

A KEIGHLEY CHILDHOOD: THE GARDEN PLOT



There is a photograph - was a photograph. Somewhere. It is (was) of a very small child, less than a year old, dressed in a white coat and beret. The child is lying on its stomach - on a blanket, I think - but is stretching up, straining and laughing towards the camera (a black Brownie box camera, to be precise). Though the photo is black and white it is clear the day is sunny and bright. They said the child was me but I don't remember, since I wasn't there. In any case, that isn't important. That's not why I remember this photograph, now, when it's all over.

The place is what's important. To get the best of the sun they had laid the child on the flags by Marsh's front door. Just behind was the fence that screened-off the garden and, almost certainly, the hinge end of the gate that led down into it. The fence was certainly covered in pink roses. I never set foot in that garden myself, except the once, but that was long after Mr Marsh had gone. It was at night and someone was pursuing us, not far behind. Over the wall we went, Coley, his sister and me, straight through the glass cover of a thoughtlessly-placed cold frame.

Mr Marsh had a walrus moustache and round, steel spectacles, and a hard, steely stare to match. His wife was small and bent and behind her round, steel-rimmed glasses, she had only one eye. The lost one was all closed in upon itself, knotted-in upon itself, and you tried not to look at it, not to fall into its terrible lost depths. Their house had a fishy smell (they kept cats). I hated fish. You got into their house through a gate between the garden fence and the house wall, then along a wooden walkway hanging perilously high above the garden. You could see down into the garden through the gaps between the slats. It was terrifying. I tried not to look. I always kept my eyes glued to the big, shady apple tree, right at the centre of the garden, like Linden Lea.

My mam and my nanna treated them like normal people, which was amazing, since Mr and Mrs Marsh were clearly something different. You knew this when he stood looking at you, with the sun blinding his glasses, watching to see you didn't go near his roses. There was never any likelihood of you touching his roses or even crossing the street to where they were, alone - it was bad enough with your mam holding your hand. I was sorry (and afraid) for Coley who

lived right next door to them, and I would do anything rather than call for him – than stand waiting for someone to open the door, which always seemed to take an age since they lived mostly through in the back of the house in a dingy, triangular-shaped kitchen. And there I am, just arrived but on the edge of departure, glancing nervously round at the Marsh's front door, even though it was never opened.

Coley's dad had one of the allotments down the slope in the garden plot next to Mr Marsh's garden. We used to go and play there sometimes. There was once (am I hiding from someone?) sitting in the middle of a huge clump of lupins, gazing up at the flowers, at their shapes and their colours, against an azure sky with sparse, fluffy clouds teasing out along it, feeling their green pods, running their furry green pods between my fingers. Snapshots of the mind. Who can say why that inward image rather than any other has remained? I have always supposed it to be my earliest, distinct memory.

And those roses. Their towering scent. All down the long slope. Velvet between small fingers. Small leaves perfect, green - light and dark - tiny serrations dew-tipped, bitter on the tongue. Blue ocean and islets drifting among arabesqued leaves and branches. First sensations absorbing. Through the gate. Through and through in a perfect silence. Beyond silence. Beyond time.

Maybe even then the allotments were being left; something the council had decided. Coley's allotment had mainly vegetables but there were others with flowers which, as time passed and the whole plot fell into neglect, stood out in their defiant colours to the last, sparse pockets of resistance to the incontrovertible advance of a brasher, post-War age. But beyond this plot of neglect and reversion, through the thick tangle of ramblers all down the slope, for a while yet you occasionally glimpsed the order and austere beauty of Mr Marsh's garden, and of him tending a vanishing world, fading undoubtedly, yet still intact.

Emergence from a real war triggered immersion in endless imaginary wars, the real one being fought over and over again in our back streets, along narrow alley-ways, over walls and on ash-tip roofs, down in the Hollow. Running battles between the English and the Germans, who sometimes metamorphosed into cowboys and indians, after 'going to the pictures' ('The Cavendish' or 'Cosy Corner') became a regular part of life; 'you walked in', they said, 'but you always rode out', and for a time then the garden plot was a battle-ground, its air thick with the sound of gunshot, the whistling of arrows. How many times was I wounded there, died there, did I kill there, among the rampant weeds and grasses and fruit bushes running wild and distorted sprouts like trees on Mars? You lay there with heart thumping, listening to the stealthy tread of the enemy pursuing, coming nearer and nearer, and you longed to be elsewhere, you held your breath until you almost died, and you wanted to be anywhere at all but here. But when at last they found you it was often not to make you prisoner, torture or kill you after all, but to tell you they had had enough and had decided to play hide and seek instead, or kick-can or tig or to hunt for frogs or worms and roast them alive in a biscuit tin. And the war would wait to be taken up again another day, while you were transformed into something else in the magic of the plot.

The world was getting bigger all the time. If the front street led to and from the garden plot and the allotments, the much longer back street, viewed a thousand times from the lookout post behind the trellis on the back-yard wall, dropped down into a grassy hollow (*the*

Hollow) which stretched away to hen-pens and piggeries, to Longstaff's orchard, to the hut Harry Tingle lived in because his brother-in-law, Tom Clifford, had thrown him out, lock, stock and barrel, when his sister, Tom's wife, had died; and so down to Arthur Calvert's sheds where he kept his horse and his carts, one for fruit and vegetables and one for coal. Arthur was another terrifying man, with a ruddy face, and a rough, booming voice that let you know at once when he was down your street, hawking his wares. He had a weighing scale with silver pans that glinted in the sunlight, and he laughed and joked with all the women who came out to buy from him. He didn't laugh and joke though if he found you playing on his carts when they were back at the shed. He was very fierce then, shouting and swearing, and they said that if he caught you he would lock you in the shed and you would die of hunger and never be seen again. But sometimes the War took you there and you had to risk it, hoping against hope he would not come down the narrow path and trap you there.

There were three garages side by side backing onto one end of Longstaff's orchard, and if you went along the narrow snicket between two of them you could squeeze through into the orchard. Once you were in though there was no way back, for the walls and the fences towered above you, it was fully twenty feet below Dalton Terrace on the far side, and you were trapped. Besides the apples and pears there were some ramshackle stables at the far end, built lean-to fashion against the gable end of the last house of the shorter row down Sussex Street. There were boxes full of rusty nails, old harnesses and other quite exciting but unnameable things to rummage through and carry off; but you were always terrified in case the big gates would swing open and you were caught red-handed. Fatty Gee did get caught and thrashed, once. You could hear him bawling several streets away, "boo-er, boo-er, boo-er". Fatty Gee was always bawling for one reason or another; everybody seemed to pick on him, everybody except me, that is. If he was at the end of the line, I was beyond that even. He was fat because of his glands, he said. I didn't know what that was, but I believed him.

One time, down the Hollow, we got into Herbert Ellesmore's hen-pen and Fatty (Edward was his real name) stole an egg and put it into his top pocket but it broke when his mother tried to get it out to make him take it back. Another time, we went in through the same hole since the fence was nominal and the hens were always free-ranging *avant-la-lettre* all over the Hollow, and we forced open the doors of one of the rabbit-hutches. The rabbits kicked and struggled and scratched our arms so much we panicked and dropped them down a well and ran away. It was old Ellesmore's fault really. If he hadn't always been boiling up old cabbages and rotting vegetables he got from Arthur Calvert and making the whole Hollow stink because of his steaming set-pot with its broken chimney, maybe we wouldn't have gone into his pen at all. Anyhow, the police came to ask me a few questions. How did they know? Who told them? Often, after that, when I went shopping with my nanna, we would see the two constables outside the post-office, and to my very great embarrassment they always asked whether I was being a good boy. Once, asked directly if I had been putting any more rabbits down wells, I hid behind her coat-tails and said no, I hadn't, but I'd like to put him down, and everybody laughed, but I didn't know what to make of that and thought it best to stay hidden.

About that time it must have been, I had a rusty saw that Edward had given me - maybe one he'd taken from Longstaff's. It was a pruning saw, I think, but in my mind I had got saw and sword mixed up and I felt very important with it, stuck in my belt. One afternoon, outside

Snowdon's dress shop, at the top of our street, I poked it into the cheek of a baby lying in its pram. Old Mrs Snowdon and her daughter and the mother all saw me through the shop window. I ran away home but they were soon banging on the door. My nanna opened it and said it wasn't me. I didn't have a saw. I wouldn't do a thing like that. They all said they had watched me do it. She wouldn't have it though. It definitely wasn't me. I hadn't been out. They were mistaken. I believed her wholeheartedly, but they didn't because whenever they saw me after that they called me a wicked boy and I always tried to avoid them. For days after that I never left the back yard, afraid lest the police would come and take me away and put me in Borstal, whose very name made it sound a terrifying place. They didn't, but I suffered as much as if they had. I hated the Snowdons for seeing me and blaming me and telling everyone I was a naughty boy and sometimes I would put soil or worms or frogs through the shop letter-box, just to punish them.

Time is a problem when you are the age I was then. It's as if, for a while, it doesn't begin to accumulate or accumulates only very slowly, imperceptibly. You are the same from week to week and from year to year and sequences run into each other and invert or run backwards and it doesn't seem to matter. Time had meaning only for playing out or for stanching hunger and thirst. So I can't really say what followed what; what was in the war and what was after it. Listening to the wireless was like that: 'Here is the news, read by Stuart Hibbert or Freddy Grisewood or Alvar Liddell (Alvarley Dell was the way I heard it)' or 'Variety Bandbox' or the 'Palm Court Orchestra' or Albert Sandler or Vic Oliver - boring, but the grown-ups seemed to want to listen to them; but just when did we listen to 'Beau Geste' or 'Send for Paul Temple' or 'Appointment with Fear' (with Valentine Dyall as 'Your Story-teller, the Man in Black')? 'Dick Barton, Special Agent' certainly came later - 6.45pm head pushed close up against our Philco radio set, or next door at Colin Woodhead's, spine tingling even before the familiar music catapults us into the next quarter-hour episode in which Dick, Snowy, Jock, Goodness and Truth invariably win through, despite our doubts and deliberately-fuelled, heavily manipulated fears. The pictures too - 'The Wicked Lady', 'Buffalo Bill', 'The Charge of the Light Brigade', 'This is the Army, Mr Brown', 'Sinbad the Sailor', 'The Prison Ship', 'Desert Song' - at The Ritz or The Picture House with my mother in the afternoon (the others were too 'common' or just plain 'scruffy') or The Cosy Corner and The Cav(endish) in an evening with old Willie Abbot, who shunned the former just as avidly as my mam championed them, for being 'too draughty' or 'too dear'. Both the wireless and the pictures led invariably to books and all three led into a private-populous world of fabulous discovery and adventure, sometimes lived out with others but more often than not quite alone. One moment I am a soldier patrolling the back-wall top, armed to the teeth with guns and swords and daggers or a cruel Japanese sailor, guarding the prisoners, in the next an Indian chief wearing a splendid head-dress my mam made, buying coloured hat feathers from Woolworth's maybe, with an ostrich plume at the front and a brilliantine brooch given me for the purpose, one day, by a lady in Bedford's corner shop. In these roles and the gear I created for them I swaggered, I was the hero the king the saviour the defiant one; if Coley or anyone else was allowed in they were carefully choreographed, told exactly where to stand, what words to say and when, and were inevitably losers or side-kicks. But it was more perfect when you lived it out alone; others were too stupid or too ignorant to know what to do or say, or why.

