

AN ILLEGITIMATE LIFE  
(DIARY OF A DINKIE-DI POMMY BASTARD)  
by John Lane

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Irena Harrison for her advice and guidance and also to Teresa Tansell of Heron Consulting, South Yunderup for her invaluable computer skills.

Interviewed by Mr. Stables and med. examined by Dr. Burns  
12.10.32 approved.

THE CHILD EMIGRATION SOCIETY  
(INCORPORATED)  
SAVOY HOUSE, STRAND, LONDON, W.C.2

Date of Application 3rd October 1932

Name of Child Jack Kenneth Ramsbottom Date of Birth 12.11.22.  
(Birth certificate to be attached if available)

Address Dr. Barnardo's Homes,  
18/26 Stepney Causeway, London, E.1.

In what Institution?—if any

How long under training there? Seven years and ten months.

Ever in any other Institution? No

School Standard IV Ability Good

Creed Baptist Church Boys Garden City Minister Rev. R.A. Allen.

Birth-place Ramsgate Institution Baptized? and where? Yes

By whom recommended Dr. Barnardo's Homes, 18/26, Stepney Causeway, London, E.1.

Mother's Name and Address Edith Buckthorpe, 128 Broadfield Road, Moss Side, Manchester

Mother's Occupation and Character Waitress - good.

If dead, date and cause of death Boy illegitimate.

Father's Name and Address Harry Mills. Not known.

Father's Occupation and Character Warehouseman.

If dead, date and cause of death

Brothers and Sisters	Name.	Age.	Address and Employment.

Nearest responsible relatives Dr. Barnardo's Homes.

Any relatives in the Dominions oversea? No, 18/26 Stepney Causeway, London, E.1.

## BLISSFUL IGNORANCE

Settling in to the comfortable business-class seat of the Singapore-bound jumbo-jet, I deliberately set out to indulge in the luxury of an unfamiliar experience. After years of 'cattle-class' flying it took only a few minutes for me to conclude that business-class was definitely the way to go. Levelling out after clearing Perth airport, I had scarcely relaxed into the spacious comfort of the flight when I found myself revelling in the personal attention from an attractive Chinese hostess. Yes, Mr Lane was perfectly comfortable, thank you. No, there was nothing Mr Lane required at the moment, thank you.

'Is this your first trip to Singapore, Mr. Lane?' I scanned her face, returning her smile while contemplating a suitable reply. Eventually I managed a quiet, 'No... I've been a few times actually, but of all my visits, this is the most comfortable, although my most memorable trip was way back in 1942.' The young girl's face immediately filled with concern. 'So you were one of the Australians who came to our defence. Was it very bad for you?' 'It could have been worse,' I replied vaguely, my thoughts being preoccupied on the reality of how well these Singaporeans knew their World War II history. I had, in fact, arrived there with the Second-Fourth Machine-Gun Battalion late in January, just in time to be overrun by the invading Japanese forces. In May 1943 I was sent to Japan to work as a slave-labourer until victory was won on 15 August 1945. Now, in March 2004, with my wife as my carer, I was on my way back to Kobe.

A little later my friendly hostess placed an appetizingly hot meal on to my tablecloth-covered tray, at the same time asking what I would like to drink. Wow, I thought, revelling in so much personal attention, it doesn't get much better than this. Twenty minutes later after washing down my lunch with two glasses of red wine, I was all set to lie back in my recliner to just drift back into the past. The only decision to make was, how far back should I go? No problems there...go right back to the beginning, that's always a good place to start.

In the dark ages during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children born into a Christian world to an unwed mother were labelled illegitimate and had to bear the stigma of being a bastard. In effect, without so much as a legal charge or summons, the child was automatically deprived of state support and aid, leaving the ostracised mother to struggle to support her baby in an unsympathetic world. Unless the mother received financial help from her family, the innocent child invariably finished up in an institution, unwanted and unloved. My personal papers reveal that I was a 'boy illegitimate' with the name of Jack Kenneth Ramsbottom born on 12 November 1922 in a Ramsgate institution. In fact, I was almost 16 years of age before I discovered who I was. Until that incredible moment of truth, I just assumed that I had been born somewhere in England in the month of November 1922. My parents had not told me that. I had never heard of my parents. Somewhere along the way, being shunted in and out of children's institutions, I had acquired the information. It probably came from my foster parents with whom I had spent seven idyllic years.

Sam and Rosa Nobes lived in one [now called Little Bismore] of a handful of stone cottages that formed the tiny hamlet of Bismore in the Cotswold region of Gloucestershire. The whitish-grey scattering of cottages clung to the lower slopes of a hill below the more populous village of Eastcombe that tumbled over the crest of the Cotswold plateau. Across the way stretched the wooded hills cradling the enchanting beauty of Toadsmoor Valley. A narrow stream crept cautiously from distant trees like a fawn grazing leisurely through a meadow before disappearing beneath the track that twisted its way out of the valley and on to the old wool town of Stroud. In the opposite direction, skirting a small copse of beech trees, the rough dirt track climbed its steep way up into Eastcombe. In the 1930s Eastcombe was a village of children. It was into this spacious environment of pure bracing air that Dr. Barnardo, as far back as 1880, decided to board out some of his host of orphans, free from the contamination of the cities. Eastcombe suited his requirements perfectly. Its strong Baptist community ensured a supply of the Christian foster-parents on which the Society insisted.

ME AT AGE 14 MONTHS



Much later in my life, when I gained access to my personal files, I discovered that I was just two years old when I had been signed away into the care of Dr Barnado Village Home in the London borough of Barkingside. Ten months later I was fostered out to the Nobes family. As I grew up, Samuel and Rosa Nobes quite naturally became my father and mother, and Mother's sister became Auntie Flo. During my seven-year stay with them I shared one of three upstairs bedrooms with my foster-brothers who seemed to come and go at irregular intervals. The exception was George Brown. George and I survived the longest, and as a result, we grew as close as any pair of natural brothers.

We lived in a typical two-storey, Cotswold-stone cottage with the bedrooms above and living rooms below. There was no bathroom, no running water and no electricity. Our water was collected in barrels that were connected to the guttering by a movable downpipe. Paraffin lamps and candles supplied the lighting. The ground floor consisted of a kitchen/family room, a large living room, a scullery and a pantry. A path from the back

door led to an outside pan-style lavatory complete with a neatly cut supply of newspaper squares, threaded on a string hung from a nail in the wall. On a small shelf rested a stub of a candle in an enamel holder and a box of safety matches. Further down the back garden, an open-sided shed alongside the wood-heap, held all Father's tools and paraphernalia. Beyond our boundary grew an extensive forest of beech trees inviting many pleasant hours of future exploration. In the front, Father had worked almost an acre of sloping land into a productive vegetable garden. He had to. Times were tough and there was very little work about. Mother said how lucky we were to have so much land when most of the Eastcombe villagers had only small allotments up on the fringe of the plain.

Father was a big-framed fresh-faced man with thinning sandy-coloured hair that could have been auburn in his youth. Well into his middle-age years there was a strangeness about him that sometimes frightened me. A severe speech impediment prevented him from communicating, a situation which often left him terribly frustrated. When I was old enough to understand, Mother explained that he had survived both the Boer War and World War I ...but at a cruel cost. 'It be the madness of men that caused so much suffering,' she went on with a rare bitterness in her voice. 'Thousands of young-uns in the Great War died horrible chokin' deaths when they was shelled with poisonous gas. Father was one of the lucky ones who survived an' you can see what it did to 'im.'

Mother was all giving. Childless herself, she not only displayed incredible tolerance in dealing with Father's affliction, but had devoted many years of her life to raising Barnardo's children. The supreme altruist, she was worshipped by a succession of foster-children to whom she gave all her love in equal portions. Many of her 'children', after reaching adulthood, still returned to see her. Florence and John Bottomley paid regular visits, and never failed to take me on a special outing. Life was wonderful.



ROSA NOBES

With brother George at school, my activities were restricted to the house and garden, which was still a sizeable playground. My pre-school activities included racing imaginary motor vehicles around the paths. George taught me all I knew about cars and bikes. Our hills were among the toughest in the Cotswolds, a feature which guaranteed

frequent trail events. Whenever the 'machines' tackled the obstacles we kids had placed on sharp bends and turns, he'd point the BSA's, the Nortons, the Ariels, and half a dozen other makes. But the pick of them all was my Rudge Whitworth motor-cycle. To me, Rudge had the sound of power. It was the noise I generated when revving up the engine. It not only rolled easily off the tongue, but after a little experimenting, I found that when used in combination with a growl, it sounded just like the real thing. Rudge-rudge-rudge and away I'd race, scorching past gooseberry bushes, screeching around corners; even coming to grief occasionally. Whether this early brief period of contrived misfortune created a regular, repetitive pattern throughout my life, I shall never know, but it seems that from then on, scarcely a day has passed when I haven't sustained a cut, or bruise, or sprain, or something worse. Suffice to say that my days of feigning injury began and ended with those unique races on that 'murderous' circuit.

But my pre-school days weren't all filled with play. I fondly remember helping my father to dig potatoes. As he forked them out of the soil, I filled my special pint-sized bucket and carted them off to the shed for bagging. The trip took me along the lower path that ran the length of a sharp two-metre drop into a gully that must have been the most fertile strip of land we had. Along its entire length grew a prolific crop of head-high stinging nettles, so rich in yield, that had a trophy been awarded for the best display, Father would have won in perpetuity. At best, the stinging nettles protected our lower boundary from sneak attacks from tramps and gypsies, while at worst, a fall over the embankment would be only marginally less disastrous than a trip to hell, which even at the age of four, I knew was a most undesirable destination. At any rate, with a potential disaster area so close, it was a powerful stimulus for concentration.

Apart from the garden, there was little else I could do to help. When I did try to lighten Father's workload in the harvesting of the gooseberry crop, my efforts went unappreciated. There was no small amount of conjecture amongst the family as to the phenomenon of a failed yield. What had promised to have been a bumper season one year had strangely been stricken with a mysterious loss of fruit just prior to its ripening. No adverse weather conditions had been experienced, no unusual insect activity had been observed, and no marauding flock of birds had invaded our territory. Apparently none of the family had counted on the guile and cunning, not to mention the appetite of one small child. I still pride myself on the skill of my operation, and, even now, think that my exploits would have remained undiscovered if I had not been untimely and suddenly stricken with acute diarrhoea, an illness that, under the circumstances would have earned me little sympathy, but for the severity of the attack. As it was, further punishment was unnecessary. The drastic consequence of my action was enough to effect a promise from me to undertake no more raids on family fruit bushes.

