

D. BARGATE

(2-35)

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LIBRARY

ROTHERHITHE STREET & PARK BUILDINGS

These buildings were in three blocks, the third block ending and overlooking Rotherhithe Street was the one in which I lived.

High rise blocks were, of course, unheard of then and these buildings were only four storeys high. We lived on the first floor landing on which were four flats.

The floors were reached by stone stairs with two flats to one side of the stairway and two on the opposite side.

Behind the street door was a narrow passage off this was a lavatory and further down a scullery. This had a stone floor which did not have any covering and had to be scrubbed. In the scullery was a coal box a large wringer, a cooker and at the end and facing the window was the stone sink. The window let in very little light as the balcony above overhung so that no sunshine ever penetrated the room. There was no room for two people to pass between the sink and the wringer as the room was so narrow.

At the end of the passage was the living room and leading from that two small bedrooms.

I remember clearly that the rent for this flat was eight shillings and sixpence per week.

We were a poor family, my father being a tuberculosis sufferer and my mother having to go to the City office cleaning every morning and evening as my sister and I were both still at school. The balconies looked on to a concrete square in the centre of which and at three separate intervals was a metal clothes line pole which were surrounded at the tops by four or five pulleys through which clothes lines were threaded on washing days. With so many tenants it was a case of first come first served and many a time I have witnessed a stand up fight when two women have both raced for the one remaining pulley. One memorable day we were greatly amused as two women fought and became tangled in a sheet. No great damage ever came from these scraps, perhaps a few scratches and some hair pulled out before the fighters gave up and compromised somehow. There were many rules to be obeyed and one was that no clothes line was to be left out after the washing had been taken in.

These poles were a great nuisance to the tenants as we children would run from the stairs race to the pole and swing round it one after the other rattling the pulleys like skeletons on a tin roof, then we would be off out of the square amid cries of abuse from irate tenants.

We were up to all the mischevious tricks that children play and our games were, catch in the rope, robbers and coppers, skipping, ball games, and of course for the more fortunate kids skates, scooters, or perhaps even a bicycle. For the less fortunate who would ride a bike there was a shop round the corner ^{where} ~~who~~ ^{could be hired} ~~loaned out~~ old bone-shaker bikes for 2d an hour sometimes there was no brake and to stop one had to grab a tree on the way round or fall off. I was never any good on a bike but my sister would spend her 1d pocket money on a Friday for half an hour on one of these machines with me running beside her to help her stop.

There were hoops too, wooden ones with sticks to guide them for the girls and metal ones with metal skimmers having a hook on the end for the boys.

Of all these games, skipping was my favourite, especially on some summer evening when two of the fathers would appear in the square with a thick barge rope which would stretch from one side of the square to the other, then the kids would flock around to skip while the men took the ends of the rope, as it was far too heavy for a child to wield. As the rope rose and fell it would hit the concrete with a loud crack and the kids would sing "All in together". The rhythm of the skipping was slow and jumping had to be high as a rap on the calves with that rope was no joke and left many a mark on a leg, but we were tough, we had to be. The noise and the whack of the rope would bring complaints from people who wanted a bit of peace and quiet, and who could blame them, but I am afraid it was only when the Superintendent, an ex-policeman came into view that the rope was quickly pulled in and that place became deserted like magic.

The Superintendent was a placid kind of chap really and I can remember one evening in the winter and after dark that two men on the balcony opposite were fighting and threatening to throw each other over the balcony that the Super arrived and as we thought would go up stairs and separate the fighters but instead he turned off the lights and let them fight it out in the dark. This seemed to do the trick, whether it was because they couldn't find each other in the dark or whether they had had enough I didn't learn but it ended the fight.

Rotherhithe Street on the other side was lined with buildings such as Wharves which overlooked the Thames and along its length were alleyways ending in stone steps leading down to the foreshore, at low tide and into the river at high tide. The Thames was an extremely busy and fascinating waterway in my childhood days. A couple of hundred yards from the Buildings was a place called Cherry Garden Pier which sounds quite romantic but was, in fact, a small wooden jetty from which small boats came and went, or tugs would visit. I spent many an hour watching the river traffic from there.

Fleets of barges were often anchored at low tide waiting to proceed and these could be reached by sliding down chains from platforms. This was a dangerous game to play but boys being what they were got on to the barges by this means and then they would jump from barge to barge as they were tethered together trying to find something to steal in the way of food or wood or whatever they could handle.

I was forbidden to go to the foreshore and on the rare occasions that I was tempted to do so, I was always found out because the grey mud was never completely wiped from my shoes so that was my undoing.