There was one winter's morning when the sun shone bright on snow and ice in the Hollow. It must be early morning for no one has been there. The covering of snow is quite intact. The dubs of water at the bottom of Craven Road have a thick layer of ice which creaks and grinds and cracks as you stand on it or snap a bit off to put in your mouth because you like the cold feel of it on your tongue and cheeks and the sounds it makes inside your head as you crunch it before you spit it out. But today the snow field is a sandy desert, the Riffs are close, we have to get through ... they're depending on us at the stricken fort; and we do, of course, get through, riding our white stallions hard across the snow-covered dunes as far as Arthur Calvert's sheds; we hide between the garages as the Riffs thunder past in hopeless search of me, Beau Geste, the hero, the saviour, the creator of a whole world. Then, stealthily, so quietly by night, we creep along a *wadi* among the snowy dunes into the fort, to stand triumphantly on the raised-up drain cover at the corner of Mr Burns's garden, ignoring the fever they said you could get from it, tommy-gun blazing, Riffs dying like flies. But then that pure, encapsulated world crumbles in an instant when David Hazel, who lived in the next to the last house in Sussex street, blunders into it, with his flat nose that had no bone in it because he had fallen against a tank in the War, and tries to tell me, ME, the only begetter, what should happen and what should not. Like the magic clump of lupins and the transfiguring scent of Mr Marsh's pink and white roses, the sunlight glinting off the snow and ice of that heroic morning still lingers.

But the snow was unquestionably snow in its own right in the winter of the big freeze. We had no choice. It seemed endlessly there and everyone struggling to move through it or over it to get to the shops or to work, to school or to the doctor's. So deep is it in our back street that Colin, Pop Thornton and Coley and a few others and me are able to build a raised-up road around the outside, with a maze of pathways, with walls so high on either side you can't see over them, in the middle. We are engineers of our own enclosed world, a labyrinth of delight and fear, and when at last the snow begins to melt we learn how to fashion igloos and we sit shivering in them, self-congratulatory, for maybe five or ten minutes, yet regretting their completeness, soon bored by their completeness, leaving them as we move on - perhaps to be inhabited by other Eskimos labouring across the pack-ice. My dad built me a sledge. Not the high, lightweight toboggan I secretly craved from Bruce Johnson's up in town, but a low, sturdy, very heavy vehicle made out of polished mahogany boards. We sledged down the long hill in Prior street, then and year after year, and when all other sledges were broken beyond repair mine went on as good and as secretly regretted as ever. Whatever became of it in the end, I wonder?

The winters immediately after the war, and not just that particular one, were hard and long, and fuel was still scarce and strictly rationed - as indeed was the money to pay for it. One of the most miserable experiences for me, occurring probably at least once a week, was being charged by my dad with the task of going to the gasworks, down Marley, to fetch one or two bags of coke on my sledge. The round trip must have taken somewhere in the region of an hour, an hour in which whole battles could have been fought and won and lost, several pages of stamps could have been transferred to my latest favourite album, the South Pole could have been reached, well ahead of Amundsen and Scott. But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was the feeling of shame, of humiliation at the whole operation. I guess that for my dad, growing up in the Depression years of the twenties and thirties, trips to the gasworks with a

bike or a bogey or an old pram were normal parts of life for the great majority of people. But I had my own scale of complicated values and I certainly didn't belong among them, even at the age of six or seven. Marley itself, though way beyond the gasworks, was a delightful walk and picnic spot in late spring or summer, when you went with your mam and dad and maybe auntie Laura and uncle Walter and Anne, from next door, to see the bluebells and the primroses and play in the ruins of the old Hall itself. But when you went in winter, usually on your own, then it was quite another experience, a different place. For one thing, you had to skirt round Worth Village to get there, and as if that wasn't bad enough, even if you cut through the Mill Fields instead of going down the main road and turning into Aireworth Road, you always ran the risk of being seen by some of the posher kids you went to school with - Michael Nicholson or Tony Barker or, even worse, some of the girls. You slid along Aireworth Road as if it were the Valley of the Shadow, particularly on the return trip, with coke spilling out of the insecurely fastened sack. But worst of all was the queuing, sometimes it seemed for hours. Every sack was filled by hand and took an age in which mortification and cold weighed you down flat into the dirty, churned-up snow. Some people - the very posh - arrived there with cars and bought five or six sacks at a time and you and everyone else had to wait and grumble, with your sledges or other ramshackle means of conveyance. But everyone there always seemed very drab, scruffy, rough and uncouth. Sometimes you would see one of the Stortons or some other notorious, much-feared, ginger-haired bully from the Village, with their clogs and running noses and faces like starved rats, and your heart was in your boots along with your icy-cold, invariably very wet feet. The very least of their pleasures would be to throw snowballs at you, with stones in them, or rub your face in the snow and tip your coke out all over the road. You paid your shilling and you made ready for the ordeal, running the gauntlet of all the hazards, real or imagined, of the return. My weekly descent into Hell.

But the snow couldn't last, not even in that terrible winter. One morning I looked out of the front-bedroom window and instead of the snow, the Mill Fields, Mr Marsh's garden, the allotments, the whole world had incredibly sunk overnight into a huge lake and even in the cellar the water was lapping high up against the white-washed walls. For however long it lasted I had to paddle over to feed the gas-metre, at the far side, in the small zinc bath. I was always afraid of the cellar since that was where the bogeyman lived, and I insisted every time that someone stand on the lowest step the crocodile-infested, inky swamp waters would allow, following my passage, talking to me all the while. The only light in the cellar came from a cobwebbed window which had an iron grating up above it at yard level, over by the metre. The cellar was always cold and damp at the best of times, with its own peculiar, musty smell. Its terror of terrors was the coal place just at the bottom of the steps. It had its own door and it was pitch black inside, reputedly the home of rats as well as of the bogeyman; I always had the fear that nanna might never come back whenever she descended the steps to fetch coal for the fire. Strangely, she always seemed to manage all right; which was more than I did on those occasions she locked me in the 'cellar head' for being naughty. I would stare and stare down into the gloom at the bottom of the steps to where they turned the corner, sure I could hear rustling, awaiting the fearsome, imminent presence with bated breath, at the same time banging on the door to be let out. Yet I too, strangely, always survived the ordeal.

Thinking about the cellar reminds me about washing day. I hated Mondays because of it. The cosy kitchen was quickly turned into a cold, comfortless, wet and steamy no-place. Rugs were rolled up and they and the table and chairs were carted through into the front-room, instantly turning it into a junk shop as well. There was no refuge on Monday. If it happened to be raining too the misery and bad temper were total. Two 'peggy' tubs would be dragged up from the cellar, the scrubbing board, the lading-can and the 'dance' (posser) as well, and the great green mangle was trundled out from under the window where it always loomed, ready to crack your unsuspecting head or bang ankles that wandered in too close; dolly blues would appear, packets of Persil or Oxydol or Rinso, and great hunks of green 'washing' soap, and the whole operation would begin only when the water, heated up over several hours in the 'copper' gas boiler, was ready. The whole miserable affair would last until late in the afternoon, but long before it was completed the next ghastly phase had begun, with the emergence of the clothes horses, normally stabled in the cellar-head, blocking off all access to the kitchen fire, and sometimes the sitting-room one as well, with their steaming loads of blankets and sheets and other alien objects. The rack would be lowered and it too would be filled with pillow cases, bolster cases, socks and jumpers, all dripping and steaming, with the windows wide open and sometimes the outside door too, even on the iciest of winter days. Monday was never a part of the good old days. Never. Never! Moreover, hatred of washing day was compounded by the fact that I once took a bite out of the bitter green soap, for some reason or other thinking it was cheese (a bit of the moon, perhaps), and was violently sick. I couldn't face cheese after that for many years to come. I didn't eat any more soap, either.

Of course, when the weather began to improve, all through the late spring and summer months, the washing would be hung out to dry across the front street, which entailed having the front door open for long periods as well as the back, with doors banging loudly shut as a Terra-del-Fuego-like gale howled between, and one or other of the women traipsing back and forth with baskets full of wrung-out clothes. On windy days it was like sailing round Cape Horn, with sheets and blankets billowing and flapping and cracking, and you thought of galleons and the Spanish Main and Captain Blood. But not even any of that could compensate for the chaos caused by washing day, when the world was turned upside-down and you felt like a fugitive in your own home.

Hospital was a fear that came early. Someone decided I should have my tonsils and adenoids removed around the time the war was ending, and they took me into Victoria Hospital ('Vic' to all Keighley-ites). The nurses were very kind and one of them was always singing 'Aye-aye, aye-aye, have you ever been in the moonlight, with South American, South American, South American Joe' or 'South of the Border, Down Mexico Way'. But the business of the operation was a brutal affair when it came. It was, I think, a Mr Chalmers or maybe a Mr Black, who did the deed. Everyone was gently reassuring, telling me that when I woke up there would be lots of nice things waiting for me and all this sweet talk served only to make the moment when they clapped the ether pad over my face seem like a gross betrayal, especially since they held me down and prevented me from tearing it away. I think I died then. When I awoke in heaven some sadist had left me a bunch of grapes, the first I had ever seen but could not eat. South American Joe helped herself whenever she went past. Maybe they kept her in

good voice but for me it was all part and parcel of my growing sense of what the world was really like.

My fears were greatly compounded, therefore, when shortly after my dad came home it was suddenly announced that my mam had to go into Victoria Hospital – that same place of torture and betrayal – to have her appendix out. I was sure they would kill her. I wrote letters to her which my dad conveyed when he went to see her. I couldn't go because children were not allowed to visit. In one of my letters, I asked her to draw me an appendix since I didn't know what it was, I only knew it had caused her very painful tummy-aches. I wasn't surprised about the tummy-aches when the drawing came back because it looked exactly like a folded umbrella.

She and I had been at the Ritz just the week before and had seen the trailer for 'The Wizard of Oz' and she had promised to take me. However, that proved impossible in the circumstances. It turned out all right in the end, though. My dad had arranged for my mam to come out onto a balcony to wave to me when he was visiting her; it was after the operation, and once I had seen her still alive up there, I was content. The contentedness turned to ecstasy when, on coming out of the hospital, dad told me we were going to the Ritz, there and then, to see the film. And he bought me an ice-cream, as well as some sweets, and that was a very good day indeed.