So far as I can remember, there were only two more attacks on my life at that time; one by my brother George, and one unintentional 'suicide' attempt. The self-inflicted injury happened while I was cleaning a jagged piece of jam-jar over one of the water butts and nearly severed two fingers off my left hand. The other near miss for me came from being too trustful of my brother. Sunday morning was the only chance the family had of sleeping in, but for we boys, it meant little, other than finding something to do for the extra hour before breakfast. George as usual came to the rescue with a new game ... bum-fights. Dressed only in our long night shirts, the idea was to position ourselves back-to-back on the bed-top and trade bump to bump with our backsides. Predictably, the game quickly got out of control with the result that in the end, I don't know who or what made the most noise; my bellow of anguish as I flew across the bedroom, the crack of my skull hitting a thick porcelain object, or Mother's cry of despair and look of horror as she burst into the room. But despite Mother's distress, it was nothing in comparison with my impending fate. It wasn't so much the fear of being hurt that troubled me, as the terrifying prospect of landing in the well-placed jerry. George's earlier positioning had been uncannily accurate.

The one redeeming feature in my favour, and perhaps a life-saving detail, was the fact that the jerry was only half full.

### **'RAMSARSE' THE WRETCHED**

Having survived enough of life's perils in my pre-school years to have lasted a normal boy a complete childhood, my first day at school just before my fifth birthday presented a hazard of bizarre proportions. Up to that day I was not unduly made aware of my uncommon surname. What I did know was that I was a Barnardo child, that the Nobes were not my real parents, that Mother's sister was Auntie Flo, my brother was George, and that I was Jack. So far as I was concerned, although I knew that my surname wasn't Nobes, there hadn't been occasion to warrant any bother about what it actually was. But after Mother had walked me up the Bismore hill to present me to the principal of the Baptist school, it all changed. Whatever preliminaries were required Mother was taking care of it; I was far too excited to worry about mundane matters such as registration. After pestering George for months to take me with him up to school, all the disappointments and frustrations of the past were forgotten now that the day had actually arrived. At last I was one of the 'big kids'

Mother hovered in the background until I was seated, then departed the scene obviously relieved in the knowledge that I had settled in quite happily. That agreeable state of affairs lasted the entire morning, augmented by the pleasant recess in which a hot cup of Horlicks helped considerably to augment the school's piped heating system.

With lunch came the first fraternising with children from the other classes that brought pleasantries to a halt and confrontation to the fore. A belligerent-looking redhead made the first approach.

'My name's Eddie Collins, what's yours?'

'I'm Jack Ramsbottom.'

'Ramsbottom? What a funny name. Fancy having a name like Ramsbottom!' With that he galloped away shouting his head off that the new kid's name was Ramsbottom ha, ha, ha. I just stood still, not fully understanding that I was going through my very first painful experience of embarrassment. The name hadn't troubled me before; none of the family had made a joke of it. The fact was that I'd only remembered being called Jack and had scarcely given my surname a thought. The sound of it not only surprised me but caught me off guard. However, after a few moments' thought I had to admit that it was a strange name; ridiculous almost. The same label on anyone else would have been hilarious, but the unhappy fact was that somehow or other, whether I liked it or not, I was the one who was saddled with it.

At that stage, I was far too young to work out the derivation of names, or how I had managed to procure my own hapless tag. It did occur to me however, that the state of being without natural parents should have been stigma enough for one person to bear, without having the added ordeal of being subjected to ridicule over my name, a circumstance over which I had no control. I had accepted the fact that I was parentless. I was a Nobes child now. From as far back as I could remember they had kept me warm, fed and loved. In their care I was happy and content. Now, on my very first day at school, I felt that secure protective blanket of warmth and affection gradually being stripped from me. I felt exposed and vulnerable.

Without warning, the introduction of this new experience in my life produced unfamiliar and disturbing emotions. There was no escaping the deluge of taunts and innuendos, the sniggers and belly-laughs that accompanied me whenever I went on the playground. I found myself with the dubious distinction of bearing a name that amused other kids, yet left me confused, bewildered and hurt. At that early stage in my life, I had no answer to their jibes.

However, it could have been worse. I derived some consolation from the fact that several of my fellow students were Dr Barnardo kids, fostered throughout Eastcombe. That was something we had in common, so there was no taunting on that score.

Happily, as the weeks went by, the novelty of my name gradually wore off and I eventually became accepted as just another member of the adopted village kids. Having George around me too, no doubt became a distinct advantage. In due course I answered to Jack, Jackie or even Rammy, but when the occasion demanded it, I was given the full treatment of Ramsbottom.

Official activities usually brought schooling to a halt with students everywhere gripped with apprehension. If the classroom became transformed into a temporary hospital, tensions dissipated immediately. Mothers knew their offspring were being either swabbed for possible throat infection or being deloused. Children thought they were either being strangled or scalped.

It happened on a day when the classroom took on the appearance of a dental surgery that terror swept through the ranks. Those with previous experience trembled visibly at the impending ordeal; newcomers, like me, froze in fright at their impending doom. It was on one such occasion while trapped in the clutches of a dental chair that, incidentally, I discovered to what extent a professional person is prepared to perjure himself in the name of humanity. 'This might hurt a bit,' the man announced unsympathetically, pedalling away on his ancient contraption. With my mouth full of fingers and thumb, I was in no position to argue, or even to comment. Somehow or other he found enough room to insert the nasty end of the drill and from then on I wished I hadn't been born.

Whether it was my muffled cry, the kick on the shins, or merely the bitten finger of the dentist that did the trick, I shall never know. All I did feel at that moment was the relief of spitting blood, bone and water into a funnel that a nurse obligingly held for me. Then, after a reassuring smile, she coaxed me back into the sacrificial couch where I was plugged and scraped until it was decided that I had enough torture for one sitting.

I suppose it could be said that the greatest inconvenience about a visit to the dentist these days, is the loss of feeling to the mouth while the effects of the local anaesthetic wears off. During my childhood at Eastcombe there was no such problem. We simply went without that refinement.

Although I was too young to be troubled by it, the Great Depression forced most families into an extremely frugal existence. Jobs were scarce and money was tight. People worked long hours to earn barely enough for the necessities of life. Luxury was a forgotten word. The closest my family came to it was to sit down to a simple supper of bread and cheese on a Saturday night, washed down with a pint of beer that Father had carried home in a jug from the Lamb Inn up in Eastcombe.

Even though my parents received an allowance from Barnardo's for children they fostered, no doubt it was barely enough to cover the cost of keeping us fed and clothed. Footwear, especially, must have been a problem, as most of us boys played football with any old can that happened to be lying about. We grew up accepting our living conditions as normal and never felt deprived. Being without the real thing served only to develop our latent talents of improvisation and resourcefulness. Consequently, the simple game of 'conkers' kept the school entertained for weeks without costing a penny, although there was often a price to pay in the form of torn britches or ripped shirts when climbing chestnut trees in search of the raw material.

Other games came and went at predictable intervals, although perhaps, some medieval West Country law could have been responsible for the transformation of an empty street one day into a battlefield of flying saucers the next. In reality, the 'saucers' were tops, set into motion by hand or string, and launched into orbit by a vigorous flogging from a home-made whip. Competitions were held to see who could gain the best distance,

an exploit fraught with danger as missiles frequently disappeared only to crash through someone's front window. One advantage of the times was the almost non-existent likelihood of seeing your best drive of the day shatter someone's windscreen. Very few automobiles made it into Eastcombe. Just as abruptly as it started, tops would be out and, in a few days, replaced by something else. In the meantime, with any sort of luck, the thrill of a lifetime might overtake us.

The most spectacular event to shatter the tranquillity of our part of the Cotswolds, was the motorbike trails. It was the unanticipated suddenness with which these events materialized that made them so exciting. No warning was given. No unusual noises disturbed the tranquility of our particular piece of paradise. It was only when someone heard the distant thin whine of a trail blazer's motorbike increase to a snarl as it scattered a red powder at strategic corners on its way through the village that the excitement erupted. No explanation was necessary; everyone knew the signs. The news spread faster than an outbreak of measles, and children prepared for action. If there was one activity short of war that could unite the villagers, this was it. Today, the adversaries were the motorcycle riders and the objective was to make their passage through our hills as difficult as possible.

Without a word being spoken or an order given, every lad went to action stations. In an extraordinary feat of engineering, particularly for a juvenile team of non-skilled workers, a typical Cotswold stone wall was demolished only to strategically reappear half an hour later in the form of tank traps in specially selected positions. And if the hapless riders thought they could avoid a trap by climbing around the banks, they were doomed to failure, if not downright disaster. The most formidable rocks were selected for just such an exigency, placed so strategically that an ant could scarcely have found a passage through. With our landscaping finished we were surprised to find an official surveying our efforts. At first we feared he might call in a bulldozer to dismantle our work, but his smile of approval put us at ease as he positioned himself advantageously for judging the contestants. With the trap well set, there was nothing more to do but wait in anticipatory smugness.

An hour later a shout went up from someone who had heard the distant gargle of an approaching bike. A moment of silence and everyone heard it. Almost immediately, another of a different pitch joined in. In two minutes a noise like a swarm of angry bees was heading our way. Now the first rider approached the bottom of the hill, gunning his engine in a powerful crescendo. Up the hill he swarmed; the revs falling away momentarily as he geared down. Closer came the moment of truth. The unsuspecting rider grew ever closer like a soldier advancing in battle. The tension mounted. Unconsciously I clutched my crotch with both hands in an effort to stop a sudden urge to urinate. When the front wheel hit the first rock, my hands shot skywards in elation, while the machine bounced precariously into space. Miraculously, the rider retained control to bring his bike back to earth in a precarious but successful landing. Time and time again the young rider displayed a brilliance of technique well beyond our comprehension, but eventually, the law of averages beat him. For several minutes he fought magnificently, bouncing from boulder to boulder with legs flying and motor-cycle screaming in protest, until through sheer volume of shot and shell, both bike and rider succumbed.

On and on, all through the afternoon, the battle continued until the last competitor walked his bike through the bend, clambered onto his seat and sped away, leaving us happily exhausted at having had the thrill of our short lives. All that remained now was the pungent smell of burnt fuel, and once again, normal conversation became possible as bird calls announced the recapture of their territory. And as the spectators dispersed, while George and I headed for home, I made the uncomfortable discovery that my trousers were decidedly damp.

The performance of the motorbike trails through Bismore into Eastcombe sparked a natural interest in conducting our own programme, using hoops. Every boy had a hoop,



which was simply a discarded bicycle wheel with the spokes removed. The problem lay in finding a suitable powder for marking the course. Eventually the problem was resolved by simply pounding away at old house bricks until it was decided that we had enough for our purposes. The occasion was ready-made for me to ingratiate myself with the big kids. Call it crawling or grovelling if you like, but if it meant relief from name teasing, I was prepared to do it. Besides, I envied the bigger boys their status. So long as I pounded house-bricks, I got fewer 'Ramarses' or 'Sheeparses', and more 'Little-un', a label that was immeasurably preferable to the indignity of the former.

