Kay Garrett (Mrs.) 108 Maidenway Road, Paignton, S.Devon, TQ3 2PZ. 21.4.1978.

Born 10.12.1899. Father - Wiltshire farmer's son; grammar school educated; ran away from home and joined the army.

Mother: Convent educated. (Her father was head clerk in a City firm). Married at 18. (? To get away from home).

Though both "educated" - my chief memory is that they drank, gambled and fought. And when my mother was drunk she shouted all sorts of obscene insults at my Dad (I didn't know then how obscene they were. Where did she learn all that bad language?) When she was drunk I was terrified; I'd stand in a corner saying over and over "please God make her go to sleep, please God make her go to sleep" - because I knew when she fell senseless on the bed there would be peace.

In our street it was normal for a father to come home drunk on a Saturday night and black his wife's eyes. But not your Mum. Mums were always good respectable women. And next day, meeting my schoolmates, I'd hang my head in shame because some of them were bound to say - "Coo, your Mum wasn't half drunk last night!"

My father was invalided out of the army (after enteric fever contracted in Egypt). He received a quarterly pension of £9. Pension Day was a fearful anticipation. We always had a special breakfast - bacon and tomatoes. I got something new to wear. But night was awful. They'd stay out till midnight - drinking. I'd lie awake listening - to footsteps coming along the street - and Mum's voice would come - raised in a stream of drunken abuse.

But it wasn't all misery When she was sober and in a good mood my mother was marvellous company. Dad too. They would sing all the music hall songs and Mum would do little dances. And my Dad, who had quite a good light baritone voice, was very good at Gilbert and Sullivan. By the time I was five I knew lots of Gilbert and Sullivan choruses.

Home was happiest when Dad had no job and times were hard: when she had her back against the wall Mum was splendid. Her first consideration (for me) was solid, terrifying discipline. She kept a cane behind the door; and at meal times it was always on the table - for elbows). But her next consideration was "plenty of good food" (for Dad too). And she could make a wonderful dinner for three for sixpence (could tell each ingredient and its price) - % are "A"

For breakfast it was Quaker oat prridge - every morning of the year. Afterwards bread and butter (marge when money was short) and hot on treacle. For treacle or jam I went to the corner shop (with a jug) and bought a ha-porth which the grocer doled out of an enormous earthenware jar, with a large wooden spoon).

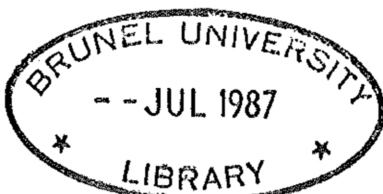
My mother cooked our Sunday dinner herself, but lots of neighbours put the joint and potatoes and dripping in a baking tin and one of the children would take it to the baker's shop to be cooked.

Special treats, when Dad was working, were fish and chips - "penny piece of fish and a ha'porth of potatoes"; or boiled beef and carrots or boiled leg of Pork and "pease pudden" - bought cooked and smoking hot (or saveloys and pease pudden) from the local pork butcher's. You had to take your own big pudding basin and boy I enjoyed watching the butcher cutting the lovely thick slices of beef or pork. Six penn'orth was plenty for three.

My mother smoked Woodbines all the time. (Five for a penny in a paper packet). When times were hard she sent me out with a tin box (I remember this when I was six) - to pick up cigarette ends from the kerbsides. She would take them out of the paper, put the tobacco in a special tin, and then, with cigarette papers she made herself new cigarettes. I remember how thrilled I was when I came home with my collecting box filled with nice big fag-ends. I knew she would be pleased with me.

When I was small I had to spend whole winters in bed (a weak chest). I never cared much for dolls and anyway we couldn't afford toys. So Dad taught me to read, when I was four-ish. At seven I joined the "Juvenile" branch of the Hammersmith (Carnegie) Library. It was near my school and on the way home I used to change my parents' books as well as my own. I often read their books. They never censored my reading.

When times were bad and Mum and Dad couldn't go out to the pub, we had lovely evenings playing cards. (I could play crib and whist and "Nap" when I was eight). And of course there were always books.



2-305.

"A"

Dinner for three - for 6d.

From the butcher: Two penn'orth of "pieces" (trimmings from joints).
A penn'orth of beef suet. = 3d.

From the greengrocer: 4 lb potatoes - 1d.
A ha'porth of "pot herbs" - a carrot, a turnip, an onion; outside bits of celery or what was in season; a sprig of parsley. = 1½d

From the grocer; A penn'orth of flour
a ha'porth of golden syrup (you took your own basin or jar; syrup was doled out of a big container - with a small ladle. (=1½d.

Meat and veg were floured and cut up and browned in dripping.
Then put in a saucepan with water and seasoning; At the right time the peeled and thickly sliced potatoes were put on top of the stew: the whole secret of its deliciousness was slow cooking:- oh, and I forgot to add a touch of dried mixed herbs, which mother always kept in her store cupboard.

