

*My First Eight Years: A Mosaic of Memories*

1. Neighbours and Early Friends

Our nearest neighbours were the Hartnells, who lived in the flat below ours. There was old Mrs Hartnel, her son Fred, and Fred's wife Florrie. There was also Roy, a ginger-haired dog of medium size and no particular breed who was very much a member of the family. Roy liked to lie on the tiled area before the flat's twin front doors, and my sister and I had played with him since our earliest years, for he was a good-tempered old dog, and never minded how much we tugged at his collar or fondled his soft velvety brown ears. He was also a dog of regular habits. At 4 o'clock every afternoon he would go padding up the road to Marsden's Dairy, which was only five or six doors away, on the corner, from whence he would return carrying in his mouth a bar of Nestle's Milk Chocolate. This he would deposit at the feet of Mrs Hartnell, who would remove the wrapper for him and tell him he was a good boy. On Friday she would go to the dairy herself and settle the week's bill on Roy's behalf. Mrs Hartnell was indeed a kind old lady, and the horse who drew the milk float got his daily lump of sugar as regularly as Roy got his bar of chocolate. Our family photograph album contained a snapshot of the horse with his forelegs up on the pavement taking the sugar from Mrs Hartnel's outstretched hand.

I remember her very well. Auntie Hartnell, as my sister and I called her, was a widow, and always wore black. (I remember being told that old Mr Hartnel was ill, but I have no recollection of his funeral.) Of medium height, she was slightly built, had a yellowish complexion, brown eyes, and a head covered with small dark curls. She was certainly very kind to Joan and me. When she made a fruit trifle, for example, there would always be a portion for us, which she would bring up to us in two cut glass tumblers. She was also concerned that we should not be upset or frightened, so that when, one sultry July afternoon, there exploded overhead the mother of all thunder storms with continual loud rumblings and crashes of thunder and repeated brilliant flashes of lightening, she insisted that we be brought down to what she seemed to think was the greater security of her kitchen, where she distracted us with tea and biscuits until the storm was over.

Uncle Fred was fairly tall, and rather thin. He had a pale, bony face, and thinning hair brushed straight back. He was a bespoke tailor, and I sometimes wandered down to see him at work in the Hartnell kitchen, slipping through the communicating door in the hallway, which was usually left unbolted. More often than not, I found him sitting cross-legged on the kitchen table, which was set lengthwise against the room's only window for the sake of the light. I do not remember him ever talking to me, but he sometimes gave me a piece of tailor's chalk to play with. My father knew him quite well, for they had grown up together, and gone to the same school, the turquoise cupolas of which could be seen from our front gate. (It was to this same school that I started going, unwillingly, when I was four years old.) My father thought Fred Hartnell a milksop, averring that when he was a boy his mother mollycoddled him to such an extent that in the morning she used to sit on the toilet seat to warm it for him before he got up. He also told me that as a young man Fred had been quite a dandy. When he went out he wore pin stripe trousers, a black tailcoat, and spatz, and sported a top hat, on account of which he had been nick named the Duke of Selincourt, Selincourt being the name of the street in which we lived. Thus attired he had courted and won his wife Florrie, though how

and where was not known, having apparently led her to believe that he had money in the bank and a house of his own. It was therefore a cruel disappointment to her when she discovered, after the wedding, that he lived with his parents in a rented ground floor flat in Tooting, and that this was her new home. The marriage was not a happy one. There were frequent quarrels, which from time to time were so violent, and so loud, that my father had to go downstairs, taking advantage of the communicating door, and try to calm things down.

While I have vivid mental pictures of old Mrs Hartnell and Fred, I have no such picture of Florrie Hartnell. I do, however, remember her as being dark-haired and olive complexioned, which in later years suggested to me that she may have been of Italian, or partly Italian, descent. Despite her unhappiness, she was kind to my sister and me, so that it is all the more unfortunate that she should have been the unwitting cause of the most unpleasant experience of my early childhood. Playing one day in the porch, I chose to press my cheek against the wall between the two front doors, at the same time spreading out my arms, as though in an embrace, until my fingers touched the doors, both of which were half open. Auntie Florrie was at home at the time, and happening to notice that the front door had been left open she closed it, thereby trapping my hand between the door-jamb and the hinged side of the door. On hearing my shrieks of agony she opened the door to see what was the matter, thus freeing my hand, the third finger of which was crushed and bleeding. The upshot was that for the next two weeks or more Auntie Florrie came upstairs every morning to change the dressing on my injured finger, sitting with me at the kitchen table to do so. I well remember the sessions. First I immersed my finger in a tumbler of hot water so as to loosen the old dressing prior to its removal. This was the most painful part of the proceedings and took a long time. Eventually, however, it was over, and the finger could be examined for signs of improvement and given a fresh dressing, and I would be free to go and play.

The Harveys lived a couple of doors away, in the direction of the school. There were four of them. The one of whom we saw the most was Mrs Harvey, who was at home all day and could often be seen in their tiny back garden or leaning from their upstairs back window as she hung out her washing. She was a tall, well-built woman, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles, and whose smooth, ginger hair was pulled back into a bun. Mr Harvey was jovial and portly, and wore a gold watch chain across his capacious stomach. A printer by trade, he was generally to be seen only at weekends. The couple had two teenage sons. As they were much older than us, Joan and I had little or no contact with them, and I do not even remember their names. As the grandest family in the street, the Harvey's commanded a lot of respect. They did not own a car (nor did anyone in the street, or even in the neighbourhood), but the family enjoyed regular outings in a chauffeur driven hired car, on which occasions the children of the neighbourhood would gather round the car and watch their departure with great interest.