## **PENNIES FROM HEAVEN**

Those villagers given to godliness were divided almost equally into two religious groups, Anglicans and Baptists and identified as church and chapel goers respectively. Each denomination had its own place of worship and ran its own elementary school. Fostered Barnardo kids boosted the attendance of the chapel brigade, while a village Anglican orphanage ensured a continuous supply of children to augment church attendances. From the time I started day school I had to attend Sunday school. For a year or so, weekly bribes in the shape of brightly coloured stickers and other awards for regular attendance were enough to keep my interest in biblical history alive. But as I grew older my concentration during Sunday school time drifted increasingly to imaginary and more recent history-making adventures of my own. However, it wasn't until I turned seven that Mother allowed me to drop Sunday school in order to attend the regular morning chapel service. When I joined the rest of the family for our very first service together, I had no idea of the surprise event that was to propel me to become the envy of every other kid in the congregation. For that dubious honour, I had brother George to thank for wangling me a job to be his assistant organ-blower.

The organ was built into a special loft to which access was gained by a flight of steps just inside the main entrance. The pipes were encased in an elaborately carved frame which overlooked a double row of stained deal pews. A carved wooden balustrade featuring a central clock encompassed the organist.

The organ had to be pumped manually by using a long wooden handle, a responsible job that George had been doing for some time, no doubt under Father's auspices. Watching George in action, I quickly understood the mechanics of the job. In order to avoid an embarrassing silence at the start of each hymn, the organ had first to be primed, so the timing had to be spot on. This meant that the action had to coincide with the minister's first word introducing each hymn. It was not physically hard work, so once I knew how to control the long handle and mastered the timing, George let me share the responsibility. This I did with great satisfaction as I figured it had lifted me out of the 'little un' category, yet not too young to realize the value of knowing the right people when promotion was on offer.

Both church and chapel celebrated significant religious events which, so far as we kids were concerned, were just an excuse to have a party. The chapel crowd set the pace in a procession around the village on Whit Monday, parading banners and singing hymns, pausing awhile outside the home of anyone ill. But the best part of the day came after Sunday school when a special tea was served featuring the popular seedcake. So many attended this function that three sittings were required to feed everyone, so with Mother busy wielding a teapot, I seized the opportunity to lose myself amongst the crowd in order to partake of multiple helpings. There existed an unofficial competition among the boys to see who scored the most. Anyone with only a single helping was considered to be a slow learner, while those who scored three times were immediately promoted to the top of the social order. Whatever the outcome, every child agreed that it rated among the best parties of the year, so with seedcake on the menu, the scramble was on to take the

maximum advantage of this rare opportunity.

The chapel's most spectacular day came when the annual autumn harvest festival was celebrated. Year after year, through good seasons or bad, there was always a magnificent display of produce and grains to offer for blessing. Practically the whole chapel foyer was transformed into a blaze of colour, with tiered shelves packed with beautifully arranged sections of vegetables, fruits and flowers, home-made jams, pickles and loaves of bread in all shapes and sizes.

The Anglicans, for their part, celebrated Ascension Day by holding an impressive ceremony called the 'Blessing of the Wells'. The wells used for the occasion are a feature of the village of Bisley, about two kilometres to the north of Eastcombe. A natural village spring has been channelled into seven separate streams that flow through openings in a man-made stone shrine. Around the walls is inscribed the text, 'Oh Ye Wells Bless Ye the Lord, Praise Him and Magnify Him For Ever.' With the adults left to make their own way to Bisley, the Church organized a special outing for the children that departed from the main street outside the church, where decorated horses waited, harnessed to colourful wagons spread with seats of baled hay. Although it was a rival group's outing, no one seemed to mind the Baptist kids joining in the festivities. That memorable 'hay-ride' into Bisley was certainly something different and always one of the most popular outings of the year.

But for some strange reason it nearly always rained at one part of the day. If it was such an important event in the Church's calendar, I couldn't work out why God didn't let them have a nice fine day. In Sunday school, we chapel kids had always been told to pray for the Lord's blessing; surely the church kids would have been given similar instructions. Ascension Day would have been the ideal day for the Lord's blessing, and the only reason I could think of why it rained, was that the church people couldn't have prayed hard enough. There was no doubt about it, they usually let us down badly. Perhaps the result might have been more satisfactory had both chapel and church kids thought to combine their efforts.

The chapel Sunday school included in its calendar an annual train excursion to Weston-Super-Mare, which, in an era when a trip of 20 kilometres to Cheltenham was considered to be quite an adventure, by today's standards was like going to the moon. The waiting was almost unbearable. For weeks ahead, anticipation built up to such a peak that by the time the day came around, I couldn't eat for excitement. As there was no direct line to Weston, we had to travel east to Swindon, then back-track on a different line. Although it was a roundabout way, it was all part of the outing. I enjoyed a train ride. I liked the clack-clacking sound of the wheels and the rhythmic sensation of a swaying carriage. I enjoyed sticking my head out of the window, relishing the clean smell of steam wafting back from the giant engine. I became fascinated by the movement of distant horizons as they drifted by in graceful slow movement. There were moments of discomfort of course when specks of soot stung an exposed face or irritated the eyes. Usually they were only minor inconveniences, but if a larger piece refused to budge, I had the luxury of retreating to Mother's lap to be operated upon. After her gentle treatment, I'd be quite content to recuperate in the comfortable softness of her bosom while dreamily watching the cows and trees and meadows waltz by like a fairground roundabout.

When we finally reached the broad seaside promenade and gazed out to sea, I became bewildered and confused. Where I expected to see a broad expanse of ocean, there was nothing but a sea of mud; a dirty grey puddly mass of it stretched away until it disappeared beyond an horizon of fluffy cloud. A thin strip of sandy beach beyond the promenade seemed to be vanishing fast beneath a growth of bathing tents, deckchairs, sprawling people and miniature castle builders. Beyond, and on the fringe of the threatening ooze, a troop of child-mounted donkeys patrolled the border between sand and slime. The contrast between home and this could not have been greater. Home was usually all peace and tranquillity, while here, from out across the space swept the wind in

sharp, salty gusts that whipped my face and stung my nostrils, leaving me gasping.

At one end of the beach, a giant pier straddled the pitted sea-bed like some prowling monster. According to George, along its length were booths of fanciful exhibits and coin-operated machines that promised a selection of mystery and horror. Without even thinking about the shops, the choice was difficult. I wanted to explore everything at once; the donkey ride, the Punch and Judy show, sand, mud and the secrets of the pier.

For the first half-hour, I saw nothing. I was too busy looking for my parents who had managed to lose me. I walked up and down the beach working myself into a panic until I was found. I think they must have recognized my whine. After that near disaster, I toddled along at my mother's heel like a scolded puppy waiting for a command, while all the time hoping for a handout. And for most of the day, the marvellous woman repeatedly dived into her purse for pennies that sent George and me scampering away to spend. All the exercise in the face of a stiff breeze soon had me wishing I'd eaten my breakfast. The sandwiches Mother had packed had vanished long before, now I felt compelled to bring the matter of my appetite to my parents' notice by setting up a constant chant of 'I'm hungry, I'm hungry'. This brought instant success.

With our appetites temporarily appeased in a nearby tea shop, and with George and I clutching a stick of Weston candy rock, we returned to the prom wall just in time to witness the phenomenon of an incoming tide. The sea surged in so swiftly that it sent the stall holders and deckchair occupants into frenzied activity, retreating from the path of relentless water. Seeing it for the first time, I remember it as a miracle of movement, an incredible force that swept in from out of the unknown which left me fearful that its power would come relentlessly on to drown us all. However, after a few words of assurance from Auntie Flo that the sea wall would halt its advance, we headed for the pier, which by now, appeared increasingly less formidable as its tall legs shrank beneath the deepening tide.

The pier turned out to be a big disappointment. With its questionable attractions given short shrift by Mother, she compensated by buying icecreams all round. I don't know what they cost in 1929 but, whatever the price; it must have made a sizeable dent in her remaining capital. We licked as we sauntered, filling in time that, a few weeks ago, seemed destined never to arrive.

The rest of our crowd must have felt as we did because, before long, we joined a steady stream making for the train and a chance to rest weary feet. George was more than happy with the movement because he had been under instructions to carry me if I collapsed. With stragglers finally settled amongst the hotchpotch of nondescript packages and sprawling bodies, the long homeward journey jolted reluctantly into life. And despite the exhausted state of my little body, from somewhere deep within my sleep-wracked head, there registered the fact that the moment of re-entry into our Cotswold cottage was the best part of the outing.

I must have been about seven years old before I realised that with pocket money practically non-existent, I'd have to find some paying jobs to do. Father was just not in the position to give us a weekly allowance. He never seemed to have regular work, which was not surprising in view of his difficulty in communicating. I had seen him wielding a scythe when clearing a neighbour's property, and had watched him disappear underground when digging the odd grave or two, but the combined income from these labours would hardly have paid for his weekly pint. The closest he came to having a regular job was officiating as a verger at the chapel's two Sunday services; eleven in the morning and eight at night. For these duties he was paid out of the takings from the last evening service of each month. When he arrived home on these special nights, we kids were waiting to participate in a rite that was not to be missed at any price.

We were already seated around the large kitchen table when Father took up his position at the head. Then with an unhurried sense of timing he produced a small calico bag bulging with money. When he upended it in the centre of the table, a deluge of coins

flowed across the bare boards in a magnificent display of wealth. There were a few brief moments in which to relish the spectacle, before all hands set to, to sort the spoils into their relative piles. Then, in an atmosphere of tense expectation, Mother and Father counted each pile separately, which when totalled, should have amounted to exactly one pound. If it was correct, satisfaction oozed from every enquiring face. There was money in the house again. More importantly, there was something in it for us.

With deliberate ceremony, father selected two of the shiniest pennies and handed one each to George and me. Despite the fact that the same ritual went on month after month, there was never any lessening of the suspense and drama of the occasion. But if the pound was as little as a penny short, a cloak of disappointment descended over the evening. At a time when money was so badly needed, a reduction in a just reward, no matter how slight, was quite an imposition. Although it happened only rarely, and we were still given our pennies, there was always a little less elation in the way we lit our candles to see our way up to bed.

By now I was firmly established as the apprentice organ pumper. Not that the job earned me any money, but it did open doors. Our popular minister, the Reverend Johnson, apparently satisfied with the progress I was making, asked me if I would like to be his messenger boy. The telephone had not yet invaded the privacy of our secluded part of England, and as the Reverend needed to keep in touch with his counterparts in neighbouring villages, he had a job for me if I'd like it. If I'd like it? I couldn't accept quickly enough; it was the heaven-sent answer to my financial problem. Furthermore, the hours of employment were just right.

On Saturday mornings at 9am I had to report to Reverend Johnson at the Manse. The remuneration would be governed by the total mileage I covered; sometimes there would be only a couple of short trips, while other days would keep me going until 1 pm. On a good day I could earn up to a shilling, which to my young ears, sounded like a fortune. And having a few coins to rattle in my pocket was so exhilarating that it gave me a feeling of power and confidence that I'd never experienced before. It was exactly what I needed. Yet it was all so simple. I enjoyed walking. Whistling my way over the Cotswold countryside and getting paid for it, was a situation bordering on perfection. I was extremely happy.