Roly Poly Pudding - Suet was chopped finely and added to flour, pinch of salt, and water to form a thick "dough" - which was rolled and wrapped in a clean cloth and tied; and put into boiling water, then "steamed" for a couple of hours. It was served hot in thick slices over which was dripped the lovely golden syrup.

School I loved. Mostly it was much more peaceful and happy than home. My first memories are of the Sacred Heart Convent, Hammersmith Broadway. As it was - I suppose - grant-aided by the London County Council - we had the same syllabus as the other L.C.C. elementary schools.

At this school there was special emphasis on singing, poetry, even Shakespeare's plays. But Sister didn't make us learn anything by heart. She selected a play, then gave us parts which we had to stand up and read (like a rehearsal). And if there were words or phrases we did not understand, she would interpret for us so that we never gabbled meaningless words.

We learned to sew and make things. I remember Sister Martineau, who was French, who was our sewing teacher, saying "Now when you are making a man's chemise", and we'd all giggle while we stitched away at the gusset in the tail of a shirt. Always, at sewing lessons, one pupil was selected to read aloud to the others. Books like "In The Golden Days" (Edna Lyall).

At school our convent teachers were just as human as any lay person. Sister Donovan got into flaming tempers, always impatient with slow pupils. Sister Stuck was just the opposite. In the noisy interval between change of teachers she would suddenly appear in the doorway of the classroom - and she didn't say a word. Just stood there with her gentle smile, and absolutely still - and the noise died down and the whole class became silent. Sister Stucke left us, one day, to go to Africa as a missionary. She died there of fever and when we heard the news it was as if we mourned an angel.

Our headmistress - Mother Oates - was frail and spiritual looking, never raised her voice. There was no corporal punishment in that school, but Reverend Mother could reduce us to silent awe. I still can't think how or why.

If any of us children had a headache or chilblains (I suffered terribly from chilblains) or fell down and grazed a knee, the nuns always told us to "offer it up to the Sacred Heart" - meaning that sharing our pain with Jesus would help us to bear it. It actually worked - sometimes.

Every day, after school, we went to the convent chapel for "Benediction". It only lasted about twenty minutes but I think it was good for us. The beauty of the chapel, the lighted candles, the flowers, the music - even the short prayers - brought their own peace and pleasure to us - who were poor and whose homes were not beautiful or poetic.

One outstanding memory of those school days was the sunday of my First Communion. For me and the others (about ten of us) it was sheer bliss - but not in a wholly spiritual sense. After Mass and Holy Communion we all went back to the convent for a good breakfast. Then we talked and read books and played games till dinner time, when we had a gorgeous meal of roast beef and yorkshire pudding with all the trimmings, and suet pudding with raisins in it, for sweet. Then Father Bailey, the parish priest, who could play the piano with happy abandon, came in and played all the popular songs of the day - and sang with us. Around 3.30 there was a marvellous tea before going home, and taking off my first white silk dress I'd ever had - given by the nuns, together with new boots and white cotton gloves.

- - -

When I was twelve (1912) my Dad - who wasn't a Catholic - decided I must "have a go on the other side". So I went to St. Mary Abbotts - in Kensington High Street. My mother did not object, but she arranged for me not to take religious instruction from the parson who came once a week. I was allowed to sit in a quiet corner on my own and sew or read. But my mother didn't object to Morning Assemby, when the whole school met for prayers and a hymn. I enjoyed it very much. And I loved the simple prayers (I discovered later they were "Collects") and the tuneful hymans - much better music that we normally had in my parish church.

One thing I learned when I went to St.Mary Abbotts was not to trust history. At the convent Mary Tudor had been a near-sainted martyr and a splendid queen, while Elizabeth was the enemy of the Church and all right-minded Catholic citizens. At St.Mary Abbots it was "Bloody Mary" and "Good Queen Bess".

My teachers were very hardworking and dedicated. In those days all L.C.C. schools had a form of end-of-term exam; to find out how we were coping, I suppose. And there were the summer annual exams, which decided whether, when you went back after the long holiday, you "went up" to the next standard, or stayed where you were, or "went down". To be in the first three was always my ambition as I grew older. Not so much for my own sake but for my teacher -

Miss Groom, whom I adored and feared. She was tall and thin and plain and I think she must have suffered from indigestion because every afternoon (after dinner) her pointed noise got red. And when she was angry little patches of bright red glowed on her cheeks.

Miss Groom couldn't stand children who wouldn't try. But we'd all have scaled Everest to hear her approving - "Well done!". Some of her constant admonishments were - "Put your shoulder to the wheel!" "Stand on your own feet"; and, to the luckless one who'd been lashed by her tongue - "Stop grizzling".

Our Headmistress - Mrs.Chapman, was tall, with a front like a battleship; grey-haired, deep-voiced, a darling. Very understanding. And if she had to be stern it was more in sorrow than in anger. There was no corporal punishment in this school, either. (was it because they were both "church" schools? Other children in our street often "got the cane".).