Tragedy would sometimes strike and a boy would miss his footing and fall into the water where the currents would drag him under a barge and he would drown.

Then the River Police were called to drag the river and more often than not the grappling hooks would catch the body then it would be brought to the shore and lain face down on the

steps to drain whilst waiting for the arrival of a kind of hand-cart or long pram with a shade which closed over the length of the vehicle.

These pushcarts were housed in sheds at various intervals and were used for a number of purposes. For instance, if a drunken person was unable to stand he was transported to the Police Station in one of these.

Our Local Police Station was in Paradise Street - another peaceful sounding name - but don't be mislead, it was often far from peaceful. Quite often on the way to school I would see the Black Maria, or Police Van as they are now called draw up at the Station to transport prisoners to the Magistrates Court at Tower Bridge. Most of these men had been detained for the night because they were found ashore after the time limit allowed by law for them to be back on the ship.

The watermen who lived round about always appeared to me like the Yorkshire miners. They were unchallenged masters of the household and many of the wives and children almost stood to attention when they came home from work.

My special friend was the daughter of a Lighterman and when her father was due home the atmosphere in the house became tense. Only on rare occasions was I allowed to witness his homecoming. The tea would be ready and the big wooden arm-chair set for him to sink into while his wife set about removing his boots and putting his slippers on his feet. The children spoke in whispers and I was afraid to breath in case he heard me, yet I never heard of him striking his wife or the children he was just a strict disciplinarian.

My mother was one of the more respected of the women in the Buildings, probably because she was a very practical person whom others relied upon in emergencies and who was not given to panic in any situation. She would be called upon to act as midwife or to perform the office of laying out the dead or perhaps supply a cure for a cough, a sore throat, a cold or a sore knee.

On the ground floor lived a widow who neglected her three small children and beat them mercilessly. She would go out at night and leave the children alone while she was being entertained by her men friends. This infuriated the rest of the tenants and on one occasion she shut her street door a split second before a large stone jar filled with salt hit it and not her as was the intention of a neighbour. However the women got together and a petition was forwarded to the Superintendent asking for her to be evicted. This was the eventual outcome and the children were taken into care, which was the best thing that could have happened to them.

Pubs were numerous in the area and many a fight would take place after closing time, sometimes in the street and sometimes after a husband and wife got home. Such a couple occupied the flat above us. We would be awakened with furniture being knocked over and all manner of objects being thrown by the contenders at each other. Next morning the wife would appear with several bruises and perhaps a shiner (black eye) and greet the neighbours as though nothing unusual had happened the previous night. She would have been horrified had she known that I had

lain in bed in fear and trembling lest one might murder the other.

One pub on the waterside was called the Waterman's Arms and was opposite our living room window. Like all the buildings on the riverside it was plagued by rats, big fearsome creatures. The landlord would set traps for them overnight and next morning he would bring the traps into the road along with his two Wirehaired terriers, release the rats and we would watch the dogs chase and kill the rodents. No windows were left open on that side of the street as the walls were covered in creeper and on one occasion a rat ran up the creeper to escape the dogs.

I have watched an army of rats, one behind the other vacate an empty grain warehouse and move across to another full Wharf.

Another pub called The Angel boasted a wooden balcony at the back which overlooked the river. My mother would take her jug here for a half pint of beer on a Sunday morning. Once or twice I was allowed to go and sit on this balcony to watch the boats. I thought that was marvellous as none of the other kids ever went there.

On Sunday afternoons I was sent to Sunday School which was held in a long hut like structure with a galvanised iron roof. This was called the Ark Mission Hall, not a very appropriate name as the roof let in the water on rainy days.

We were not allowed to use bad language nor to condemn those who did. Despite the squalid conditions I tasted happiness in simple things, sadness mostly from lack of money and my beloved father's poor health and the thing that stays in my memory is the loyalty of the common people who offered help when possible and were not, in their turn afraid to ask help of others. To their condemnation of acts immoral and their acceptance of human error.

MY SCHOOLS - THE FIRST

My first infant school was in a School Board for London building. I believe I was four when I first started. *in 1916*

There was a large hall - or at least it looked large to me - the classrooms all led off the hall and the headmistress, or governess as she was then, had her desk raised on a small platform and placed next to the big coal fire ^{which} was stoked up by the caretaker.

In one corner of the hall was a big rocking horse on which the new intake of children were occasionally allowed to ride.

Of the actual teaching I can remember little except that all the pupils sat on the hall floor for assembly and that during winter it was an advantage to be near the front where the fire was as the children in the top classes were in direct line with the double doors leading to the concrete space which was our playground and the draught froze our feet and seats.