Somewhere in among all these events the tipping started. Although thinking about it at this distance, that couldn't have been before they had constructed the brick pillars. There was a serial on 'Children's' Hour'; it was about Saxons and Normans and, for all I know, it might even have been about Hereward the Wake, or maybe Ivanhoe, but it was the music that introduced it that spoke much more deeply to the child - it must have been so since it always remained with me. Years later, I was to learn that it was the 'Farandole' from Bizet's *L'Arlésienne*. But that serial, whose content I have long forgotten, heralded a period in which the endless war was fought between Saxons and Normans and mainly in the dilapidated, overgrown and by-this-time totally abandoned allotments. I remember it because it is in this place, in this war, that the beautiful though fragile wooden sword my dad had made for me was broken. I am climbing over a fence, it gets stuck in the netting or maybe I fall on it. Normans or no Normans, I cried and cried inconsolably and didn't know what I would do, how I could tell them at home.

My dad was proud of that sword. He had made it for me when I had written, directed, and starred as Captain Hook in 'Peter Pan and Wendy' that the whole school had been made to sit and watch. A boy called Roger, who later emigrated with his parents to Canada, and who played the part of Smee or maybe Starkey, lent me a splendid admiral's uniform for the performance. It was all black and silky, with gold tassels on the shoulder epaulets and had a plumed hat to match. I felt very important in it, strutting up and down, in command of the whole world, correcting everyone's lines even as they spoke them – come to think of it, not unlike Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It must have been around then that my dad was reading us his own, serialised version of *Captain Blood*, every night after tea, when the washing-up was done and just before I went to bed: The *Cinco Llagas*, Don Diego de Espinosa de Valdez, Peter Blood, Jeremy Pitt and Miss Arabella Bishop, even if they were all pronounced wrongly, were magic, and after the success of 'Peter Pan' I wanted to go on and be Captain Blood, in part maybe so that I could wear that

splendid uniform once again, for did not my new hero dress always in black? But that is my last memory of the allotment as it had been and they began tipping - a fine black powdery ash which had jagged bits of metal in it on which you cut yourself so easily and so often, and which they all said was refuse from a foundry. I knew about foundries because Willie Abbot worked in one, only he called it 'the black shop'.

Over many weeks, it must have been, bit by bit, what had been the allotments were being filled up with this tipping. The few straggling flowers and shrubs that still remained were gradually obliterated; my lupins among them, I suppose. Only Mr Marsh's hedge of roses still stood as it had always done, Nature's bulwark, all down the slope that led, for a little while longer, from the gate in the front street into the vanishing garden. The brick stanchions had old railway sleepers laid across them and in that way a heavy wooden roof (which eventually proved to be a floor) was put in place, with the in-filling foundry sand packing beneath. Regret at the loss of the garden plot was soon forgotten then because this huge cave, not unlike Ali Baba's - indeed, very like Ali Baba's - was taking its place. The period of time over which this structure emerged seemed long, leisurely, for Ali Baba's cave was also the place in which somebody or other's sister would let you pull down her knickers, for a couple of sweets, and let you watch her weeing into an old tin can we had set into the earth for the purpose, for a few sweets more. And that wasn't all; she would stand or lie as required, being poked with sticks or fingers, quite unconcerned and not much interested, munching away at her 'spice', providing the little boys of the neighbourhood with their first glimpse of honey and gall.

But this excitement bore its own nemesis. One sunny afternoon, arriving home from school - perhaps even with thoughts of honey already beckoning - I found myself confronted, point blank, with the awful question, 'What have you been doing to Evey?'

'Doing, mam? Doing what, mam? I don't know what you mean, mam'; but no amount of denials or pleading could make it go away or prevent me from being dragged across the street to confess and apologise to the girl's mother. All I can remember of what could only have been a humiliating, blushing interrogation is her final, laughing words to my mother - 'They're just kid's tricks! There's no harm done really!' Maybe it was those words and no others that echoed on, conveniently, because they seemed to fall somewhat short of a condemnation or, indeed, a prohibition. Anyhow, after a few weeks of abstinence and confinement to the back yard, the commerce began afresh and continued, as far as I recall, into our early teens, passing through all the regular channels from 'Mothers and Fathers' and 'Doctors and Nurses' to games of 'do or dare' and 'forfeits'. But it always puzzled and worried me how they had found out. Who had told them? Was it Evey herself in a fit of pique or remorse (was it really **chocolates** she wanted?), or one of the other kids who had passed it on to a tittle-tattling mother, out of spite or envy or an inability to cope with the enormity of it? Childhood is a game of whispers and it affords no secrets, in spite of what we swear to or bully or cajole others into promising.

By the time Evey's creamy delights were being spread around, the garden had already slipped well and truly below this world's horizon to fill an empty niche in that of memory and regret.

The War - the real one, that is - was always present, even when it was long over. So what was it in that world of early growing-up? It was infrequent short visits by a soldier and his kit; his tin hat, his kit-bag, his ankle puttees, his Black Watch cap badge and the 'bonnet' with its

pom-pom. At least once he brought his rifle, which he left standing in the corner by the kitchen cabinet, and which I knocked over so that it fell hard against my forehead and I cried and they put butter on the bruise. It was that same soldier standing at the outside door, trying hard to smile and say it wouldn't be long before he was home again, and my mam in floods of tears long after the door had closed behind him, with me saying she shouldn't cry, she should be brave like me and not cry, and she would hug me and sob with renewed vigour and wet my face with her tears which tickled unmercifully as they dried there. And for days after he had gone back to the War, I patrolled the wall-top with my wooden rifle on my shoulder and bits of string tied round the bottoms of my leggings to simulate his ankle puttees. Whenever anyone spoke to me as they went by, I assumed a stern look and demanded to know 'Who goes there?'

The big building across the main Bradford Road became the local headquarters of the Home Guard, and there was once (and my guess is it must have been in the build up to 'D-Day') a great commotion, soldiers everywhere, with a great tank and a couple of anti-aircraft guns down our back street! I saluted and presented arms and challenged all day long, that day. My nanna said it was the Cameronians. Later she said that very few of them 'had come back'. From where, I didn't know, and I don't know how she knew either.

The War was also periods in which I didn't see my mam for days on end, since she was working nights on munitions at Steeton Dump, and even those weeks when she was on days, she left before it got light during the winter months. There was one such morning when she was getting ready to leave, and I had come downstairs in my dressing-gown and slippers because I had heard the postman knocking at the back door. A big parcel had come from my dad in Holland and it had a pair of red-painted wooden clogs in it, but my feet were already too big for them to fit me. The wood smelt vaguely of cheese. There was also some parachute silk, which didn't interest me in the least, and most exciting of all, some toy soldiers which were made from tin and were very different from the lead soldiers mam bought me, from time to time, from Bruce Johnson's. There was also a letter which was cause of another flood and yet another wetting, patiently endured when all the time I wanted to get to the soldiers. Such parcels came with increasing frequency, from Belgium, from Germany, with their contents encased in sturdy wooden boxes my dad had made (he was a joiner), and they contained such delights and wonders, toys such as I or my envious friends at home and at school had never seen or hoped to own. There were German soldiers made from some kind of clay, which were hand-painted and which, I very quickly discovered, were not water-resistant - they didn't drown they sort of just melted away. They were head and shoulders taller than my ordinary lead soldiers and much more life-like. I took three of them to school to show my teacher, Mrs Mitchell, and she said how nice it would be if we could display them on the Nature Table, so that everyone in the class could share them. Impressionable, compliant, I readily agreed, and they had disappeared for ever by the following morning. So much for 'sharing'!

There was one Christmas morning - it must have been 1944 - when I crept downstairs alone; it was still dark and I think one or two of the Bone girls, from Gargrave, were staying with us in the house, but I can't be sure if it was that Christmas or a later one. Whenever it was, one of them, red-haired Elsie, knocked the Christmas tree over when its lights were lit and my mother got a shock when she tried to right it.

That particular year, Father Christmas had, of course, been. Oh, and how he had been! The mince pie had disappeared, apart from a few crumbs, and the sherry glass was empty; but these were incidentals, even if they were, in their way, precious relics to be revered, aeons later. It was what he had left rather than what he had taken that was magic! Hanging from the front-room ceiling was a glinting silver model of the Graf Zeppelin and a first-world war open fighter plane, both of which were made in a lightweight metal called aluminium that enabled them to fly as they hung when they were wound-up. They were immensely detailed and both bore the fascinating, dreaded German insignia. But that wasn't all! On the hearth rug, set out for all the world as if it had been Bruce Johnson's very shop window, were toy soldiers and guns and compendiums of games and snakes and ladders and a large, black-painted, wooden model of a Heinkel bomber which my dad had made, and books - especially my first *Rupert Annual*; and the sock I had left hopefully on the fireside chair the night before was bursting with nuts and an apple and an orange and a new sixpence and all sorts of little boxes, which all had to be opened at once and then left at once because there were so many other things to pass on to to discover. I remember I switched on the Christmas-tree lights and switched off the centre light and stood back, breathless, Aladdin stumbled into his treasure cave. One or two of the lights - they were painted porcelain Chinese lanterns - were revolving slowly back and forth and in their movement their warm glow would catch the tinsel fleetingly so that it flashed red or gold or silver, and the tree and the hanging aircraft were shadowed against the wall, and life would never be quite so full ever again of such bounty. Then someone was singing 'Away in a Manger' outside the front door, then reciting 'Christmas is coming', then all fell hopefully silent. I picked up the gleaming sixpence, unlocked the door, and thrust it into the boy's open hand, neither of us quite believing, I think, what was happening. Away he sped, leaving me to explain (or not) the fate of the silver sixpenny piece given away in a quite spontaneous flush of gratitude.

One of the most important events of my young life was my meeting with a boy called David Newby. He was slightly older than I was, though not much more than a couple of years at the most. I think he was in Colin Woodhead's class at Eastwood and maybe he had come to the latter's house, next door, to play. He lived in Worth Village, which I already knew as a place of terror, full of 'common' and 'scruffy' people and big, rough boys who were always fighting and bullying timid types such as me. But David's family weren't like that, I don't think. They came from Jarrow and both his mother (with whom my own worked, for a time, in t'mill') and his father, who was keen on boxing and teaching David how to defend himself, were very kind, decent folk; I think I was a little bit in love with his sister, Celia, too. Eventually, they emigrated to Australia. I knew they were going for quite a long time before, but I was ill in hospital by the time they left and I never managed to say 'goodbye'. It was one of the first tragedies, maybe even the first real tragedy of my life, and I cried for weeks after. It couldn't have affected him in the same way, I think, since he never made any attempt to come and see me.