Every Friday afternoon Mrs.Chapman invited six of the girls in "Standard VII" into her study. They took their sewing or darning; she read out something from a newspaper - an item of news or part of a leading article - and we had to discuss it with her.

While I was still at school I got a job. Every morning at 7.30 I went to a house in a posh street (Kensington was a very royal borough in those days). I washed a long flight of red-tiled steps and polished the door brasses (knocker, letter box, etc.). For this I received from the housekeeper tuppence a day and breakfast - lovely hot dripping toast and a big mug of cocoa. (My mother took the tuppence).

At this time my parents were "caretakers" in a big house on the corner of Holland Road and High Street Kensington - I think there's a garage there now. Caretakers lived in an empty house - kept it swept and safe at night; and lived on the ground floor rent free. They got the job because my Dad, being an Army pensioner, was considered "safe and reliable". (Any trouble with the police would have meant losing his pension).

I remember walking along Kensington High Street to school and seeing not a whole piece of glass left in the windows of Pettits, Derry and Toms, Barkers. It was all lying in shards on the pavements. The Suffragettes had smashed all the windows.

I remember seeing pretty, tall young ladies in the tightest of hobble skirts, teetering along the High Street, twirling brightly coloured sunshades - on each of which was printed "Tango Teas".

I remember, in late 1914, the long queues of young men outside Kensington Town Hall. Tables had been set up in the street and recruiting sergeants were signing up eager volunteers. I remember the solemn, earnest - almost dedicated faces of those young men.

Another memory - "The Festival of 5,000 voices". A concert at the Crystal Palace provided by children from elementary schools all over London. Each chorister had the same song book, but groups of schools had song books with covers of different colours. In between groups of songs (one I specially remember was "Where'ere you walk" - by Handel) the conductor pointed his baton to a certain section of the choir - and our books were moved in unison - so that there were large blocks of moving colour all through the massed choir.

It was always a marvellous day - after the singing we could wander through the huge grassy grounds of the Crystal Palace; and look at the side shows. Tea and buns were provided and our teachers took us home - on trains or buses.

I left school when I was 14½, thoroughly grounded in English - literature, grammar, spelling, essay writing, punctuation. I can still do my "twelve times table" and can add up what I owe (in my head) the shop assistant quicker than she can (or he). I knew enough French to get by among the continental workers in the Kitchen of the National Liberal Club where I worked as a kitchen clerk. I could do plain cooking, and I had learned to swim - all thanks to London County Council and the "elementary" education they so freely and expertly provided. But I know I was lucky in one important respect. My parents (when they were sober) greatly encouraged me to learn and took a keen interest in all my school work.

16/5/1984.

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1916 - 1917 Worked at the National Liberal Clb as kitchen clerk. (Thanks to the French I learned at an ordinary L.C.C. school). In the kitchen there were Italians, French, a Swede, one American, and an ancient Scot. No Englishmen. They were all in the army. They all understood "Kitchen French" - and that was about the extent of mine. I sat in a high desk at the end of the kitchen which was so cavernous that I could scarcely see what was going on at the other end. (The "pastry" was in another huge (adjoining) room.

"Chef" did not cook. He looked after his thirty-five man staff; did all the planning; all the ordering., He had a budget with which to run the kitchen and everything had to be included - except our wages. He wasted nothing. And as it was war time and austerity was the rule, no one grumbled when he even made his own kitchen soap out of the waste fat. (This was once a month. It was cooked in one of the huge copper cauldrons - and it stank like hell.). At that time the Liberals were in power and"the House" was just across the road. So we did three hundred lunches and three hundred dinners every day; and every now and then we had banquets in the "Caxton" Room. At that time the National Liberal Club was on the Corner of Victoria Street - opposite the Central Hall (at the back). It had been the Westminster Palace Hotel. It was, when I first went to work there, and I was the only member of the whole hotel staff the Club kept on. Kitchen clerk was really a man's job. But there weren't any suitable men left.

I shared a lovely room on the fourth floor with another girl - Bridie. She was 17. A year older than me. We got on very well. There was a splendid bathroom at the end of the corridor which we were allowed to use. She was my "other half". We shared "shifts", taking it in weekly turns to be on early duty - 6 a.m. Whoever was on late duty worked till 1 a.m. when no more orders came from the dining room; in the night the members could get tea and coffee and sandwiches from the stillroom.

