It said "To Glad, from Dad with love."

I unwrapped it and gasped, a whole half-crown!

That was the end of the stocking, so I put my presents as tidily as I could, and decided to unwrap the special present.

Slowly I unfolded the paper. Something black and hard with sharp edges. When it was quite unwrapped it turned out to be a thick black Japanned coal scuttle with a handle at the top and a little shovel, an exact smaller edition of Aunt Charlotte's which stood in the Front Room. It seemed to be full of something. Could it be coal? I lifted the lid and there inside were

gold coins of all sorts! I picked one out, and turned back the gold paper, and I could see they were made of chocolate!

How perfectly lovely! I think it's the best present I shall ever have! I knew at once that Mam had got it for me! She always did buy the most beautiful presents.

Christmas Day went by like a dream, with numerous callers, some of them standing out in the court and singing a carol before taking off their caps and coming into the kitchen. Nobody went back out without having a mince pie and a glass of wine or cider, and wishing everybody "A Merry Christmas."

The cooking of Christmas dinner went on regardless; the jellies, etc. now well set were found places on the chest of drawers with a cloth overall.

A good fire was now burning in the Front Room, and Lil and Vi and myself were allowed to take our presents in there so as not to be under everybody's feet

Two Christmas Puddings were being re-boiled in the copper. Mam, Aunt Charlotte and Hetty had the fat goose sizzling in the oven and vegetables boiling on top of the stove.

Uncle Fred was in charge of dealing out drinks to the callers, his face getting redder and redder in the process.

Mam went upstairs to straighten the beds, and Uncle Fred caught her nicely on the third step from the bottom, and kissed her soundly under the mistletoe. Mam went very pink, and ran quickly back to the stove, but one of the visitors managed to trap Aunt Charlotte, who pretended to be very cross.

I thought, I'm not going to let that old Uncle Sam catch me. I went to help Vi lay the big white tablecloth on, and lay knives and forks and spoons, and silver cruets round the places.

You had to watch it, as Uncle Sam came through often enough, to put a log or shovel of coal on the fire.

Cousin Vi had me going into the kitchen to make sure our numbers were right. I saw Uncle Sam bending over the sitting room fire, and thinking, now's my chance, ran for the kitchen and got seized by Uncle Fred, lifted up and given a smacking kiss; Uncle Fred was getting merrier every minute.

At last everything seemed ready for serving. The last visitor gone to his own home, everybody put in place at table. Uncle Fred was supposed to have been doing the carving of the goose in the kitchen, but he was so wobbly that he was manoeuvred into the chair at the head of the table by combined forces and sat heavily down.

Dishes of vegetables and boats of gravy were on the table, dinner plates with portions of goose nicely carved by Aunt, were brought in by Hetty and placed before us in suitably sized portions. Mam distributed the vegetables on the children's plates, potatoes and greens, roast potatoes and mashed swedes, boiled parsnips and thick rich gravy overall. She cut up the meat on Vi's plate. The rest of the company had passed dishes round and helped themselves, and at last Aunt, Mam and Hetty were able to take their seats too.

There were bottles of wine and glasses on the table, and fizzy ginger beer for the young ones.

"Happy Christmas, Everybody!!" said Aunt Charlotte raising her glass, and everybody said "Hurray," and we attacked our plates.

Vi whispered to me that she didn't like this, which was well seasoned stuffing, so I ate hers as well as my own.

Clatter, clatter went knives and forks, steam rose to the ceiling, Uncle Sam was across the table. He pretended to shake his fist at me. He knew I'd been dodging him and his scratchy beard. His cheeks were like polished red apples.

I was wading bit by bit through the mound of food, Edwin's plate was already clean and he went out for extra helpings, I had more apple sauce, which I loved. I wondered if Uncle Fred knew what he was doing, when I saw him take two spoons, filled to the brim with mustard and put them on his plate; but he rolled pieces of meat in it, and chewed and swallowed without a quiver.

At last everybody had eaten their fill, and it took some time to get everything cleared into the kitchen. The plates and dishes had to be scraped ready for washing up. A cloth was brought in and the tablecloth smoothed over, and set to rights, until everything looked clean and fresh again.

"You come with me, Edwin" said Aunt Charlotte, "and give me a hand getting the hot puddings out of the boiler."

Mam went out too, and came back with a stack of pudding dishes, then a large jug of custard.

Then we heard Edwin's voice. "Jolly Good Aunt! Well done! turned out a treat."

We turned our heads and stretched our necks and tried to see round the corner, but were told to keep our places. Aunt Charlotte and Edwin came in one behind the other, the puddings steaming, a piece of holly in each, quivering through the steam.

Aunt Charlotte stood ready to do the dishing up, when Mam whispered, and had a nod in reply.

Mam stood up. "I've been asked to read this out," she said, "So I'd better do it now."

She held up a piece of paper.

"Dear Hetty, Charlotte, Fred, Sam, Vi and all my dear children. A very happy Christmas to everybody.

I feel I must take this opportunity to tell Aunt Charlotte and Fred how much I appreciate the way you have cared for my family, until I can get back and look after them myself.

I can tell from the children's little letters how happy they are, and I will never forget your kindness.

I guess you are having a good time down there in the Forest, and you can imagine my Christmas will be very fine indeed here in London.

Turkey and Champagne and the very best of everything, presents for every one of us, and something that is quite new to me, Christmas Crackers!

I shall save my paper hat and the pretty things inside for you young ones

So, let's all raise our glasses, and Fred old boy, have another one on me!

Let everyone have a good time, you know where my thoughts are.

So, Happy Christmas again to every one of you,

With all my love,

George."

Mam sat down quickly.

Aunt Charlotte said, "Quick, the brandy!" and taking the holly from the pudding, proceeded to pour with great abandon the contents of a small bottle all over the pudding.

Quickly she struck a match, and applied it to the spirit, which immediately caught alight.

Magic! Magic!...Magic!... I thought.

I didn't know which was the more exciting - little blue flames running all over the pudding or Dad and the other men pulling crackers with the nice nurses and visiting ladies at St. Dunstan's in London Town.

The days of practically non-stop eating of Christmas Holidays, were followed inevitably by the season of coughs, colds, sore throats and worst of all - chilblains.

From my point of view, chilblains were by far the biggest enemy. As soon as you got your stockings off at night, the itching started - red blotches appeared on your feet which itched intolerably. You were told not to scratch, but there was nothing else you could do. Sometimes they got so bad that breaking outs appeared. Then Mam would put something called 'Zambuk' on a piece of pink lint, and tie them with tiny bandages, which seemed to give temporary relief.

<https://www.lakecountrymuseum.com/zam-buk-a-healing-antiseptic-ointment/>

Then it was sore throats. There was only one cure for a sore throat.

"Mam, my throat hurts" you would say.