However, it wasn't the short, intense friendship that mattered eventually, so much as the stamp-collecting and fag packet collecting to which he had introduced me, and especially the former. Stamps were a passion that dominated the whole of my early years and which lasted well into my teens, and through them my mind and imagination travelled the whole world. I yearned for the Gilbert and Ellis Islands or the British Solomon Islands or Pitcairn Island where, as the pictures on the delicately-tinted stamps told me, there were long, golden

beaches with palm trees and men fishing from catamarans, any one of which could have been a Treasure Island and was certainly a paradise where nothing bad ever happened. It was an obsession fuelled constantly by the offer of 'this wonderful stamp (or set of stamps) absolutely free', advertised in the comics I read - *Adventure*, *Hotspur*, *Wizard* and *Rover* - and I would send away for them then watch the post every day with trepidation and disappointment until, eventually, they arrived, along with the books or sheets of stamps 'sent on approval', which were a great temptation and source of anguish because I never had enough money to buy the stamps I craved from them. A philatelic junky, I would keep them for weeks, sometimes months, in the hope that somehow the necessary cash would turn up, or my nanna or Willie Abbot would take my hints and resolve my dilemma. Letters reminding that the return of the stamps was overdue would arrive, then others more forcefully worded ('long overdue'), and eventually threats of court action, and somehow, the amount of money accumulated in the envelope never seemed to add up to anything like the value of the stamps removed. Time after time I found myself in this ridiculous, infernal position, was bailed out (usually by nanna), forbidden ever to send for stamps again, agreed in gratitude, then was trapped in desire the next day or the next or by the end of the week, by some new offer of another 'magnificent stamp absolutely free'. My very first Belgian Congo stamp was acquired in that way, the brown one with the leopard on it. This lust would also take me to Bruce Johnson's window with its 'bumper' packets of 'Whole World' or 'British Colonies' or single countries and I would do anything to get them, even the blatant blackmail of telling Willie that 'Yes, I would go to the pictures with him, if he would buy me such and such a packet or set displayed in Johnson's or Gibson's (East Parade) or Passingham's (next door to the Regent) shop window'. I didn't really understand, I think, that he was lonely, certainly had no friends we ever knew of other than my mam and my nanna, and I exploited that frequent question about 'going to the pictures with him' quite unmercifully, as I got older and more worldly-wise.

My first stamp album was bought from Huntington's shop, that later became Barwick's. It was called the XLCR, a name I could make neither head nor tail of and so, I suppose, I was a bit dubious about it right from the start. It was small and loose-leafed and often seemed to have far more country names at the top of the page than there were spaces to receive their stamps, if you were lucky enough ever to find any from Württemberg or Bavaria or Afghanistan. But when David brought his Stanley Gibbons 'Commando' album, which was divided between British Colonies in one half and the Rest of the World in the other, and had a map of the world at the front and back which was mainly pink, and had capitals and other information printed beside the country's name, that was the end of the road for the poor little XLCR. I just had to have a 'Commando' album; I even had to have the same stamps David had, stuck in in the same order he had put them.

Though the number could only have been very small at that time, my eventual acquisition of the album saw the first of the unending transfers of my collection from one album to another. It was forever in transit. I never could make up my mind where I wanted my stamps to be. I suppose I wanted them to be everywhere, really. That Christmas, after David had left for Australia and I had just come out of hospital and Willie had been reinstated after one of my mother's and nanna's periodical feuds with him, I had a new album called 'The Bounty'. It bore the enlarged picture of a Pitcairn Island stamp and, I think, an image of Captain

Bly. I always liked that album, it was bigger than the other two and had shiny pages and a very particular smell it never lost and which always pleased me. My stamps had increased in number quite considerably by then, and how I delighted in counting them - how many you had was an important part of it, of course.

The man who owned our house, Mr Walton, was at that time the headmaster of Holycroft secondary school and he used to call for the rent on Saturday morning. My dad didn't like him at all, said he was all talk and never put his money where his mouth was. My mam liked him, though, and so did I, and especially because he too was a stamp collector. Often, I would sacrifice all sorts of pleasures, even the Saturday morning pictures, to wait in for him coming, just so that I could show him my stamp album or some particular stamp, and just very occasionally he would bring me stamps, though he promised them a good deal more often than they materialised. Sometimes, his visits were extremely short, he was in a hurry, had a meeting to go to (he was a town-councillor and years later was made mayor) and his glances at my treasures were perfunctory, and maybe he never quite understood how important his approval was and what disappointment he caused by not fulfilling to the letter the role that had been chosen for him.

Yet, for all that, he had a powerful influence on my developing interests and my education. Later, when it came to taking the 'scholarship' examination to enter the Grammar School, he helped me, especially with arithmetic, and always encouraged and advised me but, I realised long ago, he also came, in a way, to envy me. His subject was geography, yet he had never completed his degree; completed or not, his knowledge and his interests nourished mine, and from my tenderest years he always predicted a great future for me along the educational road.

But I digress. Stamps in one way or another indeed led naturally enough to 'being good at geography' and I knew all the capitals in the world and where all the countries were, and in my early school years I was always 'top' in geography, even if I couldn't do sums and ended near the bottom of the class almost every time there was a test. One time, a missionary came to talk to our class. He had been in the Cook Islands and I was the only one who knew where they were, Raratonga, Aitutaki, Niue. He showed us all kinds of implements and beads and works of art he had brought back with him and I continually asked him questions about how they lived there, questions all based on how I interpreted the pictures on the stamps I should have liked to acquire from there but which always eluded me. He and my teachers were amazed that one so young could know so much about such a remote place, and that day I soared. We sang 'Far round the world thy children sing their song', a hymn I had never heard until then but which, since that day, has always remained tucked away among the other seemingly trivial exhibits in the museum of my life, a touchstone, a talisman. I sang it with all the desire and the passion and the ache that those elusive stamps and that man who had been there wrung from me and I resolved that some day I would go there; those islands became a golden goal, haloed in an eternal, misty sunlight.

Not long after stamp-collecting had entered my life, history followed, maybe even the same year, though I know, for other reasons, that history definitely arrived at Christmas 1947. It happened like this. It became a tradition which lasted for several years that about five or six weeks before Christmas, my dad would take me to Reid's book shop at the bottom of Cavendish

Street, to choose a whole pound's worth of books for my present from him. He enjoyed those visits every bit as much as I did; we would go straight downstairs into the basement which had floor-to-ceiling shelves all crammed with wonderful books (another Aladdin's cave) and we would start together, pulling down book after book, him reading the blurb on the back cover, me looking at the pictures, but gradually, we would drift apart, he absorbed in some 'school tale' or one about rugby or football, me looking for adventures in far away places or far off times, or both.

Only years later, I think, did I understand that he too was looking for something he had never had but had maybe secretly yearned for. Coming from a very large, working-class family, growing up in the twenties and thirties, the opportunities for reading, or indeed for anything other than finding ways of scraping a living, were as distant as China. He had passed the 'scholarship' exam for the grammar school but, of course, he couldn't go; not only couldn't the family afford it but, I imagine, because their whole ethos was set against it. I remember that when I went to grammar school, several of his brothers and sisters, even in my presence, suggested it was all a waste of time, I should be in the mill, bringing home my keep. But there were other things too. The day before his funeral, my mother and I went into a butcher's down East Parade, and somehow or other it came out that he had died, and one of the men behind the counter overheard the conversation and came over to us. 'Charlie Thompson' he said, 'he could have played for England if only there had been the chances then there are today. He was brilliant. He could control a tennis ball as if it were stuck to his toes. Stanley Matthews had nothing on him, I'll tell you.' And back he went to serving his customer.

My dad would read the papers avidly, 'The Daily Herald', 'The News of the World', 'The People', 'The Telegraph and Argus', which latter he continually cursed because of its flagrant Tory propaganda, the pink and the green sports papers, occasionally the buff one too, every Saturday evening. I don't really remember him reading books, though I suppose he must have at different times. Apart from the football and the racing results, I don't remember him listening to the wireless much either. By the time television came along, I was in my teens and we had pretty well drifted apart, him and me. So, one way or another, the annual visit to Reid's was an outing for him, an Aladdin's cave for him too. Then I would show him the books I had gathered up and he would look through them and show me the ones he had taken a fancy to on my behalf. Since a pound was the limit, there were always difficult choices to be made, and I also learnt quickly that one of mine, at least, would have to be sacrificed for one of his, just so as not to disappoint him. Eventually, if not that year or the next, I would get round to reading most of the ones he chose, I suppose when rugby and school had become dominant realities in my own life. There was one, *The Impossible Prefect*, which was about public school and cricket, I must have read it a dozen times after Biggles and Tarzan of the Apes had begun to loosen their grip on my fantastic inner world. I never did manage to read *From Pillar to Post* though, for one thing the author's name - Gunby Hadeth - sounded sissy and brashly posh, and for another, the book had no pictures, even though it was about rugby.

So there we would be, with him pushing the claims of one pile and me those of the other, and that year he did his level best to dissuade me from including *Our Island Story*, not so much on the grounds of content (even though, of course, it was neither sport nor school) but because it cost seven shillings and sixpence and that would mean a whole third of my allowance would

have gone on one book - was it worth it when there were so many more good books to be had in greater numbers? Its spine may have long ago disappeared but as I look at it now, high up on my book shelves, I know I was right to resist his insistent arguments. If ever a single book shaped a life, it was that one. That Christmas and for the following months I read it from cover to cover, at least twice over, and gradually, it organised a vague feeling of the romantic nature of the past into a knowledge and an understanding of its continuity and importance. Throughout the whole of my school life it remained, in some measure, a reference, a deep mine shaft from which many diamonds were to be extracted. Of course, it didn't exactly eliminate *Dandy*, *Beano*, *Radio Fun* and *Film Fun* but they had to move over and make way for its adventure, mystery, violence, heroism, tenderness, patriotism and so on, which, unlike their pleasures, were grounded in a reality that echoed on and on, long after the comics were in tatters or were lost or consigned finally to the flames or the ash-tip.

Once history, the romance and mystery of the past, any past, had got a stranglehold on mind and imagination, reading matter couldn't come fast enough. In the first year or two after the war, Woolworth's (I think...) were selling a paperback pictorial History of England in several volumes. The pages were crammed with 'authentic' photographs and with line drawings of siege-engines and 'typical' Viking village scenes, whatever characterised a century or an age. I know I first came across them on holiday in Maryport; an older girl there, who used to look after me and sometimes take me to the pictures, had one of them I think, or maybe it was someone else there, and I eventually got the whole set. Colin Woodhead had them too and we used to spend hours tracing from them, with greaseproof paper, and making our own history books, colouring in our much-admired efforts. There was one time, I was maybe seven or eight, no more, when it had been raining all day and I went out into the back street with the whole set, and settled down in the tent-like shelter that belonged to the electric-cable men who had been working at the top of the street for several days. I must have got fed up with reading, or maybe it stopped raining, but I decided to go and see if Coley was coming out to play. His house was just round in the front street, a mere thirty yards away. So, I left the books in the shelter and went and knocked on his door. Either he wasn't there or wasn't coming out, I don't now remember which, but by the time I got back to the shelter, certainly no more than two minutes later at the most, the whole set of my lovely books had gone. I just stood and gaped at the spot where I had left them. At first, I thought my mam had come out and taken them in the house, but she hadn't. I kept going back into the shelter to see whether they had reappeared, but they hadn't, and they didn't. It was incredible. How was it possible? They were there then they were gone, all in two minutes; twenty centuries of history, vanished in the twinkling of an eye. Had someone come out of one of the houses in our street, Mong maybe, and stolen them; or had someone seen them as they went along the top of the street, either up or down the main road? I never did find out what happened to them and, of course, never saw them again. I was heartbroken but they were never replaced. 'That'll teach you to look after your things' my dad said, scarcely looking up from behind his paper, 'Trouble with you is, you get your things far too easily' - this latter said as much, if not more, for my nanna's benefit as for mine, since she was ever the disapproved bringer of such bounties and had almost certainly bought me all of the adored but now forever regretted pictorial History of England.