The Harveys were not only the grandest family in the street. They were also probably the most literary. At least they took in the popular weekly *Everybody's*, and when they had finished with it they passed it on to us. I do not remember if my parents read it but I certainly did. I particularly enjoyed the short accounts of striking events in the lives of famous people. These were written in what I later came to recognise as a journalistic style. Thus it was a French King's discarded mistress "scrawled on a sheet of scented parchment 'I have seen the man in black'" rather than the more straightforward "wrote on a piece of paper etc". The Harveys had also taken in, week by week, the successive parts, sixty one in all, of Harmsworth's children's encyclopaedia. When they learned that I

had been diagnosed as having Valvular Disease of the Heart (VDH) they very generously gave me the entire set. For this kind act they have my undying gratitude. For the next two years and more the Children's Encyclopaedia was my constant companion, turning what might otherwise have been a period of gloomy imprisonment into a time of enrichment and enjoyment, and opening up for me all the treasures of the human spirit.

At a gate midway between the Hartnell's flat and Marsden's Dairy, there often stood, immobile, a stout, middle aged woman in a pinafore. She never spoke to anyone, and so far as I remember no-one ever spoke to her. It was as though she was waiting for someone who never came. This was Mrs Hoare. Joan and I were very conscious of her presence at the gate, for one side of her face was entirely covered by a reddish-brown birth mark. Rather unkindly, we called her 'Fishpaste-face', for the birthmark was of the same colour as the fishpaste we had for Sunday afternoon tea, along with the watercress, celery, and winkles.

The neighbour who was on the most intimate terms with us, in a sense, was red-faced Thomas Whitehead. He was close to us on two counts. Not only was he my godfather; he was also a close friend of my grandmother, and the two old people used to go on outings together. Being a little pitcher, and having a little pitcher's proverbially long ears, I knew that Uncle Tom had asked my grandmother to marry him, promising that if she did so he would make me his heir. She had no difficulty resisting this temptation. She had buried two husbands, she told him bluntly, and she had no wish to bury a third. Uncle Tom therefore remained a bachelor. He lived on the other side of the road, almost directly opposite us. He lived with his niece Barbara, a small, thin woman with lank brown hair, a long red face, and a long red nose who always looked as though she had been crying. I often visited him in his room, the attraction being not so much Uncle Tom himself but the stuffed fox with a pigeon in its mouth, which occupied a glass case against the wall. I longed to possess this wonder, for the collecting instinct was already strong in me, and I believe my godfather had promised that the fox should be mine one day.

Uncle Tom often came to see us, being very much part of the family, especially at Christmas and on birthdays. On my own birthday he would seat me on his knee, tell me to hold out my hand, then slowly count into my palm as many half crowns as he felt disposed to give me. My father always paid this birthday money into the Post Office savings account he had opened for me soon after I was born, as he did with any money I was given when I was young. Forty years later, when I returned to England after an absence of twenty years in the East I withdrew all the money. By then it amounted to a tidy sum, for my father had had the interest made up at the end of each year, and Uncle Tom's money went towards financing my 1966 travels in Italy and Greece. By then my Godfather was long dead. He died when I was five or six and I disgraced myself in the eyes of the family by demanding, when I was told of his death, 'shall I get the fox now?'

For the first four years of my life my playmates were Joan, who was fifteen months younger than me, and a lively little girl of my own age called Frances who lived next door to Marsden's Dairy. Later my friends were boys of my own age who were in the same class as me at school or who lived in the same street. My principle friends at this time were Gerald Inkpen and Robbie Rudd. Gerald lived in the next street, and I was often at his house. His mother and mine were friends, so that whenever my mother went to see Mrs Inkpen, who was a Rechabite, I would go too, a circumstance which must have facilitated the development of my friendship with Gerald. He was taller than me,

though no older, and we swapped cigarette cards and comics, roamed the streets together, and played with each other's lead soldiers and Meccano sets. Robbie Rudd lived in a ground floor flat at the end of the block, as an American would say. His father was a policeman, and he had a much older sister called Ivy. My mother and his mother were *not* friends. Littler pitcher that I was, I knew that Mrs Rudd had run away with another man, returning to her husband three weeks later rather worse for wear, and the other women who lived in the street tended to avoid her. Robbie said nothing to me about this, of course. He was a dark-haired boy of my own age, reserved rather than shy, and fond of reading. Since he lived so near, I saw more of him than I did of Gerald, so that his parents and sister were used to seeing me around. On entering their kitchen one day I saw four or five black kittens crawling about on the floor. I had not seen kittens before, and the sight of the helpless little creatures gave rise to an emotion I could not then have described. It was compounded of surprise, delight, curiosity, and pity. I have always loved animals. During the four years before, and the four years after, my confinement to bed, I had a variety of pets. They included two guinea pigs, a pair of green budgerigars, two white mice (soon there were forty of them), and half a dozen lizards caught on Wimbledon Common. Later I had a frog, and a toad who liked to have his neck scratched.

When my two years of confinement to bed were at length over, and I was able to lead a more or less normal life, I discovered that Gerald and Robbie were no longer around. Robbie's parents had moved to a council house in another part of Tooting, and what had happened to Gerald I never learned. I therefore had to make new friends. This was not easy, as I was not allowed to run, or even to walk fast, and therefore could not join in sports or games. A few friends I did, however, make, mostly among my classmates. There was Leonard Westward, who was better dressed than most of the other boys, Alec Havell, who had a hare lip, Owen Wheeler, who liked to run round the playground with outstretched arms pretending to be an aeroplane, Freddie Timmins, whose father was the local chimney sweep, Douglas Nicholas, who was a cry-baby, and whom I once rescued from a group of boys who were bullying him, and ginger haired Raymond Parratt, who collected American postage stamps. I, too, collected postage stamps, but not American ones, and I wondered why anyone would want to collect the stamps of a country as uninteresting as America. I favoured the more exotic varieties, such as the orange-and-purple, high denomination stamps, with the King-Emperor's head in the middle, that came affixed to the parcels received by the family from Uncle Dick, my mother's youngest brother, who was stationed in India.

