A Child of the Thirties

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Five Aunts and a Joint Birthday Present.

To be fatherless in the Thirties was an unenviable experience for any child, but was especially so if your mother did not have a home of her own and had to support you and herself on the 35 shillings a week she earned for 5 ½ days of labour in a boot and shoe factory.

My father, an amiable barber, died when I was three, leaving my mother with an uphill struggle for survival. But although fatherless, I was blessed – or cursed – with five aunts. Their names were Nell, Elsie, Flo, Kate and Maud and they were big and buxom women who over the years brought me joy and unhappiness in just about equal proportions.

They were tough and uncompromising women – far more aggressive and assertive than their generally gentle, mild-mannered husbands. This was surprising, bearing in mind that all five husbands had served in the trenches in the Great War. But perhaps that was why they were so compliant, feeling that even a minor domestic squabble was not worth becoming involved in after all they had been through in Flanders.

So when my five aunts called a family meeting at my grandmother's council house a few weeks before my ninth birthday, my mother and I feared the worst. And as far as I was concerned, the event that followed confirmed my fears.

The aunts sat in a circle in granny's sparsely furnished living-room. Their husbands propped themselves against the wall, puffing away at Woodbine cigarettes with a dedication to the task that verged on the fanatical. It was all too much for me. I went into the kitchen and tried to listen through the door.

Aunt Elsie, most forthright of all the sisters, made the announcement. 'We've come about Ronnie's birthday,' she said.

My heart gave a jump. There must be something special in the wind if they were all prepared to turn out on a dingy Sunday afternoon to reveal plans for my anniversary.

'We are not going to waste money on buying toys or books for him this year,' she continued. 'We are going to put it to better use.'

My heart, which was working overtime, did not jump at this revelation. It sank.

'We've decided on a joint birthday present,' said Aunt Elsie, in a positive tone. 'We are going to kit him out.'

For a moment I thought she had said 'kick him out', but then it dawned on me that she was using one of Uncle Ted's army expressions.

'Flo and Bill are going to buy him a nice overcoat they have seen in the Co-op,' said Elsie. 'Maud and Jack will get him a new cap and some socks. Kate and Harry have seen a smart pair of trousers and a tie, and Ted and me are thinking of a shirt and some gloves.'

Aunt Nell butted in. 'And my Walt's going to make him a pair of boots,' she said proudly. 'A hand-made pair of boots,' she added pushing the fact home to make sure my mother did not underestimate the value of the gift. 'They'll last Ronnie for years. They'll never wear out, will they, Walt?'

Uncle Walt voiced his agreement. By this time I had opened the kitchen door and stood watching the family scene. I knew it was ungrateful, but it was one of those moments when I almost wished I had been an orphan.

Once Uncle Walt had measured my feet, the clan departed, assuring my mother once again that , come my birthday, I would be the best-dressed kid in the

street, if not the town.

On the morning of my birthday – a Saturday – my mother produced the combined family presents. She watched as I slowly and reluctantly put on the clothes – shirt, socks, trousers, overcoat, gloves, boots and finally the cap.

'Let's have a good look at you,' she said. I stood to attention with my arms tightly by my sides, struggling against the urge to burst into tears.

There was no doubting the quality of the clothes, but there was something terribly wrong. None of them fitted. Not only were they too big, they were far too big.

The trousers reached down to the top of my socks and the overcoat fell only a few inches short of my ankles. The shirt collar was almost large enough to accommodate another neck. As for the cap, it came close to defying description. It was as big as a dinner plate, with a massive peak that jutted out several inches. To crown it all, it had a decorative button on top that looked like a gobstopper.

Worst of all were the boots. They were at least three sizes more than they should have been and the bulbous toecaps were as hard as rocks. I hated every item of this joint birthday present but I hated two of them far above the others – the monster cap and the giant boots.

My mother and I set off on a grand tour of all the aunts and uncles so that they could see me attired in my new outfit. From my point of view it was a depressing outing; from their point of view my appearance was the realisation of a master plan. Without exception, every aunt said, 'We bought them big so that he could grow into them.'

At last it was over and we headed home to granny's house. I had hoped that my mother would walk back without passing along Edmund Street. If there was one area of the town to be avoided by a small boy it was Edmund Street – especially if he was clad in the way I happened to be.

The reason? It was happy hunting ground of Maxie York and his gang, a villanous bunch, who, even at the tender ages of nine or ten, seemed hell-bent on getting to borstal by the quickest possible route.

For some unknown reason, as we turned into Edmund Street my mother took hold of my hand. I was horrified. If Maxie and his boys saw me hand-in-hand with my mother my reputation at school, such as it was, would be in tatters. My hopes of avoiding confrontation were unfulfilled. Maxie and his wrecking crew were watching and waiting, and as we drew nearer they were able to take in the full nature of my apparel. They shrieked with laughter, pointing their fingers and stamping their feet.

'Look, he's got his dad's boots on,' howled Maxie.

I stopped and tried to turn back, but my mother took a firmer grip on my hand and pulled me along.

'Take no notice,' she said. 'They are only jealous.'

For the life of me I could not see what they had to be jealous about.

'Go and fetch seven pounds of potatoes in your cap!' Maxie shouted.

That was too much for me, I wrenched myself free from my mother's grasp and tried to set off across the street to challenge my tormentors. But my mother was too quick for me. She grabbed me by the shoulders, clipped my ear and pushed me ahead of her as though rolling a boulder up a hill.

The spectacle filled Maxie and his gang with delight and they trailed along behind us, chanting, 'He's windy, he's windy!' – a schoolboy term meaning cowardice in the face of the enemy.

My humiliation was complete.

I dreaded the following day. It was Sunday, which meant Sunday School and the wearing of the 'Sunday best'. Up until this moment I had never had a 'Sunday best', but now I had – in the shapeless form of the family's combined birthday present. I knew that my mother would insist that I wore every item and I knew that meant more merciless ragging if I came across the Edmund Street gang on my journey back from Sunday School.

It was during prayers that I came up with an idea that I thought might just alleviate my current situation.

The class concluded, I pulled on my overcoat, drew my cap low over my eyes and set off home. I marched along Sackville Street and turned left onto Edmund Street. Dusk was on its way but it was still light enough for me to see Maxie and two of his pals hovering around one of the doorways.