"Right Let's see; it's Friday, that's good."

The good part about it was that the longer you had worn the stocking the better.

Saturday night was bath-night, so you wore clean stockings on Sunday. So if your sore throat started on Friday, you had been wearing the stockings all the week, which made it more effective.

Mam flattened the foot out, so that the bottom of the stocking could be put on the front of your throat, the leg of the stocking wound carefully round and round quite tightly and a safety pin secured it at the back of your neck. Strangely, this always seemed to work.

Sometimes the infection was deeper in the chest, which was a more serious matter. Hetty was the one who seemed to suffer most from this complaint, and sometimes had a terrible cough and felt very feverish at night.

Aunt Charlotte had what she considered a sovereign remedy for this complaint. She kept in the cupboard a large basin of goose-grease, carefully salvaged from the drippings from the Christmas Goose.

"There's nothing like Goose-grease" she would say.

Hetty hated it, but was willing to submit when she was really ill.

A piece of brown paper was cut vaguely in the shape of a shield.

It was put flat on the kitchen table and spread thickly with goose-grease. Hetty was stripped to the waist.

First hold the greasy paper before the fire, and when it became warm, clamp it quickly on the front of the chest where it clung.

Repeat the process on the back, a flannel vest went over the top to keep everything in place.

There was one girl at school who had an outbreak of eczema on her head at this time. Her mother was frantic and consulted Aunt Charlotte. Nothing she had been given by the doctor had had any effect.

The disease just spread and spread and her hair came out.

Aunt Charlotte recommended the last resource, which was using a cottage loaf. The soft bread inside was all taken out, until a hollow crust remained. The hollow crust was put right over the head, like a hat. It had to remain in this position, until clear healthy skin began to grow, which it surely did.

Hetty had to stay at home with her bad chest till she was better.

Lil and I went to school as usual. Sometimes it was slippery, and the cobbled entrance up to the school yard was hard to climb. We kept on the edge near the black iron railings, and clung to them to help us up the slope. It was comforting to see the stoves glowing when you went through the door. If you could bring a spare pair of shoes, you could put your wet boots round the outside of the fire-guard to dry out.

The big pot-bellied stoves, one in the main room, another in the Infant's, glowed sometimes red-hot.

Jackie Hopkins was the boy who brought in the tall hopper, full to the brim with dull coke, and opening the lid of the stove, poured inside enough to last till the end of the school day.

Every time he came in, a ridge of soft snow clung to the edge of his boots, and by the time he had finished his stoking up, little puddles lay steaming round the floor at the edge of the guard.

It was the happiest part of Jackie's day, replenishing the stoves morning and afternoon, and he did the job seriously and regularly. It was a good thing he got satisfaction from this source at least, for there was little he tried with pen and paper, or anything of a literary nature, that earned approval from his teachers.

I had long been reading small books, which were a great delight, and I had read everything they had in the Infant's room, and Mrs. Parker would choose some for me from the Junior Class.

In the afternoon you could do paper cutting and drawing. I cut out paper dolls, and separate clothes to dress them in and made dresses in beautiful patterns.

It was nearly dark when you went home, which you did as fast as you could.

After tea we played Ludo and Snakes and Ladders, and Mam taught us a game which she used to play when she was a girl.

One person was chosen to be the old woman, who was dressed in a long skirt, had a shawl over her head, and carried a bag.

Everybody else sat round in a circle. The old woman went round the circle saying,

"Here comes an Old Woman, from Botany Bay, who wants to know what you will give her today?"

She faced the person in front of whom she had come to a halt. The only answer you were allowed to give was, "Nothing at all." If you laughed, or said anything else, you had to give a forfeit, which she put in her bag.

It was amazing how, as soon as you were told not to laugh, you began giggling; or when the old woman stood in front of you saying her rhyme, you were tempted to offer her something ridiculous!

At the end of the game the forfeits were redeemed, and you were given silly or near impossible things to do before you could get your property back.

One evening, Aunt Charlotte said, "Be a good job when Easter comes and we can all have a break. I've been thinking, Hetty, I think we'll take them down to see the Bore."

"The Bore! What's the Bore? Where is it?" we all clamoured.

“Well I don’t know. Don’t they teach you anything these days? Everybody all over the world knows what the Bore is.”

“We’ll try and go there on Good Friday. That’s usually the best time to see it! Of course, Easter comes at different times so you can’t really count on that.”

“But what is it? Where is it?” we wanted to know.

“At Newnham of course, and it’s caused by the tide.”

“What’s the Tide?”

Mam said, “Of course they’ve never seen the sea. When I was a little girl, we always went to the seaside for the summer holidays. We always went by rail, my mother and father, my brothers Henry and Frank, and my sister Lily.

The thing we children did all the time was to build sand castles, with buckets and spades. We made moats around them and patted them smooth. Then we would watch to see the tide turn. It crept further and further up the beach, until it filled the moats, and we would run round trying to keep the water inside. But the waves splashed higher, and we had to back further up the beach. For a little while the castles were still there, then they fell into the moat, then they melted away and the waves came tossing right up to the promenade, and we had to go back to the hotel for tea.”

“Did the tide do that every day?” I asked.

“Twice a day’ said Mam, “It always seemed to come in just before teatime, then after a while it went back out and people walked on the promenade in the moonlight, and the sands would dry out. Then, I believe it turned again in the night and went back out and let the sun dry the sands, in time for us to go to the beach again and make more sand-castles.”

“Just the same on the Severn,” said Aunt Charlotte, “Morning Tide, then Evening Tide.”

“So, what is the Bore?”

Hetty suddenly said, “I remember having a lesson in Geography. The highest tides are in the Spring, about Easter time; the tides come all round the coast, but when they come to the Bristol Channel, they’re coming so fast that it is as if they were going into a funnel, and the waves get piled one on top of another. They rush up the Severn, and the narrower the banks, the more water piles up. By the time it gets up to Newnham instead of the tide just turning, it comes with a great rush, like a wall of water, and it’s called the ‘Bore.’”

“Of course,” said Aunt Charlotte, Easter isn’t at a certain date like Christmas, so that although all the tides are high at this time of the year, you can’t be sure you’re going to see the highest tide just this Good Friday, but it’ll be near enough, so we’ll try and have our picnic then. The fresh air will do us all good.”

Sure enough, the weather gradually improved, and I thought I should be glad when I was old enough to learn Geography, which seemed to be the key to a lot of mysterious things that happened around us.

The boys began playing marbles in the playground, and Mam brought us skipping ropes from Cinderford. Sometimes high winds swept down the valley, and the boys ran down the cobbled drive, throwing their caps in the air, and chasing and catching them as they fell to the ground.

The Easter holidays were not far ahead, and I thought about seeing a wall of water rushing up the Severn. I had never been as far as Newnham, but Uncle Fred went there nearly every day.