No one bothered about our private lives. We could be out every night till midnight when we were off duty. We had to go in and out by the Staff Door (opposite the Central Hall) and there was a man in a little office who booked us in at night. Apart from that - well .... London then was blacked out (but not as totally as in World War II). The streets were crowded with soldiers on leave - British, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, - all sorts. They were hungry for "a good time". Sometimes Bridie's and my free time coincided; she was a great one for "getting off". She was a lovely Irish girl - huge grey eyes and blue-black hair and high cheek bones. We met dozens of boys - and men - and went out with them and to dances and to teas and suppers, etc. We were both virgins. Most young girls were, in those days. For all the entertainment we received the most we ever allowed any of our escorts was a prolonged (but not too prolonged) good night kiss. Where else they found their "good time" we never even thought about. The poor lads came and went. And many of them never came back. I corresponded with one - a Canadian - for a long time. But in the end he went too.

1917. In the middle of 1917 I enlisted in the army - the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps ("the Waacs"). I was graded as a "Domestic", but at the end of my recruit training I was re-graded as a clerk, (after a test - English, Arithmetic, General Knowledge). Recruits began army life in Connaught Club in Seymour Place, off Edgware Road. (It was a gentlemans' club in peace time). Our officers were "ladies" - in speech and manners. I like them. We had to put up with mountainous and surrilous abuse. As the first women to wear khaki and serve under "King's Regulations" - we were a scandalous novelty. A bit like Florence Nightingale's nurses, but we were treated to no haloes. The least rancid epithet for us was "officers' remounts".

The best girls were from Scotland and the North. They were workers, - a bit rough and to me their speech was almost incomprehensible; but out there in France, - as bakers, (baking bread for all the troops): domestics in all the houses and establishments behind the lines, and as drivers and telephonists and clerks, - those girls from Scotland and the north always seemed to me to be heroic. I never got to France. Too young. You had to be twenty or over.

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1916 - (National Liberal Club)

One item I omitted from my memories of the N.L.C. Every second Sunday there was an afternoon concert in the large splendid main dining room, - for wounded soldiers. They came, in their "hospital blues", from hospitals in and around London; brought in buses, mostly, though sometimes in ambulances.

There was always a full orchestra; and stars of current musicals - the most famous at that time being José Collins, the star of "The Maid of the Mountains". Everyone gave their services free.
In between the solos there would be community singing (they didn't call it that, in those days:- it just happened).

After the concert the soldiers were given a very good tea, and club staff who weren't on duty elsewhere were delighted to do all the serving. I loved those Sundays.

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An instance of how people could be treated in a voluntary hospital in 1916.

For several weeks I'd been having sore throats. So I went to the Westminster Hospital Outpatients'. The hospital then was opposite St.Margaret's Church and very conveniently close.

The first time I went, after waiting two hours, I saw a doctor who prescribed for me a bottle of stuff wherewith to gargle and told to come back in a week's time.

I dutifully gargled, but the swelling and pain remained. On my second visit a nurse glanced at my "notes" and told me to wait. I waited till all the other out-patients had been dealt with; then I was placed in an old horsehair leather armchair. There were no nurses to be seen. Two young men in white coats stood one each side of me and more or less held me down. Then the doctor I'd seen before advanced with what I now know was called a "guillotine" - and removed my tonsils - with no warning and no anaesthetic. Then, they actually told me I could "go home". No solicitous words. No advice about how to treat my savaged throat. And I, being green and accustomed to accepting what my elders and betters said or did, meekly went back on duty (I was due on at 6 o'clock) because I didn't think I should make any "fuss".

I sat in my high desk and watched "Chef" approaching; and I must have looked a bit odd because he asked me if I was all right. I managed to mumble out what had happened. He didn't believe me. He said - "Open your mouth". So I did. He took one look and nearly fainted. Then, kindly, in a tone of voice I'd never heard from him before, he said - "You go up to your room. I send you iced water. You don't come to work tomorrow."

Nobody seemed to think the doctors at the hospital had been incredibly savage to a 16-year old girl. They were "they" and we were "us" and we had to be grateful that we got free treatment.

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I worked in "Records" in Grosvenor Street, as a filing clerk. We went back to Connaught Club after work. To supper - so-called. We were always hungry. Rotten food. Badly cooked.(all the best cooks must have been over in France). Never enough of it. And as our wages ranged from 5/- to 10/- a week (I got 7/6d) - we couldn't afford to dine out. So we accepted invitations - from soldiers. Never civilians. It wasn't done to be seen with anyone out of uniform. But even if your brother was an officer you had to get special permission to be seen out in his company. So we were confined to chaps who were in the ranks. Not that I minded. I had always been "in the ranks", but one or two of my friends (including a bishop's daughter and an author's daughter) must have felt a bit irked.

One day, waiting at Marble Arch station for a friend who didn't turn up, I met a South African soldier, - a third generation(English)South African. In Jan.1919 we got married - in Shoreham-by-Sea where by then, I was stationed and working in the Garrison Orderly Room of the Royal Garrison Artillery. My mother didn't trust my husband and had made him promise to wait till I was 21 (three years). So I lied to the Registrar and on my first marriage certificate I am two years older than my age.