Maxie spotted me immediately and was plainly ready to give chase as soon as I turned tail and ran. But I just kept walking towards them, almost as though they did not exist. Maxie and the gang could not believe their luck. It was like manna from heaven. They waited with ill-concealed excitement until I drew level and then the three of them began to circle round me like mongrel terriers tormenting a sheep in a field.

I stood stock still, with my arms by my sides as two of them capered about in front of me and Maxie sneaked behind, ready for the pounce I hoped and prayed would come.

Then Maxie did it. He leapt forward and snatched the cap from my head and waved it around in triumph. This was followed by a little jig as he teasingly held out the cap, daring me to take it back.

'What you goin' to do about it, what you goin' to do about it?' he jeered.

I remained still and silent. Maxie, his little blackcurrant eyes dancing and his cheeks red with pleasure, had known all along what he intended to do, but my refusal to attempt any form of defence led him to shorten the torture and get on with the deed. He turned away from me, gripped the cap by its peak and hurled it skywards in the direction of the sloping roofs. The cap flew off like a boomerang but, unlike a boomerang it did not come back. It struck the side of a chimney and slid down the roof, ending in the guttering. All that could be seen of it now was about an inch and a half of the monstrous peak.

'Well, what are you goin' to do *now*?' howled Maxie, flushed with achievement and wallowing in the admiration of his henchmen.

'Nothing,' I replied. I turned and walked away, deliberately scraping the steel tips of my heels on the pavement so that the sparks flew brightly in the fading light.

I had my back to them, so Maxie could not see that I was smiling the broadest of smiles. I was a happy lad at that moment, but already my mind was wrestling with the next big problem in my young life: How could I get rid of those bloody boots?

The Four-eyed Prizefighter

One of the most pleasurable activities for an enterprising working-class youngster in the Thirties was collecting cigarette cards. One of the most unpleasant experiences was being told you had to wear spectacles, since in those days it inevitably meant you would gain the nickname of 'Four-eyes'. These two emotional extremes came together for me one cold, hard winter, leading to a painful incident and a chain of events that left me a sadder but wiser lad.

Most boys from hard-up families used cigarette cards – or 'photes', as they were popularly known – as currency, and a boy with his pockets bulging with cigarette cards was rich indeed. But it did not end there, for the avid card enthusiast liked to collect whole sets of cards – famous footballers and cricketers, wild birds of Great Britain.

At the time of the adventure I am about to relate, I had reached the final stage of a bid to complete the collection of a set of cards entitled 'Famous Cricketers'. It had been an uphill struggle, but I had managed to pull together 49 of the set of 50, the only one missing being the Australian batsman and captain, Bill Woodfull. He was proving a difficult man to track down.

It was at this crucial point in my hunt that it was decided that I needed spectacles - an awful blow to my pride. The frustration of not being able to complete my set of Famous Cricketers, coupled with the indignity of having to face my peers in a pair of steel-rimmed specs, induced in me a feeling of depression that was difficult to shake off.

There was only one thing to do in such a mood of black despair – pay a visit to Grandma Bassett. I could always count on her to raise me from the depths.

On Fridays I always ran to Grandma Bassett's house after school. Friday was pay day and Grandma always prepared a special tea for her husband and two grown-up sons. On Fridays there would be thinly-cut pieces of ham on every plate, and in the centre of the table, taking pride of place, would be a pile of shop-bought cakes shaped like the diamonds in a pack of cards. Grandma would let me have one of the cakes and I would sit in a corner and eat it as I watched my grandfather and two uncles arrive home from work, open their pay packets and lay them before Grandma.

On the night of my great depression I had stayed longer at my grandmother's house than I had planned, and when I set off for home (currently Aunt Kate's spare room) it was turned nine 'o' clock and quite dark. At the bottom of Palmerston Street, where Mr Cox's grocery shop stood, was a lamppost, and jostling about in its light was a crowd of youngsters. As I drew nearer I could hear them shouting words of encouragement and then I saw two boys engaged in a fist fight.

I stood on the fringe of the crowd and watched. A tall, thin boy with a long pointed nose stepped forward and rang a bicycle bell. It was Lennie Cunliffe, who was in the same class as me at school.

'End of round two,' he announced. It was then I realised that this was no off-the-cuff street scrap. It was a well-planned affair.

Lennie Cunliffe, was a born organiser. He was always arranging things-marbles contests, kite-flying marathons, inter-street football matches, or amateur talent competitions in his dad's big allotment shed. Like all good impresarios, he always made sure he was in pocket at the end of every venture. And his currency, like everybody else's, was the cigarette card.

While the two fighters were having a breather between rounds, a rather fat boy wearing a Balaclava helmet walked over to me and shouted in my ear: 'Push off,

Four-eyes!'

'It's a free country,' I replied. 'I've as much right to stay here as you have.'

The fat boy, whose name was Barry Elmore, was ready with his answer to this one.

'No you have not, Four-eyes,' he yelled. 'You can only watch this fight if you pay ten fag cards entrance fee – like we all have.'

Lennie came across to us.

'Barry's right,' he said. 'Give us ten cards and you can stay to watch.'

'I haven't got any photes with me,' I said.

'In that case, push off, Four-eyes,' cried the fat boy, giving me a shove in the ribs. Immediately I pushed him in return and we stood glaring at each other.

'Hang on a minute,' said Lennie, his talent for organising coming to the fore. 'Tell you what, why don't you two have a fight? Fifty fag cards for the winner.'

He swung round and addressed the crowd. 'We've got a grudge fight here,' he shouted. 'Ten photes each to watch a genuine grudge match!'

While Lennie was whipping up the enthusiasm, I was making the decision to tell him that I did not want to take part in this fight. I was about to make my verbal submission when I noticed the top card in the pile of Lennie's hand. Wonder of wonders, it was the one depicting the elusive Bill Woodfull.

'Is that the prize money?' I asked.

'Yes,' said Lennie. 'And there will be a bonus of ten photes for a knockdown.'

The lure of the Bill Woodfull card was too much. I abandoned my 'peace at any price' policy and agreed to the contest.

'Don't forget to take your specs off,' said Lennie, who never failed to show a fine regard for the welfare of his performers.

I removed my glasses and put them on the window sill of Mr Cox's shop.

My opponent and I stood eyeing each other, fists clenched and raised and heads swaying from side to side – just as we had seen Max Baer do in the cinema newsreels.

'Get on with it,' one of the crowd shouted.

I decided not to prolong the agony any longer. Throwing caution to the winds, I dashed at the fat boy, fists flailing like a windmill. For a few fleeting seconds I thought I had the measure of him, but Barry was made of sterner stuff. He withstood my initial attack and then retaliated with gusto, his knuckles peppering my unprotected face.