The first post-war, door-to-door encyclopaedia salesmen were making their appearance at that time and there was a long debate, into which even Mr Walton was dragged (because the 'pro' party shrewdly saw in him as weighty an ally as was ever likely to come their way), about whether or not the thirteen pounds so many shillings for the eight-volume set of *Newnes Pictorial Knowledge* was indeed the snip the salesman swore it was. Over a period of a couple of weeks he became a regular visitor, patient withal, 'dropping in as he was passing', to see whether or not his commission was in the bag yet, and to add a couple more words of persuasion. Oddly enough, it was I who all unwittingly came up with the clinching argument, casually, quite innocent of the effect it was likely to have on everyone, especially my dad, the chief sceptic. 'David Hazel's mam and dad have bought him a set; not these though, some that are more expensive'. All eyes turned on dad. The pressure must have been intolerable. He bit into his lower lip, as he always did when he had that fearful vision of his wallet opening and pound notes flying out in all directions. 'All right, then', he said at last, 'but make sure you make use of 'em.' Painfully, he counted out the thirteen pound notes, slipping each one back and forth several times between his tightly-pressed forefinger and thumb before letting it fall, like a lost soul on its way to perdition, just to make sure that two hadn't got stuck together. As if to reassure him, the salesman picked them up and counted them out equally slowly and very visibly, before deftly transferring them to the safety of his own snug wallet. So, there they were, eight stiff-backed volumes, each one wrapped in a white paper cover, and they were mine. 'Make use of 'em?' I devoured them; not all, but the history, geography, myth and literature ones, time and time again. They confirmed, filled out and added to the legacy of *Our Island Story*, as well as having a particularly nice newly-off-the-press smell they have never lost and which made reading them an olfactory pleasure as well.

But, as dad frequently reminded us, 'money doesn't grow on trees', and the wallet didn't open too frequently for books after that debacle. So, it was natural, inevitable, that sooner or later I should discover the public library up town. It was a Carnegie library, my dad said, and this mysterious fact I readily shared with all my friends, sure it must be important even if having no meaning for me, since my dad had said it. I think it must have been Auntie Edna and Colin who introduced me to the delights of the Children's Library, after maybe one or two abortive attempts by my own mother, who certainly used the library herself about that time. There was always a sense of hope, of anticipation, about a visit to the library. Maybe today would be the day you finally got your hands on the wholly elusive *Biggles in Borneo* or *Biggles Defies the Swastika*, which, it seemed, barely touched the shelves before they were whisked off again by some favourite of the gods, who wasn't me. It seemed the whole town was queuing up to read *Biggles in Borneo*. You put your books on the counter, glancing wistfully in the direction of the shelves you knew would fleetingly contain it, paid your fine (always, of course, there was a fine), got your tickets back and pushed through the little gate with the latch, almost running in case, even in those two or three moments, someone else was already there lifting it from the shelf; your book of right, *le Saint Graal*. You looked swiftly, grabbed any Biggles story you hadn't yet read, if you managed to locate any at all - as a stop-gap and a precaution in case one of the other million or so Biggles-hunters should snaffle it under your very nose - then you went back and looked again, eyes travelling slowly along the line, reading each title carefully. Then when that didn't cause the object of desire to leap out into your trembling hands, you

began to look behind other books, to move to other adjacent shelves, just in case it had been misplaced or got shoved behind, though by the time you had adopted that stratagem you knew in your heart of hearts that it was hopeless. Later on, when you were a bit older, you would go upstairs to the Reference Library and start reading some page you never finished or go along the shelves reading the titles, occasionally taking down a book, deciding it was quite incomprehensible, utterly boring, and put it back. You would force yourself to do these things for a quarter of an hour or half an hour, then charge downstairs again into the lending library, to see whether in the short time that had elapsed the miracle had occurred. But it never did.

Biggles in Borneo. Far off places and far off times. They were the driving force, the inspiration. But in the late forties and early fifties, Bradford and Leeds were far-off places. In Leeds, my dad told me, I might even see a black man or even a Chinaman. London (where mam and dad had been for the 1937 rugby cup-final - Widnes 18 Keighley 5) was a place of fantasy, all decked out in fancy lights, all linked by 'the tube'; it was the place of the Tower of London (where the princes were murdered), of Tower Hill, it was Tower Bridge, it was Whitehall where 'Charles the King walked for the last time' (according to the caption under the first picture in *Our Island Story*), it was also where auntie Daisy's knicker elastic had broken as they were all trying to get across Piccadilly Circus on their way to the match and uncle Steve had bent down swiftly, in full flight, and whipped her fallen combinations up into his pocket to save the day, honour, blushes and whatever else! Even last week was then a far-off time and both time and place were continually being etched in with stories of other people's life's experiences, real, embroidered or imagined, so that my world was then an intricate pattern of fantasies woven out of words and they, not what they expressed, were the only guaranteed reality. 'Nanna, tell me about the times when you were Tiger Fallowfield at school chasing Teddy Oliphant, ... tell me about Long Tom and Mushroom Dora and Clip-sticks, Worry-a-rat and Two-pennarth-o-fat-bacon, ... tell me about when you lived at Beck Wythop, ...' and, of course, she did, referring always to her Cumbrian-Westmorland earlier country life as 'the olden days', painting pictures of delightful and terrifying places and people, a fairy-goblin world which, in essence, was not very different from that she read to me in *Where the Rainbow Ends*, *Peter Pan and Wendy* or *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*.

Old Willie Abbot too was a source of perplexity and wonder. Who was he? The man who, ever since my memories began, had been coming to our house in his battered old trilby, a shabby navy-blue overcoat and two or three days greying stubble on his chin, for ever sucking at an old clay pipe which had a rubber band wrapped round the mouthpiece, since it was too hot to smoke without. When he talked, saliva would run down the pipe stem and eventually drip off the bowl onto his knee or the carpet. I didn't like that at all, being extremely fastidious. It was many years before I understood his relationship to our family. I think my dad didn't have much time for him, seeing him as something of a wastrel (which in a material sense he undoubtedly was), having very little in common with him, in reality, and in any case, since Willie's attachment was to nanna, for whom my dad ever felt a deep rancour, Willie was almost a non-person. Whenever Willie came he brought something as a gift, often a bag of fruit, or some puzzle or magnetic toy – such things seemed to fascinate him, but they were brought also because he thought they would amuse me. Unfortunately, he also brought fleas which seemed to delight in my tender young flesh, and this became a source of great tension in the house.

Sometimes, when my mother and nanna knew he was coming, they would roll up the carpets and remove all the rugs, or worse, lock the doors and pull the curtains and pretend to be out - 'Is 'ous all oot?' was his invariable greeting, in his Cumbrian dialect and accents, when he did manage to get in - and we would sit in silence while he tried first the back door and then the front, and I always felt uneasy about this. From time to time they would confront him with the evidence of his man-eaters, the great red blotches and weals on my skin, and he would flatly deny responsibility and stamp out, greatly offended, swearing under his breath, and he would stay away for a week or so but he always came back in the end. And maybe he was right, since there was one other visitor to the house who might also have been the culprit, quite apart from my own possible contacts. But then again, maybe he was responsible because when you saw where he lived and how he lived, it was perfectly possible. It was in one room of a tumble-down house, in a yard enclosed by walls so high that the light barely penetrated, in a slum area of the town. The filthy curtains were always drawn. He slept in the same room on an old camp bed. There were no carpets on the floor, he used newspapers as a table cloth, there were coals or coke piled on the floor near the fire-grate, and every surface was covered in years of dust and smoke and cobwebs. The room was lit by an old gas-mantle and there was always a smell of gas in the room. If ever I had the misfortune to go there, I took great care never to sit down - not that that was often a real option, since every surface was covered in junk and piles of 'Exchange and Mart' or programmes from the wrestling matches he avidly frequented at the Baths Hall. He hadn't been upstairs for years, since the roof leaked or had maybe even caved-in. Fleas, I had to accept, would likely feel very much at home in that habitat, in company with the mice he often trapped and the other creepy-crawlies that scuttled about when disturbed by the sudden, wan light.

Yet, for all that, I knew those few square feet of squalor contained all kinds of treasures in addition to his fish tanks and his Axolotls. Occasionally, he would open an old tin chest which sat beneath the curtained window, piled high with rubbish, and in it there were carved walking sticks, jewelled knives, calabash and meerschaum pipes, oriental fans, and what I then took to be a goblin's shoe. And why not, since Willie's earlier past had been very very different. He came from a wealthy family of Maryport ship-owners and had himself been born at sea. He had been married but his wife died young in childbirth and by the time of my early years two of his three children had long deserted him, for America, for Australia, and no longer kept directly in touch with him nor he with them. One daughter, Olive, the mother of the Bone sisters mentioned earlier, lived not too far away, before she too emigrated with half her family to Australia, taking my special favourite, Lillian, who worked as a nurse in Bradford, with her. That departure was, for me, like a bereavement, worse even than David's. For years after she had gone, I had this dream of captaining the Great Britain rugby team to Australia and turning up unannounced at her door. Almost half a century was to go by before I saw her again, but as captain of nothing.

Well, anyway, Willie used to take me to Gargrave to see Olive and her family from time to time, or one or other of them would visit our house, since their lives and my nanna's and mother's had all been closely intertwined before they had all, for one reason or another, left Maryport for West Yorkshire in the early nineteen-thirties. Nanna had been house-keeper to Willie's mother, and it was in their house, 'Gill Mont', that my very young mother had

encountered a middle-class gentility, as well as a generosity and a kindness, which gave her too a glimpse of a different world from that into which she had been born. There were books, fine clothes, paintings, antique furniture, and all kinds of strange objects, the mementoes of several generations of Barnes-Abbot voyages to distant parts of the world, but mainly East Asia. She had the reality at one remove, as a child in that house, and my legacy was the words of it, the shadow of it, but it sufficed to steer me into waters I might not otherwise have visited or visited so early and so decisively.