1919

November 1919 (30th) sailed for Durban in R.M.S. "Armadale Castle" - a ship taking soldiers and families back to South Africa. I didn't get my discharge from the army till after I'd sailed and had to wear my uniform because I hadn't had time to do any civvy shopping. My husband had gone ahead of me. (He had to go when he was told - couldn't wait for my demob.)

Durban was to me a paradise - warm, colourful; beautiful trees and flowers. I could swim in a warm sea. We had two furnished rooms and shared a kitchen with two other young families in a huge house. The kitchen was really a large long back verandah - with trellis for a fourth wall. Here everyone cooked (on the same stove - but timed so as not to interfere with each other) and ate and exchanged conversation. It was like a delightful café except that we did our own cooking; and we all got on splendidly.

1919 - (late in the year) - to Southern Rhodesia, where my husband's family had moved (during the war) -. Bulawayo - a three-day train journey away - was then just like a frontier town in an old western. Just one shopping street - Main Street - with a statue of Cecil Rhodes in the middle of the road in the down-town part. By Rhodes's order, when the city began, every street had to be wide enough for a span of fourteen oxen - with ox-wagon attached - to turn round.(I imagine modern motorists are grateful). It was a chequer-board plan. All the streets ran straight one way. All the avenues straight across.

Stayed with my mother-in-law and Zoë, my unmarried sister-in-law, for a long time while Hugh, my husband, looked for work. It was heavenly. My sister-in-law was a glorious musician - (piano) and friends came for musical Sunday mornings - singers, violinists, cellists. Evenings she played the piano at the one and only cinema (called a "bioscope"); and she also had the first jazz band in Rhodesia, playing for dances, weddings, parties - and I used to go with the band - to gold mines and ranches - but only as company for Zoë - I couldn't play anything, though I did sing a bit.

While Hugh was searching for a job I went round the town also looking. In the army I had learned to type. Everyone said - "H'm. Typing and filing. If you could do shorthand too, we could give you a job.". So, when Hugh at last found work up country, I took with me an old second hand typewriter, a new Pitman's Shorthand Instructor (with "key" at the back, for correcting one's exercises) and two big foolscap-sized Letts Diaries (for a start) for practise.

Hugh's job as on a small asbestos mine. There were only three white people the boss, his Cape Dutch wife, and a Scottish engineer who, because he had a beard, I thought must be at least eighty. He always referred to me as "Yon young cockney piece". (No love lost on either side).

My husband worked as book-keeper and "compound manager" - which meant complete charge of all the African labour. As he could speak Zulu before he spoke English (his mother had insisted that the Zulu nursemaid should speak no English to the children) he could also speak Matabele (the Matabele are an offshoot of the Zulu tribe). He got on very well with them and they respect

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him because he always "listened" - without interruption, to grievances, accusations, excuses, justifications. In short, he understood them and that was a rare thing, then, among white bosses.

We lived in rondavels (round, thatched-roof huts) - two, joined over-head by a second all-over thatched roof. The space between the huts we called "the verandah".

These huts were made from extinct termite hills - the hills were knocked down and the rubble mixed with water to make mud - which was slapped on to slender tree trunks; the ceiling's "spokes" were branches with thatch on top. You had to have calico looped up, like an inverted tent, under the ceilings, because the wood was inhabited by "borers" - who ate the branches and there was a continuous fall-out of "borer dust".

Unfortunately, our termite hill was not quite extinct. It was all right when we first took up residence, in April (or was it May?). But when the rains came, in November, the walls and floors came to happy life. There were little ant hills poking out all over the walls and heaving up through the floors. You couldn't leave your socks on the floor overnight. In the morning, if you did, you found just a few stray shreds.

Our only real furniture was a double bed, a wooden kitchen table and two bentwood chairs. All the rest we made out of orange boxes draped with cretonne. There was one unglazed window - narrow - in each hut.

There was, of course, no electricity, no gas, no fireplace in the huts - (too dangerous). And no water. This had to be brought from a spruit, about a quarter of a mile away. We had a water boy - a "picannin" - from a nearby kraal; he fetched the water. Baled it into an 8-gallon petrol drum on four wheels, with a plaited wire handle for pulling. One bath a day in a tin tub. We took it in turns to go in first, each evening. The water was heated outside over a wooden fire contained within a square of bricks. It was carried indoors in a 2-gallon paraffin tin. I had a tiny "kitchen" - just another little building made of pole and dagga, like the huts, but square, and in that I had a small paraffin cooker - 2 burners with rings on top and an "oven" - a box - between. I had to bake my bread in this little box, as well as cook all the meals on it. I had a frying pan, two saucepans and a kettle. I also had a "boy" -. He took "the washing" to I knew not where and brought it back bone dry. He also washed the dishes and did other odd jobs around "the house".

The country around was splendid. Lots of trees and bushes and beyond, great rolling kopjes. Some of the kopjes were made of ironstone and when the rains came and the wild electric storms, you could see the lightning dancing in blue flashes along the tops of these kopjes.