In 1936 I moved with my parents and my sister to a council house in the same part of Tooting where Robbie now lived. It was not long before we resumed our friendship, which lasted until, in the second year of the War, I was evacuated to North Devon.

## 2. In the Classroom

Mrs Davis was my teacher when I was in the top class of the Selincourt Road Infant School. She was stout, grey-haired, and motherly, and like the other teachers she wore a housecoat to protect her dress from the clouds of chalk-dust that flew from the blackboard whenever it was wiped clean. Her housecoat had a pattern of brown leaves and yellow flowers, and I have a mental picture of her in it as she sat at her desk in front of the class trying to thread a needle. Her eyes

bulged as she focused her gaze on the eye of the needle and the tip of the thread, and I could see that the whites of her eyes were yellow.

The upper half of the classroom door was glassed in like a window, while across the lower half of the window there hung a short curtain. One day Mrs Davis painted this curtain with broad vertical stripes of all the colours of the rainbow, as it seemed. This gave a touch of brightness and gaiety to the rather drab classroom, as no doubt she had intended.

I did not learn very much while I was in Mrs Davis's class. I have vague recollections of white cards printed with such sentences as 'the cat sat on the mat', of our chanting the multiplication table in unison, of scripture lessons, and of our teacher reading to us some of the Enyd Blyton stories, none of which I remember, a fact that suggests I did not find them very interesting. One autumn afternoon she wrote on the blackboard the lines

Please to remember the Fifth of November  
Gunpowder, treason and plot.

She did not tell us anything about Guy Fawkes, or about the nature of the famous plot, but she did want to know if anyone could read the words 'remember' and 'November', pointing to them with her ruler as she put the question. I was the only one who could do so, for some of the other children were still struggling with 'the cat sat on the mat', whereas I had no difficulty with words, and by this time was reading such classic children's books as *Black Beauty*, *The Water Babies*, and *The Swiss Family Robinson*.

We had no formal singing lessons, but in the course of the term Mrs Davis taught us a few songs. One song touched me deeply, but it was not the simple tune that affected me so much as the words. The song was a lullaby, sung by a mother to her baby, and the second verse ran:

Sleep and rest, sleep and rest  
Father will come to thee soon;  
Rest, rest, on mother's breast,  
Father will come to thee soon;  
Father will come to his babe in the nest,  
Silver sails all out of the West  
Under the silver moon.

When we came to the words 'silver sails all out of the west' I experienced a thrill of intense delight, and there flashed upon my inner eye a vision of bright silver sails. What was more, those silver sails came not from a particular point of the compass but from somewhere beyond all geography. This was one of my earliest experiences of the magic of poetry, as well as of my capacity to match its images with vivid mental pictures of my own.

Although there were both boys and girls in Mrs Davis's class, I do not remember any of the boys. On the other hand I do remember two of the girls. Indeed I remember them extremely well.

Daphne Taylor was an ash blonde with green eyes, white skin, and a slightly prominent nose. Sometimes we shared the same desk, and on one memorable occasion we simultaneously bent down, as if searching for a fallen pencil, and under cover of the desk kissed each other on the lips. Daphne's lips were deliciously soft, and meeting them with my own was definitely a sensuous, even sensual experience, though not at all sexual. I liked Daphne, but I was much fonder of her friend Gladys Gown, who was as shy as Daphne was forward. Whether I knew it then or not I was in love with Gladys. A little taller than Daphne, and quite slim, she had straight fair hair, blue eyes, and a small nose and small mouth. I thought of her constantly. So much so, that at night, in bed, I used to pretend that my big teddybear was Gladys and would hug him for a few minutes before going to sleep. I called this ritual "Gladys's love".

Shortly after moving from the top class of the Infant School to the bottom class of the Junior School, and from the care of Mrs Davis to that of Miss Browne, I came down first with scarlet fever, then with chicken pox, and spent three weeks in hospital. When my mother came to take me home one of the nurses told her that my pulse was unusually fast and that I should be taken to see a doctor without delay. The result was that I was found to be suffering from Valvula Disease of the Heart (VDH) and my parents were told that I must be put to bed and kept absolutely quiet, this being the standard treatment at the time for my condition. For the next two years, therefore, I was confined to bed, seeing no one except my parents. This was followed by six months in a wheel chair. I was then deemed well enough to go back to school. I had not forgotten Gladys, and looked forward to seeing her again with great eagerness. I went back to Miss Browne's class, which was the Junior School's top class, but Gladys was not there. When I did see her I received a shock. She wore a navy blue beret and a short black coat, and was not only taller than before but so thin as to be positively skinny. What was worse, in their black stockings her thin legs looked like the black hairy legs of a spider (not that I disliked spiders). I fell as quickly out of love as I had fallen *in* love three years earlier. It was one of the biggest disappointments of my young life.