For the whole of the nineteen-forties, after the end of the war, our holidays were only ever spent at Maryport, and usually staying with friends of my mother and nanna or even in places we didn't know, after asking around among friends and acquaintances after we got there. I remember the very first time we went; it was decided only the evening before. That's how it always tended to be. I had a book which had pictures of children building sand castles on a seashore and I imagined that Maryport would be just the same, with the towers of a fun-fair with flags streaming, in the background. It wasn't at all like that because it was a working port not a resort, and yet it had miles and miles of sandy beaches, with deep red sandstone rocks that the local people used to use for scouring their steps, and seaweed with pods that popped, and dead jelly-fish, and that was all very exciting. There was one holiday when nanna would take me there every afternoon while Willie was off playing billiards with his cronies from the old days, and I got badly sunburned. There was another time, or maybe it was the same time, when my mam was there and some of us were staying at 'Knocker' Hind's and others at Katy Wheatman's, just a few yards down the brow, and my dad's sister, Auntie Annie was there ('Teapot Annie', my nanna called her; maybe because she always had some tea on the go, but then, she had a nickname - usually derogatory - for more or less everybody), and my cousin Geoffrey (Auntie Mabel's son) whom I always liked. Well, we had been playing with some other local kids - with the fluted, funnel-like megaphone from an old phonograph - and were called in to have dinner at Katy Wheatman's house. Part of what we were having was baked beans and I said I didn't want any - maybe because I didn't know what they were. Then, when everyone had been served, by Auntie Annie, I changed my mind, perhaps because Geoffrey was having some. Anyhow, Annie said I couldn't have any and my mam said I could and there was a furious row, but I don't think I got any baked beans, possibly because they had all already been served. I never did like Auntie Annie after that. She was squat and fat and loud and very ugly and the baked beans really tipped the balance.

Maryport had been bombed during the war and that made it an exciting place to me. As Knocker's house was close to the harbour there were quite a lot of traces of the bombing in the immediate vicinity; derelict houses in which they said that such-and-such a person had been killed with his family, or such-and-such another. That made a deep impression on me. There was a joke about Knocker's stick which they all kept referring back to and every time they did some of them would laugh until the tears streamed down their faces. I never did know what it was. Still don't to this day. Knocker's stick. You see? Nothing. Not a flicker! Knocker had a son in South Africa and I remember him showing me a stamp on a letter, which I greatly coveted, but I hadn't the courage to ask for it and he hadn't the imagination to know that I might covet it. So there it stayed. What a waste when it could have been gracing a page in my album.

Once, curly-headed Coley came with us, and I remember him lying asleep on his pillow with his head rolling back and forth from side to side and my nanna said that that was a bad sign. But he seemed not to take any harm from it that I could see. We stayed on that occasion with a family called Facchi (they must have been Italian, at least in origin) and their house was none-too-clean. It was possibly **there** that I first discovered the paper-backed history books which were later to cause me such pleasure and anguish. They had a son about our age. He used to take us up through a skylight onto the roof of the house, which was very high because it had three storeys. I was petrified and always kept well away from the edge but even clinging to the chimney stack I could see the view right down to the harbour, the beaches and way over the Solway Firth up to Silloth and Scotland. We used to go and fish for crabs and eels in the river Ellen, down by the harbour. When the tide was out the drop down into the water was immense; and I went there always in fear and trembling, since I couldn't swim. All the local lads could, and did, right there in the muddy waters under the bridge, with or without their 'dookers'. We sometimes went off to play down Shippen brow. I once cut my knee on some broken glass hidden in the long grass and had the scar of it for years after. On really hot sunny mornings we occasionally went hunting for butterflies with jam jars, just to see how many we could catch, but these delightful pastimes were invariably interrupted all too soon by someone coming to fetch me. We were going to Netherton or Netherall or somewhere else, to see Mrs Hewitt, who had a coarse, black horse-hair sofa that I detested because it set my teeth on edge, and her sons, Tommy and Bobby who once gave me a bantam's egg, or some other boring people at Dereham or Worki'ton, although I liked it when they took me to see the giant's grave or that of 'Ten Shilling Smith who died a pauper aged twenty-five pounds', and especially if we called in at Anovazzi's ice-cream parlour to buy me an orange ice cream on the way there, or at Quaito's fish and chip shop on the way back - or both. I saw 'King Kong' at Maryport; the older girl I mentioned earlier, who was very motherly and was called Sheila Thornthwaite, took me. I watched the whole dreadful film through the bars of my fingers, not at all convinced by Sheila's continual reassurances that 'it was only a picture'.

On the occasion that Coley came with us, my nanna took us to see 'Tales of Uncle Remus' - now, that really was some picture! 'Zipper-de-do-da, zipper-de-ay, my oh my what a wonderful day'; with painted butterflies flying around Uncle Remus's head, and the whole world bright and sunny and Coley and me tagging along behind Brer Rabbit, Brer Terrapin and Brer Fox, not to mention the Tar Baby. That really was the world to be in.

All in all, despite the various lodgings of more than dubious hygiene we stayed in, holidays in Maryport left a goldenish glow so that I always felt a little bit aggrieved when my friend, Michael Nicholson, whose mother owned a dress shop and whose father was a manager at Keighley Lifts, would tell me they were going to Ayr or Torquay or Eastbourne for their holidays and would be staying in a private hotel, adding with something very like a sneer - 'I suppose you'll be going to Maryport again, as usual.'

The allotments had all but disappeared and so too had our 'cave' beneath the sleepers, engulfed in the slow tide of black ash. An ugly building began to take shape, constructed out of red bricks and breeze blocks and asbestos, to become eventually a 'joiner's shop', owned by Robinson and Nowell. As I said, my dad was a joiner, a trade he had learned in the War so as to 'better himself' in 'civvy street', and sometimes they would borrow tools from him, or he from

them. For a long time though we kids resented their being there at all, since they had destroyed our world not just once, but twice over and now we had to play down in the Hollow or the Mill Fields and from this latter we found our way over to the dam-side and from there to the Becks (as that section of the River Worth was known locally), which was literally only a footbridge's width from the dreaded Worth Village. That frontier region was always to be avoided, but most especially in the weeks leading up to Bonfire Night, lest you fell into the hands of the 'Villagers', who would torture you with pen-knives, nettles or lighted matches and even cigarettes or give you the worst Chinese burn you were ever likely to get anywhere in the world – including China.

As I got older patterns changed; you no longer had to go to bed in the summer months when it was still light. Indeed, towards the end of the forties, there was a long period in which I was taken up by Colin Woodhead and his mother, and that too was important. He was a couple of years older than I was and his father had been killed during the War in North Africa. His mother, Auntie Edna, as she always was to me, was someone who had a wholly untutored artistic sense. She was good at knitting and crocheting and sewing, and she taught us how to make Christmas decorations out of crepe paper and tinsel. She was endlessly patient. She encouraged us to draw and paint and Colin was really quite accomplished in these skills and always a bit condescending about my efforts, but I learnt, I improved. During this time we used to play with his meccano set and build cranes and wagons. We also played with plasticene, building stockades and castles, rolling it out with a rolling pin, then cutting it up into planks or square sheets or rolling it into round 'stakes' to build the walls, and this, I think, as a result of seeing the film 'Treasure Island'. We went through a phase – definitely the result of that film (with Robert Newton as Long John Silver) – in which we would draw maps of the island and colour them with coloured pencils or paints, then slowly 'roast' them over the open fire until they went brown and brittle like ancient parchment.

We went to the cinema, every week on a Wednesday evening, usually The Ritz, to see whatever was showing there. The very first film I ever saw with them was called 'Torrid Zone', with George Raft and James Cagney, it was about Africa, I think, but generally we were happier with Abbot and Costello, or Bob Hope, or films like 'Captain Blood' or 'The Three Musketeers' or 'The Ghosts of Berkeley Square'. We would have ice-cream in the interval and try as I may I could never make mine last, and Colin would gloat silently as he slowly dipped his wooden spoon and licked it languorously, long after mine was finished. Midland Counties, it was, hard as iron, in waxed tubs or choc ices which didn't last me more than two minutes and I could have eaten twenty of them. Ice cream was agony and ecstasy on those visits to the pictures. In the winter months we would go back to a supper of fish and chips or pie and peas or occasionally chick-peas which Auntie Edna had 'steeped' overnight. In the summer, she would take us off to Cuckoo Beck, up Slaymaker Lane and across Branshaw golf course, where we would see wood anemones (she knew all the names of the wild flowers) and rhododendrons, and play in the beck, building dams and sailing sticks, and have a picnic. If it wasn't Cuckoo Beck it would be Haworth Park, or Oakworth Park where there were 'real' caves, in truth, a Victorian garden with ornamental grottoes, someone's folly, in which we would play hide and seek until it was almost dark, while she sat crocheting or doing some other kind of thing with wool or cottons or silks. Then we would go home, usually a fast, bouncy ride on the bus,

downhill all the way, on the front seat upstairs, windows open, hair streaming. Those lovely, long summer evenings.

Sometimes, we would go to the swimming baths in town, and it was partly through an intense rivalry with, and envy of, Colin, that I learnt to swim. On a Saturday, we might walk over the moor to Ilkley to the open-air baths, or go on the bus to Manningham Park baths in Bradford. Once, Colin and I had fallen out over something or other, and because she had already promised us the outing, Auntie Edna took me on my own, because he had made other plans or had refused to come if I was going. She was like that; kind, honest, scrupulously fair. But the Ilkley trips were best. There was a tank from the war up on the moor and we always stopped to play in it on the way there. We sometimes made a diversion to go and look at the Roman baths. We always took a picnic – tomato sandwiches, cheese sandwiches, bovril and dripping sandwiches for Colin (I didn't like those), and buns Auntie Edna had baked, and a bottle of 'pop' - dandelion and burdock was our favourite.

Our back street had other 'uncles' and 'aunties', the favoured few who managed never to fall from grace with my nanna – Auntie Laura next door on the other side, whose house abutted the fast disappearing allotments, and Auntie Edie across the street and her mother, Grandma Fish. I was never very sure whether the husbands of these aunties were uncles or not, especially Edie's husband, Tom.

Tom was the love and the bane of Edie's life. He had been a professional soldier in the twenties and thirties, in India, and had learnt there how to drink hard and drink long. Many a time he would fail to arrive home from work, having gone instead to 't club on Beeches Terrace on a bender, on his way home, quite losing all track of time and of how much beer he was downing. She would stand for hours on end at the top of the street, trying to catch sight of him rolling down Bradford Road, her eternal meat and potato pie (was it this he couldn't face or her rotten teeth?) burnt to a frazzle in the oven, yet again. When he did eventually get there, somewhat after closing time, it was usually to beat her up if she uttered even a breath of protest. She never did learn. Once their son, Eric, was big enough, however, the beatings became fewer, and their place was taken by fights, more often than not accompanied by shouting and cursing out in the street at two in the morning, with Edie banging on our door begging someone to get the police as Eric was killing his father. He never did, of course, and by morning or, at the latest, the following evening, everyone at number 5 was friends again - it was only the rest of the street that seemed to remember and shake its collective head, ruefully.

Edie had a heart of gold, all the kids in the street and beyond knew that, and it was perhaps in recognition of this that their parents tolerated the periodic small-hour shenanigans. When television arrived on the scene, Edie and Tom were the first in the street to get a set, and every evening they had a house-full of kids from far and wide, sitting watching Children's television for an hour or more. They regularly got fuller houses, I swear, than did The Cosy Corner or The Cav! If you arrived a bit late you had to sit on the floor or on some low, uncomfortable stool, but you were never turned away. Edie took an ostentatious pride in naming all of the presenters for you, will-ye nill-ye, telling you this was Mr Pastry or Philip Harben or Sylvia Peters or Lady Barnet or Macdonald Hobbly. Maybe it was the nearest she ever got to being distinguished for knowledge of any sort, the knowledge that came from being first in the field; it was her moment, but it very soon passed.