At last the day came when we broke up for Easter, and we were helping to pack baskets ready for the picnic.

Aunt Charlotte and Mam made sure that everything we could possibly need was packed in somewhere.

We had to get to bed early, for we were to catch the earliest reasonable Motor that went down the valley. I was greatly excited, for I loved the rail-motor dearly, and had studied everything with the greatest care going up to Cinderford.

The surroundings on the way to Newnham were completely new territory, and I anticipated them as though going to a foreign land.

First, of course, we had to get ourselves and our belongings over the line and up the road to the Halt.

There we waited, but this time we watched up the line for the motor to pull in.

"I doubt very much we'll see much of the Bore." said Aunt Charlotte to Mam. "I've known it come up as early as six o'clock in the morning!"

"I wouldn't worry." said Mam, "It's in the fresh air, and it's a picnic, I'm sure that's enough of a treat."

She had had her work cut out keeping us away from the edge of the platform - craning up the line to see the engine coming in.

"Here she come," I heard a man say, and almost at once there it was!

We all climbed aboard, and the guard came round for our tickets, saying "Off early this morning, then Mrs. James?"

Something outside caught my eye, and I was just in time to see our own home, when the lights came on and we were inside the tunnel with the hooter hooting.

Only a short period of darkness, and we were again in daylight, already in a different country - lush green grass, cows in pasture, white cottages.

Just a few minutes and we were in the mile tunnel. When we came out of that, we could see the Severn itself, away on our right, under wide skies. The woods had retreated miles away, and more and more cows lashed their tails, and gazed straight at us out of great brown eyes, I could even see their eye-lashes.

It was really quite a fair way to the river, but the air was so full of light that it looked nearer. We paused at two halts - Bullo and Bullo-cross.

All at once something very strange seemed to be happening.

A toy engine, puffing steam and pulling toy carriages, seemed to be rushing towards us across the emerald marshes between us and the river.

I realised it was the distance that was making it look so small but that distance was rapidly diminishing, and if we both carried on at this rate, we were clearly set on a collision course.

"Look Mam! Look Hetty!" I shouted. "That other train, is it going to bash into us?"

"Of course not," said Aunt Charlotte, "That's the South Wales Train. It's due to meet the motor at Newnham, so that people who want to go on to Gloucester can change here. Ours will be going straight back to Cinderford.

I began to get some inkling of the meaning of the magic box in Aunt Charlotte's kitchen. How clever to be able to send messages with little bells and flashes, to tell the Engine Drivers exactly where they should be.

Slowing down, we pulled in at Newnham Station.

A footbridge went over the line, its criss-cross railings painted white. "Up over the bridge with you." said Aunt, "But no running off the platform till Mam and I get there."

We climbed up the steps and stood holding the white pole across the top. The other train was pulling in, and puffs of white steam were floating all around us. How absolutely lovely, I thought!

Down the steps the other side, and wait for Mam and Aunt Charlotte. Together we walked down a strange road past several cottages, and found ourselves looking at the High Street.

No resemblance at all to Cinderford with its windy streets and workaday air.

On this side the shops and houses were set well above the street on a flag-stoned terrace.

Between the terrace and the road was a grassy back abloom with daffodils.

We paused and looked.

"Now girls" said Aunt, "I'm afraid the Bore went up early, so we'll just go round to the green for our picnic. You must keep close to me and your Mam, because we have to cross the High Street. So keep all together."

Down some stone steps and walk across the road where an occasional horse and trap, or a car, went on its way.

On to the pavement the other side, where many of the houses had a very superior air, and bore highly polished brass plates and immaculate doorsteps.

The street went downhill, and lower down, you could see the Town Clock, set in a square tower high above the street.

More daffodils tossed their heads among brilliant green grass at the foot of the tower. Round the corner we went, and there suddenly was the Severn. Railings all along the roadside with access spaces to go on to the green, which was furnished with many public seats all facing the river and with their backs to the highway. Mam and Aunt sat on one of the seats and put our belongings beside them,

"Can I look at the river," I asked.

"Yes, but not too close." said Aunt. "You can see with your own eyes; it's still going upstream."

Certainly, it was going upstream. Debris floating on its surface went swiftly by.

A powerful angry spirit had possession of that river. Look how it had torn heavy branches off trees, and carried them like weightless twigs miles from their home. What was it so angry about?

Perhaps it was trying to tell Newnham, with its pretty daffodils and polished brass plates, that here was a more powerful force, angry and destructive, demanding respect for all its moody power.

Looking across the still turbulent water, I could see a strange looking cliff, with a church spire on top.

It looked as though a giant cleaver had sliced straight through the land, leaving layer upon layer of various strata exposed for all to see. Red soil, yellow layer, brown layer, a thread of something brighter.

It was clear to see that it was the work of the mighty Severn.

How many eras had that angry flood been roaring up the river, eating away the land?

"Glad, stop staring at the river." shouted Hetty, "we're going to play rounders."

Bundles had been rolled up, and placed at intervals around a rough circle.

We were in two teams, Lily and I against Hetty and Vi; not a very fair division, for Lil and I were both good runners, but Vi kept laughing and falling over, so that Hetty had to do twice as much work.

We gave up after a while as nobody was willing to have Vi for a partner. We sat with our legs through the back of the seat and watched the traffic on the highway.

Several carriages of different kinds went by, some looking highly polished with high-stepping horses, and quite a number of farm-wagons with ruddy faced, heavy-looking men holding the reins.

Aunt Charlotte said the strange looking cliff was at Westbury, and that it always reminded her of a layer cake, and we all agreed with her.

She said that it always did everybody a lot of good to spend a day in the open air by the river, because the 'bore' always brought with it real sea air. Practically just as much good as going to Weston-Super-Mare, which everybody knew was a healthy place.

She and Mam decided to get the meal ready. First spread a blanket on the grass. Then a well laundered white table-cloth.

We looked around for clean stones to weight the cloth to the ground. Then out came cups and saucers and plates, knives and spoons, a large home-made fruit cake, a large cottage loaf and dish of butter, a pot of strawberry, another of blackberry jam, two thermos flasks of tea.

Aunt Charlotte clasped the loaf to her bosom and cut the first crust. Mam buttered it and gave it to Hetty. For some reason Hetty always had the crust because she liked it. Then Aunt Charlotte buttered the loaf and cut the slices. Mam spread the jam of your choice and passed it round on plates. We just sat and ate, finding we were very hungry.

The cottage loaf was close to its end, but Mam was given two thin slices of bread and butter for herself. She was a very dainty eater.

She and Aunt had the first two cups of tea from the flask, which came out strong and hot, as they loved it.

We also had cups of tea as far as it would go; extra sugar in a bag provided more sweetening for those who wished it.