The inevitable happened and blood began to pour from my nose. The crowd hooted their appreciation. There was nothing they liked better than a good nosebleed.

Just when it seemed that a monumental thrashing was to be my lot, a large figure emerged from the darkness and pushed through the crowd. It was Barry's father.

'Pack it in,' he shouted and grabbed me by the shoulder, 'Leave our Barry alone, you little bully,' he roared, completely overlooking the fact that our Barry was doing very nicely and had not got a mark on him.

Most of the spectators scattered, including Lennie, taking with him the gate receipts and the prize money.

'If I catch you hitting our Barry again, I'll give you a clip round the ear,' threatened Mr Elmore, before putting a protective arm around the shoulders of his smirking son and leading him away from the battlefield.

As for me, I set off home, vainly trying to stem the blood as it dripped off my chin on to my jacket and pondering the retribution that awaited me.

My mother was standing on the doorstep when I got back. I was hustled up the narrow stairs leading to the back bedroom that constituted our home and my explanation of events was received without much sympathy. I received a couple of smart slaps on the backs of my legs for my pains. But worse was to come.

'Where are your glasses?' asked my mother.

It was then I remembered I had left them on the windowsill of Mr Cox's shop.

'They'll be gone by now,' said my mother, ever the pessimist and cuffing both my ears before adding in direct contradiction, 'You go back there and get them before somebody pinches them.'

When I arrived back at Mr Cox's shop there was no sign of my spectacles and then I saw them on the pavement, glinting in the light of the street lamp. Picking them up, I was horrified to see that one of the lenses was cracked. Somebody must have trodden on them.

My first thought was that I was in line for more trouble at home. Then I remembered once hearing Uncle Jack say that nobody in this country could be tried and punished twice for the same crime. Hoping for the best, I dropped the spectacles down the nearest street drain. Happily for me, my reasoning proved sound. My mother accepted the loss with a shake of her head and neither said nor did any more about it.

Despite my bleeding nose I was over the moon that I would no longer have to wear my spectacles for a while at least. However that could not compensate for the fact that I had come within an ace of obtaining the Bill Woodfull card, only to have it snatched from my grasp at the last minute.

I went to the drawer in the old cupboard where I kept my cigarette cards so I could take a look at the other 49 in the series and imagine how they would have looked with the Bill Woodfull card. But as I opened the drawer I realised that, even if the card had come into my possession, I would not have had a complete set of Famous Cricketers – far from it. In the drawer was a broody white mouse who had chewed them all to pieces while trying to build itself a nest.

But that's another story.

The Jailbird from the Co-op

Probably the most pleasant flight of fancy for working-class men and women in the Thirties was the prospect of a windfall, sudden or anticipated, financial or in kind.

It was while my mother and I were lodging with Uncle Walt and Aunt Nell that the harmless pursuit of windfalls landed me in trouble with the law through the persuasive powers of Mr Tailby.

Mr Tailby was a travelling librarian by trade who milked his customers for all he could get, talking his more vulnerable clients into taking three or four books at a time. The result was that some of the slower readers had to sit up half the night to complete the stories before Mr Tailby's next visit. The old saying 'Waste not, want not,' applied to everything in life those days.

Mr Tailby was also an enthusiastic seller of raffle tickets and the first time I saw him he was trying to sell tickets to Uncle Walt for the Christmas fur and feather raffle on behalf of the British Legion.

'You never know your luck Walt,' said Mr Tailby. 'What could be better than a nice bird for Christmas?'

Uncle Walt refused to buy any, but then Mr Tailby turned to my mother.

'How about you, my duck?' he said 'It's for a good cause.'

'I'll have one,' she said, poking around in her purse and bringing out two pennies and two halfpennies.

'Why not?' said Mr Tailby. 'You've got just as good a chance with one ticket as 50. After all they only draw out one ticket at a time.'

Uncle Walt said he could not understand the reasoning behind that observation, but then Uncle Walt didn't like Mr Tailby. Apparently it was because of the habit Mr Tailby had of telling tall tales about his exploits in the trenches during the Great War. Uncle Walt always said 'People who did things out there never talk about them.'

Exactly a week after this visit Mr Tailby turned up again on the doorstep. He had a white envelope sticking out of his overcoat pocket and looked elated. It was my mother who opened the front door.

'You're a winner, Mrs Bassett,' he announced handing over the letter. My mother ripped open the envelope and we all watched her read the letter carefully.

'Well,' said Aunt Nell, 'What have you won?"

'It doesn't say,' answered my mother. 'It just says I have won a prize in the raffle and that I can pick it up from the Co-op butchers in Regent Street.'

'I hope its not a rabbit,' said Uncle Walt. 'A rabbit for Christmas is not much cop.'

The following day, before I set off for the last day of the school term, my mother took the winning ticket from her handbag and handed it to me.

'Now,' she said, 'when you come out of school I want you to go to the Co-op and get our prize. Whatever you do, don't lose the ticket.'

The responsibility weighed heavily on me all day. Every few minutes I would feel in the back pocket of my trousers to make sure the ticket was still there. One of the teachers, Miss Dickerson, saw me.

'That's the third time I've seen you feeling your behind,' she said. 'What's the matter? Have you got a boil coming?'

Miss Dickerson always assumed we had boils coming when we started to fidget in class. More often than not she was right.

When I got to the Co-op butcher's shop, the head butcher came out of a back

room. I gave him the ticket and he checked it against a list that was pinned to the wall. It was then he began to chuckle.

'You planning to take it home on your own?' he asked, winking at the other butchers.

'Course I am,' I replied, wondering why he thought the prospect so funny. I soon discovered the answer to that one. The man went into the back room and returned carrying the biggest unplucked goose I had ever seen. It was bigger than me.

'You'll never manage it son,' said the head butcher. 'Better let your mam fetch it.'

'Yes I will manage it,' I said with all the confidence I could muster, even though, in my mind's eye, the goose was beginning to take on the proportions of an ostrich.

The butchers were still laughing when I staggered out of the shop under the weight of the monstrous bird. I held it close to me, with my arms round its back, as though we were taking part in some ludicrous dance.

After a couple of paces I was exhausted, but then I was struck by a brainwave. I remembered that Les Bonham lived only a few doors away and Les was the proud possessor of a bicycle. If Les would lend me his machine I could prop the goose on the saddle and wheel it home. It was all so simple, or so I thought.