To make life even better, another job came my way when two Bismore families employed me to collect their daily newspapers from the Eastcombe post office after school and bring them back with me on my way home. Once again it appeared all too simple, although there were occasions when I put the job in jeopardy. Being a lad who loved sport and games, it didn't take much persuasion from the other kids to join them in an after-school game of football on the village green. The only question was, what to do with the newspapers while I was busy kicking goals. When the weather was fine and calm there was no problem, but wet, windy weather whipped up the ingredients for potential disaster. The obvious solution was to wrap my coat around the papers, a remedy that was only partially successful. The tricky wind blew with such fickleness that it left the newspapers soaking up the playing surface, which, although helping considerably to improve the quality of the game, presented a tendency for the soggy pages to disintegrate before I could deliver them, in all innocence, to their astonished owners.

Those were the easy days. Complications arose when our miniature football ground became engulfed by a sudden squall. This caused a number of things to happen simultaneously. Firstly, while deciding whether to continue the game or to pick up our coats and run for shelter, we got wet. Secondly, the newspapers not only become soaked, but before anyone could rescue them, they started to scatter page by page, in a mad swirling rampage all over the village. That was the moment in which I came closest to resigning my position as newsboy. I came ever closer to tears as self-disparaging thoughts overwhelmed me. Why did it have to happen to me? It was all my fault, I shouldn't have

stayed behind to play, I would never amount to anything, and so on.

But I was not without friends. Quickly donning their coats, the kids went racing down narrow lanes, over stone walls and even up trees to retrieve the wayward pages and bring them back to the assembly area. The challenge then, was in putting together two complete newspapers out of the pieces. That's when I started praying: 'Oh please let the outside pages be there...and the newsy bits'. I could get away with some of the less important parts missing, but it was a little more difficult explaining to my employers how the front managed to start on page five. It was a permanent source of puzzlement to me just how I did manage to hold down my job. But hold it I did, and what was more important. I was paid for it, adding another sixpence a week to the coffers. I was cultivating a liking for this commercial business.

Although Eastcombe had a small general store and on the fringe of the village on the Bussage road there was a Co-op, most people went into Stroud to do their serious shopping. A bus service took the route down the steep hill, past Toadsmoor Lake, then along the valley into the town. But that cost money. There was a back road that went over the Bismore Bridge, through the wooded hillside up to Lypiatt and along the Bisley road. Because we lived in Bismore that was the way we went. It was a pleasant walk which gave George the chance to study the cars, while I was content just to count the numbers of vehicles that passed us. Apart from the usual half-dozen motorbikes, some of which had side-car attachments, if the number of cars reached double figures it was a very busy day. More often than not the number was about five.

Now that I was earning pocket money, I occasionally let my head go and bussed it into Stroud to see John Bottomley, a sort of foster-brother who had lived with us for a short time but was now living with another foster family in Cainscross, about two kilometres the other side of Stroud. As the bus from Eastcombe terminated at Stroud, I walked the rest of the way until I reached the entrance to The Retreat. This consisted of a small group of houses that backed onto the Severn-Thames Canal. Every time I visited him, John and I would spend hours fishing with our home-made lines of string and a bent pin, but despite the efforts of the newly dug worm to free itself from the pin, I can't remember ever catching anything. To relieve our frustration, we used our energy to skim small flat stones along the surface of the canal, after which we gorged ourselves with sandwiches of chunks of cheese pressed between two giant slices of fresh white bread.

On the way home, there was usually quite a wait for the bus, which made the location an ideal spot for the local busker. On one occasion we waiting passengers were entertained by a little old man dressed in a grubby suit and a peaked cap that threatened to fall off. He played tunes on a battered old concertina with a flare that demanded attention. The rhythm and style of his playing must have stirred an undiscovered musical chord somewhere inside me because the music had me spellbound. At the old man's feet was a dilapidated bowler hat that appeared in danger of blowing away for lack of ballast, a peril that none of the crowd seemed keen to correct. A couple of pennies was its only anchor. In response to a sudden surge of compassion, I reached down into my trouser pocket and withdrew my total wealth in my loose fist. Opening my hand, I counted four pennies and a threepenny bit. A quick mental calculation told me that the threepence was superfluous to my needs, so I walked quickly to the hat and dropped the coin in. My action was without hesitation, but after I had done it, I was surprised to find how good I felt about it. After all, I had myself experienced some difficulty in the pursuit of money. The old man had worked far harder for his few coins than I had for mint.

### **LIFE'S UNPREDICTABLE CYCLE**

Village life was usually fairly predictable. Our activities and pursuits were governed largely by seasonal weather patterns. Only the most severe weather conditions kept the kids

inside, and I was ever grateful to Mother for giving me the freedom to join the others in extracting every skerrick of enjoyment from our environment. There were times of course when I appreciated my home-life to the fullest. Life was very comfortable in our little Bismore cottage, and although we had few amenities, I was always happy enough and never felt deprived.



BISMORE VALLEY  
NOBES' COTTAGE TO THE MIDDLE RIGHT OF THE PICTURE

There was no electricity, no running water, no bathroom even. No priceless art collection gathered dust in the cupboards, no masterpieces accumulated wealth on our walls, and no Ford dripped oil on our driveway. Yet we lived in an environment of plenty. Our riches lay elsewhere; we were surrounded by wealth. Our treasures were the love and warmth of a close-knit family, our priceless paintings hung from every window, from the front door and beyond. And all were landscapes that had the magical advantage of changing with the seasons, so that without extra cost, viewings were to be had of nature's magnificent panorama; uncluttered, unspoilt and undamaged by man's disastrous attempt to improve perfection.

Perfection may not have invaded the kitchen, but charm and warmth were substituted by the bucketful, especially on bath night. While I was still young enough to need supervision, being bathed was my favourite luxury. For Mother, it was sheer hard work. Out from the scullery would come the old bath tub, while a row of large saucepans competed for the erratic flames from the kitchen fire. After carefully balancing hot with cold, mother sat me in the tub and set to work lathering and scrubbing while I lay back revelling in the warmth of water and fire. When I was done, she lifted me out and sat me on the towelled surface of the kitchen table, where she dried me down before slipping a pre-warmed nightshirt over my head.

Even after all that fussing, I would trot off into the living room where Auntie Flo would lift me on to her ample lap and wrap her strong arms around me. Although they were sisters, Auntie Flo was a bigger woman than Mother, and perhaps because she had fewer responsibilities, her sense of humour was more keenly developed. Really she should

have been slimmer, because she walked to and from work six days a week. She worked at Critchleys, a pin mill down below Toadsmoor Lake, amongst a group of factories that kept most of the villagers employed. On a clear day you could hear the different pitch of the starting hooters which sounded at varying times, so that once they were recognised, it was a useful way to tell the time.

In the season when flowers and plants and trees come bursting into life to lift winter's stark bareness into the living freshness of spring, a surprising reversal of life's cycle struck with tragic suddenness. One day in the spring of 1931, I arrived home after school to find several strangers in the house. Something was wrong with Auntie Flo. She had been carried home from work, unconscious. I still don't know why she wasn't taken to hospital – all I know was that she lay in bed and I wasn't allowed to see her. It seems that she must have had a stroke, because she lingered only a few days. I wasn't even allowed to go to the funeral.

It was the first time in my life that I had been associated with death, and it was all too much for me to understand. I had always thought of Auntie Flo as being a strong, healthy woman, without a care in the world. Now, all of a sudden, she had let herself die, and there was Father digging her grave.

If Auntie Flo's death had been bewildering, the sight of a new-born baby was nothing short of a miracle. And what more appropriate person to perform the miracle than the teacher of God's word himself. It happened one Saturday morning when I reported to Reverend Johnson in my duties as his errand boy. On this occasion I was surprised to find myself being invited inside 'The Manse' and directed to a room just off the passageway. In the centre of the room a crib rested on a stand. The inside of the crib was filled with a bulge of blankets out of which protruded the tiny head of a baby. Mrs Johnson had now joined her husband beside the crib and proudly announced 'God has blessed us with a son Jack, I'd like you to meet little Arthur'.

Summer was always the season for exploration and adventure. We invaded the woods, knew every track, almost every tree. The hazelnuts were closely watched with keen competition to find the largest pods. During the conker season the foliage of massive chestnut trees housed a rookery of plundering boys.

We explored the remains of an ancient saw-mill at Toadsmoor, with only a few weed-infested mounds of sawdust remaining as evidence of a once thriving timber industry. A few holes of varying sizes dotted the area, indicating that the site had not been completely abandoned. 'They be only weasel or mole holes,' declared Bill Allen, with some authority. Bill should have known – he was the expert amateur naturalist. He knew practically every bird's nest in the woods and hedges, and boasted the biggest collection of eggs in the village. He specialized in burrowing animals. Bill lay flat on the ground beside the most fresh-looking of the holes, and unflinchingly thrust his right arm in as far as he could reach. Success was almost immediate.

'Dost have something,' cried Bill triumphantly.

David Spence and I crowded around him eager to see his catch.

'It ain't 'alf 'eavy,' said Bill, slowly retracting his arm.

The next moment his hand came into sight; or at least it would have been his hand were it not for the fact that it was hidden under a writhing bright green skin.

It was ten minutes before I found out how long the two snakes were. By the time Bill's arm came right out, I was on the other side of Toadsmoor Brook. After waiting for what I considered to be a prudent period of time, I dared a glance back to see if the snakes had been taken care of, only to find myself staring at a three-metre stretch of water. There were few wider places along the entire length of the brook, and it took me ten minutes to find a spot narrow enough for me to jump back. It was the first inkling I had that there were distinct future prospects for me in the athletic world. On a hot, drowsy Saturday afternoon, charming Toadsmoor Lake lay helpless under the onslaught of a gang

of marauding children. One minute she was a serene picture of poise and grace, reflecting the perfect image of an empty sky bordered by a bank of massed trees; the next, she became a beauty ravaged. Flat stones were sent ricocheting across the still surface, while larger rounder ones exploded into the now disturbed water like shells on a battlefield. A few minutes of colliding evergrowing circles, and the carnage was complete. Then having spent all our ammunition, we plucked large handfuls of fresh watercress from the shallows of the stream where it entered the lake, and headed for home.

In the depth of winter, Toadsmoor Lake froze. Her beauty was cloaked with a more appropriate selection from her wardrobe. The green bonnet of summer was discarded in favour of a patterned white shawl that encircled her body with a dazzling simplicity. She was still subjected to violation however, only this time she appeared to welcome the attention from visitors who tickled her ribs in day-long skating performances. Yet always her deeply scarred evening face repaired itself, and she awoke to reveal the magic of her recuperative powers by parading with all the charm and softness of her former self.

But before winter set in there was Guy Fawkes Night to celebrate. In my childhood days nearly every family held its own celebration, using the occasion to burn the accumulated rubbish. The amount of rubbish in our household wouldn't give off enough light to see a way to the lavatory, but fortunately a copse of beech trees behind our house supplied us with enough material to build a sizeable bonfire. For several weeks before 5 November, the wood was regularly patrolled for fallen branches and pieces of dead wood, and masses of dry leaves were raked up and carted back to the bonfire site. On the day of the big bang there wasn't a twig to be found anywhere, so it was common practice for those with pathetic prospects to pool their resources, so that two or more families shared a decent-sized fire.