We all seemed to be happy there, and on Empire Days the 24th May all the children wore some red, white and blue, either as hair ribbon or perhaps threaded through ribbon holes at the waist. Those who had flags brought them to school and the children all joined hands, then, lead by a teacher would wend their way in a long crocodile all round the hall, outside, then round the playground and back again, singing the while "There's a long long trail awinding".

Later in the morning we would join the big girls and the big boys in the boys playground where there was a landing reached by a flight of stone stairs on either side before entering the upper school. On this platform would sit Britannia resplendant in her white gown, ~~and~~ helmet, shield and trident of gold cardboard. Around Britannia would be grouped children dressed in costumes to represent all the peoples of our far flung Empire.

The whole school would sing at the tops of their voices Rule Britannia and all the other patriotic songs, ending, of course with the National Anthem, two verses.

then a half days holiday would be announced and everybody would cheer.

Eventually, of course, I went upstairs to the Big Girls. The classes formed a "Well" round the roof ~~dwnstairs~~ of the hall downstairs, there being no hall upstairs.

Again in each classroom the big open fire surrounded with a hefty iron guard.

To get from one side of the school to the other one was forced to walk through all the classes on one side to reach the other corridor and there seemed to be a never ending procession of people wishing to be on the other side.

Singing lessons were shared by two classes. This was achieved by raising the shutter which divided them, a wooden shutter, similar to those used on the front of shops and raised and lowered with a "long arm".

The desks were in long lines, rising in a series of steps with two pupils to each desk.

Dicipline was firm but not severe and punishment was mostly by a black mark in a black book for which the culprit was sent to governess to collect and return. Three black marks meant being kept behind after school with a task to do. There was a cane but I never saw it but the teachers had long white pointers with red tips with which they pointed out things on the map, or at times, regained a pupils attention be a rap on the hand. These pointers were of shiny cardboard and the whack did not have to be very severe for the pointer to break a frequent happening which drew forth giggles from the class.

I only reached the second class in the Big Girls when the family moved away and I joined my second school.

My First Impressions of World War 1 in London.

X 39.

When I was only two years old,
This England was at war,
But my memory is clouded,
Till I reached the age of four.
Twas Winter and the lights were lit
As the cloth was spread for tea.
To wait for father to come home.
We lived in Bermondsey.

Things seemed to be quite normal,
Yet, as the cups were placed
They rattled on the saucers
And mother was white faced,
I must have sensed the change in her
She was always very calm
"Dad will be home soon she said
We wont come to any harm".

I had many times seen soldiers
In trains on the railway bridge
And mother said "They're going to fight
The Germans at Vimy Ridge."
Just then a knock came at the door
And dad was home at last.
"Maroons have fired" he said to mum,
"Get the girls to the shelter fast."

So a flask was filled with cocoa,
Coats donned, then out quick march
We hurried to the dugout,
A train under the railway arch.
Mum knew a Mr Bassett
And he said "Come along,
It's safe here in this carriage
And the arch is very strong

So a train became our shelter
Until the War was through,
We slept most nights, we children
Till the "All Clear" bugle blew
On the nights when we were wakened,
It was usually because
The gun on Tower Bridge was fired,
"Big Lizzie" she was called.

And when we heard her booming out
We knew that the Huns were near.
The planes would be over London
And our hearts were filled with fear.
We would huddle up to father
Saying "Will they drop bombs here?"
Then mother, with a trembling voice
Would say "Of course not dear."

Page 2

Once I saw a German Zeppelin
Burning in the sky,
I thought it looked quite pretty,
Though the men inside would die.

And ~~Then~~ one day in the summer
We saw lots of airplanes near,
We could see the big black crosses
And we all began to cheer,
Till mother rushed to grab us in,
No time to ask a reason,
"They're German planes, you silly girls
We'll be locked up for treason."

Then a very long long time went by
I was all of six years old,
When mother hung a flag out,
The war was over we were told.
And when eleven o'clock came round
They would fire off every gun,
But we weren't to be afraid again
That awful war we'd won.

So that was the end of the railway arch
And the cocoa in the flask.
We could eat our tea in peace again
And sleep at home at last.

MY RELIGION AS A CHILD IN LONDON.

My initiation to religion was at a place called The Manor Mission, in Bermondsey.

Here, I joined the kindergarten where we sat on little chairs placed in rows, were expected to behave, and sung such things as "You in your small corner and I in mine", Down came the raindrops on a cloudy day and All things bright and beautiful. Each Summer we were transported for the day by horse brakes on a Sunday School treat, but only if our attendance card had procured the necessary number of attendance stars.