When I arrived at Les Bonham's house there was no reply. I walked round to the back and there, standing against an old mangle, was Les's bicycle. I knew Les wouldn't mind if I borrowed it.

I perched the goose's rear end on the saddle and hung its neck over the handlebars. The saddle of the bicycle was not too secure causing the bird to slip off, but, taking everything into consideration, I made good progress.

It was as I trudged past the police station that things started to go wrong. In the doorway was a figure. It was Police Sergeant Beckett, who regularly visited our school to give road safety lessons.

'Hey!' he called. 'What have you got there?'

My next action was based on the well-known fact that policemen did not speak to small boys unless they felt they were up to no good. I tried to run away, but the sudden burst of speed made the saddle move sideways, dislodging the goose. I tumbled into the gutter with the machine and the goose on top. I looked up and saw Sergeant Beckett looming over me.

'Is this your goose?' he asked.

'No, it's my mam's.'

'What are you doing giving it a ride on your bike?'

I made another mistake. 'It's not my bike,' I said.

'Not your bike? Who did you steal it from then?'

'I didn't steal it. I borrowed it from Les Bonham. He's a pal of mine,' I said, but even as I spoke the words, I knew I was plunging myself into even deeper trouble.

'Did he say you could borrow it?' said Sergeant Beckett.

I hesitated before answering, but I knew I was trapped whatever I said. 'No, he didn't,' I mumbled, adding hopefully, 'But he would have done if I had asked him.'

'Ah but you didn't ask him did you? That's the point. Borrowing things without asking is stealing. Did you know that?'

'Yes sir,' I said, tears welling into my eyes. Visions of a jail sentence on Dartmoor were beginning to cross my mind.

'Now about this goose,' said Sergeant Beckett, 'Where did that come from?'

‘My mam won it,’ I said with confidence.

‘Won it, did she? That’s another good excuse people use when they’ve got something that doesn’t belong to them.’

There was a silence for a few seconds then Sergeant Beckett picked up the goose and said, ‘I think we had better put this in a safe place until all this is sorted out. It’ll be quite safe in one of the cells until we get to the bottom of all this.’

I held onto the goose’s neck, unconvinced.

‘I’ve even got my own Christmas dinner in there,’ said Sergeant Beckett. ‘That’s goose as well. Come and have a look.’

I followed him along a corridor and sure enough in one of the cells was a fully feathered goose, its head dangling over the side of a bunk bed.

‘There you are,’ he said. ‘That’s my dinner.’ As he held up his bird I could see it was not as big as the one my mother had won.

‘Right,’ said the sergeant. ‘Now we’ll go back and get to the bottom of this. What did you say your name was – Ronnie Bassett?’

I could not take anymore of this inquisition. I turned and ran along the corridor and down the steps into the street.

Aunt Nell, Uncle Walt and my mother were sitting round the table having a cup of tea when I burst into the room. My mother’s first question was, ‘Where’s our pirze?’

‘It’s in prison,’ I gasped.

‘What do you mean – in prison?’

‘A policeman took it off me and put it in a cell,’ I said.

Almost before I had finished my story, my mother was putting on her hat and coat, ready for a trip to the station.

‘I’ll come with you Madge,’ Uncle Walt said quietly but firmly.

When we arrived Sergeant Beckett was standing behind the counter, a copy of the local paper open in front of him.

‘What are you doing saying our Ronnie is a thief?’ my mother demanded to know.

Before he could answer she slapped the raffle letter on the counter.

‘That’s my bird,’ she continued. ‘Our Ronnie was only bringing it home from the shop.’

Sergeant Beckett read the letter through, ‘How do I know that you are Mrs Bassett,’ he said ‘You could be anybody. You could have found that letter.’

It was at this point that my mild mannered Uncle Walt revealed a side to his personality that surprised and at the same time delighted me. He leaned across the counter, putting his face within an inch of Sergeant Beckett’s.

‘Considering that you have three stripes on your arm, you are a very foolish fellow,’ he said, ‘Now either you give my sister-in-law her goose or I shall go round to your superior’s house and register a complaint about your unreasonable behaviour. I know Inspector Rankin well. We fought in the war together.’

The two men stared at each other for a few seconds before Sergeant Beckett went off to the cells and returned with the goose. My mother’s face lit up.

I was not so thrilled. This bird was smaller and less plump than the one I had collected from the Co-op. I came within an ace of announcing that it was the wrong goose but decided not to. I had made enough mistakes for one day.

Christmas Day was soon upon us and the festive feast laid out on Aunt Nell’s table was a marvel to behold. The well-basted brown-skinned goose occupied place of honour in the centre. But the best was yet to come. As Uncle Walt set about carving

the goose, he paid me the supreme tribute.

'Seeing as you have been such a good and brave lad, I reckon you ought to have one of the legs,' he said, dropping it onto my already overcrowded plate.

As I munched through my goose, I had the added pleasure of watching Uncle Walt eating his food with the knife and fork he had taken off the dead German in the trenches. I could not have asked for more. I even managed to entertain the genuine hope that Sergeant Beckett was enjoying our goose as much as we were enjoying his.

A Midnight Date With Doctor Frankenstein

My mother liked nothing more than a visit to the cinema. It was a passion she shared with millions during the Thirties as a way to escape from grim reality into a dream-world peopled by pretty dancing girls, murderous gangsters, brave cowboys, savage Indians and infallible detectives. Few members of the working classes could resist the appeal of what was commonly known as 'three pennyworth of dark'.

However, as a child of the thirties there were a number of films we were unable to see. Some ambitious youngsters would walk on the balls of their feet or talk in a deep voice to try and get into a film underage, but there was always the chance that even if you got in the manager would appear at the end of the row and thunder, 'Come on you – out!' Such exits were never less than embarrassing.

I was thrown out only once, and it was my mother, who brought about the dismissal. We were staying with Aunt Flo and Uncle Bill at the time of the unhappy incident involving the hard-boiled eggs and our ejection from the Electric Plaza.

The day had started off well, with my mother announcing that she intended to take me to the pictures that evening.

'You be waiting for me outside the factory at half past five and we will go straight to the pictures,' she said. 'If we get there nice and early we ought to get good seats.'

'What about tea?' I asked. Food was seldom far from my thoughts in those days.

'I've made us some sandwiches,' she said, 'We can eat them while we are watching the film.'