### 3. Outings

We were up 'in the gods' together. There were six of us: my mother, Joan and I, and my mother's friend Margaret and her two children – Rita, who was the same age as me, and Mavis, who was the same age as Joan. We were up there with our bottles of lemonade and our buns. It was Christmas time, we were at the Wimbledon Hippodrome, and I was seeing my first pantomime. From where I sat I had a clear view of the stage far below. The pantomime was 'Shock-headed Peter', a character of whom I had not heard before. I do not remember what the story was, but I well remember the small figure of the pantomime's eponymous hero. He wore a black jacket with a belt, and black breeches, and he had an enormous shock of white hair. On the stage there was also a well. As I watched Peter jumped into the bucket that hung above the well and *disappeared from sight*. I was overwhelmed by feelings of indescribable horror and dread. It was as though Peter had descended into unfathomable Tartarean depths and was lost forever. I expect he reappeared later on in the pantomime, but of this I have no recollection. For me his disappearance must have been absolute, and the feeling of horror and dread must have persisted for some time. I do, however,

remember the pantomime's 'principal boy'. I remember her singing 'whistling in the dark', a song which evoked in me an eerie feeling of loneliness and desolation.

Christmas was also the time when Joan and I visited one of the big department stores in Tooting Bec, or Balham, or Brixton to meet Santa Claus. It was always our mother who took us, for our father detested shops and shopping. Dazzled by the myriad lights and deafened by the noise we would push our way through the milling crowds to where Santa Claus sat or stood at the entrance to his magic grotto, his sack of presents beside him. He was dressed from head to foot in red, and his abundant white beard reached down to his waist. In return for our sixpences he dipped into his sack and gave Joan a pink package and me a blue one and we were allowed to enter the grotto, where we saw not only more lights but all manner of wonders, from Santa's sledge and his two reindeer (were they real?), to huge Christmas trees hung with tinsel and silver bells and topped with a glittering star or no less glittering fairy. On reaching home we would open the presents Santa Claus had given us. One Christmas Joan's contained a small celluloid doll, mine a tin whistle.

Although our father never took us to see Santa Claus, he certainly took us out – particularly me. One grey Saturday afternoon he took me to see a football match. We went with Uncle Jack, my mother's brother, who was a staunch Fulham supporter. The match was at the White City, a name that conjured up a vivid mental image for me. Though for much of the time I sat perched on my father's right shoulder, which I was still small enough to be able to do, I could see little or nothing of the game, with the result that I did not enjoy the outing. Moreover, there was a drizzle of rain, and I felt cold and wet. I must have expressed my dissatisfaction to my father afterwards, for he did not take me to a football match again. My first football match was therefore also my last.

A black ditch, and across the ditch a wooden plank. My father and I had to walk over the plank in order to get to Figge's Marsh and to the fair that was in progress there. It was a new experience for me, and as we wandered in and out of the good-natured holiday crowd, I with my hand firmly in my father's, I took in eagerly the unfamiliar sight and sound. Roundabouts whirled to the music of the mechanical organ, the riders of the brightly painted wooden animals screaming with laughter; swinging-boats carried people high into the air. We passed coconut shies and shooting galleries, passed purveyors of bright pink candyfloss and vendors of balloons. I was particularly attracted by the stalls where, for a single penny, one could win a big box of chocolates. These stalls were circular in shape, the proprietor standing in the middle, entirely surrounded by his counter. On the counter there was laid out a tempting array of large and small boxes of chocolates. From behind a barrier one tossed a penny on to the counter, aiming for one of the boxes of chocolates. If your penny landed on the box and stayed there, it was yours. With pennies supplied by my father I made several attempts to win one of the boxes, but even if it hit the box I had chosen it bounced or rolled off it onto the counter. As we turned away from the stall, my father and I, a man walked past carrying an enormous teddy bear he had won. Some people were luckier than others, it seemed.

The fair at Figge's Marsh was a new and exciting experience for me, and it is not surprising that I should have vivid memories of it, but I have an equally vivid memory of an experience of a very different kind, albeit one still connected with the fair. My father and I happened to pass by a small tent, and seeing that the front was open we looked in. Seated at a small table were two midgets, a man and a woman. Though fully grown, they were no bigger than I was then at five or six. They were

folding leaflets, working steadily and silently. Neither of them looked up at us or showed any sign of being aware of our presence. They just carried on folding the leaflets. The sight was infinitely touching, and the image of the two midgets at their task haunted me for a long, long time.

.....I was inside the Big Top. I do not remember how I got there, or who took me there, but I was inside the Big Top, eyes fixed on the arena below, oblivious to everything else. White horses trotted round the arena at the command of a man wearing a top hat and carrying a long whip; an elephant did ponderous tricks; red-nosed clowns in white made me laugh at their antics. But best of all were the Japanese acrobats. They ran nimbly up and down the high wire, a parasol helping them to keep their balance. From time to time one of them let out a tremendous shout in a language I did not understand. Another pretended to be about to fall off the wire but recovered himself in the nick of time with miraculous agility. Yet another ran up to the top of the wire then slid all the way down to the bottom holding his parasol triumphantly aloft as he did so. It was a glorious time I had, inside the Big Top that day.