It was a good idea to keep the rich fruit cake till the last; it was so full of nourishment that it only took a small slice to fill up any empty corners.

The sun had been shining more warmly for some time.

The end of the loaf and the remains of the fruit cake had been wrapped in tea towels and stowed away. We looked and found a small gully where water was still draining towards the river. Cups and plates were given a cursory washing up, and wiped with handfuls of damp grass, and these too were packed away.

I ran down nearer the river bank, and saw that the water was now flowing downstream in a more civilised manner.

<https://www.royalforestofdean.info/severn-vale/newnham.shtml>

Aunt Charlotte said we could now pack up and take our belongings down to the quay.

We retraced our steps back towards the town, past the clock, up to the pavement. More people were now about, visiting shops, stationers, bakers, grocery stores all set among professional offices with their brass plates. It was really warm on the pavements.

We came to some substantial railings round the end of a paved area, and peering over could see a broad cobbled way descending very quickly downhill. I caught a brief glimpse of water at the bottom.

Aunt and Mam were a short distance behind us, Aunt rather puffed and out of breath.

“We’d better wait a bit” said Hetty, “This is sure to be the way to the quay.”

She ran back and helped Aunt with the basket.

“That’s right” said Aunt, “Good girls for waiting.”

“You can see for yourself that it’s very steep down here, so take it steady. We’ll go quietly down and you will see a wooden seat on the left side. We’ll go as far as that first.



Which is just what we did, but Lil, Vi and I still got to the seat first, and immediately started shouting.

“Mam, Aunt Charlotte! There’s sand down here! Real sand! Can we take our shoes and stockings off?”

At the sight of the sand, all thought of the roaring, angry spirit of the river fled my mind.

Sand was for making sand-castles, water for paddling. The sun shone on sparkling happy water.

Mam and Aunt Charlotte were seated on the bench. They looked at one another.

“Well, I suppose they’d better have a try.” said Aunt “But remember this. Never trust the Severn. Go carefully. Watch your feet, and don’t go in water beyond the sand-bar. The current’s still running. Anybody trying to do anything foolish could easily get carried away.”

We left our shoes and stockings with Mam, and crept gingerly down the cobbled road, till we came to the quay. The Quay was built of flat heavy rocks, but smooth to walk on. It went horizontally along under a huge red cliff, which appeared to be holding up the church standing precariously near the edge.

The quay seemed to have been under water at flood tide and had little pools still drying out under wind and sun.

The golden sand-bar beckoned us, but between it and the quay, a yard or two of slimy Severn mud barred our way.

Gingerly we tried it out with our bare feet. It was a dirty, slimy, slippery way to go, but nothing was going to stop us getting to that sand.

At last we reached our goal and turned to wave to Mam and Aunt on top of the bank. We stood at the edge of the sand and washed our feet in the water, then skipped and jumped about on the sand. We tried modelling it with our hands and making trenches to let the water in.

We found that if we stood for a little while we started sinking.

“Quicksands,” we shouted, “Quicksands! If you stand still for two minutes, you will get pulled right under.”

So we stood for a while, the sand under the water shifting round between our toes, then leapt back to safety.

All the time we could hear from above Mam shouting admonitions.

“Watch out for Vi. She’s getting too near the other side. Don’t let her get her dress wet through. Tuck it up for her.”

For a while I stood looking across the other side. Cows were coming down and drinking in the river. There seemed to be more sand that side, and one largish building. I found out afterwards the place was called Arlingham, and the place was a public house and farm.

I wondered who ever would be likely to take the trouble to cross the river to buy a pint of beer. As far as I could see, there was nobody at all living over there except perhaps the farmer, whereas Newnham had numerous Hotels and public houses. I had a great desire to go to Arlingham. I was convinced that there was plenty of sand and no mud on that side.

Presently Mam and Aunt were shouting that it was time for us to be coming up.

If it had been a hard job to get to the sand, it was well-nigh impossible to get back through the mud to reach the quay. There was no water to wash slimy mud off your feet. It looked as though you were wearing black shoes and socks. We could find no way of carrying water, and in the end had to do the best we could with long tufts of grass.

Back to the seat we scraped dried mud with whatever came to hand, and put stockings and shoes over our smudgy feet and legs until we could reach home.

“We’ll be getting back into town,” said Aunt Charlotte, “We’ll just have time to have a word with Fred and Millie, before the motor’s due.”

Carrying our belongings, we scrambled back up the cobbled way. It was so steep that we had to stop several times to let Aunt catch her breath. It was a very interesting old street with many old buildings housing old fashioned trades. Several had boards hung out announcing unfamiliar occupations.

The foundation layer of stones joined the roadway at a very sharp angle. One board had a painted sign, 'A. O. Beard Fettle, Est 1803', another 'J. R. Reems Chandler'.

Neither of these trades meant anything to me, but I was determined to find out. I wondered if, when you walked inside, the floors would be tilting upwards as it appeared outside.

One open-sided shed had the shell of a boat propped on racks, and a young man was shaving off curls of fresh clean wood, which mounted in curly piles around his legs. What a wonderful occupation, I thought.

We reached the High Street, and under Aunt's direction crossed over and went up the steps to the terraced pavement on the far side.



Undetected before, we could see a stone arch set in between two shops.

Surprisingly we came out of the passage into a kind of courtyard. Facing one another across small plots of garden were six cottages, three on our left, and a practically identical three on the right.

We went across a narrow pavement before the three left hand cottages. Instantly a door opened and a lady appeared at the door.

"Why, Goodness me, it's Charlotte! Come in! Come in! and these must be George's girls, and Hetty. Is that right? And what you could all do with is a good cup of tea. Come along all of you. We'll fit you in somewhere!"

This lady was Millie Tarling. She was the wife of Fred Tarling who had come as a foster-child to Aunt Charlotte when he was a young boy.

Aunt Millie was a striking looking woman. A well-rounded figure with heavy, nearly black hair. This she wore smoothly brushed over her head and resting in a heavy coil on the nape

of the neck. Her eyes were large, dark brown and expressive, and what struck me most was the beautiful skin, pale, flawless and smooth, like rich cream.

She gave an immediate feeling of warmth and kindness. She was deep-bosomed and obviously the mother of the several children who eyed us shyly.

Her husband arrived from work, a tall handsome man, with a healthy colour in his cheeks and a brown moustache. He was slim of build and very dark eyed. He was wearing the working uniform of a railway employee.

All the children were extremely good looking. The eldest girl, Margey, was about ten, most of the others seemed to be boys. One of the little ones pulled my dress and said would we go out for a game. So several of us went outside and played 'Hide and Seek' around all sorts of courts and alleys.

Within several inter-connecting courts we found numerous corners to hide and dodge and return to den, a marvellous place for 'Hide and Seek.'