One Christmas, Edie's relatives at Malton, who periodically turned up in a great cattle wagon, very thoughtfully brought her a goose; a live one, however. She kept it in the cellar, fattening it up, and called it Esmerelda. For a whole month before the fateful day she had a constant stream of kids coming to see Esmerelda and to feed her. The goose was a real charmer, she would let you stroke her and she would eat the corn seed, very delicately, out of your hand. Edie was a regular visitor to our house of an evening, and it was from conversations with my mother and nanna that I first picked up her growing unease about the forthcoming ordeal – her showdown with Esmerelda. Tom, though quite willing to share in the devouring, had flatly refused to participate in the despatching of the goose, of which he too had grown inordinately fond, giving her the odd saucer of ale! Everyone gave them advice but no one offered to carry out the murder, and the upshot of this was that Esmerelda shared their Christmas dinner rather than being it, and was duly returned to Malton fat, wholesome and no doubt eternally grateful to Tom and Edie, to survive at least another year.

Tom had a fund of stories from his days in the Indian army. He had had a dog called Muttah and he would pull out a tattered old photograph from his battered old wallet as if to prove it, and this Muttah had been a great character – and maybe Tom had glimpsed something of this in Esmerelda – and he and Edie would lean against their yard wall on a summer's evening, 'gassing' and smoking fag after fag, with my mam and any other neighbours who happened by, with Tom reeling off episode after episode from the life of Muttah. The gales of laughter seemed endless, and he always concluded with the opinion that Muttah had been a victim of Doolali-tap, that curious madness that allegedly affected British soldiers once they had been exposed to the sun and whatever else in the Indian sub-continent. Tom himself was undoubtedly living proof of it.

Tom could never quite make up his mind about whether to shout and threaten us kids when we played cricket in the street or whether to come out and join us. We would pull the pig-bin into the middle of the street and, most of us being right-handed, the ball sooner or later would thump against Tom and Edie's window or door. You would see him leap up from his chair to come dashing outside to scatter his expletives among us, but by the time he had got there there wasn't a kid in sight. Other times, though, he would be leaning against the wall and you could see he was just itching to have a go – and it took nothing at all to persuade him. There was one evening he was really on form, maybe he had had a couple of jars on his way home, but he danced Compton-style down the wicket to smash every ball that left your hand almost before it had. We were playing with a quite heavy, green ball that evening – I know because it was mine – and down he skipped and smashed it hard and high, right across Bradford Road it went, still gaining height, to crash into the huge neon sign that stood proud of the wall just below roof level on Fred Hurtley's factory. One moment the red and green sign was flashing out its colourful message 'Lightsome Belts for Men', the next it was a myriad pieces of broken glass tinkling on the pavement thirty feet below, but by that time, only the pig bin remained to shoulder the blame, still standing stupidly in the middle of the street. A bewildered Kit Nowell had to move it back to the wall next morning so that he could get his lorry down to the workshop.

But for all that, Tom, who had almost achieved 'uncle' status, proved to be a great disappointment in the end. Coley and me were coming down Bradford Road one Saturday

afternoon and we caught up with Tom staggering home from t'club. Coley's dad was one of his boozing partners and Coley was always a special favourite of Tom and Edie. He chatted away to him with his gently teasing irony, but I walked on in front, a bit ashamed to be seen with drunken Tom, and it was then – *in vino veritas* – that Tom confessed to Coley that he couldn't stand me, never had been able to, 'too stuck up, just like me mother', and dutifully, Coley relayed this to me when we had finally parted company with him. It came as a great shock. I told my mam and my nanna when I got home and for a while after that, Tom and Edie lost their status and were kept standing at the door until the realisation dawned on one or other of them that they were no longer welcome. Eventually, inevitably, they all got back together again, as thick as thieves, but from then on I always kept aloof from Tom, though I couldn't punish Edie in that way for long; she suffered enough from Tom as it was, without me adding to her burden by denying her the chance of lavishing her rough but kind attentions upon me!

Weekdays were so full of action and adventures but Sunday, by contrast, was always a let-down. Boring boring Sundays when you couldn't even play out. Though my grownups had no religious convictions, you could only play in the yard, since it was only 'common' people who let their children out on Sundays. My dad reading the papers, my mam and, when she was living with us, my nanna, preparing Sunday dinner all morning – the sizzle and smell of near-burning fat as the Yorkshire pudding mixture was poured into it; then the wireless in the late morning and all afternoon – 'The Billy Cotton Band Show' ('Wakey, wakey!'), 'Two way Family Favourites', 'Big Bill Campbell', 'Life with the Lyons', 'Have a Go' (with Wilfred Pickles – 'Give 'im the money, Barney!'), 'Down Your Way' (with Franklin Engleman). Sheer, unalleviated boredom for a child, and, judging by the speed with which they all dropped off to sleep and got to snoring, not exactly gripping stuff for the adults either, leaving the wireless wittering on to itself, ignored entirely by me, playing with my soldiers, or sorting and sticking stamps, or trying to relive the pastimes with plasticene or pencil and paints that the rest of the week I shared with Colin and his mother – but it was never quite the same at home. For a short time, there was a dramatised version of the 'Just William' stories on the wireless, around tea time, which served for twenty minutes or maybe half an hour to push back the yawning, oppressive edifice of Sunday. There was the perpetual foiling of bullying Egbert Huggins, who reminded me of Colin Murray, Eric Redman, Alan Wilson, Jacky Wray and a dozen others who terrorised my early school life, until nanna paid Walter Nixon threepence a week to look after me, which only made matters ten times worse when he blabbed it around, pocketing the cash and never anywhere to be seen whenever I was set upon. But most of all, you waited for Violet Elizabeth Bott to threaten William with her 'I'll thcream and I'll thcream till I make mythelf thick!' Then there was tea itself, which always seemed to end with a tin of rubarb or golden or red plums and condensed milk – I liked to get a lot of juice and mix it up with sneaked extra helpings of the milk, so that it coagulated and was thick and creamy as it slipped slowly, coldly down your throat. I liked that a lot. It was just about all you could look forward to on Sunday.

There were times when friends of my parents were invited to tea, or we went to their houses. Some were all right, but others, like Albert and Renee or Aunt Mag and Uncle Herbert, contributed heroically, monumentally to the crashing boredom of Sunday. Mag and Herbert were my dad's aunt and uncle. Whenever she set eyes on me she would without fail burst into tears – which I found a bit disconcerting – because she had lost her son, Norman, who had died

of some wasting disease, while their daughter, whose name I forget, had left them to go off with someone married, I think, or disreputable in some other way, and she lived in Leeds or America or New Zealand or somewhere far away, and they never had any contact with each other. Uncle Herbert was as loud and opinionated as he was narrow-minded and ignorant and he smoked a pipe and filled our house with the smell of it. But everybody smoked then and you never thought anything about it, everybody but my dad, that is, who was a 'teetotaller', lauded and held up as a shining example to the world by my coughing, wheezing relatives, his brothers and sisters, "'e doesn't smoke an' 'e doesn't drink, our Charlie" - "'e does reight! Savin' 'is brass", they agreed one and all, refilling their glasses and passing the fags round yet again.

I mentioned 'Bonfire Night' a while back and the two or three weeks leading up to it were always an exciting time. It was as though something in the air told you it was time and you would drift together and instinctively, it seemed, start propping. Nobody organised you, nobody said 'we have to get started'; it just happened. Suddenly, there you were all together with an assortment of saws and choppers and ropes, heading in a particular direction, eyeing likely bushes, trees and fences. Us little ones were often dispatched back to base with smaller but combustible stuff found en route, with instructions to come on after to give a hand with the real prizes the bigger lads would undoubtedly gain. Sometimes we did, at others we forgot, got distracted, and urgently started playing some game or other, abandoning our bits of prog carelessly around the Hollow. If you hadn't gone back to help you sometimes got shouted at, or cuffed, or even told you couldn't join with the bonfire any more and were cast out into solitary despair until after a day or two of mooching about on the periphery, being ignored or taunted, you suddenly sensed you were forgiven and reinstated, and you drifted back in as though nothing at all had ever happened. Or, going back in the direction the big lads had taken, you might meet them returning, nonchalantly dragging half trees or whole fences behind them, and they would stop for you to marvel at their booty and they would explain in minute detail, each one adding his bit or repeating what the other had just said, how they had come by it, so that you couldn't help but admire their skill, their stealth, their cunning, their resourcefulness and yes, most of all, their daring and their bravery. And bit by bit, in the time-honoured place, always on the same patch which never quite managed to heal from one year to the next, the pile would grow, and if on the following morning you were the first to arrive you would circle it and admire it and feel immense pride and gratitude that you were a part of it all.

But success often bore a bitter price, for word would get around, and you might be visited by one or two lads from other bonfires, ostensibly to admire, in reality to spy, and you then had to look to your defences because you knew that sooner or later the raiders would come. You agreed a roster for guarding the prog, a system of warning, of gathering quickly in an emergency, and you waited in trepidation. It always seemed incredible that our big lads, those same big lads you stood in awe of, could themselves fear others who must therefore giants be, towering way above you, like gods, biding their time, waiting to destroy you and set your puny effort back in its miserable perspective. Giants whose very names struck terror into a timid heart such as mine: Jack Bell, Jimmy and Jack Hardy, the Stortons, the Molloys, 'Thil' Chester (who lived by the river and was always 'thishing' - like Pedro) and his crony, Lister Brown, all of them mean, malevolent, unpredictable, who would smile cruelly as they bent back your thumb or twisted your arm up your back until you howled with the pain of it. And sooner

or later the storm would break. A gang of boys, bristling with sticks, would appear like a dark cloud at the bottom of the Mill Fields or coming over from the dam-side or even, occasionally, coming down our very streets - the Aireworth Roaders, the Becksiders, the Bradford Streeters or worst of all, yes, the Villagers. And you would pick up your staff or your stones, stand shoulder to shoulder, hurl defiance and rocks if they came too close and sooner or later you would charge, either at them or away in headlong flight depending on their numbers and their size and on how many you had been able to muster. But whichever way it was, I was never in the van, if forward my courage wouldn't permit it, if retreating my legs wouldn't go fast enough. Always, I think, I took the Falstaffian course, not just in keeping clear of the fray but even in the way I would tell it once the enemy had fled or retired in triumph, dragging away with them half the fruits of our past week's endeavour. Those brave days of long ago Novembers!

But it wasn't just the heroism and the comradeship that made bonfire time special, it was also the fireworks, and here I usually managed to do much better than Colin, whose only source was Bruce Johnson's - a two and sixpenny box of Standard Fireworks was his lot - whereas I got those and then others besides, Lion and Brock's, through Mr Barker. Mr Barker was one of a seeming drove of insurance men who called once a week. He would thrust the door open with a peremptory knock on the move, breeze in, intoning as he came "Good evening, Lilly!", his trilby pushed far back, Sinatra-style, on his forehead. In addition to insurance, however, he and his brother ran a clothing business (in the Bridge Inn yard), and it was through his business contacts, I fancy, that he acquired the fireworks, even in the early years after the War when they were still quite scarce. Bundles of bangers,imps, rip-raps, rockets, snow fountains, chrysanthemum fountains, Catherine wheels, Roman candles, and many others besides in such profusion, a currency which for a few days made you famous, the green envy of all.