These treats took us from Bermondsey to perhaps Shirley Hills, Riddlesdown or Abbey Wood, where, on arrival games and races would be organized and where stalls would display chalk ornaments, cheap brooches and other Knick-knacks which the children could purchase for a few pence to take home to mother.

Some mothers were asked to come along to help with the children and my mother was always one of the volunteers. Mother had the ability to organize everyone and turned many a tear of frustration into laughter. On the outward journey she would tolerate the demand for hymn singing made by the very prim and proper Sunday School Teachers but on the way home she would start us off with I'm for ever blowing bubbles" and follow with other popular songs with which the children joined in with gusto until we arrived back at the Mission, hoarse, decidedly grubby but happy.

The brakes and horses were hired from the local Undertaker Mr Knox. These brakes had a roof but the sides and the back were open, long wooden seats ran along the sides and back. Two horses would draw each brake and I well remember the names of two of the creatures as "Robin and Fred". The driver sat on a long seat high above the brake and four of the children were allowed to sit up alongside him - two on either side. I was up there when Robin and Fred were pulling and when we stopped to water the horses I was allowed to hold the reins while the driver hopped off for a minute or two. I was instructed to hold the reins quite still and I sat through those two proud minutes, which incidentally seemed much longer - not daring to turn my head, let alone moving my hands unless the horses should gallop away with us to the edge of beyond. I need not have let such thoughts enter my mind of course, as the horses were much too busy drinking their fill after their long, hard pull.

When I reached the big Sunday School I went into the choir. Not because I particularly wanted to sing - I had a very mediocre voice - but because the choir sat high up in front of the rest of the children and looked important. What a sinful little hussey I must have been!

Manor Mission, like all the other Sunday Schools I attended in my childhood, gave prizes for good attendance during the year as an incentive and I wish the practice were carried on today in my own Church

In my opinion children need some "carrot" to encourage them.

On moving house, my next Sunday School was at Spurgeons Tabernacle at The Elephant and Castle. The name somehow has a Jewish ring but I believe it was Baptist although I just accepted the teaching because I liked the place and I never thought about asking which Denomination it belonged to. It was simply Sunday School to me. This is where I heard stories about Jesus and His love. ~~Here~~ Here I was presented with my very first Bible duly signed by the Superintendant whose name I remember to this day, it was a Mr Wagstaff. Unlike Manor Mission, this was a much more highly organized affair, having a second building called The College and running a Band of Hope - an anti drinking organization - Spurgeons also had orphanages somewhere. I remember once going to a school with the soul destroying name of "The Ragged School" to give them a concert. I had to learn a very long poem called "The Two Pledges" by W.A.Eaton, which was about a drunken father who ill treated his family and spent all his money on strong drink until he was persuaded to sign the Pledge. This was my first appearance on a stage and, judging by the applause, it went quite well.

Now Spurgeons also helped poor children to get a holiday by the sea. As we came into this category my mother applied for my sister and me to go and we were accepted. The holiday was to cost £/6p per week for two weeks and mother was allowed to pay 1/- per week till the time came for us to go. We duly arrived at Passmore Edwards Holiday Home at Clacton-on-Sea. We went for three consecutive years and apart for brief bouts of Home sickness we did enjoy ourselves. The rules were quite strict, such as, changing shoes on entering the Home, no talking at meal tables or after lights out at night when, at the first sign of a giggle or a whisper a nurse would appear at the door and shout out "SILENCE", thereby waking those who had already gone to sleep. However the days on the beach accompanied by a nurse were great and the joy of seeing two swings and a see-saw on the lawn for the use of the children was a real luxury.

I left Spurgeons, sadly when we next moved.

My third Sunday School was called "The Ark" this was in Paradise Street, Rotherhithe, Alas! it would not have served ~~NNoah~~ well as the roof leaked, and on wet days the chairs had to be moved around to avoid the puddles. The roof was of galvanised iron and when rain fell it sounded like a roll on a kettle drum. I was not happy here and left to join the Rotherhithe Great Hall.

Here I became quite established. Being older I understood the teaching and its purpose and I was happy to join in as much as I could. ~~Here~~ Here again I went into the choir and joined the Bible Class.

Page 3

We took yearly examinations in conjunction with other schools. First, Second and Third class certificates were issued to those who passed certain marks. I managed a Third and a Second but never aspired to a First. Whilst I was there I became a wage earner, left Sunday School for good and joined the adult congregation.

At the age of sixteen I lapsed from my Church going and returned in earnest later in life but I know that my initiation as a child gave me the grounding that I needed and the urge to return to my Faith and become an active member of The Church of England at my own choosing.