While my husband was at work I also toiled at my shorthand and touch typing. It all came in very handy when we went back to Bulawayo and Hugh* couldn't get a job, at first. But I got one straight away. It was all a great adventure.

1927 My daughter was born - in the only nursing home in Bulawayo - run by one ex-sister/midwife(?). It was a hellish experience. I vowed "never again". And I never did.

1930. At that time Southern Rhodesia bore the enviable reputation of consuming more spirits per head of the population than any other country in the British Empire. After work people would come home from work, have a bath and change; then they either sat on your verandah or you on theirs and no one moved till the bottle was empty. You could buy "dop" (pure grape but immature Cape brandy) for 3/6d.).

For various reasons, including constant drunkenness, I left my husband and came back home to England with my daughter, then aged two. It was against his will. He promised to send me £5 a month for Domini, my daughter, but I didn't ask for, and he didn't allow me, anything for myself.

I was under the happy impression that I would get a job the day after I landed.

* The asbestos "mine" failed & Hugh's job folded.

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But "the Depression" had set in. Wherever I went, in answer to an advertisement, there were queues of shorthand-typists stretching out into the street. They all had up-to-date London references. What could I hope for, straight from a frontier town (don't suppose anyone there had even heard of Bulawayo, in those days) in darkest Africa?

Fortunately, I was able to live with my parents in London. Mum wasn't drinking so much (she'd had sclerosis of the liver and the doctor had warned her of untimely death if she didn't cut it down). Dad didn't drinak at all. After a nervous breakdown he'd come out of hospital with no more desire for drink. But he was rising sixty and had no job. He did a "round" - carrying a cardboard suitcase holding razor blades, boot laces and other odds and ends - to the pubs and taxi ranks, bus and tram depots, etc. None of his customers was - (were?) - exactly rolling; I reckon they bought from him out of sheer kindness of heart because he was a gallant and witty old chap, Luckily for all of us he was an Army pensioner. He'd served in Egypt where he contracted enteric fever which left him with permanent phlebitis. He was awarded a pension of £9.10 per quarter. This meant Mum could get a small amount of credit from the grocer's shop and the dairy - who knew they would be paid "on pension day".

I went to the local Employment Exchange. They had no clerical work. I couldn't apply for unemployment benefit because I had "no stamps". They gave me a green card for a job as a daily woman in a new suburb about a mile away, in Acton.

The lady who opened the door wasn't much older than I, then 30. She asked me to wait in the hall while she consulted her husband. (My application for the job had to be "after 6 p.m." - so that he could vet me, I decided). I heard the lady whisper - "It's a girl. She doesn't look the type". I was hatless, which was unusual in those days. I always looked ten years younger than I really was; I wore a navy blue trench coat. I guessed they thought I was too "superior" for charring. After some more whispering, she came back. I said - "Madam, I couldn't help overhearing your conversation. I can do housework. I started when I was eight years old - at home. Just give me a week's trial and if by then you think I'm unsuitable, I will understand."

I got the job. £1 a week and my lunch. Worked from 9 - 5 each day. Saturdays till three. When the week was up my employer told me I was "the quitest maid she'd ever had. (I didn't bang about).

To my extreme embarrassment she made me her confidante. Every morning at eleven she would call me into the morning room for coffee and tell me her troubles. Perhaps it was because I was near her in age and she knew I was not a chatterer; whereas she couldn't talk to friends or relatives. It seemed she had married her boss for whom she had worked as secretary. He was much older and had two grown up children - son and daughter -. They lived at home and they made her life hell. I imagined they resented her taking the place of their dead mother. It was a fine new house, grandly furnished, and her husband was someone quite important "in the City". Poor soul. I have often wondered what happened to her.

After about seven months, I thought I would try for a job with more pay. J.W. Lyons were advertising for trainee waitresses for work in their tea shops and corner houses. I was granted an interview. The lady listened to my recital of my "experience". She said - "You can't be a waitress. It takes time and money to train girls for that job and I've had clerical types here before. If you got a chance of an office job you would leave and all our time and money would be wasted." And she was right. But she did give me a job - as "counter hand" in the Picadilly Corner House - Third Floor. I stood behind a huge hotplate and dispensed fish and chips and curry and rice and soup - all the "entrees". Behind me was a huge oven in which were the hot "sweets" - pies, apple dumplings, puddings etc. Hours of work - 6.30 - 6 p.m. five days a week and one 12-hour day. Wages 27/6d a week and lunch, which was always the same deadly "stew" and we spent our own hard-earned money if we wanted anything different from "the canteen".

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16/5/1984.

Mid-1931 At last I secured a job in a City Office. My employer was an agent for high-class knitwear - importing from Switzerland and other parts of the Continent, as well as promoting British firms like Jaeger.