Fireworks were more difficult to get. The traditional fund-raising venture was to parade an impressive-looking 'guy' from door to door around the village, inviting the occupants to contribute a penny towards the poor chap's send-off party. The trouble with this system was that there were too many 'guys' being paraded for the economy of the village to support. Unless you had something outstandingly original to present, you were given short shrift. Competition was so keen that parents were known to keep their wardrobes locked for weeks leading up to the big night. A man's suit was a prize possession that had to last years. Consequently, any 'guy' dressed in one, no matter how decrepit, was treated with more than a little suspicion. But when it grew dark enough, 100 'guys' occupying place of honour, no matter how precariously balanced on top of each pile, were set ablaze to the vocal delight of the children, and the more muted approval of the adults. And with the low cloud a mass of flaming reflection, the children who had naively thought that just because they had done all the work they could demand the 'box' seats, found themselves rudely displaced from the vantage spots by ignorant adults. Always, there was plenty of action. When it came to letting our fireworks off, it was a wonder there was enough gunpowder left to ignite them. For days before, I had performed a daily ritual of taking them out of their box, stacking them in their various groups, counting them carefully, and then re-stacking them. Each time I did it, residue of a fine black powder was left to be swept up. George and I usually started the night with what we regarded as the least spectacular of our collection; sparklers. Rather than just wave them about in our hands, on this the Guy Fawkes Night of 1931, I had worked out a special plan. With the bonfire positioned behind the house, I had to run with a lighted sparkler to the front garden and do a lap of the paths before the sparks expired. When the moment arrived for the start of the big event, the family sent me on my way with a lot of encouraging shouts. This made me feel good and no doubt contributed to the excellent start I made. Counting away my time, I whizzed around the side of the house, past the front door, up towards the gate before turning off down to the lower path that led back to the finishing line. Everything was going well until I came to the gooseberry bushes. Then I made my big mistake. I looked to



see how much of the sparkler was left. It was only the briefest of glances, but it was enough for me to become momentarily disorientated. And of course, it had to happen at the most crucial point in the circuit. At that precise moment it was vitally important that I should change down and brake hard for the ninety degrees right turn into the lower path. I executed the correct procedure well enough: the error was in the timing. And with no crash barrier in place to protect me from the consequences of my indiscretion, instead of a right turn, I went right off. Over the embankment I tumbled to land amongst the forest of stinging nettles.



*OUR FOSTER MOTHER, ROSA NOBES, WITH FOSTER CHILDREN*

It was my bawling that alerted the family to the fact that I had come to grief. The ever reliable George led the rescue party, homing in on my distress signals and delivering me out of the jungle into the arms of Mother who waited as anxious as ever to apply salve to my wounds. There was only a short delay to the proceedings; the threat of missing the long-awaited fireworks display was incentive enough to effect my rapid recovery. And by the time the potatoes were pushed into the dying embers of the bonfire, I was well enough to leave the sanctuary of Mother's lap.

With Guy Fawkes Night over, it was time to prepare for Christmas. There were funds to be found to replenish those that had just gone up in smoke, and there were presents to be bought. Fortunately I still had my two regular jobs which, with careful management, would be enough for my purposes, but there were still a few pennies to be earned doing the traditional rounds of carol singing. No matter how affluent you felt, Christmas was never the same without carol singing. Every child in the village went the rounds in all kinds of weather, either singly or in groups, huddled outside a closed cottage door to sing with all the emotion that the occasion generated. Once again, the generosity of the community was put to the test. Tolerance too, was occasionally in demand. Some villagers had as many as ten different callers on the one night. But generally the seasonal spirit of goodwill overcame most inconveniences and irritations. Only very rarely was the singing interrupted by an impatient householder. Most people waited until a carol was finished before opening the door, and even if there were no pennies handed out, a sweet or a fruit mince pie, or even a hot drink was sometimes offered to the cold and often weary

songsters.

One year, I started out on a solo round about a week before the customary start to the season. I'd like to think that the reason for this was an over-keenness on my part to hurry the season along. The truth was I figured that the first carol-singer on the scene would be more likely to get the cream of the offerings before the coffers dried up. However, justice was done on the very first house of call, when I was brought back to the fold by the door opening before I had completed the first line, and a sharp voice shouted, 'You're far too early, Jackie, come back in a fortnight.'

I can't remember the days when I believed in Father Christmas. My earliest memory of Christmas is of hanging one of Mother's old stockings on the end bedpost, knowing that during the night she would fill it with presents. When George and I awoke in the still darkness of the early morning, the candle would be hurriedly lit before we scrambled to the foot of the bed to untie our bulging stockings. The bulging was not the result of being compacted, but it was the rather awkward shapes of some of the packages. Although we both had a fair idea of what was to be in the stocking, we plundered the contents and tore away the paper with no lessening of enthusiasm. There was nothing frivolous about our presents. There were table games for playing on long winter evenings, some socks, bags of sweets and nuts, and always in the foot slept a candied mouse, with an orange tucked right into the toe. But in the Christmas of 1931 the moment of greatest joy came when I spotted the brightly wrapped parcel that lay flat on the floor. I knew it was the Bubbles Annual with its extra-lengthy episodes of adventure, travel and sports, featuring Cucumber Kane, Fireworks Flynn and half-a-dozen other heroes whose exploits I had followed all through the year in weekly episodes from the pages of my favourite comic. George had been equally excited about his Tiger Tim Annual. Between the two of us, we had enough reading to last the winter. The comics were a luxury that Mother never deprived us of, and although the weekly cost for the two of them came to only fourpence, the cost of annuals at three and sixpence was a small fortune to Mother's meagre resources.

Much later in the morning, when the family came to see how we had fared, our small bedroom burst into life with the sounds of happiness and delight in the joy of exchanging simple gifts. Mother and Aunt Flo, when she was alive, usually received small lace handkerchiefs or tiny bottles of perfume, while Father invariably received some simple accessory to go with his pipe. One Christmas George and I pooled our money to buy him a new pipe. When he opened the parcel, his face expanded into such complete rapture, that the emotion of the moment has remained with me to this day.

In the aftermath of Christmas, the village social life, which could never at any stage have been described as riotous, reverted to its mellow existence. By virtue of its isolation, most of the entertainment resulted from our own efforts, but occasionally the Reverend Johnson organised concerts by visiting groups. These functions were held in the school, an auditorium being performed by shifting the desks and constructing a temporary stage at one end. Most of the entertainment consisted of choral recitals, with some excellent performances by an all-male Welsh choir. The school, too, presented an annual concert with each class doing its own production.

It is a matter of reality that events in one's life are remembered either by stunning successes or by miserable failures. One is fortunate if, after a mandatory three score and ten years of survival, the scales registering one's endeavours hover in equal proportions. An analysis of my life's achievements would reveal a distinct tilt to the negative end. As some excuse for this unfavourable tilt, I claim the acute embarrassment I suffered whenever my name was shouted in public. Consequently, when it was announced that little Jack Ramsbottom was to recite the well-known nursery rhyme, Little Jack Horner, my distress began to mount. Despite a satisfactory rehearsal, when I found myself alone on centre stage clutching a bowl of Christmas pie, panic overwhelmed me. The words came out reasonably well, but when it came to the last line 'and said, What a good boy am I', I

was supposed to have been looking at a ripe plum between thumb and forefinger held aloft for the audience to acclaim my skill. In theory this thrilling climax was designed to bring the house down. The reality was far more spectacular and completely unrehearsed. Simultaneously as my last line faded into silent space unaccompanied by the appropriate action, the enormity of my mistake hit me, and without even waiting to execute the customary bow, I raced off the stage. At least running was the one thing I was good at, but the combination of a fast getaway and a clipped ankle spelled a recipe for disaster. Under the circumstances the steps were superfluous to my exit. My recollection of the actual landing is a little hazy, but I distinctly remember becoming airborne to the accompaniment of belated thunderous applause. When I regained consciousness, I was told that it was for an immaculately executed 'one and a half somersaults with tuck'.

But the real stars were the members of the Eastcombe football team. Never was there a more unifying medium. A whole village of children forgot personal differences when they were at a match. Even the descriptive embellishments to my surname were forgotten for the duration, although they would be more vehemently reinstated if we lost. Because of the cost involved in getting to an away fixture, it was practically impossible to attend those games, but we rallied to a man whenever we played at home. The pinnacle of fame for Eastcombe came in the 1931-32 season, when they not only topped their Division but also won the Auxiliary Cup. It was an unprecedented feat which called for a special celebration. Practically the whole village pitched in to honour the occasion. The church hall was hired and decorated in the team's colours of green and white, and a mass community effort was called for to prepare a feast to follow the victory concert. Most of the performers were members of the team. Their versatility seemed endless. They formed a choir that roared its way through a number of rollicking songs; they substituted more appropriate words to the popular songs of the day; they put on skits, and they told jokes. They even sang serious songs accompanied by their own pianist. Eastcombe had seldom known such diversity of talent and volume of noise. Such was its impact, that even though there was only one performance, some of the words remain with me today.

Yesterday I went to the races,  
I lost my shirt, my collar, my stud and my braces,  
So give yourself a pat on the back, a pat on the back, a pat on the back,  
And say to yourself, 'I've jolly good health,  
I've had a good day today'.  
Yesterday was full of trouble and sorrow,  
No one knows what's going to happen tomorrow,  
So give yourself a pat on the back, etc.  
I'm yawning, I'm yawning,  
I shan't get up till ten tomorrow morning,  
So give yourself a pat on the back, etc.  
And say to yourself, 'I've jolly good health,  
I've had a good day today'.

An hour and a half later, the curtain came down after everyone joined in with the singing of Hearts of Oak, letting ourselves go for the last line, which went: 'We'll fight and we'll conquer again and again'. I was never to see my heroes play again.



*EASTCOMBE ASSOCIATION FOOTBALL CLUB*

*WINNERS OF THE 3<sup>RD</sup> DIVISION AND AUXILIARY CUPS 1931-32*

## **CLAPHAM**

Right from the time that I could understand, mother had told me that she, Father and Aunt Flo were only foster parents, and that one day, I would have to return to Dr Barnardo's Home in London. But being so young and happy, I'd never thought much about it, so when one August day in 1932, after the postman had called, Mother took me aside, and with tears in her eyes, showed me the letter that told of my recall, I just looked at her in dismay. I still don't know what distressed me the most; the sudden realisation that I was about to lose a family I loved, or the shock of seeing my mother in tears. In all the years I had lived with her I had not once seen her cry.

When the day finally came, I felt that I had just awakened out of a long frustrating dream. In the month since the arrival of the letter from Barnardo's, I had been in a state of confusion. Most of me wanted to cling to the sanctuary that I knew as home; the old Cotswold cottage with its cozy fires, steaming hot baths, mother's comforting arms, the boisterous blow-football games with George, and the comics by candlelight. I didn't know why I was being recalled at the age of nine while George was able to stay on at 13. Nothing was explained to me, so I was left to stew in my own bitter mixture of emotions. It was not a happy time for me. And it wasn't made any happier doing the rounds the village farewelling the families with whom I had grown up. Right up until the last day I had wished for a miracle to happen that would allow me to stay, but, as young as I was, I knew that miracles just didn't happen like that, and that I would have to leave. Suddenly it was time to go. Father held me in his strong arms for a few moments, not even trying to get anything out. When he freed me enough to let me look at him, I could see why. The stress of a verbal farewell was beyond him. He had no need for words; his eyes said it all.