The day passed quickly enough and, my mother and I wasted no time in starting the long walk to the Electric Plaza. Soon we were curled up in two nice seats, ready to be entertained when my other opened her shopping bag. It was as the trailers for the next week's films started that my mother handed me a slightly clammy, oval-shaped object. It was a hard-boiled egg with the shell removed.

'Don't drop it on the floor,' she whispered.

I looked round at her and saw her take a huge bite from her egg. As is the nature with some hard-boiled eggs, a somewhat unpleasant smell began to permeate the air around her. Several people in the row in front looked over their shoulders and I could hear them muttering.

I had only just bitten the end off my egg when the manager marched up the aisle and stood looking down at my mother

'Excuse me madam,' he said. 'Are you eating hard-boiled eggs by any chance?'

My mother let out a mumble through her mouthful of egg.

'Yes she is,' said the man sitting next to us, 'And it's a right pong. It shouldn't be allowed.'

The manager bent down towards my mother, 'This is not a restaurant,' he said.

'Well,' said my mother swallowing 'you sell ice cream and chocolate. That's eating, isn't it?'

'I'm afraid I must ask you to leave,' said the manager. 'If you don't go at once, I shall have to call the police. You are upsetting all my patrons.'

When my mother suggested we return the following evening, I took the coward's way out.

'Do you mind going on your own mam?' I said. 'I've promised to go round

and play at Norman Mason's house tomorrow night.'

Episode TWO

Norman Mason was probably my best friend during that stage of my life. He had one fault, though. He could not keep a secret.

It was my friendship with Norman that sparked off the midnight adventure to the cinema and provided me with an insight into the bizarre world of grown-ups. It all started while I was listening to Uncle Bill reading out stories from the newspaper.

'Hell's bells, listen to this!' he said and proceeded to read out a story about the Regal Cinema, which was due to show a horror-film double bill the following week – Frankenstein and Dracula.

The story revealed that the manager, Mr Horace Templeman, had offered a prize of five pounds to the first woman who volunteered to sit alone in the deserted cinema and watch the two films – starting at midnight. Uncle Bill roared with laughter.

'And you'll never guess who's going to do it,' he said.

'Who?' said Aunt Flo.

'It's her next door!' said Uncle Bill howling with laughter.

'That doesn't surprise me at all,' said Aunt Flo. 'That Daphne Shore is daft enough to do anything.'

'And with anybody,' said Uncle Bill.

'Don't say things like that in front of the boy,' said Aunt Flo primly.

Daphne Shore was notable for quite a few things, not the least of them being her short tight dresses and the height of the heels of her shoes. She was certainly popular with the male inhabitants of the estate although not too well regarded by the womenfolk..

Her husband Harry, however, was small and mild of manner. Before he married he had been in the Merchant Navy and had sailed to all parts of the world. I once heard Uncle Bill say, 'I wouldn't mind betting he'd rather be on the high seas now than be here with her.'

As I lay in bed that night, thinking about the two horror films to be shown at the Regal and Mrs Shore, a plan of my own began to take shape.

The following day I discussed it with Norman Mason.

'I wouldn't mind seeing that Frankenstein film,' I said.

'We'd never get in,' said Norman. 'The manager would throw us out as soon as we got in the foyer.'

'What if we sneaked in the back way the night Mrs Shore watches the films on her own?' I asked. 'No one would spot us if we did that.'

Norman, who was ever-ready for an adventure fell in with my plan readily.

The day came and we got into the cinema no problem through the rear exit, then came the long wait. Eventually the opening music to Frankenstein began and we began to crawl into the auditorium. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I could see Mrs Shore was sitting in the centre of the ninepennies, the best seats downstairs. But she was not alone.

Sitting beside her was Mr Templeman, the cinema manager. I knew it was him because of his shiny bald head. He had both arms around her and they appeared to be kissing. Suddenly Mrs Shore sat up straight and pushed Mr Templeman away.

'Now,' she said, in the firm manner in which I had heard her address her husband many times. 'You're sure you have ordered the removal van for Wednesday?'

‘Of course I have,’ said Mr Templeman. ‘It’ll be there at eight ‘o’ clock.’

‘And the van mustn’t be late coming. I want us well on our way before Harry comes home. There could be a terrible carry-on if he catches us. You know what these quiet blokes are like when they are roused.’

‘Don’t worry, it’s all arranged. I’ve never let you down, have I?’

With that, the kissing resumed and Norman and I crawled as far away as possible so that we could watch the films with the minimum risk of being spotted.

Two days later, on the fateful Wednesday, I was playing a game of marbles with Norman in Aunt Flo’s back garden. Harry Shore came out of his kitchen door and looked over the fence.

‘Is your auntie in?’ he asked. He appeared serious and even paler than usual.

When I nodded, he vaulted over the fence and tapped on the back door. Aunt Flo opened it and said, ‘What’s the matter, Harry? What’s the trouble?’

Without a word Mr Shore beckoned us all to follow him. When he opened his front door, the sight that confronted us brought a squeal of astonishment from Aunt Flo.

She had good reason to be shocked. The living room was completely bare except for a small stool standing in the centre. On top of the seat were a cup and saucer, a plate and a knife, fork and spoon.

‘That’s all she’s left me,’ said Mr Shore.

‘What do you mean, Harry – that’s all she’s left you?’ said Aunt Flo.

‘Daphne. She’s gone. She’s run off with that bloke who manages the Regal. They’ve gone to Southport to live – according to that,’ said Mr Shore, pointing at a farewell note propped against an empty jam jar on the mantelpiece.

‘When did all this happen?’ asked Uncle Bill.

‘This morning, not long after I went to work, according to her on the other side,’ said Mr Shore. ‘A removal van turned up, they piled everything into it, and off they went.’

As we walked back to Norman’s house, Norman had little to say. He appeared puzzled.

‘Poor old Mr Shore,’ I said, ‘I can’t get over her clearing off like that and not telling him. It must have come as a bit of a shock when he got home and found she had gone.’

Norman was silent for a few seconds and then he said, ‘But, he knew.’

‘Knew what?’

‘That Mrs Shore was going to run away with Mr Templeman.’

‘How could he know if she didn’t tell him?’

‘Because I told him,’ said Norman sheepishly ‘I saw him coming home from work last night, so I went up to him and told him what we heard in the cinema.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He just gave me a funny smile and said, “Really?” Then he gave me a shilling and asked me to promise not to tell anybody else about it.’