I was shorthand-typist, copy typist, filing clerk. If I had been a normal sized woman instead of a midget(4ft.11")- I would have had to model the garments, as well. Hours of work 9 - 6 Monday to Friday. Saturday 9 - 1 p.m. Wages 30/- a week. (Fares to the city from Acton had to be paid out of this princely sum). My boss was a large overbearing bloke who dictated letters lasting two whole quarto sheets of typescript. He fancied himself as a master of English.

From the first I knew I was in for trouble. He was always breathing down the back of my neck, apparently to see, over my shoulder, what I was typing. He dug out of me every detail of my circumstances - how I was on my own, with a daughter to support. (My husband had long ago stopped sending her allowance). Once or twice he put half a crown on my desk, saying - "treat yourself to the pictures". I never went to the pictures. Even "the ninepennies" were out of the question.

Then, one night, he locked me in the office with him. It was awful. He was so large and overpowering. In the end, desperation brought inspiration. I came over all coy and feminine and hinted that "it wasn't the right time ...". He threw me away as if I'd burned him. Unlocked the door without a word and let me go.

Next day I told the Manager, the only other person in the office. He did all the book work and arranged sessions for buyers to come and view the suits and sweaters and all the other knitted clothes. He was tall and thin and had a little ginger moustache. (Quite by accident, long afterwards, I learned that he was what in those days they called "a pansy". In my protected life in Africa I had never heard of such people). But he was the gentlest and kindest man I ever met. He listened to my story and promised that, no matter how late I had to work, he would never again leave me alone in the office if the boss was there. And he didn't.

After I'd been there eight months and could ask for a reference I went after another job, in a mail order warehouse. There I took charge of about six copy typists, as well as being secretary to the managing director. I started at 32/6d a week and when I'd been there three months they raised my pay to 37/6d. It was fine. But because of all the unemployment and the poverty all over the country the business failed and we all got the sack. No "severance pay" in those days, so I went again to the Employment Exchange and this time I could "sign on" for Unemployment Benefit,otherwise known as "the dole".

You had to "sign on" every day, to make sure you weren't working on the sly, and to get a green card if there was a possible job. You took the green card to your possible employer and if he gave you a job he kept it and signed it and sent it into the Exchange. If not, you took your green card back next morning.

Pay day at the Exchange was on Friday. I forgot to say that by this time I had moved out from my mother's flat to a room in Deptford, in the house of an uncle and aunt of one of the girls who had worked with me in the mail order job. (I couldn't go on living with my mother. She still treated me in the domineering way I had suffered from as a child. But I left my daughter with her because, strangely, she was quite gentle and kind to her and they got on quite well together. I used to visit them three times a week,when it was possible and of course I had always paid my mother for Domini's keep).

Well, back to pay day at the Employment Exchange - the first. The rate for a woman was 15/- a week. No children's allowances. No supplementary benefit. But I received, that first Friday, only 7/6d. I just stared at it. There must be some mistake. But I couldn't argue with the counter clerk. Deptford was then a dockland area and the queues at the Employment Exchange - women's as well as men's - stretched out into the street.

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The counter clerks had to deal with a fixed and large number of people per quarter hour. So I went home and wrote a letter. I ended it by saying if the mistake was mine, well - but if it was theirs I would be very grateful to receive the other 7/6d.

I took the letter with me when I went to sign on, the next Monday morning. On the Tuesday morning I was asked to go behind the scenes, to meet the Senior Woman Officer. She was little and plump and very sweet. She had my letter in front of her. She explained that it was the custom to hold back half of the first week's pay. And I would get the other half when I eventually "signed off". I felt such a fool. I should have remembered that this was the custom in all factory and industrial jobs, though not normally in offices. So I apologised and left.

The following Saturday afternoon the Women's Vacancy Officer (meaning the lady who supervised the distribution of the green cards) called at my digs. She talked with my landlady, had a good look round my room, asked me a few questions, then departed. Ostensibly she had come to hand me a green card for a job to be applied for on the following Monday morning. I realised afterwards what a flimsy excuse this was. She had come specially to see where I lived and how - and no doubt to ensure I was respectable.(I forgot to say that I had told everyone I was a widow after I came home. It was easier than going into all the embarrassing explanations).

The upshot of the visit was that when I went to sign on, on the Monday, (the job had gone) I was invited again to call on the Senior Woman Officer. She asked me if I would like to work at the Employment Exchange as the Manager's shorthand-typist and confidential clerk. I thought I must be dreaming. But no, I was sent at once to Regional Office where I took tests in shorthand and typing and English. Then I went before an interviewing panel - two men, one woman - and they asked me all about myself. You'd have thought I was applying for a First Secretary's job. The upshot was I got the job. Temporary shorthand-typist, Grade II; salary 34/9d a week. With annual rises, after one year, of 2/- per week.