My brother George was plainly distressed. We had been put together for as long as I could remember, and the wrench was as painful for him as it was for me. He tried hard not to let me see him crying, so he gave me a quick hug, a muffled goodbye, and a wave of his arm as Mother and I started out for the five-kilometre walk to Chalford Station. A final wave at the front gate, and we turned our backs on Bismore.

We were early for the train, so we sat quietly on the long station seat, prolonging the agony of parting. Thankfully we didn't have long to wait before the London train appeared and quickly groaned to a halt. Mother held me in one final embrace, then half

released me for a last kiss and a brief hug before putting me safely into a third-class carriage. Quickly opening the window, there was just enough time for her to press a two shilling piece into my hand before the moving train forced us apart. As the train gathered speed, I leant out of the window and waved at the fast-disappearing figure of my mother until she was gone. Only then did I look into the compartment, and through the blurred vision of my tears, I realised that I was alone.

I suppose I was met at Paddington station by someone from Barnardo's. I don't remember. What I can remember is the train coming to a halt inside a giant glass-roofed building full of engines, carriages and people. The clean smell of steam, mixed with the clatter of shunting engines and the noise and bustle of travellers, was strangely exciting. It was even more bewildering when I was taken down a moving stairway to another set of railway tracks deep below the ground. Having lived in the tranquil setting of the Cotswolds for the previous seven years, I found the London Underground frantic and boisterous. I just sat and stared. The train seemed to be going on for ever, and when I thought that the journey had come to an end, we alighted from one train only to walk into another and continue on through the tunnels. Eventually, we got out at Stepney Green, and up the stairway into the grime and gloom of the London East End. After a short walk my escort opened the door of an old brick building and invited me inside.

I walked straight into a different world. I saw rooms full of beds, taps that ran water into hand basins, baths like long white troughs deep enough to lie down in, swim in almost, and lavatories that flushed with water. The place swarmed with children, most of them about my own age. I wondered where they had all come from and where they were going to. Adults showed me where I slept, ate and played. I obeyed quickly, quietly and without question. I suppose the other children felt the same as I did, scared and shocked.



*JACK RAMSBOTTOM, AGED NINE,  
ON BEING RECALLED TO DR. BARNARDO'S AT CLAPHAM, LONDON, 30-8-1932*

Everything was totally different from the lifestyle I had known. Inside, there was crowding and restriction. I missed the tranquillity of my Bismore home, the colourful autumn woods, the song of birds, and above all, I missed the company of the people I loved. But my stay at the Stepney home was not for long. After only a few days, several of us boys were taken on a short trip to a new home. No one told us why. I wasn't sorry to leave Stepney; as a

first taste of institutional life, it had been a distressing experience. Now that I was going to a place away from the centre of London, conditions were bound to be much better. Surely they couldn't be worse – nothing could.

But I was wrong. When our small party stepped into the hallway of our new home off the main street of Clapham, my heart sank even before the heavy door had slammed shut behind us. With the light from a pale globe so high that it could have been a distant star barely illuminating the dark timbered passageway, we groped our way until we were herded out through another door into the comparative brilliance of a dull London sky. A set of stone steps led down to an area of bitumen about the size of four tennis courts, on which a small group of children was playing. The courtyard was completely hemmed in by grime-covered brick buildings, with the exception of a wide gateway in the far corner that obviously led to the street.

We were led across the courtyard into the tallest building, and up several flights of steps. At each floor level, a middle-aged woman took charge of two or three of our party, until, by the time we reached the fourth floor, only three of us were left. The lady to whom we were assigned was more than middle-aged, and yet not into old age. She was in an indeterminate category, influenced by a hideous application of make-up. She appeared out of a dim doorway like an apparition, her small blue-black eyes, heavily brushed with thick brows, were accentuated by the contrasting of deep red lips and unnaturally rouged cheeks. Topping all was a mop of vivid ginger hair that crowned a short, plump figure.

The woman was introduced to us as Miss Marks, and we were to call her Miss. She would be responsible for issuing our clothes, seeing to our cleanliness, and the maintenance of discipline. In a brief introductory speech she explained that in order to run any institution successfully, a high standard of discipline must be insisted upon. There would be set times for getting up, for attending meals, for schooling and for going to bed. If we followed the movements of the other boys, we would settle in quickly and avoid trouble. Any infringement of the rules, or disobedience, and we would find ourselves before the Principal for punishment. What the punishment would be, we were never told, but the inference that any rule breaker would suffer dreadful consequences, especially breathed from the fiery mouth of Miss Marks, was enough to put the fear of the devil into me. In the few days since I had been away from home, I couldn't help but compare my mother with every woman I met. By comparison to the appearance of Miss Marks, my mother automatically qualified for angel status.

After the welcome speech by Miss, she led us through the door from which she had appeared earlier into a room almost as big as a football ground only slightly narrower. Down each side of a central walkway a row of beds stretched away to a distant wall. Selecting three beds in close proximity, she allotted one to each of us and told us to put our few personal possessions into a cane basket we would find underneath our beds. Then stripping my bed, she gave us a lesson in making it up, after which we took it in turns to do the same. I didn't know about the other two boys, but it was the first time in my life that I had ever made a bed. I didn't realise it then, but my whole life was about to change; not just through minor adjustments to my former lifestyle, but to a complete new method of living that was foreign to everything that I had ever known before.

Miss Marks directed us to a row of hand basins at the other end of the dormitory, indicating that we should wash ourselves in preparation for the evening meal. She also handed out towels with the instruction that they were to be hung on the end bed rail. She advised us too, that as she lived in the partitioned room near the washbasins, we could put any thought of larrikinism right out of our heads.

Later in the afternoon when the boys arrived in from school, she introduced us newcomers, telling them to show us where to assemble when the tea bell rang. When the time came to fall in, two hundred boys scurried into several lines preparatory to being marched in to the ground floor dining hall. As we filed past a serving point, a dollop of

shepherd's pie was placed on each boy's outstretched plate to be taken to one of a number of long wooden tables upon which were platesful of sliced buttered bread. The first boys to be served were distinctly disadvantaged, because they had to wait until all had been served before Grace was said. By that time, their food was practically cold.

The first few weeks at Clapham Barnardo's Home was one of the most unhappy times of my life. As soon as my name was known, sniggers and derisive remarks came at me from all directions. For a kid my size, there was little I could do except feel sorry for myself and lament the fact that one particular child should have to suffer the multiple misfortunes that I had to endure. While I had lived with the Nobeses, my life had been pleasantly blessed. Now that I was suffering the trauma of an institutional existence, the first real understanding of my predicament became painfully clear. No amount of wishful thinking could alter the facts. For some unknown reason, my natural parents were unable or didn't want to look after me. Then after a few happy years of love and security, it had all ended abruptly, with nothing left in life but to eat, sleep and be disciplined. And as if that wasn't enough, I had to withstand the barrage of ridicule wherever I went.

After a few weeks at Clapham, the reason for my recall, at so early an age from Bismore, was made known. I knew there was something in the wind when I was placed with a small group that attended a special inside school, while the remainder were marched off each day to outside schools. Our teacher, Mr Dunn, unravelled the mystery by explaining that we 20 or so boys had been chosen to be sent to the colonies to become farmers. I was on the list for Australia. It was at this point that Mr Dunn draped a map of the world over the blackboard. Focusing our attention on the continent of Australia, he pointed out the names and locations of the places to which we would be going. With the ruler that was his constant companion and weapon (many a pupil had sampled the painful blow its leading edge had inflicted upon the skull) Mr Dunn indicated a spot low down on the Western coast. He told us that it was the port of Fremantle. Here we would leave our ship and travel by train through Perth, which was the capital of Western Australia, and on to the country town of Pinjarra, about 80 kilometres to the south. It was only a short distance then to our new home, Fairbridge Farm School. Mr Dunn then went on to add that every boy would have to undergo both a physical and an intelligence examination before final selection was made. Here the temptation to impart a snide comment about our general quality of education proved too much for him. 'God help the colonies if half of you pass the intelligence test.'

As yet, there were no definite sailing dates, and in all probability there would be a waiting period of several months. In the meantime, the authorities considered it advisable for us to continue our schooling in Mr Dunn's class. This news to a boy not yet ten years of age was naturally exciting. Coming totally unexpectedly out of nowhere as it did, conjured up all sorts of conjecture and imagination. I had heard of this big country that was supposed to be all bush and kangaroos, and when I found it again in an atlas, way down in the southern oceans, it not only added to my initial feeling of excitement, but stimulated my natural boyish interest in adventure. Then a real conflict of emotions gripped me when I thought about just how far Australia would be from my parents and home, and even when I was grown up and earning money, how I could ever afford the fortune it would cost to return to England. Yet looking at it from the other angle, it meant that I wouldn't have to put up with living under the dismal conditions of Clapham for too long. If I stayed, I could be there for years. After enjoying the freedom of the Cotswold Hills, the Clapham home was like a prison to me, hemmed in by dirty brick buildings with only one small exercise yard to play in. And because I had to attend the inside school all through the week, there was no way of escaping to the outside world and freedom. The exception came on Sundays. Even then, the escape was supervised as we were all marched two kilometres through the streets to the Anglican church and back.

A further reprieve came for us 'insiders' by way of a Saturday morning's outing to

Clapham Common. Once again we were lined up in threes, counted, and marched the short distance to the Common where we were released on the understanding that we return to the assembly point by 12.30. To help remind us of the time, a series of short whistle blasts would be blown five minutes before. At first glance, Clapham Common appeared to be so crowded with goalposts that it seemed impossible for any two to pair up. But after a walk around the place, they gradually sorted themselves out. There must have been 200 goalposts in all, angled in every direction, the bright white uprights and crossbars contrasting sharply with the brilliant green of the grass. But the Common wasn't all playing fields. On my first stroll of discovery, I found small ponds and clusters of trees that sheltered secluded patches of grass, but as soon as the football players started to arrive, I was drawn like a magnet towards them. Within a few minutes, the once-deserted area became alive with a multitude of colour as the players changed into their 'stripes' and limbered up in pre-match preparation.

When the games got under way, it was all shouts and whistles. There were more whistles in that one playing area than in the whole of London's police force. It seemed a miracle to me that any team recognised their own referee's whistle. But the games went on without disruption. After watching the play for a few minutes, all the old atmosphere of Eastcombe days returned, erasing the thought of any recent problems. At that moment my only problem was in selecting a team to follow. There were so many combinations of colours from which to choose, that deciding on one was a difficult job. Then, suddenly, it hit me. Why not look around for a side that wore the same colours as Eastcombe? So off I went in search, threading my way around the touch-lines towards the centre of the action, pausing every now and again to watch some of the play.