Like other London children, Joan and I were taken to see the animals in the Regent's Park Zoo. This was a family outing, in that it was both our parents who took us to the famous institution. We saw the Chimpanzee's Tea Party, had a ride on the back of an elephant with our father while our mother watched anxiously from below, and saw a polar bear stand on its hind legs to receive a stream of condensed milk which someone on the terrace above poured into its open mouth. These and a hundred other sights I shared not only with Joan and my parents but also with tens of thousands of other visitors to the London Zoo. Three of those sights made a stronger impression on me, perhaps, than they did on other people. The macaw is a gorgeous bird, but there was not just one of them. There were a dozen or more in a row, all on their individual perches, all preening themselves in the sunlight. It was the most brilliant display of colours I had ever seen. But if the gorgeous macaws impinged on my sense of sight, the occupants of the Big Cat House impinged less on my sight than on my sense of smell. It was not that I paid no attention to the lions, tigers and leopards, as that I was much less conscious of what they looked like than of how they smelt. Their combined stench was indeed overwhelming, and not easily forgotten. There was also Monkey Hill. It was surrounded by a moat and a parapet and was inhabited by two or three dozen monkeys, all of the same species. The monkeys were always on the move. They ran up and down the hill, darted in and out of its caves, chased one another, and even sometimes fought. One monkey did not move about much. It was a female, and she sat there clasping a baby monkey in her thin arms. It did not take me long to realize that the baby was dead, had perhaps been dead for some time, and that the mother was refusing to part with the body. It was a pathetic sight, and must have moved me deeply. For forty years later, when I had long forgotten it, and when I was in a distant place and in a strange situation, the image of the mother monkey clasping her dead baby suddenly surfaced, as I have related elsewhere.

Another family outing was the day trip we took from London Bridge to Clacton-on-Sea on a steamship of the Eagle line. I spent much of the voyage leaning on the rail watching the Thames slowly widen as we moved downstream. It was the first time I had been on the water. On our arrival at Clacton-on-Sea I saw that the beach was jam-packed with people, which I suppose was the reason why we did not go there. At least I have no recollection of our going. All I remember is that we spent some time in the town, then boarded the ship for the return journey. When my grandmother gave me a model yacht on my seventh birthday I named it Crested Eagle, this being the name of the

steamship that had taken us to Clacton-on-Sea. The yacht had adjustable sails and a polished wooden deck, and my father used to take me to Clapham Common so that I could sail it on the pond there. Once a dog swam out to it, seized it in its jaws, and returned with it to the shore. The yacht bore the mark of the dog's teeth on its deck for the rest of its days.

Not all my childhood outings were as exhilarating as my visits to the circus or the zoo. There were also outings of a quieter character. Most of them were with my father, who in those days was often out of work. I liked being with my father, for he always talked to me, and told me things. Several times he took me with him to the employment exchange (as I think it was) at Tooting Bec. There he always saw the same person. Her name was Mrs Cheeseman, and she always gave me a chocolate drop. There were also trips to Mitcham Common, where I fished for Sticklebacks in the pond, and occasionally to the more distant Raynes Park. When he was in work he sometimes took me to his workplace on Saturday mornings, from where we would go somewhere in the afternoon. Once he took me to Bennett's Yard, which was somewhere in the City. We climbed up a wooden outside staircase into a kind of loft where four or five men were at work. They must have been carpenters, for I remember that the floor was ankle deep in wood shavings. Another time he was working at Dean's Yard, Westminster, and one Saturday afternoon we visited the Abbey. I do not remember the monuments, but I well remember seeing the very lifelike funeral effigy of Queen Elizabeth. I was already no stranger to Good Queen Bess for I had come across her in a story book, where she was depicted seated in a chair and wearing the familiar farthingale and ruff. My father bought me a picture postcard of her effigy, and I added it to my postcard collection. She has always been my favourite historical character. Another Saturday afternoon found us at the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. I was tremendously impressed by the 30-foot long skeleton of a Brontosaurus and by Leonardo de Vinci's winged flying machines. We also saw the stuffed animals. Among them was the famous War Office Cat, an exceptionally large tabby. As a very small child he had ridden on its back, my father told me, for his father had worked in the War Office, and his mother had sometimes taken him there. I cannot vouch for the truth of what he said about his riding the war office cat, for my father was an inveterate teller of tall stories, which he always told with a perfectly straight face. When Joan and I were quite small, he once told us that when he first met our mother she was so thin that she could get through a keyhole. Naturally, we believed him, and spent the next half hour carefully studying the keyhole of the kitchen door and trying to work out how our mother had managed to get through.

#### 4. Shops and Shopping

My earliest memories of shopping are connected with my mother. We are walking along the street together, and she is carrying a shopping basket. Every few yards, as it seems to me, my mother meets someone she knows, and the two women stop to talk. They talk, and talk, and talk, and soon I am tugging at my mother's hand and saying impatiently, 'Oh, come *on*, mum!' until finally she detaches herself and we continue our progress until she meets someone else or we enter a shop. It was one of the mysteries of my boyhood why women talked so much. I remember some of the shops we entered by their smell. In one there was the cool, fresh smell of cheese and butter, in

another the fusty smell of cloth, and in yet another the sickening smell of blood. This last was the smell that pervaded the butcher's shop, and so much did I dislike it that I insisted on waiting for her outside whenever my mother shopped there. There were also visits to the Tooting Market. It was a covered market, with stalls on either side of a central aisle. One of the stalls sold rabbit meat, and skinned and unskinned rabbits hung upside down from hooks. Only later did I realize that there was a connection between them and the rabbit stew we occasionally had for lunch. One morning we learned that there had been a fire at the Tooting Market and that much of it had been destroyed. The next time I went there with my mother only the first few stalls were open for business. The rest of the market was a tangle of charred and blackened beams.

My mother did not always take me with her when she went shopping. Sometimes she left me in the flat on my own, with the admonition that I was not to answer the door if anyone knocked or rang the bell. As soon as she was gone I would crawl under the kitchen table, for the tablecloth hung down on all four sides, thus making a tent in which I could hide. As I could not yet read, I amused myself by scribbling with crayons on the unpolished underside of the table. More often than not there would be no unexpected callers, but if the silence of the flat did happen to be suddenly broken by a knock or a ring I would sit frozen with terror, imagining that someone or *something* horrible had managed to open the front door and was slowly creeping up the stairs. If the knock or the ring was not repeated I would gradually relax, and the pounding of my heart would slow down. Only when I heard the front door open and my mother's familiar step on the stairs did I crawl out of my hiding place and sit on the floor, as if I had been there all the time. I never told my mother about the terror I had felt, probably because I did not have the words with which to describe my feelings.