We heard our names being called and went back to the cottage. Mam and Aunt Charlotte were ready and waiting, and the Tarling children waved us 'Good-bye'.

Auntie Millie seemed to be specially attentive to Mam. She kissed her as they parted, and I thought I heard her say, "Good Luck Hetty - Not long now."

I had good reason to ponder on these words over the next few days.

On the journey back to Soudley Halt, I had been overcome with sleep, and in a half-asleep condition, had been hustled off the motor at the Halt, and had trudged bleary eyed with the rest back down the road to the Railway House.

Before going to bed we had to get ourselves cleaned up with the help of bowls of warm soapy water, and dispose of the remains of Severn mud.

It was, of course, the Easter Holidays, but Mam and aunt seemed always to be going off on secret assignments.

Nobody gave us a hint of what was afoot. I kept repeating to myself the words I had heard passing between Mam and Aunt Millie, "Good-luck Hetty. Not long now."

To me it seemed to hint that we were about to be involved in some momentous change, which although good in itself, needed very careful handling.

The letters that had recently come from London had not been read out, but limited to 'Dad sends his love' or suchlike remarks.

Putting two and two together, I began to think it was just possible that Dad was about to come home.

I wouldn't mention this even to Lil, in case I was way off the mark. In any case it seemed that we were all living in a state of suppressed excitement.

The practical fact that another adult, a man at that, would possibly be joining us, had not presented itself to me as anything posing a problem.

If Dad was coming home, then joy, joy, joy! That was all we wanted wasn't it???

Then what was all this fuss and secrecy about? If not, I couldn't for the life of me think what was going on.

Then one evening before going to bed, Aunt Charlotte called us round the table.

"Now, my dears," she said, "Mam and I have some good news for you. Your Dad will be coming home on Saturday."

"This Saturday?" I asked.

"Yes."

I think that both Het and Lil had their own suspicions of what was afoot.

Het said, "Saturday, is it? H-m-m."

"We're very happy then, aren't we?" I said, "Or is there something the matter?"

Aunt Charlotte shook her head and swallowed. She didn't look exactly happy.

"You see my dear. There's not really enough room here for us all including a married couple."

Then the horrible truth struck me.

"D'you mean we can't live here anymore? But it's so lovely. Aunt Charlotte and Uncle Fred, and Edwin and Uncle Sam and Cousin Vi and Mam and all of us! Simply lovely!!

Aunt Charlotte put her handkerchief to her eyes.

"My love, d'you think I won't miss you. But you must think of others."

Your Dad is a man, and a man wants his own home, with his wife and children to himself.

You're always writing letters and looking forward to Dad coming home, so this is how it's got to be.

As it is, we've been lucky. We've found a home for you right away, not far, and there's no reason why we shouldn't see one another every day; for some time anyway."

By this time I had my own interpretation of what Aunt Charlotte's 'being lucky' consisted of.

Scouring the highways and byways, interviewing influential people, pressing and persuading to obtain her end; always, let it be said, to the benefit of someone near and dear to her.

It was Hetty who got down to practical details. "So, have you found a house for us, Aunt Charlotte?"

"Yes my dear. It might be a bit strange at first, but you must all remember, it won't be for very long.

St. Dunstan's are taking up a business for your Dad in Cinderford; but in the meanwhile, we all thought you would be better living as a family for a while, without anybody interfering.

It's not far short of four years since Dad and Mam ran their own home. You all know your Dad is now blind. The house is a very quiet place. Don't you think it's fair that Dad and Mam should have a quiet time together before attempting to run a business?"

A great deal of this went completely over my head.

"Yes," we all said, "But where are we going?"

"You will be going to live at the Mill House," said Aunt Charlotte.

For a moment my mind was completely blank. At last my thoughts settled, and I just barely realised that there was indeed a place that could be called "Mill House."

The Railway House was the last house before the tunnel.

The hard road through the village continued on its way to Blakeney. This road was very steeply hemmed in on the left by woodland that ascended, steeply and abruptly, from the road's edge to a good height, all covered with timber.

One could continue down this road for a good half mile with no sign of human habitation, until lying low off the road was the old mill.

A lonely, abandoned looking spot, which may at one time have been a thriving place of industry, but at this time was a tangle of fallen timbers, lumps of concrete, broken beams and a general air of neglect. The whole complex of the mill lay well below the road level, and could easily have been passed by a traveller without so much as realising its existence.

There was however, one solid building which could lay claim to care having been taken, and a look of solid respectability. This was the small block which stood exactly on the road, and had previously acted as offices.

Constructed of brick, one storey high, a solid front, panelled door painted brown, several fairly large sash windows, a slated roof and a brick-built chimney. I don't think it had been used as a home before.

We were taken down to see it in the week, and it was soon apparent that Mam and Aunt Charlotte had been very busy there.

The interior of the house was lined with match-board, stained and varnished to a high gloss, giving a very clean and cheerful air. The floor in the living room had been covered with brightly striped coco matting, and the furniture that we had last seen at Littledean Hill had reappeared in this new setting. A solid scrubbed top wooden table, kitchen chairs with varnished backs and legs, and two wooden armchairs.

A free-standing stove against one wall, with shelves for pots and pans, and a large cupboard against another wall.

This was the largest room; the rooms leading out of it were furnished as bedrooms. The curtains in the main room were of bright chintzy material.

Between living room and bedrooms a door was set in the back wall, opening onto a wooden stairway with handrail, leading to the yard below. The yard was of flagstones, giving ample storage space under the whole house. Wood and Coal and other necessities could be stacked here, and a wooden lavatory was built at the one end.

From this level you could see the remains of the derelict mill, old beams hanging at crazy angles, broken and rusted pieces of machinery. None of it appeared to be of a size and weight that could be adapted for games, but rather spelt 'Danger'.

Moreover, the ground, extending to several acres, which surrounded it was of a swampy, marshy nature where the brook seemed to have spread itself with no confining banks. Some of the plants which flourished there were in themselves attractive: bull rushes, and spiky pink flowering plants, yellow irises, all of which I longed to gather. The boggy land, however, would not support a person's weight to pick them.

In fact, the whole place, except for the house interior, had a forlorn and lonely air.

Many hands helped to transfer our goods and stock our supplies, and eventually we ourselves were installed.

There were no taps in the house but, on the opposite side of the road to the front door, a pipe stuck out of the bank, and fresh spring water came spurting out. This indeed was a novelty, and I was allowed to take a pail and fill it, and suddenly my heart was full of wonder and joy.

The sun shone on bright sprays of water, and there, hovering on iridescent wings, were the most beautiful dragonflies. Their angled bodies were like dainty beads strung on wire, the

wings like gossamer rainbows. I had seen dragonflies in nature books, but this was the first time I had seen them in reality. I went to fetch Mam to see the beautiful sight, and she too was delighted. She helped me to carry the water back.