Away in the distance, I thought I'd caught a glimpse of the right colour combination, so I made a move in that direction. As I drew nearer, my excitement mounted. Now I could see it clearly. Yes, there it was. There was no mistaking the light green shirt with a white V stretching from each shoulder to meet at the front waistline. I was running now, cutting corners in my haste to get to the side-line to cheer my team on. The next hour was just like old times except that I missed the company of the old gang of village kids. When the final whistle sounded, it was the happiest I'd been for a long time, but the exhilaration of the previous hour quickly evaporated as the teams dispersed and I picked my way slowly back to the assembly area.

After the first Saturday, the next one couldn't come quickly enough. The only other thing that really mattered was my schooling. I had to do well in that; not only for my own good, but also for my name's sake. Experience was fast teaching me that achievement of any kind demanded a certain amount of respect; while mediocrity condemned me to purgatory. But Saturday was my day – my few hours of freedom, where I could lose myself in the Common with my team. As the weeks went by, I got to know their names. They were a team of talkers – calling out for advice and instructions to each other in a strange new dialect. If any of them talked to me, I did my best to answer them in their own language. My West Country Quaker talk was fast disappearing. But all the familiarity only served to emphasise the wide gulf between their world and mine. When the match finished, the players went their way, I went mine. I could only guess at what they did after the game. No doubt they had real homes to return to, meals with families, then spent the afternoon watching their heroes play in the big league, or went to the cinema even.

My activities had already been programmed; day by day – it was all so predictable. Once inside the gate, that was it for another week. On Saturday night when everyone else in London was out enjoying themselves, Barnardo kids were having their weekly bath. In recalling events of my childhood, most of the detail has been forgotten, but I shall always remember bath nights at Clapham. Deep in the labyrinth of rooms that I called the dungeons, were the bath houses. The outer room was for dressing, while the inner rooms contained the baths. And the baths were something I'd never seen before, or even knew



existed. I remember huge round concrete vats set into the ground, with billowing clouds of steam rising from the bodies of naked children. Somewhere beneath the mass of bodies there must have been water, but little of it could be seen until a supervisor's whistle-blast emptied the vats. Before the next batch could be done, the water level and temperature had to be checked by operating small round wheels that were attached to pipes. And, everywhere, the strong antiseptic smell of carbolic soap penetrated everything, even to the drying room where we towelled off and put on ridiculously long nightshirts. And afterwards, Miss Marks supervised prayers – only now her name had been reversed into the more descriptive appellation of 'Skram'.

Nights were made for retrospection. In the darkened dormitory, lying in a cold, hard bed, sleep did not always come easily...time then for pleasant memories and fanciful imagination. I missed my old bed, the familiar bedroom with its small dormer window from where I used to count the stars in a rare patch of sky. I missed my favourite picture of a lone figure making his way across a field of snow towards a distant cottage. In the half-light of a flickering candle, I could make the picture come alive with fancied movement. I spent hours in encouraging my friend to continue his struggle to reach the house where warmth and hospitality awaited. With intense concentration through half-closed eyelids, I could get him to move...slowly, step by step; but no matter how many paces he staggered, I could never get him closer to his destination. Eventually, in a fit of frustration, I would puff out my candle and, then, overcome by mental exhaustion, would drop straight off to sleep. In the morning when the light came streaming in, my picture used to assume a different role. My solitary friend was now merely out for a brisk stroll, enjoying the crisp breath of a bright winter's day, and feeling the crisp crunch of his footsteps on frosted snow.

My nights in Clapham were not always so uncomplicated. The dormitory sometimes stirred with an intrusion of troubled sounds. A repetitive tossing and turning told of a disturbed sleep, while an occasional stifled sob out of the darkness meant that other boys were also plagued with trauma. This knowledge only served to deepen my own melancholy. Then one night the solution came to me. It was all so simple I wondered why I had not thought of it before. I would run away ... back to my home in the Cotswolds! So excited was I in finding the answer to my problems that I was unable to sleep. Finally, I did drift off into a troubled sleep which, when awakened by Skram's shrill voice, found me a lot less enthusiastic about my escape idea. Still, as the weekend approached some of my initial excitement returned which helped to reinforce my decision. It would have to be on a Saturday. That was the only day the opportunity would arise. So I decided that next Saturday would be the day. And when Saturday came, it was easy enough to slip away. The rest of the boys had become used to seeing me wander off on my own. They knew all about the team I followed, so no one took any notice of me as I went off. It had been quite an effort to keep my plans to myself; I had wanted to share my excitement with a couple of my friends, but somehow I had managed to control myself. Making sure that I kept well clear of the assembly area, I lost myself amongst the horde of footballers, moved out of the common and into the streets.

My first reaction was a feeling of tremendous relief at getting away with it, followed a few minutes later by sheer euphoria. At last I was free. I had made no plans, no preparation for this great dash for freedom. I just walked and walked with the vague notion that, somewhere across the country on the other side of London, was where I had to go. Even after an hour's spirited walking, I could still manage a cheerful whistle. The closer I got to the centre of London, the more interesting it became. As I whistled my way over Battersea Bridge, high spirits kept me company. So did cars of strange makes and shapes, and big, black taxis that swept noisily past. It was when the tall red double-decker buses lumbered by that I wished I'd had some money.

That was something I hadn't thought about; money. It would have made everything so much easier if I had money for fares, money for food, money for...everything. That

started me thinking; there was definitely no substitute for experiencing the real thing. Two hours later and I was in the heart of London. I could tell I was there by the soldiers marching up and down, guns on their shoulders, outside a huge high-walled palace.

Suddenly I became frightened. Not only that, I was tired and I was hungry. Taking my eyes away from the soldiers, I looked around and saw a big park. Dotted here and there, a few isolated people drifted along scattered paths that disappeared into the distance. A sense of loneliness overwhelmed me all at once. Tears welled into my eyes as the thought of defeat burdened my grief. My once jaunty walk was now a slow shuffle, aimless and dispirited. I stopped. For several minutes I just stared at the passing traffic negotiating a busy intersection. Tears flowed freely.

Abruptly, I saw a frantic waving of arms from the policeman on point duty, which had traffic lurching to a stop in all directions. Then with deliberately long strides he made straight for me. 'Don't cry, young fella, I'll get yer across safely.' One huge arm came gently around my shoulders. It was the first touch of friendliness I'd felt since Mother's last hug. Taking hold of my hand, he escorted me across the wide intersection with me taking three steps to his one. As we walked he went on, 'Got yerself lost, have you sonny, where do you come from?' For such a big man, his voice was very gentle. There was no alternative now but to return to the home. I forced a lifeless response: 'Back at Clapham, sir.' 'Yer a long way from home, ain't yer? If yer keep headin' in that direction till yer cross the bridge, then ask some one to put yer on the right road, yer'll be home afore dark.'

With that, he pointed me on my way, and strode swiftly back to his traffic. There was nothing left for me to do now, but to start my long walk back to the institution. The policeman's kindness had made me feel a lot better, and my tears had dried. Now I was only tired and hungry. But after a few minutes, the sudden thought of a new danger very nearly had my tears flowing again. When I did get back, there would be most likely be punishment waiting for me for running away. Other boys had tried it long before I had, and they hadn't been allowed out for a long time afterwards. It looked as though I was in a real mess this time.

It was while going back over the Battersea Bridge that the solution came to me. I'll tell 'em I got lost. That was it then. Tell 'em I bin hours trying to find my way back 'ome. The more I thought about it, the more plausible my excuse sounded. It was easy to become confused amongst all those football teams. Yeah...I thought I was running late and took a short cut. Only it turned out to be the wrong way. After that, I got frightened and lost myself. I was so pleased with myself for having thought up such a good excuse, that I forgot all about tiredness. I didn't even have to ask the way either, I remembered the streets from the morning. All I had to find was the Clapham High Street. When I found the big entrance door to the institution, I pressed the bell button and waited. The waiting time was just long enough for me to go into a bit of a panic. Doubts crept in. What if they didn't believe me...that I was telling lies? The punishment would be a lot worse then.

Then the door opened and a man let me in, looking at me suspiciously. That made me all the more determined to stick to my story. When I found myself sitting at a table looking across at three senior members of the staff, the questions came thick and fast. Why hadn't I returned to the assembly area on time? Once I realised I was lost, why hadn't I asked a policeman for direction, or anyone else? Where had I been all day?

And I had to go all over it again. Finally, one of them thought to ask me if I had eaten anything during the day. Whether it was a consensus of opinion that brought the interrogation to an end, or whether it was my pitiful 'No sir' to the last question, I don't know. But after that I was taken away to the staff dining room and given a meal. It's amazing what a difference a meal makes, especially a meal from the staff kitchen. It was probably the hot food that gave me the warm feeling deep down, although I was convinced it was the warm glow of victory. I was so relieved at having had my story believed, that I forgot all about the conditions that initiated the escape attempt in the first place. All I could

think of at that moment was the fact that I had avoided punishment by putting on an act that had convinced the staff of my innocence. I had come a long way since my 'Little Jack Horner' disaster. In fact, I felt quite pleased with my performance. I didn't know it at the time, but I had just put to use the skills of deception and deviousness so necessary for survival in the institutional world.

## **A CHANGE OF FORTUNE**

During the days that followed my little jaunt, I had to survive a barrage of taunts and caustic comments about my escape bid. But I weathered the storm, drawing comfort from the fact that as I had confided to no one about my running away idea, I was safe from the tittle tattle tongues of little twerps who were always ready to curry favour with the staff by running to them with tales of others' trivial wrongdoings.

As it turned out, life at Clapham improved quite a bit after that incident. A letter from Mother gave me the lift I needed just at the right time. I was tempted to write and tell her how I just failed in my attempt to pay her a surprise visit, but I thought better of it. All letters had to be handed in to Skram, and I was pretty sure that they were all censored by the staff.

A further improvement in conditions came when I joined the cubs. Barnardo's at Clapham had its own cub pack complete with uniform and special badge. The cub-master too, was one of the most benevolent men at the home. The weekly meetings were full of interesting games and exciting competitions; it was a chance to forget the day-to-day dreary existence in dungeon-like surroundings, especially when we visited outside cub packs. Any opportunity to spend a few hours amongst children in the outside world was a blessing that was fully appreciated. It was on one of these visits that I first heard the song *Waltzing Matilda*, and by the end of the meeting I knew the words and the understanding of them. In view of my impending journey to Australia, I had a special incentive to learn the story.

More fortune came my way early in the new year of 1933 when I was called up to the main office. At first I was full of apprehension. Why should I be the only one to be called up before the Principal? What had I done wrong now? My guilty conscience was working overtime. But when I arrived at the reception room expecting the worse, the best surprise for a long time was staring me in the face. Seated in one of the big padded chairs was Miss Radford [Hester Maitland Radford] from Bismore. She was the lady who owned the biggest house [now called Little Orchard] in the hamlet, set in a large garden which included an acre of orchard. She was also one of my newspaper clients who had helped to keep me in pocket money. To think that this fine lady had taken the trouble to come to the orphanage to see me, filled me with cheer. But that was not all. Miss Radford had not only come to see me, she had gained permission to take me out for the day. When I ran back to the dormitory, old Skram already had my Sunday best clothes out for me, and despite her look of disdain at my good fortune, nothing could detract from my excitement. Naturally, I couldn't keep an occasion like this to myself, and as the word spread, even the taunts of the envious failed to upset me.