For a minute, I looked at Norman blankly then the penny dropped and it all became clear. Mr Shore actually wanted her to leave. And, in keeping with his nature, he was anxious that it should happen with as little fuss as possible.

A week later, Harry Shore rejoined the Merchant Navy. We never saw him again, but he sent Aunt Flo a postcard from Hong Kong. It contained a short but revealing message: ‘Never been happier in my life. Regards. Harry.’

The Corner Shop Casanovas

Being without a father in the Thirties had many disadvantages, not least of them the lack of someone to boast about.

Of course, a boy in such a situation might have his mother to fall back upon, but it was not the same thing. Telling your pals that she made the best date pudding in the world cut no ice at all. Without question, a male parent was essential. And it was my desire to have someone to boast about that prompted me to attempt to play Cupid on behalf of my widowed mother.

The story began not long after we had moved to the home of Aunt Maud and Uncle Jack. I had two candidates in mind for my new dad, both of whom had made it plain in various ways that they had a warm spot for my mother; Bill Clarke and Fred Starling. By coincidence, both were shopkeepers, but the similarity ended there and it was Mr Starling who I preferred.

He was quieter and more discrete about his affections for my mother, sometimes slipping a packet of Woodbines into the shopping bag and whispering 'Just a present for your mam.'

Mr Clarke on the other hand could never be discreet. Now and again he would cut off a few pieces of bacon wrap them in a sheet of greaseproof paper, and toss the package across the counter.

'Give that to your mam with my compliments,' he would say in a loud voice, following up with a wink for the benefit of any men who happened to be in the shop.

Thus it was that it was Mr Starling who met with my approval but the question was: How could I eliminate the other suitor from the contest.

I knew it would not be easy. Mr Clarke had a far more positive approach to wooing, but it was at this stage in the story that the awful Pikey Hull arrived on the scene, although I have to admit that involving him in my plan was done on the spur of the moment.

Pikey Hull was heartily disliked by everyone in Wordsworth Street, mainly because he was an aggressive bully and everybody was frightened of him – children and grown-ups alike.

The day that Pikey became involved in my life, my mother had instructed me to call at Mr Clarke's shop on my way home from school to pick up a quarter of potted meat for our tea. Before handing over the paper bag, Mr Clarke said, 'Hang on a minute.'

He took a piece of paper from under the counter, scribbled on it, folded it twice, and pushed it into my hand.

'Give that to your mam for me,' he said. 'And don't lose it on the way home.'

As I set off along Wordsworth Street I could not resist the temptation. I unfolded the paper and read its contents: 'Dear Madge,' it said, 'would you like to come to the pictures with me on Friday, love Billy boy.'

I was so appalled by the prospect that I did not look where I was going and bumped into Pikey Hull, who true to character, grabbed me by the ear and gave it a vicious pull that lifted me onto my toes.

'Why don't you look where you're going?' he growled.

'Sorry Mr Hull,' I bleated, but even as I uttered the apology, a plan leapt into my mind. It was built around the simple but vital fact that Pikey's wife and my mother shared the same Christian name – Madge.

'Mr Clarke down at the shop asked me to give this to Mrs Hull,' I said, holding up the note.

Pikey snatched it from my hand and read it, his lips forming the words as he did so. His rage was terrible and a torrent of swear words could be heard all along the street as he marched off in the direction of Mr Clarke's shop. I ran after him.

When he reached the shop, Pikey flung open the door, strode in, grasped the unsuspecting Mr Clarke by the collars of his tweed jacket and pulled him halfway across the counter.

'You keep away from my Madge,' Pikey bellowed 'If I catch you as much as looking at her again I will smash you to pieces – and your bleeding shop. Have you got that?'

'Sorry Mr Hull,' spluttered the hapless Mr Clarke. 'I didn't know.'

As I made my way back to Aunt Maud's house I could not help but entertain a feeling of satisfaction. My off-the-cuff scheme had worked out admirably. Now the way was open for Mr Starling to pursue his wooing without a rival. Not for the first time I was wrong.

The following Saturday my mother appeared to be on edge – not in an irritable, nervy way, but pleasantly excited as though in anticipation of something. I was even more puzzled when she announced that she had an appointment at the hairdressers. Something was afoot.

'There's someone coming for tea,' my mother explained as she helped me put a Windsor knot in my tie. 'Now, you'll be a good boy, won't you? You won't let me down, will you?'

The visitor arrived on the stroke of four 'o' clock. He was of medium height, but strongly built, and he wore a navy blue three-piece suit. My mother was almost twinkling with pleasure. After the grown up formalities had been concluded, she drew me to her and said with a dazzling smile, 'And this is my Ronnie. Ronnie, I would like you to meet my new friend, Ray.'

'Hello Ronnie,' said the man. He took my hand and shook it vigorously, just as though I had adult status, then reached in his pocket and drew out a small but well-filled paper bag.

'You like soldiers, don't you?' he said, handing me the bag. I opened it and looked inside. It contained about ten lead soldiers in Grenadier Guard's uniforms. As far as I was concerned, it was a marvellous start to the visit.

Towards the end of the meal Ray saw me looking at a red and blue mark showing below the cuff of his right sleeve.

'Do you know what that is?' he asked.

I shook my head.

'It's a tattoo,' he said, rolling up his sleeve to show a snake entwined round a dagger. He then rolled up his other sleeve to reveal an identical tattoo on his left arm.

Aunt Maud did not look too impressed, but my mother said 'I think they are pretty and colourful.' And no one disagreed with her.

Later on Ray took my mother into the town for a drink. I stayed with Aunt Maud and Uncle Jack and I heard them talking as they did the washing up.

'He'll be alright for our Madge, don't you think, Jack?' said Aunt Maud.

'Course he will,' said Uncle Jack. 'Seems like a nice bloke to me.'

So there it was – a ready-made dad on the way with no help whatsoever from me. But much as I appreciated the gift of the lead soldiers, Ray did not quite match up to Mr Starling in my eyes. The quiet shopkeeper was still my favourite.

Little did I know there would be an incident on the day of the forthcoming Silver Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary that would alter my views on this matter completely.

Like most streets in most towns and villages throughout the country, the residents of Wordsworth street had been planning a Jubilee party for the children. The street was a hive of activity, most residents being occupied with the job of draping colourful home-made bunting across the fronts of their houses. Then one of the men, Mr Bradbury from number 33, unfurled a large Union Jack flag.

'Where shall we fly it?' he asked his fellow committee members.

They pondered for a few seconds and then one of them said, 'Well there's only one place for it – right at the top of The Pole.'