"Isn't it lovely Mam?" I said, "Dad will be home tomorrow, and we've got Dragonflies dancing by our front door."

This was the first night we slept at the mill house. When the oil lamps were lit, a fire cheerfully burning in the stove, pretty gay curtains drawn across the windows, bright new striped matting under our feet, we began to feel that this was indeed our home.

We were tucked in our beds; Mam had a room of her own.

I was aroused from sleep by a crushing noise underneath and horrible squealing noises. I was soon out of bed and creeping into Mam's room.

She woke on the instant. "What is it, love?" I told her.

"That'll be the old tom-cats, hunting rats in the mill. Creep in by me for a bit."

"Rats in the Mill!" I thought, "This is a lonely, frightening place." and crept into the comfort of Mam's body.

It had been arranged that Uncle Fred would meet Dad off the London train at Gloucester, and bring him down to our new home.

It was difficult to settle down to do anything in the time we spent in waiting. Difficult for me, but how much more for Mam. I had written so many letters to Dad, but it was almost like having written to a figure of my own imagination. Now that the time had come that he would soon materialise on our own doorstep, I started to feel rather apprehensive.

Most of Dad's letters to me had been about walks he intended taking us around places he remembered so well from his young manhood. I had no reserves about this at all; no doubt at all that this would be simply accomplished. He never mentioned, or referred in any way, to the fact he was now sightless, nor did it ever occur to me that it might be an obstacle to our planned explorations. I simply accepted it is a fact, that if Dad said we were going to do something, then that indeed is what we would do.

At last the time arrived that we caught sight of two figures walking smartly down the road; Uncle Fred carrying a case, and a man wearing a brown suit, a trilby hat and carrying a walking stick.

Mam opened the front door and they came in.

"So, safely delivered, eh Fred?" said Dad, taking off his hat.

We all seemed struck dumb for a moment, then Mam came forward and put her hand on his shoulders.

The next thing seemed to be that cups of tea were being poured, and Uncle Fred saying, "Well, you've got yourself fixed nice and dandy then, eh, Hetty," and Mam asking how the journey had been.

We were all sitting round the table watching like cats.

How dad touched everything before lifting it to his lips, how carefully he replaced cup and saucer in its place, and helped himself to a sandwich put before him, making conversation all the time, but making no errors.

He wore blank spectacles, and at each side of the temple was a scar, perfectly healed and not unsightly.

Tea over, Dad said, "Well now, let's see who we've got here," and sitting in the armchair, he had us all come round him.

"Het first," he said, and Het stood before him. He placed his hands on her shoulders, then lightly spanned her waist and lifted her.

"H'm, young lady about four foot eight, weight five stone three pounds, brown hair in plaits about twenty inches long, red jumper, blue skirt, black stockings.

Het started laughing, and Vi shouted "It's not right! it's not right!"

Dad caught her. "Who's this little person telling me I'm wrong?" and lifted her on his knee.

"It's Lily whose got the red jumper, silly," she said.

Soon we were all arguing about colours and weights and Uncle Fred was joining in.

At first I couldn't think what was different about Dad, apart from the obvious, but suddenly realised that he was much more solid, no longer a slim lithe figure, but a square-built man.

In the days that followed, we were soon to learn that, with a blind man in the house, there were certain orders that had to be obeyed.

First in importance was that no pot was put on the stove with its handle pointing outwards, secondly that chairs were replaced under tables when not in use, every article had a place and was replaced there when not in use. Uncle Fred on the first day had shown Dad down the outside stairway, and Dad soon had the plan of it in his mind.

I used to close my eyes, and try and get the lay-out of everything in my mind, but it was harder than I thought. It seemed to me that once Dad had the plan pictured in his mind, it was there forever.

One of the first catastrophes to occur, was when someone had left a door into a bedroom half- open. Dad had walked quickly from the other end of the room and met it head on.

The language that ensued made Mam gasp, and say that the army had certainly not improved his language, which was shocking! Apparently when a young man, Dad had been an active member of the Baptists, a lay preacher, and drank no intoxicants. On the other hand, I thought, there wasn't much you could do about the edge of a door striking you full in the face except swear, if that gave you some relief.

We soon learnt that was one of the things you did not do - leave a door half open.

Dad was soon chopping wood, carrying coal and wood up the back steps, and fetching pails of water from across the road, without spilling a drop. His stick was a substitute for sight, and there was so little traffic on the road that this presented no problem.

The one morning the postman arrived with Dad's well -anticipated Library Books, and was not looking too happy about it.

Dad was reading Dickens, and the first four volumes in Braille, which constituted only a small portion of one of the novels, had presented quite a problem for the village postman.

Each volume consisted of a hard covered book, about eighteen inches by twelve and two and a half inches thick, the heavy brown pages deeply embossed in braille writing. Each volume totally enclosed in a canvas cover, tied securely with three sets of tape.

It was difficult to guess the weight of these volumes, but certainly a considerable burden to convey on a bicycle.

"How often d' you expect a load like this then, George?" asked the postman at the door.

"Depends on how soon I can read them and get them back, doesn't it" said Dad, "How long do you think? There'll be a pretty well of smaller stuff coming through: St. Dunstan's

Review, that's ordinary print, Weekly News Braille about half a pound. I expect you'll get to recognise it; but it's all important stuff, so don't get tempted to leave anything behind. Buy you a pint at the White Horse on Saturday, eh, Jo? So long."

"Oh Jo, by the way, I'm expecting my typewriter some time. It'll be well packed up. It'll be pretty heavy. We shall have to see about that, so I'll be glad if you'll keep your eye open, eh?"

Dad was a very independent sort of person, but there was no need for him to take on everything.

The village people were so kind-hearted and sympathetic, and many a bag of potatoes, bag of peas or several cabbages found themselves on our doorstep, donor unknown.

We awoke one morning to find there was a great amount of activity on the wooded hillside in front of the house.

Draft horses, dragging heavy loads, had arrived way up the hill, and had already started on the process of tree-felling. The sound of huge saws gnawing their way through massive trunks, then the heartening cry of "Ti-im-m-ber" followed by a hush, then a resounding cr--a--sh.

As the great trees fell, so the sunshine crept in transforming the accustomed shadowed hillside into a sun-filled playground.

If you climbed up the bank, you could see the handsome horses being linked by chains to huge trunks which were dragged over rough ground to the edge of the woodland.

Other men were flashing saws, axes, and choppers as they trimmed branches and guided them into rows.

Every day Lil and I climbed the bank, got through the wire and watched the distant figures clear yet more woodland, and the sunshine creep towards us until the trees were lying down, right to the wire fence bordering the road.

We picked our way carefully through the brushwood, in full sunlight, until we could look from above at the house lying far below us.