Bonfire time was also a time for paying off old scores with bangers dropped in empty dustbins with their lids hurriedly replaced, or rip-raps pushed through letterboxes at Roberts's or Fawcet's or (naturally) Snowdon's shop. Mischief Night was the night before Bonfire night, when, the hard labour of gathering and assembling the fire being over, you could relax a little by scaring the living daylight out of grumpy neighbours. Bonfire night itself was usually a bit tame in comparison with the build-up, the anticipation; the fire never seemed quite to live up to expectations in terms of longevity, despite its height and girth, and it was important you got your parents there in the first fifteen minutes or so before it fell in on itself, just so they could see and admire it as proof of something or other that concerned you deeply but which lacked the words to know quite what it was - the crackle and phut and flare and the torrent of sparks shooting skywards in the darkness said it all. The roast spuds later on in the evening always turned out the same, cindered black on the outside, raw in the middle, and far too hot to handle, while the 'plot' toffee was never enough to go round. And gradually, people would drift away into the night until only a few stalwarts were left huddling around the flickering embers, reminiscing about the raids and the battles and prized pieces of prog and how they had each been won. A wind might get up, a few sparks would fly still, but the circle of light which, at first, had extended to the four corners of the Hollow, had shrunk now almost to nothing. And it was all over. Next day, before you went off to school, or at dinner time at the very latest, you would

wander down to the Hollow and look at it wistfully, as if it were some huge animal gasping its last, still warm, still able to manage a few sparks, but undoubtedly near to death. You would throw any bits of twig that had not yet burnt into the embers, just to keep it alive a while longer. Languidly, you might collect up a few spent firework cases and take them home but you never kept them for long. What was the point? They meant nothing, really. Never mind, it's not all that long to Christmas, now!

It was not just serious events like Bonfire Night or Keighley Gala that had their seasons, but games too - playing 'conkers' in September or lakin' at taws from April through to November, when it got so cold, you couldn't grip them properly and the game faded out till the following spring. I never said 'laking' of course, since only 'common' people said 'laking' - but I didn't have any difficulty with 'taws'! You could play nuggy or follows-on but round our way ringy was the great favourite. Some kids were brilliant - Wilf Murgatroyd, Kenny Heaton, David Rollins, David Brett - they were crack shots. Practise hard though I may, and I did, both indoors and out, I could never match them in their skill. Two of them would team up and play together and the rest of us might as well have handed over to them all the taws we had without the formality of the game. They were a bit like Mississippi gamblers, with their bags of taws, dudes of the dust in which we traced out the ring with a stick and the starting line with a foot. A bit like miniature *boule*, except for the ring which held the prizes as well as the promise of disaster. Each player put a taw inside the ring, then away you went, each one throwing for position. The one who threw nearest the ring was 'firstsy'. If there was any dispute about who was nearest, you had an elaborate measuring system: large distances were measured by counting the number of feet placed toe to heel, between the taw and the ring; small distances were measured in hand-widths, and really small distances, by two or three fingers placed side by side. The principal aim was, of course, to fire at the taws in the ring and knock them out. You did this by resting your marble in the crook of your bent index finger and flicking it with your bent thumb. Your hand had to remain perfectly still during this operation, if it jerked forward at all then you were guilty of 'fullocking', a grave infringement which was punished by 'mens'. Your taw was placed on the ground, and an opponent's foot was placed hard up against it and tapped sharply with his other foot, sending your taw shooting off (with many a groan) to the outer edges of the galaxy, from where you would then fire haplessly in the direction of the ring without a cat-in-hell's chance of getting even half way there. Mens was the universal summary justice for all infringements. If you knocked a marble (or more) out of the ring cleanly, both it and your 'firer' going clear of the ring, then it was yours and you had another shot at the remainder. However, if your firer stayed in the ring, you theoretically had two options, you could shout either 'stop off' or 'puts in'. If the former, you kept the taw you had shot clear, picked up your own firer and dropped out of the game, having at least got your 'dibs' back. If the latter, you returned the taw to the ring and took another shot at it from your former position. However, if someone else got his shout in before you did, then you were bound by whatever he had shouted. Disputed calls were settled by majority decision. Disputes were frequent and if law and order was suddenly sensed to have broken down irretrievably, there you all were scrabbling for your taws, and that was another way in which the sharpers always managed to win; not me though, as I was often left with only one taw and not the two I'd started out with, or scuffed and pock-marked items that nobody would have wanted to win

anyway. One oft-recurring cause of quarrels was whether or not, when an opponent was (legitimately) about to blast your firing taw to kingdom-come, you could substitute a minute bead or ball-bearing in its place, or even a giant ball-bearing (a 'bolly'). If the former, he might well miss or suffer as much as you did, if the latter it would be his taw and not yours that ricocheted off into the outer darkness. Sometimes it was allowed, at others it was not, you never knew until the situation arose, and then it depended on who you were playing with and whether you even dared protest at all.

If not taws, then ton-weights-coming on and eventually, football. Football sooner or later had to claim me. I had been to t'match at Lawkholme Lane, with my dad on two or three occasions, and stood cold and bored and miserable, listening to Uncle Herbert arguing the toss with the visiting supporters, and looking desperately forward to half-time when I would at least get a fourpenny meat pie and a glass of pop. But football eventually discovered me all in its own good time.

It was a games afternoon at Eastwood School and the sides had been picked, with me being, as usual, the one that one of the unfortunate sides was left with. What a liability. They stuck me in goal to keep me out of the way. But all of a sudden, somebody on our side had been penalised for handling the ball and they were going to take a penalty shot at goal. I hadn't a clue about what was going on but they eventually conveyed to me that I had to stand there while Eric Redman, the cock of the whole school, blasted the ball at me from close range. This was not really to my liking. Everybody told me what to do but I would rather have been elsewhere just then. Up he stepped and let fly. I completely misjudged the direction of the ball and instead of getting out of the way of it blundered straight into its path and stopped it with my hands which had been thrust up to my face to protect it. Suddenly, instead of being derided as a wimp I was being hailed a hero and it was from that ludicrous moment on that the myth of me the goalkeeper was born, second only to Derek Newiss, the school goalie. Of course, I had to have a royal blue polo-knecked sweater and black shorts just like his - after all, if you are going to indulge in theatre, you might as well dress up for the part.

The short front street was blocked-off now at the end. The two adjacent gates remained; everything as it always was through the one on the left leading down into Mr Marsh's garden, the one on the right going in at street level to Robinson and Nowell's squalid construction, with their ramshackle lorry often parked just inside. The tipping had left off a yard or so short of the thick rose-hedge, leaving a deep trench below the back of the building which reared up, high above it, blocking out the light. 'Jerry-built', my dad said it was, which I found confusing since I thought all the Jerries were now dead and I certainly hadn't been aware of any around among the builders when the shed was being constructed.

The only positive thing finally to come out of that act of vandalism was Deadman's Dick. Along the back of the shed, a walkway had been left, maybe half the width of a railway sleeper. At the gate end the drop into the trench was no more than a couple of feet, but at the far end it had increased to seven or eight, before it turned the corner onto a wider platform from which you could see over into Mr Marsh's on the one side, Mr Burns's straight ahead and the bottom houses of our back street, and the Hollow, over to the right. It was Colin who christened it, doubtless under the influence of some of the names which appeared on our maps of Treasure Island. Its main function, as I remember it, was as a hiding place when we were playing

'Delieve-o' (probably 'Relieve-o' but that was the name we inherited and, in our turn, faithfully handed down).

'Delieve-o'! What thrills and terrors and skills and derring-do! You divided into two teams, after two captains had been nominated, both clamouring 'Baggy first pick', so that the only way it could be settled who had 'first pick' in the selection of the teams was, of course, by having recourse to the time-hallowed 'one potaty, two potaty, three potaty, four', and when that was done the teams were quickly assembled, with the best runners and the toughest being chosen first, until only the dross were left. And me. And I was invariably last, being the youngest, and would have given anything not to suffer that ignominy, just once. We first played it in Eastwood School yard, I remember, but it was nowhere so good there as it was in our streets. The way it evolved there was that the few 'big lads' would be on one side and the hordes of us 'littl'uns' on the other. You had to have a den and, despite his endless protests, that was always the short wall by the ash-tip beside Mr Wilkinson's shop, on Bradford Road, at the top of Sussex Street. The aim was that one side 'got off' and then, after a suitable interval, the other side would come looking for them. They captured you by tapping you on the head three times saying 'Delieve-o one, two, three' and escorting you or sending you back to the den where one of their number was on guard. Once they had captured three of you you would all go round the streets shouting 'All up! All up!' and you would all gather at the den and then the other side 'got off'. However, since most of us littl'uns would never have been able to reach as high as the heads of the big'uns, let alone overpower them sufficiently to get in the required three taps, we never moved to this second stage. You could, of course, free your captured comrades, by charging the den, tapping three times on the wall and shouting 'Delieve-o one, two three'. This was one of the exciting bits. As well as trying to avoid capture yourself you tried to sneak up on the den, usually two or three of you together so that the defender had less chance of preventing a break-out. We always played the game in the autumn and winter months, when it came dark early, so that the darkness added its own element of excitement and mystery. Well, the platform at the end of Deadman's Dick is a favourite hiding place. It gives you a good view of the directions from which the hunters might come, but even if they come right up to the foot of the platform, passing, naturally enough, through Mr Burns's garden, there is no way they can get up to you, other than by going round to the other end and sidling along the perilous Deadman's Dick, hanging above a shadowy void and, by the time they have reached the platform, you will have dropped down and run away to some other hiding place. Only if there are two of them are you trapped; but their numbers are so small (Jack Martin, Peter Coleman, Kenny Lythe, Alan Burrridge, Kenny Dixon, that's about it) that they can't afford the luxury of hunting in pairs. So, it was just occasionally that two of them coincided there, spotted you, and bagged you, one waiting for you to jump, the other cutting off your retreat along Deadman's.

The garden plot was fulfilled and those who had known it and maybe even loved it as it was, were merely fugitives there now, in a game of hunters and hunted, seeking salvation each according to his own particular condition and its needs; like me, perhaps, in some measure haunted, taunted by images flickering across the screen of memory, of long summer evenings and the scent of roses, of neatly ordered lots each with its fruit trees or dahlias or lupins or

whatever, clear through to the fence which barely broke the continuity over into Burns's garden and on through to those all down the Mill Fields, with Thwaites Brow and its high horizon so near you only needed to lean forward to touch it. Who, standing there now, in what was our neat front street, with its scoured steps and clean-swilled flags, could ever imagine what all its squalor had once been, and who, in their right minds, would ever dream of laying a baby on a blanket there, in a white coat and beret, to be photographed in the bright early-evening sunlight?

Doug Thompson

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