"Ere – did you 'ear about Ramsbum going out all day with a rich woman?' and again, 'Urk! Fancy someone wanting to take smelly Sheepsarse out.'

But smelly or not, as Miss Radford led me by the hand out into Clapham High Street, no beribboned pedigree ram could ever have felt more honoured. While the rest of the gang were out on the common, I could forget the poor little orphan boy image for a few hours. I was being taken out by a real lady.

We dined at a very posh restaurant called Lyons. Several smart waitresses dressed in black and white uniforms scurried about in between tables. Miss Radford selected a table in a secluded corner, inspecting the immaculately laundered white tablecloth carefully

before inviting me to sit opposite her. We had scarcely settled into our chairs when a waitress approach Miss Radford with a collection of folders, and enquired: 'Would you like to see the menu, Madam?' Then turning and holding one out for me to take: 'And how about you, young man?' I was captivated. From 'Ramsbum' to 'young man' in the space of an hour was a giant step forward in anyone's language. 'Thank you,' I acknowledged in my newly acquired accent.

It was the first high-quality menu I had seen, and it was taking me quite a long time to get through it. Finally Miss Radford, sensing my difficulty, came to my rescue and suggested something to which I gratefully agreed. Her advice didn't stop there either. All through the meal she quietly showed me the correct cutlery to use with each dish. She did it without fuss or bother; just a soft directing explanation. Miss Radford may have been rich, but she was certainly not a snob. Her calm, gentle guidance put me completely at ease. She made me feel so very, very good.

After taking over an hour to get through our lunch, as Miss Radford had called it, she asked me if I would like to visit the cinema that, she had observed, was just along the street. It was another first for me. The closest resemblance to a cinema I had experienced before was in Eastcombe School watching the Reverend Johnson's magic lantern slides. But this was the real thing; images appearing on a big screen; moving images of real people that talked and sang. As it turned out the picture was mostly singing; a man and a woman singing together and to each other. I think it may not have been very exciting for a ten-year-old boy, but Miss Radford, showing remarkable understanding, substituted taste for exhilaration by producing a box of chocolates from the depths of her bag and handing them over to me during the interval. Furthermore, she again demonstrated perfect etiquette by limiting the number of chocolates she took to just one. Nor did she remonstrate with me when I left the empty box on the floor after the show, a solution I thought preferable to facing the embarrassment of refusing them to the other kids back inside. Not to mention the mileage to be gained later in describing to my clamouring audience the undreamt of delights of discovery as my teeth sank deeper into one delicious chocolate after another. Also to be gained was a great deal more chocolate.

When the cinema show finished, Miss Radford walked with me back to the home. She had treated me to the most remarkable experience of my young life, and because of its spontaneity, it had been all the more enjoyable. Now it was over. But there was still a measure of satisfaction to be had perhaps for a week, by regurgitating the events of the day to small groups of interested inmates.

But of all the gifts Miss Radford showered on me that memorable day, the most treasured of them all was the immense feeling of esteem she gave me. In an environment of lost identity, she made me feel special. Not many orphan kids experience it. During prayers that night, I gave special thanks to God for sending me Miss Radford, and for the ten shillings parting gift she gave me.

The winter of 1933 was cruel. A mixture of snow, sleet, slush and rain made life difficult. Sometimes it had been impossible to visit Clapham Common; even the parade ground became unusable. In the middle of this big freeze, the news that the Australian party would be leaving at the end of April, was received with mixed emotions. Now that the time had been fixed, I thought more about the people whom I would leave behind. But it was impossible at that age to fully realise the implications of the move. The only tangible difference that could be understood during those bitter weeks, was the knowledge that the weather would be a lot warmer in Western Australia.

Then something happened that turned the most chilling of Arctic days into a tropical paradise. Skram notified me that in the morning, I would be leaving for a two-week visit to my parents! Bismore! I was so ecstatic I could have hugged her. To think that after nine months I would see my parents and all my old friends again was almost beyond belief. And when I heard that the Eastcombe people had contributed the cost of my train fare, I cried.

It was the kindest parting gift they possibly could have given me. A staff member escorted me to Paddington Station, bought my ticket, and put me on the right train. Not since my first Sunday School trip to Weston-Super-Mare had I been so excited. For the next two weeks in Bismore I was a celebrity. I must have been one of the first children to have been chosen to go to Australia, and the villagers weren't going to let me leave without a proper send-off. But two weeks was so little time in which to say goodbyes, although it was easy enough to farewell former school friends by being there when school came out. Time has erased the recollections of individual gestures of goodwill; that is, with one memorable exception – a girl. Her name was Doreen. She was the village beauty and extrovert. Although she was only a couple of years older than I, Doreen Mortimer had the ability to breathe life into the dullest of school days. Her talents had long been appreciated by the older boys, and she had never been averse to putting on a free show in response to their persistence. She would start with a flippant curtsy and a disarming smile flashed from a face that was turned at just the right angle to suggest that the devil had possessed her. But it was her dainty hands that took hold of her skirt at each extremity, like a classical ballerina. Then slowly ...ever so slowly, Doreen would raise the arms, revealing, inch by inch, her shapely legs, posed to perfection. And when it seemed that there was nothing left to reveal, she would pause, professionally, delaying the final scene just long enough for maximum effect, while her immature audience would gape in anticipation. Then suddenly, with a quick flick of her wrist she would raise her skirt just enough to give her admirers a brief glimpse of her knickers before letting her skirt drop like a swift curtain fall at the end of a show.

When most of the school children had gone home, Doreen approached me with a sweet smile. Although she lived only a hundred yards away she flashed her pretty eyes at me with the question, 'Jackie, wouldn't you like to walk me home?' And it was while we walked slowly down the lane to her house, that I realised that I used to talk in the same idiom, but in the nine months of living in London, I had lost it all. It sounded so quaint to hear it again. When we stopped outside her gate, Doreen took a step back and dropping her voice to just above a whisper, she cooed: 'Seeing thee's off t'other side o' the world Jackie, I dost want t' give thee something special. Something thou canst allus remember me by.' With that, she took hold of her skirt and lifted it higher than on any previous occasion, and gracefully posed for an embarrassingly long time. Then, letting her dress take care of itself, she held me firmly by the shoulders and kissed me softly on the cheek. The next moment she slipped the latch on her garden gate and skipped off down the path, turning just once to give me a final wave. It was the last time I ever saw her. Yet as I wandered thoughtfully home, I reckoned that I had been privileged to see more of Doreen than anyone else in the village. But I was far too young to understand the complexities of sexual arousal. In some strange inexplicable way girls held an inherent kind of attraction for me, especially girls as pretty as Doreen. But my awareness was limited to her face; other parts of her body were shrouded in far too much mystery for my comprehension. I was content enough in the knowledge that Doreen had given me a very personal and exclusive parting present. Her intimate gesture and gentle kiss had left me with no great excitement but it had filled me with a warmth that I had not previously experienced.

I reserved the final day for the best. More than anything else I wanted one last walk through the steep fields and woods that I had grown to love so much over the years. I had deliberately denied myself this, savouring the anticipation with mounting excitement. As I set out on my journey along the Toadsmoor Valley, I willingly succumbed to the spell of vivid imagination induced by magical potions dispensed by nature's creators in residence. The gentle fold of the Cotswolds tumbled before me, a table covered with a lush emerald-green cloth. An irregular pattern of tracks was intricately woven into the fabric. To complete the extravaganza, little imagination was needed to picture models displaying exclusive creations along catwalks that led to the horizon. Across the stream, resting in the arms of

the hill opposite, the awakening branches of beech, elm and ash stretched sleepily to embrace a refreshing shower before slipping into daringly brief costumes featuring plump young buds that held promise of superb summer fashions. In the distance, Toadsmoor Lake lay silently holding her breath in appreciation of the presentation, yet delighted enough in having such a favoured viewing position that she grasped long stretches of scenery to hold them close in perpetual reflection. I lingered long over this spectacular display, savouring every moment, recalling over and over again the enjoyment that the woods had freely given, and knowing only too well there would be an awful long time between meals. That night, back in my favourite bed for the last time, I asked my silent, snowbound friend if he would like to come with me to Australia. I did my utmost to encourage him, promising soft, sandy beaches and perpetual sunshine. At one stage I thought I had convinced him when he appeared to take a few faltering paces towards me. But his effort soon died, and with it the last opportunity I'd ever have of releasing him from his frozen environment. In my imagination, he seemed so desperately to want to leave, but was compelled to remain by circumstances beyond his control. In a way, I understood the predicament he was in. My situation was similar to his, but in reverse. Through no wish of mine, I was being uprooted and taken from the people and life I loved for a purpose I could not understand. And to make matters worse, there were no comforting words from George that night. He had been recalled to Barnardo's two weeks before my visit. When the time came for me to leave the little Bismore cottage, my father placed his arms on my shoulders, and with more emotion than I had ever seen him display before, struggled to get out his few words of farewell. I could not understand all his words, but Mother repeated them with no loss of feeling. 'Thou hast been a good son, Jack, dost write an' tell us all about Australia, an' when thou grows up to be a man, dost come back to see us.' This time he was not embarrassed with Mother's interpretation, and when I looked up into his face, it was red with the effort of his speech, and his eyes were moist with emotion. I suddenly realised just how much I was losing. When I had been at Clapham, Eastcombe hadn't seemed so far away. A hundred miles was not an impossible distance; only a few hours away in fact. But Australia was half a world away, and suddenly, the thought was frightening. Instinctively, I flung my arms around my father and clung to him. His big hands were on my head, and I cried. Once again, it was time to go.

Now there was the ache and trauma of parting to go through all over again. There was also the long walk to Chalford railway station, which, for Mother, would have been taxing enough on its own, without having to face the lonely return journey and the steep Chalford hill. Years later, when I was old enough to appreciate the feelings of other people, I marvelled at her strength, both physical and mental, in giving years of her life to the service of rearing orphans. So for the second time in a year we sat together on the station seat waiting for the train that would take me out of her life for ever. The last time I had sat there with Mother, I was full of apprehension about the future. On this occasion, there was little change. Although I now understood the implication of institutional life, I couldn't help wondering what the future would hold for me in a far-off country. Most of my tears had been shed back at the cottage. There was now only dismay at the sound of the approaching train. A sense of loss overwhelmed me greater than anything else I had ever experienced. Our goodbye was an emotional mixture of holding hands and embracing each other, until, with a final kiss she put me on the train. For a few moments she stood outside my window, drained of all expression except for a faint suggestion of a smile on her wide open face. With a short toot and a few shunts, the train crept slowly away, and with the movement, my mother's face slipped out of sight. I had neither the energy nor the will to move to the window. I just slumped into my seat in a dejected heap, drained and bewildered. I never saw my mother again.