From here we could see smoke from our own chimney rising towards us, and flowers and brilliant green marsh plants spreading a patterned carpet down the valley.

It was easy to think of lovely games to play up here.

Lil's dearest wish in life was to be a rich lady, in beautiful clothes and jewels, a carriage and horse, and servants to wait on her.

Now here we were with endless carriages at our command. We selected a branch with a smooth stem.

Lily made herself a comfortable seat with broken fronds, but first she had to have a name. This, Lily had already chosen.

The richest person we knew in our estimation, was cousin Vi, who had a gold wrist watch, went to piano lessons, and never appeared to soil her hands with unladylike tasks.

What is more, Lily knew what was supposed to be a secret; Cousin Vi, known as Vi James, had started life as Violet Parnell, a much superior type of name.

Now that Lil had become a carriage owner, she decided to adopt this name for herself, and was to be referred to as 'Lady Violet Parnell'; the bracken, green satin cushions; and the tall bracken she held in her hand a fringed parasol.



I had a double role, first a horse pulling the carriage downhill, pawing the ground and tossing my head, and at the level ground rapidly changing into a beggar girl called Annie, pathetic and poor and holding out pleading hands to the highborn lady.

This act was so successful, that we rushed back up the hill for another carriage, and thought how we could improve on the first presentation.

We found a winding garland of wild honeysuckle, which had lately bathed the air at the very top of the tree with heavy perfume, but now had become well within our reach.

The garlands became a jewelled veil, draped over Lady Violet's head and shoulders. I became a much more active carriage horse; and when I changed into Annie, I had acquired a starving baby sister, and wrung my hands, and tears flowed down my cheeks.

Even Lady Violet's proud heart was touched, and she gave me a handful of jewels from her veil.

When Lil stepped from the branch, she eyed me severely. "You look a terrible mess; anybody would think I'd been beating you.

Clean your face up and you can be Lady Violet Parnell for a bit, and I'll be the horse and Annie; you'd better start smiling and looking proud and happy. Here's your jewelled veil, and we'll get another carriage.

All the days while Lil and I had been inventing new games on the sunny banks, Het had been helping Mam in the house. This was no hardship to Hetty, she loved keeping the house clean and polished.

Dad put up a new clothes-line down in the yard, which made a good drying ground, as here too the sun shone brightly. Dad made himself a guide-rope, about a foot from the ground, by knocking pegs in the ground and attaching a rope to it. Thus he was able to keep contact with it by touching it with his stick, and not stray into 'No-Man's-Land' in the roomy yard.

He did all the heavy chores about the house, and in the evening read his Library Books, sitting in the armchair and running his forefinger over the dots.

In a short while he was able to get up to the White Horse occasionally, Uncle Fred having taken him a few times. He never set out without certain essentials stowed about his person. First his walking stick; second, his Braille Pocket Watch which never gained or lost a second; next his tobacco pouch and matches; then his double pack of playing cards, all stamped in the corners with the card value in Braille; his lovely box of ivory dominoes, and his mouth organ.

Crib was the favourite card game, and Dad was soon in the local crib team, being able to memorise every card as it was called out when applicable.

A game of dominoes, too, he could enjoy as would a sighted person.

When we felt quite settled down, Dad said to me, "Now then Glad, what about a walk Saturday afternoon? I know from your letters most of the places you've been to, so what about trying some new pastures. Try our luck on the other side of the brook, eh?"

Saturday afternoon found Dad and I setting out for our first walk together. Up through the village and under the railway bridge, past the row of sunny cottages.

"Look across the green and you should see a single white house, a lane running up the left-hand side of it with a white gate at the top."

This I soon located and away we went and through the gate. We were confronted with a steep hill.

"Look up the path in front of you, and see if you can pick out a tall tree; the top is shaped like a fan, with a segment missing, stands out from the rest."

Gazing around me I located the tree. It was a fair walk up the grassy ride, but at last we reached the top. A few more paces and we were on level ground.

Here we halted and I was told to look back towards the village.

"Now" said Dad, "Let's see if we can get our bearings." The village looked quite different from this angle.

Dad stretched out his hand, pointing his stick.

"I am trying to point at the church spire," he said, "How far out am I?"

"You've nearly got the right place," I said "but you're way over the top."

"Never mind that" said Dad, "Just move it a bit to the right angle."

<https://www.forestofdeanhistory.org.uk/learn-about-the-forest/st-michaels-church-soudley/>

[She was mistaken about the spire – only a bell-tower – maybe it seemed bigger in her memory? Writing this she was remembering events around 70 years previously.]

This I did and we turned again and had to look for another landmark. I told Dad everything I noticed, and sometimes Dad would feel the trunk of a shrub or tree and tell me its name. I just carried on at Dad's discretion, with no idea where we were heading, and only knew I was in unfamiliar surroundings.

We were walking over a path through tall pines, when Dad recalled how he had once been frightened at this very spot.

"It was quite late in the evening," he said "When a Barn Owl came soundlessly through the trees and brushed my face. I was terrified."

"I expect I'd have been terrified too," I said, "except that I couldn't imagine getting up here in the first place, especially nearly dark."

"Oh I used to roam all over the place, and sometimes got myself lost and arrive back after dark. It was then I started to memorise certain landmarks to look for; just as well as it turned out."

So we went on and eventually found ourselves approaching a hard road over a little green.

Turn left here, and ten minutes later, we mysteriously found ourselves on our own doorstep, having approached it from the opposite side from which we started. Dad laughed when I said I couldn't imagine how we had got there.

"Didn't you realise we had been travelling in a circle?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Good job it was me taking you, instead of the other way about then; you'd soon have us lost"

A cat had now joined our family, and we loved him dearly. It was a beautifully marked grey tabby, with golden eyes. We called him 'Tiger'. He had an ideal life, vermin to chase in the old mill, food provided by four worshippers, and unapproachable places to get beyond our reach.

Numbers of business-like letters arrived at the Mill House. Dad's typewriter had arrived damage-free. He typed replies, and Mam read them over before they were posted. As the incoming letters had also to be read out, we were all aware of what was going on.

It was all about our proposed removal to a shop in Cinderford. This of course, was a very exciting proposition.

Many arrangements had to be made, but in the end I left Soudley in tears.

I had kept Tiger close by me while we packed ourselves into the horse-drawn vehicle that had been decided upon, so that our personal goods were under our own supervision.

Tiger was in a basket and a cushion over him, which I held down firmly.

Many friends were there to wish us well, but as the wheels started to turn, Tiger gave a great heave, leapt over the side, up the bank, and streaked off among the undergrowth.

Everybody said, "Cats won't leave their homes," and Uncle Sam said he would keep an eye on him, and bring up a report.