They were speaking of a thirty-feet tall, cast iron column that rose from the pavement not far from Aunt Maud's house. No one knew for certain exactly what purpose it served, but it was generally considered that it was used to disperse excessive gases that built up in the sewer system. Residents simply referred to it as 'The Pole' and left it at that.

'Nobody's got a ladder long enough to reach the top of that,' said Mr Bradbury. 'Somebody will have to shin up it if we want it to fly right at the top.' Immediately one of the younger men volunteered to make the climb. He managed to climb six or seven feet, but then slid back to the ground, admitting that the task was beyond him.

Encouraged by their wives and offspring, half a dozen more men made the attempt but, like the first volunteer they did not get far.

Looking round I noticed my mother standing with Ray at the back. She leaned close to him and whispered in his ear. He nodded and came to the front of the crowd.

'I'll have a try, if you like,' he said quietly.

He took the flag and tucked a corner of it in his belt. After a quick glance at my mother, he curled his legs around the column and began to shin skywards. Without pause, and at a surprising speed, he reached the top, gripping the pole with his knees while he tied the Union Jack in place. There was a spontaneous burst of applause from the crowd. I was so filled with pride that I could not resist the lie.

'That's my dad,' I announced to the children gathered near me.

'No he's not,' said a knowing girl with a runny nose, 'He's your mam's fancy man. I heard my gran say so.

I refused to be defeated. 'He will be my dad – one day,' I replied.

I turned my attention to the top of the pole. Ray was grinning with satisfaction. He looked down at my mother, flipped the peak of his white cloth cap with the tips of his fingers, and blew her a kiss. She put both hands to her mouth and blew him a double one in return.

Ray then made a searching look around the crowd until he spotted me. He gave me a cheery wave. For the first time ever, I had a hero I could boast about to all my friends. King George V himself could not have been happier on that glorious day.

The Big Break-Out from St Mary's.

St Mary's Infants and Junior School was more than a place of learning. It was another home, a cosy haven, stiff with discipline but warm and comforting.

Without doubt my favourite teacher at St Mary's was Miss Morgan, my Form 2b mistress, who took an interest in me from the moment I told her, quite truthfully, that I liked poetry. But if Miss Morgan was my favourite teacher, Mr Blyth, the deputy headmaster who was famous for his accuracy in chalk throwing, was my least favourite. Yet both had a role to play in the incident that nearly cost me my place at my beloved St Mary's.

At the time, my mother and I were staying with Aunt Elsie and Uncle Ted. It all started, harmlessly enough, with a few verses of a poem that Miss Morgan decided to recite to us in the middle of a geography lesson.

'Can anyone tell me who wrote that beautiful poem?' she asked at the conclusion.

There was a silence for several seconds. Eventually a hand shot up and one of the girls suggested Tennyson, but she was wrong. Another offered Coleridge and a third put forward Masefield.

The names of poets were being blurted out in a cascade – Whitman, Longfellow, Browning, Keats. With each wrong answer Miss Morgan became angrier.

'Surely one of you knows who wrote that lovely poem,' she said, almost pleadingly. She turned and looked at me.

'Do you know Ronnie?' she said.

I could see that she was praying that I would not let her down. My mind was racing and just as I was about to admit my ignorance, it struck me that my fellow pupils had named every well-known poet except one – William Wordsworth. It was worth a guess.

'Wordsworth,' I said.

Miss Morgan permitted herself one of her rare smiles. She looked round the class and waved her arm in my direction.

'Now here's a boy who knows and loves his poetry,' she said. 'Here's a boy who will go far. Well done, Ronnie.'

At once a sense of shame overwhelmed me. I knew I had taken the credit for something to which I was not entitled. Worse still, I had deceived Miss Morgan.

Thinking about my act of deception I forgot what time of day it was and walked out of the school gates.

A loud shout of 'Oi! You!' disturbed my thoughts. I looked over my shoulder and saw two of the senior boys running towards me, waving their arms. I did not know why they were after me, but I did not intend to stay to find out. I sprinted off as fast as I could.

But within a few seconds the boys pounced on me. Taking an arm each, they began to drag me back in the direction of St Mary's.

'What's up?' I gasped. 'What have I done?'

'Running away from school,' said one of my captors, prodding me in the back with his knee to keep me moving.

'But it's going home time.' I said. 'I was going home for my tea.'

'It's not going home time,' said the other boy. 'It's only playtime. There's two more lessons yet. Mr Blyth'll kill you.'

The full horror of my situation dawned on me. Running away from school was a major crime.

Playtime had just finished as I was marched through the school gates. There was an odd silence as 150 pupils waited to see how my crime would be punished.

Mr Blyth stood at the bottom of the steps leading up to the junior section. As I was led towards him I felt like a human sacrifice.

'You know what you've done don't you?' said Mr Blyth.

'No Sir.'

'Yes you do. You left the precincts during school hours without permission.'

He made it sound as if I'd masterminded a mass break-out from Alcatraz.

'This is a very serious business,' he continued 'What do you think would happen if every boy and girl at this school did what you just did?'

'I don't know Sir.'

'We would have an empty school, wouldn't we? And if the school was empty, all the teachers would be out of work, including me. I wouldn't like that very much.'

Mr Blyth smiled and looked around the assembled pupils to signal that he had made a joke. Dutifully, everybody roared with laughter.

'Right,' said the deputy head, 'You will stop in school tonight to make up for your absence this afternoon. Report to me as soon as the bell goes.'

At the end of lessons I went to Mr Blyth and began my detention.

As I sat in the classroom there was not a sound in the building and soon my boredom brought on tiredness. I rested my head on my folded arms and fell asleep.

A screaming voice woke me up. It was shouting 'Ronnie!' and it awoke me with such a start that I kicked over the desk and the contents of the ink well went all over my face. There was another screech of 'Ronnie!' and I scurried to the window.

Looking out, I saw my mother standing alone in the middle of the playground. She was waving her handbag round her head.

'Ronnie!'

I pushed open the window and shouted, 'I'm up here, Mam!'

My mother took a step back. 'What are you doing up there Ronnie?'

'I've been kept in after school.'

'Kept in after school,' she howled. 'Do you know what time it is? It's gone seven 'o' clock. I've been worried to death about you.'

My mother's shrill cries brought the school caretaker running from his house outside the school gates.

'What's up missus?' he asked 'What's all the noise for?'