Whenever I hear people talking about civil servants having an easy time - mostly drinking cups of tea - I froth at the ears. I never worked so hard, in any office, as I did at Deptford Employment Exchange (and, later, at Bermondsey). As well as working for the Manager, I typed minutes and documents for the Deputy Manager and fourteen supervisors. Cut and kept stocks of at least 100 stencilled forms. Had to book in and out all H.Q. files - mostly complaints from members of the public, sent to their M.P.'s. I often worked after hours but of course there was no overtime pay. But the job was safe, so long as I did it properly; and it was permanent. And who knew - I might one day get "established" - and could then look forward to a tiny pension on retirement.

Sept.1939 . The war. I was promoted from the typing grade, to Clerical Officer, and sent to Bermondsey Employment Exchange. In due course a new animal emerged in the Ministry of Labour - the National Service Officer. He/she could issue a "direction" to a worker - to go into war work or Ordnance factory or into the Services - and if the direction was not obeyed, the National Service Officer could take the poor worker to the magistrate's court for enforcement - or even for prison. Directions had to be signed personally by the National Service Officer. It was the first emergence, for civil servants of any kind, from anonymity.

I felt sorry for my girls. Many of them had never travelled farther than a threepenny tram or bus ride from home and I had to send them to places like the Ordnance Factory at Stone, Staffs; take others out of jobs they'd been happy in all their working lives and put them in strange and uncongenial factories. Or give them a travel warrant to an Army or WRAF depot. I tried to make them see that I was only the corporal, passing on the orders from Mr. Bevin.

I was small and had short hair and from the counter clerks in the outside office I learned that I was referred to as "'Er with the curls" or, much nicer, " That little curly cow"!

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Living and working near the docks was a bit hairy during the blitzes. I was bombed out twice. The first bomb came through the ceiling of the basement kitchen where I was sleeping. It was an old Victorian house - three floors and basement. The bomb cut through every ceiling - a nice neat square, and finally went through the basement floor - and didn't go off. If it had been six feet closer to my bed it would have gone through me.

The flying bombs were awful. My daughter, who was then living with me, did her London Matric. in a Lewisham grammar school, - right in the path of "bomb alley". She told me she was so frightened that her pen "kept wobbling". She passed. (She said she reckoned they were all "passed" because of the conditions under which the exam was held.)

The V2's were awful too; worse, really, because there was no warning. One Saturday morning while I was at work I heard a terrible bang. I rushed out to the back of the office and saw a giant dust cloud rising across the river and I thought - "That looks like home". It was near enough. I came home around two o'clock to find the front door at the back of the hall and the basement back door lying just inside the blown-in front basement door; and once again all the windows were in shards and fragments everywhere and the place heaped with rubble. Across the road, (New Cross Road) the Woolworths was levelled and the bodies were being dug out for three days and nights. A row of shops adjoined the Woolworths. If I'd been home that Saturday morning I'd probably have been somewhere there, doing the shopping. By the grace of God, my daughter was not there either. She had gone to stay with friends for the week-end, in Harrow.

1946.

I was a bit worried because, after all the wartime comradeship in the streets, people were going back behind their front doors and ceasing to care about their neighbours. Looking back, I couldn't blame them. They had suffered so much. But I remembered what I'd read about what happened after the first World War (I was far away in Africa, then). Now I remembered the wartime poster on the town hall wall with the pointing finger and the reminder - "It All Depends on You!". So I sat down and wrote my thoughts about "It All Depends on Me!" and what we all had to do to ensure that the misery of 1919 and after, didn't happen all over again. I wrote it in my lunch hour (sandwiches and coffee at my desk) and left it on my desk. I often wrote about things that troubled me and then tore up the effort and I would have done the same with this one; but one of my colleagues - a girl who was with us from H.Q. - a graduate, learning about what goes on in Employment Exchanges - before going back to the rarefied regions of Whitehall - came into my office and glanced at my writing. She read with interest and then said - "This is good, Who wrote it?" Modestly I claimed authorship. She said -"You ought to send it somewhere". I said - "Where? Who'd want to read that?" She said - "I once sent something to the Daily Mirror and they sent me two guineas." Two guineas! That was a fortune. More than half my weekly pay. I thought - "What the hell. It's only a stamp." So I sent it in. And was totally incredulous when I received a marvellous letter from the Features Editor who said he agreed with every word I'd written and would I go to see him after work as soon as possible. So I went. And they did print, and I got seven guineas! And that's how I became Mary Brown of the Daily Mirror and stayed there seventeen years, till my retirement.

When I showed the Manager of my Employment Exchange the letter with the offer of a staff job - with starting (N.U.J. rate for beginners) pay of fourteen guineas a week, the poor bloke went green. He, having worked in the Min. of Lab. from boyhood - almost - and now Manager of one of London's busiest Employment Exchanges, was, after all those years, earning just a little less.

I have omitted all the "personal" bits from this narrative because I imagine they are not what is wanted. If you want any extra filling-in, please tell me, though I imagine this is more than enough.