"Guess him'll g-go w-w-wild" he said, "but 'im-ll be all right"

<https://www.thesprucepets.com/all-about-tabby-cats-4145476>



Postscript

I have revised my mother's text slightly for this new edition; correcting spelling mistakes and other obvious errors. I moved one small section involving the school stove being stoked-up until it glowed red, as it appeared to be out of order with the surrounding story. Apart from that, her work is as she wrote it over 45 years ago.

I have gathered a substantial amount of back-ground material about the various people and places in mum's book – sadly not as many photographs as I would have liked, but in those days ordinary people could not afford a camera. The fact that the gatekeeper's cottage is



photogenic and that there was a lot of interest in the railway which ran through Soudley has helped. It means there are more old photographs and accounts of this place than there are of many others.

The family photo above is the only one I have found with Uncle Sam in it, (standing centre, back, white hair and beard.) Seated left to right are Uncle Fred, Aunt Charlotte and Emily Allen (senior), born in 1831. She was my mother's father's maternal grandmother; she was listed at the GK cottage on the 1901 census. She died in Stoke in 1908. Standing on the right is mother's aunt Ruth, her father's younger sister. Next to Ruth is her father James Worgan, my mother's paternal grand-father. I am not sure who any of the children are. The James's adopted Frederick James Tarling, who was born in 1895. He could be the lad standing behind Fred and Charlotte – if so the photo would have been taken about 1906. My mother's parents got married in 1906 in Stoke. It would be possible to date the picture if I knew who any of the younger children were – but I don't. (cousin Vi was born in 1906)

I have a copy of the 1921 census for the GK cottage residents. Uncle Fred and Aunt Charlotte were still there, as was Cousin Violet. Still in school aged 14yrs 11 months, a remarkable thing for a girl from a poorish family at that time. Cousin Edwin was working at the Eastern United with the pit-ponies underground – probably travelling back and forth by train. Uncle Sammy was still a forester.

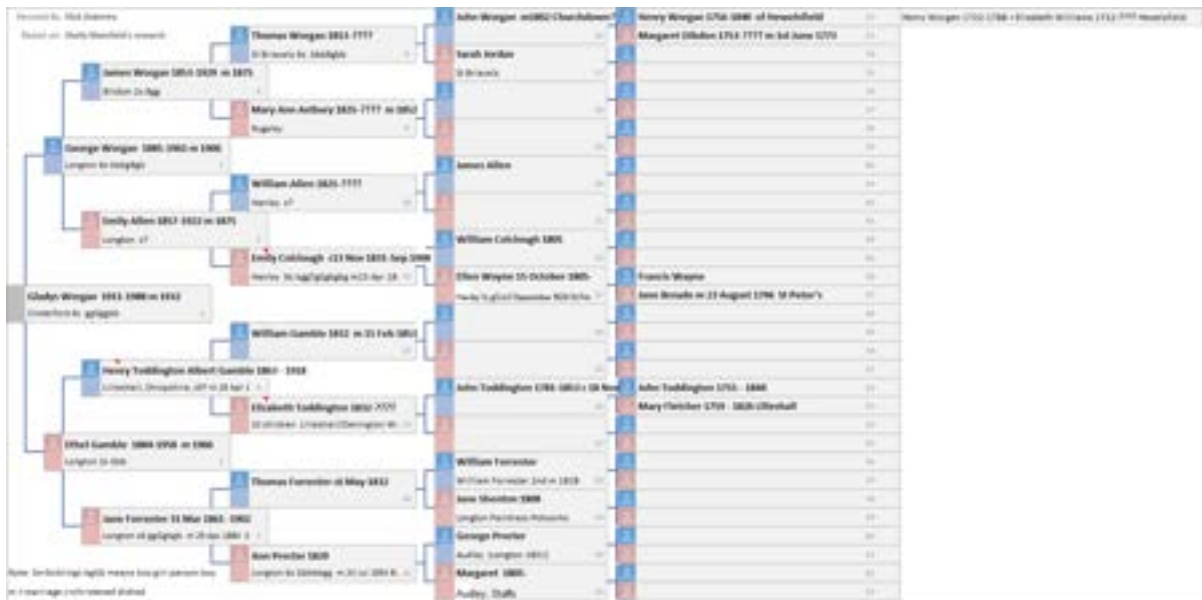
Mr Fred Tarling and his wife Amelia, who mum visited when they went to Newnham and missed seeing the Bore, stayed working for the GWR in Newnham into the 1920s. Later on the Tarlings moved to Lower Soudley becoming the gatekeepers of the level-crossing there. A photo of that crossing at the top of page 12 with the gatekeeper's cottage to the right in the background. I believe the Tarlings went on living there after the line finally closed in the 1960s.

My grandfather and his sister Ruth, shown in the photograph above, were very good friends and she came to visit him much later in his life when he was living with his eldest daughter Hetty and her husband. They ran a dairy farm at Woolaston.



The photo on the previous page is how I like to picture the GK cottage in my mind's eye - nestled comfortably against a hillside with Uncle Sam having lit the stove to keep everyone warm and boil the kettle. According to a comment on a local website “the **W.P.** in the bottom corner stands for Will Phillips from Gloucester. He photographed local scenes to be sold at a guest house in Soudley. The folk sitting on the bank in their best summer hats are Mrs Phillips, her sister, and maybe the young daughter of Mrs Thomas, who ran the guest house – it is believed to have been taken in 1912.”

My mother's family tree (as of 01 May 2022)



What next?

Back in the early 70s, when I talked my mother into writing about her early life the vague idea was to for her to start as far back as she could remember and finish about 1930. She married my dad in 1932 and the Ruardean Duberleys demand a whole other book.

As mum wrote and time went by she was encouraged to have her writing published – that happened with the help of Douglas McLean at the Forest Bookshop. Heaven Lies About Us finishes when the family move to Cinderford in the late spring of 1918. It is only part one of her planned reminisces. I'm not sure why that was all which was included back then. I have a feeling it was to do with the length of a book that could be printed at a certain price point. I suppose it was an early form of self-publishing and wasn't cheap.

Part 2 was written but never revised into a final form. My mother grew increasingly ill in her final years. She died in 1988. I don't think she did much if any work on her manuscripts after 1985. However I do have enough to make another book covering the time her family lived in Cinderford mid 1918 to 1929ish. In fact I have rather too much material. Mum, as with most writers, wrote numerous drafts - including some things one time, leaving them out the next and so on. I plan to scan all these versions into editable files as a first step – fortunately the originals are typed. The next job will be to edit the various versions and stitch the texts together to make a coherent story. I'm not sure how long this will take but my hope is to make part two of my mother's memories available next year, 2023.

I have amassed extra material when fact-checking, looking for photos and so on which I hope to pull together somehow. There is too much to include in a book alongside mother's writings, so I'm intending to add some family related local history to new pages on my website <https://www.nickduberley.com/>