Though my father disliked shops and shopping, there was at least one shop to which he did not mind going. This was the little toy shop in Tooting Bec, to which he took me from time to time. When quite young I had been given a wooden fort, complete with brightly painted lead soldiers, but I was not particularly fond of soldiers and did little to add to their number. On the other hand, I was hardly less fond of lead animals than I was of their flesh and blood originals, and was always wanting to add to my collection. Hence the visits to the little shop in Tooting Bec with my father. By the time I was seven or eight I had a sizeable collection of lead animals of various kinds. My favourites among the wild animals were a giraffe, a kangaroo, and an elephant. The elephant came complete with a howdah, which could be placed on its back, and on which six tiny human figures could sit, three on each side – just like their real life counterparts at the Zoo. I also had a whole farmyard of domesticated animals, including a pig, piglets, a sheep, a bull, and a duck and ducklings. Sometimes I made a farmyard for these animals, with cardboard painted green for grass and a piece of mirror for a pond. I would then amuse myself arranging and re-arranging them within the imaginary fences of the little farmyard until I was satisfied – or until the table had to be cleared for a meal.

Once I was taken shopping by my grandmother. Nana, as my sister and I called her, often came to see us on a Saturday afternoon, after she had been to Wandsworth Cemetery and placed fresh flowers on the grave of her second husband and their only daughter, who had died very young. It was in the course of one of these visits that she took me shopping with her. My sister wanted to have a black doll. She already had a white doll, called Muriel, but she very much wanted a black doll too and Nana had promised to buy her one. We did not have to go very far or search for long. At the entrance to one of the shops in Mitcham Road there was a large basket full of dolls of various kinds. Among the dolls there were several black ones, and one of these Nana bought. It cost her a shilling.

Joan was delighted with the new doll, whom she Christened Topsy. Thereafter she spent many happy hours playing with her two dolls, dressing and undressing them, putting them to bed when they were ill and giving them medicine, and scolding them when they were naughty. In short, she loved both her dolls dearly and treated them equally without the least help from any Commission for Racial Equality.

There were two shops in the neighbourhood with which I was particularly well acquainted. One was the dairy at the top end of the street; the other, the sweet shop that was just round the corner opposite the dairy. I was familiar with the dairy because my mother sometimes sent me there for an extra pint of milk, and old Mrs Marsden, who was usually behind the counter, knew me as well as I knew her. One day she gave me a pair of Oxo spectacles. They were an advertising gimmick on behalf of the well known beverage, but I did not know this, and wore them proudly until they fell apart. At the dairy I naturally encountered other customers. One of them was a very old woman dressed from head to foot in rusty black. She had a yellow face and yellow, claw-like hands, and she emitted a horrible smell. I never learned who she was or where she came from and probably thought it better not to ask. The sweetshop was an Aladdin's Cave of multicoloured confectionary. Besides chocolate bars and other more expensive items, there were sherbet dabs, liquorice sticks, and jellybabies, and scores of other sweets the names of which I have forgotten. The pleasure was not just in buying but in choosing, and I spent a lot of time deciding what I wanted. In those days, when there were two ha'pennys to a penny, or four farthings, one could get quite a lot of sweets for a penny, and like other boys I wanted to get as many sweets for my money as I could.

## 5. Nana

Everyone has two parents, four grandparents, and eight great-grandparents, but not everyone is brought up knowing them all. Apart from my parents, I knew only my father's mother and *her* mother, all the rest having died before I was born. I was my grandmother's first grandchild, and I was very much part of her life, as she was part of mine. In the family photo album there is a picture of her standing in the porch of her house in Southfields and holding me in her arms. I am still wearing long clothes, and she is smiling at me.

As a small child I sometimes stayed for a few days with Nana and Auntie Noni, Nana's unmarried daughter, who lived with her. A little bed was made up for me on the floor in the corner of the big downstairs bedroom they shared. When I was older I shared a bed with Uncle Charles, my father's much younger half-brother, who still lived at home, and who had a room upstairs. In the morning I watched him exercising with a pair of chest expanders, and once he gave me a blue and white school tie.

Nana lived not far from Wimbledon Park, and whenever I stayed with her she and Auntie Noni took me to feed the ducks who lived in the pond there. On the way we passed the local tennis courts, the entrance to which was flanked by enormous clumps of tall African grass, and where people in white could usually be seen playing. In the background, high up on the embankment, the red carriages of the District line trains sped back and forth, their wheels going *clickety-click, clickety-*

*click* as they passed. Among the ducks swimming on the pond, there floated a pair of swans, probably the first I ever saw.

It was Nana and Auntie Noni who took me on my first journey by train. I was then three or four years old. Our destination was Besthorpe, the Norfolk village where Nana had been born and where my father had spent several years of his childhood. At Attleborough we alighted and soon the three of us were walking along the road to Besthorpe. While Nana and Auntie Noni chatted, I ran on ahead, darting from one side of the road to the other excitedly plucking flowers from the hedgerows. We had not gone very far when from the opposite direction there came an old countryman on a bicycle, a sack of potatoes over one shoulder. Just then I happened to spot some flowers growing in the hedgerow opposite, and at once darted eagerly towards them. Unfortunately I did not look both ways first, as I had often been told I must do before crossing the road, and ran smack into the bicycle and its rider. The old countryman lost his balance and fell off his bicycle, and the sack burst open, spilling potatoes all over the road. As for me, I was knocked unconscious, and had to be carried to Besthorpe and my great-grandmother's cottage.

I did not know all this at the time, of course. I came to know it later because my father was fond of relating how he had seen Nana, Auntie Noni, and me off at Liverpool Street station, and how after the train's departure he had heaved a sigh of relief, thinking that whatever mischief I might get up to in the Norfolk countryside I was at least in no danger of being run over, as I certainly was in London due to my habit of running out into the road without looking first to see if it was safe to do so. Evidently he had underestimated my capacity for getting into mischief, he would ruefully observe, after which he would recount the details of the accident as he had heard them from Nana and Auntie Noni.

The first thing I can remember after regaining consciousness was being given a boiled egg for my tea. The reason why I remember this is that the egg had two yolks, and as I had never seen such an egg before I thought it a wonderful thing.

In an upstairs room, probably the one in which I stayed, there hung an enormous crinoline. By some coincidence, I was given a children's book to look at in which ladies were depicted wearing just such crinolines over a pair of frilly long pantaloons. In an adjacent room lay Auntie Fanny, who was probably one of Nana's sisters. She was an invalid, I was told, and bed-ridden. The room was darkened, and all I could make out was a thin white face and the white bedclothes.

One morning I was taken to see Aunt Luke, who lived in the nearby row of almshouses. Whose aunt she was I do not know, but she was very old, said how pale I was, and gave me a glass of elderberry wine.

My only other recollection of my first visit to Nana's ancestral village, was of being told that I should on no account go near the well. This well was situated at the end of a lane behind the cottage, and apparently it was assumed that if I was allowed to go near it I would somehow manage to fall in.

I have no recollection of my great-grandmother, but I remember my mother speaking of her, some years later, as a little woman and as 'a dear old soul', and no doubt the description would have held good at the time of my visit. She died not long afterwards, and my father travelled to Besthorpe

for the funeral. He was very fond of his grandmother, and in after years I more than once heard him say that if ever he became rich he would put a headstone on her grave.

One of the things I looked forward to on my visits to Southfields was the Camp Coffee which Nana put into my hot milk. I was very fond of this mixture of coffee and chicory, which we did not have at home, and I was particularly fond of the taste of this famous beverage. A label on one side of the bottle depicted a kilted soldier seated in front of his tent as his turbaned Indian bearer brought him his Camp Coffee on a tray. I also looked forward to seeing Uncle Leonard, one of my father's Lingwood cousins, whose shoe repair shop was just round the corner from where Nana lived. The first time I went there it was with Nana, who wanted to have some shoes resoled, but thereafter I went on my own. I always found Uncle Leonard working at his bench in the shop. He was about the same age as my father, had a lot of untidy brown hair, was invariably unshaven, and had a pair of very bright eyes. He always treated me in a very friendly fashion, and I never visited him without his giving me a few coppers from the till. Under the counter would often be a litter of puppies, for Uncle Leonard bred Sealyhams, and I looked forward to seeing the puppies too. Sometimes I went through into the living quarters behind the shop to see stout and hospitable Auntie Louie and the three boys, the youngest of whom was about my own age, and sometimes I stayed for a meal.

I do not know if Nana had a Norfolk accent, but her voice had a lilt, and she certainly always said shootin' instead of shooting, and Tootin' instead of Tooting. Though she had spent the greater part of her life in London she was a countrywoman at heart. Once I was in the kitchen with her, Auntie Noni and my mother when a mouse ran across the room. Auntie Noni and my mother screamed, jumped onto chairs, and lifted up their skirts; but Nana, like a true countrywoman, seized a poker, chased the mouse, cornered it at the bottom of a cupboard, and killed it.

Both Nana and Auntie Noni believed that my sister and I were growing up rather spoilt, and since both were outspoken by nature they did not hesitate to tell my father so. But all he would ever say in response to this criticism was "let them enjoy themselves. They are only young once."

## 6. Illness and Accidents

On the horizon, close together, there are two reddish-brown cones. They gradually grow larger, then disappear behind the rooftops..... Then I am in a large room. There are squares of glass on the walls of the room, and behind the glass something is moving. It looks like a spider..... I am lying on my back in another, much smaller room. I am lying in a kind of cradle, and faces are looking down at me.

These are among my very earliest memories. The facts behind the memories are that I was lying back in my pram, looking out on the world, that my mother was taking me to the post-natal centre at St George's hospital, Tooting, and that the reddish-brown cones were the cowl on the hospital's chimneys. The large room was probably the waiting room, and the squares of glass were either pictures or aquaria, but I have no idea what the 'spider' behind the glass may have been. In the smaller room I was evidently being weighed, and the faces looking down at me must have been the faces of the doctors or nurses. Walking beside my mother, and also pushing a pram with an

infant in it, there would have been her friend Margaret, whose daughter Rita was almost exactly the same age as I was. The two women may well have met for the first time at the post-natal centre. Auntie Margaret, as I called her, lived in Bickersteth Road, which lay at the end of Selincourt Road, and formed a T-junction with it. I remember once being at Margaret's house when Margaret was suckling her baby, which probably was not Rita, but her second daughter, Mavis. I thought the big, brown dug was rather an ugly sight. I must have already forgotten my own breast-feeding days!

There were other things I had forgotten by this time, but about which I heard later from my parents, usually from my father. Several of the experiences I had forgotten were painful ones. There was my vaccination by our GP, Dr Bradlaugh, when I was a baby. Even if my parents had not told me about the vaccination, there on my upper left arm were the four tell-tale scars, each the size of a fingerprint, which testified to the fact until I was well into my teens. Then there was the time when I burned my left foot by touching a hot flatiron. I was then a baby, and was sitting on the kitchen table while my mother was ironing clothes. When she went into the scullery to get more clothes for ironing I crawled towards the flatiron, which she had stood up on the table, and happened to touch it with my foot. My piercing screams brought her hurrying back to the kitchen to see what was the matter. What happened next I do not know. What I do know, is that for many years I had a small scar on my foot. Above all, there was the unremembered time when my parents, Joan and I all went down with the flu. It must have been in 1927 or 1928, when Joan was still a baby. The four of us lay helpless in the big front bedroom together. Dr Bradlaugh came every day, and my father gave him the key to the front door, as neither he nor my mother had the strength to go downstairs and let him in when he called. Old Mrs Hartnell, who lived in the flat below, came and cooked for us, though I suspect none of us had much appetite.

Not long after we had all recovered from the flu my father was away for three weeks. He had been sent to a convalescent home for ex-servicemen in St Leonard's, near Hastings, for the injuries he sustained during the War had left him without the full use of his right arm and right hand. I do not remember missing him while he was away, but I must have missed him greatly, especially at bedtime, as he always came to my room and talked to me for a while before I went to sleep. Though I have no recollection of his going way, I well remember his return. This was due partly to the fact that he had a present for me from a relative called Aunt Dick, of whom I had not heard before, and of whom I never heard again. She lived in Hastings, and was probably my father's cousin or aunt. Her present to me was a toy telephone, which gave me many hours of innocent pleasure. I derived no less pleasure from my father's account of life at the convalescent home. Afternoon tea was served out in the garden, and I particularly enjoyed his description of the birds that came to the table and pecked fearlessly about his and the other men's feet. There were not only the ubiquitous sparrows, but robins and blue tits, as well as finches of various kinds and colours. So graphically did my father describe the birds that in my mind's eye I had a vivid picture of them as they hopped on his table and fluttered round his feet in all their diverse colours.

Though I have only one actual recollection of experiencing pain myself (when my finger was caught in the Hartnell's front door) I have several memories of my mother suffering pain. Like many other working-class women she had bad teeth, and when she was about thirty she had them all out and replaced by false teeth (cf. the pub scene in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, first published in 1922). On her return from the hospital she told my father what had happened, and Little Pitcher that I was I could not but overhear what she said. While under the anaesthetic she could hear someone

screaming in the distance and realised that it was she herself who was doing the screaming. The nurse had scolded her when she came round, saying, 'Oh Mrs Lingwood, you *did* make a fuss!' The removal of the teeth made a great difference to my mother's appearance. Without them, she looked like an old woman, as she did afterwards whenever she took her false teeth out, as it was her custom to do at night. There was also the occasion when my mother treated herself to a 'permanent wave', and as a result experienced severe headaches for several days. The flat, regular waves of the perm made her face look thinner and younger, but it did not improve her looks. My mother was never beautiful, or even very pretty, but old or young, pretty or not pretty, I loved her and could not bear even to think of her being hurt.

Fortunately for us both, only once during my early childhood did I actually see her hurt. Our back stairs were quite steep, and my mother was down them and up them twenty times a day. One day she lost her footing on the way down and fell headlong to the bottom. Though she was not injured, she was badly shaken and could not help crying. The sight of her flushed, tear-stained face affected me deeply and remained a painful memory for a long time afterwards.

There was another accident in the family around this time. One morning the door bell rang and my mother went downstairs to see who was there, and I trailed along after her. On opening the front door she found herself face to face with a member of the St John's Ambulance Brigade, across whose outstretched arms there lay a small body so completely swathed in bandages as to look like an Egyptian mummy. My mother let out a shriek, and without waiting for explanations turned and dashed up the stairs calling loudly for my father, who then happened to be at home. The 'mummy' was my sister Joan. She was not dead, only injured. It transpired that she had been playing outside with her friend Francis, a lively, adventurous little girl of about my age, and that Joan had been knocked down by a car as the two of them were crossing the main road, a thing which Joan, at least, was strictly forbidden to do. Francis was not hurt, but Joan sustained a few cuts and bruises, and for the next three weeks was confined to bed.

When I was six years old I underwent two minor operations. The first took place in hospital, the second at home. One was for the removal of my tonsils, the other for the lancing of a large swelling that had developed in my groin. About an experience I had at the hospital, and of how it aroused in me a sense of injustice (and therefore of justice), I have written elsewhere. The operation I had at home took place in my bedroom. While Dr Bradlaugh conferred with my parents in the kitchen, the anaesthetist was with me in my bedroom making his preparations. Inquisitive as ever, I wanted to know the name of the liquid with which he was soaking a wad of cotton wool. In fact I wanted to smell the liquid, but this he would not allow me to do. I soon found out what it smelt like! Afterwards I was told that when the time came for the anaesthetic mask to be placed over my face, I fought like a tiger and that it took the combined strength of Dr Bradlaugh, the anaesthetist, and my father, to hold me down. When the operation was over, and there stood beside my bed a basin half full of a yellow liquid, I complained vigorously. If I had been allowed to smell the liquid when I wanted to, I said, there would not have been all that fuss!

As a child, I knew that I had once had both measles and whooping cough, but I did not remember having them, probably because I was very young at the time. But I certainly remember having scarlet fever. I had it when I was eight, and I remember it mainly because it was the first of a series of events which, culminating in my being confined to bed for two years, affected the whole

subsequent course of my life. Those two years draw a thick black line between my early childhood, on the one hand, and on the other my later childhood and my adolescence.