'What's up?' said my mother. 'I'll tell you what's up. They've got my Ronnie locked up in there, that's all. And look at his face,' she continued, pointing up to the ink stains round my eyes. 'They've been beating him up. His face is covered in bruises. He's black and blue.'

'No they haven't mam,' I shouted, ' It's only ink,' but it was plain to see she preferred the worst possible interpretation.

The caretaker released me from captivity and my mother led me back home. When we got there she relayed the story of my detention to Aunt Elsie

'I'd have it out with them at that school if I were you, our Madge,' said Aunt Elsie.

'Don't you worry,' said my mother. 'They're going to feel the sharp end of my tongue, I can tell you.'

The following morning, my mother escorted me to school. We entered the assembly hall and my mother spotted Mr Blyth standing by the door leading into classroom 2b. She wasted no time with opening pleasantries 'What happened to my Ronnie last night?' she demanded.

Mr Blyth spread his arms airily ‘It was all a mistake, Mrs Bassett,’ he said smiling sweetly ‘I just went home and forgot that I had left him in the classroom. I’m ever so sorry, but it’s easily done.’

‘That’s the daftest thing I’ve ever heard,’ my mother yelled. ‘Anything could have happened to the boy. There could have been an earthquake for a start.’

I could not follow my mother’s line of argument with that last observation and it was plain Mr Blyth did not understand it either. ‘Now come on Madge,’ he said, ‘Calm down.’

It was then my mother did something that really surprised me. She swung her fist up and punched him in the face. Her thin, blue-veined fist bouncing off Mr Blyth’s jaw like a dried pea off the skin of a kettle drum ‘Don’t tell me to calm down,’ she said, staring at him..

There was a burst of startled ‘oohs!’ and ‘aahs!’ from the pupils who had crowded into the assembly hall. Mr Blyth threw back his head then looked straight at her. This time he didn’t call her Madge. ‘I am afraid you will have to take your son home Mrs Bassett,’ he said sternly ‘I don’t think we can keep him at this school any longer. He’s obviously a bad influence here. And so are you.’

My mother turned and strode off, pulling me with her. As she reached the door leading from the assembly hall, she shouted over her shoulder, ‘I’ll bet you wouldn’t have done this if his father had been alive.’

We went home and after tea, Aunt Elsie said to my mother ‘Now then Madge, what are you going to do about that school?’

‘Nothing I can do now,’ said my mother. Her fighting spirit was spent.

‘Why don’t you go back and have another word with them? He might be a little more sympathetic.’

‘No use,’ she said ‘There’s no soft spot to Bill Blyth, especially when he’s been made to look stupid.’

Uncle Ted laughed, ‘Well, he’s changed then,’ he said ‘During the war he had a number of soft spots. Especially for the girls. If some of the old squaddies in this town knew what he got up to with their wives and girlfriends when he came home on leave, they would knock his teeth in.’

At this point I glanced across the table at Aunt Elsie. There was an expression on her face as if she was recalling things that had not entered her mind for years.

After a long silence she got up from the table and picked up her coat and hat.

‘I’m going round to that Mr Blyth’s house to have a word with him about all this,’ she said. ‘You never know your luck – he might change his mind.’

She was gone for more than an hour and when she returned her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were bright. She looked years younger.

‘What did he say?’ asked my mother puffing nervously on yet another Woodbine.

‘He says you’ll hear no more about it. And Ronnie can go back to school tomorrow,’ said Aunt Elsie.

‘How did you manage to get him to change his mind?’ said my mother.

‘Quite easily,’ said Aunt Elsie. She was smiling reflectively as she removed her coat and hat, ‘Let’s just say the ghosts of the past are bound to come back to haunt you – sooner or later.’

I had no idea what she meant, but I didn’t particularly care. I was glowing in the knowledge that the following morning I would resume my rightful place in that earthly paradise, Class 2b at St Mary’s.

The Day it Rained Cats and Dogs – and other creatures

Being the proud owner of a pet – however humble its place in the animal kingdom – was a source of great joy for the average working-class boy growing up in the Thirties. For a long time, the nearest I got to having a genuine pet of my own was through the kindness of Mrs Greenaway, who not only gave me Oxo and chocolate biscuits but also let me walk her spaniel, Patsy.

Each time I came to collect Patsy, Mrs Greenaway reminded me that I must never let her off her lead. I tried to follow her instructions to the letter – except for the day when I met up with several boys from school and I unleashed her in the hope that she would prove to be a hunter and catch a rabbit.

It took me an hour to catch her. I felt ashamed that I had let Mrs Greenaway down, but I did not have the courage to tell her what I had done.

The results of my actions became apparent some weeks later, and it happened on the same traumatic day when a succession of pets passed through my hands with a speed that left its mark for weeks to come.

I was walking along Carrington Street when the upstairs window of number 39 shot up and Billy Compton popped out his head.

'Hey Bassett,' he shouted. 'Do you want something for nothing?'

As an opening gambit it was irresistable.

'What?' I said. 'What have you got?'

'Come up the entry and I'll show you,' said Billy .

Still suspicious, I walked up the entry dividing the two terraced houses. Billy was waiting for me at the back gate. He let me in and led me to a kennel beside the outside lavatory.

'You can have one of these puppies if you like,' he said. He pointed inside the kennel, where I saw a doleful looking black bitch with four fairly helpless puppies snuffling around her.

'My dad's going to drown 'em when he comes home from work tonight,' said Billy. 'So I'm trying to give 'em away before he gets back.' said Billy.

I couldn't bear to think of this puppy being drowned. I carefully put my hand in the kennel and lifted out a tiny, whimpering creature. But as I set off for Aunt Flo's house I knew I was doomed to be disappointed.

'No Ronnie, sorry,' said Aunt Flo as I held the puppy towards her.

'I'll look after it properly,' I said.

'I'm sorry duck,' she said firmly, 'but it's out of the question. There's the mess and everything. And who would look after it while you were at school?'

Cradling the puppy inside my coat, I began the long walk back to Billy Compton's house, but I hadn't gone far when I came across the solution to my problem in the form of Gordon Brown, a boy who had more pets than any dozen schoolboys put together and who happened to be walking towards me at that very time.

'What have you got in your coat?' he said.

'A puppy,' I said, 'It was going to be mine but my Aunt Flo won't let me have a dog.'

'What sort of dog is it?'

I reached inside my coat and brought out the shivering puppy, I could feel its heart beating as I held it up. From somewhere I said, 'It's a Great Dane,' even though she was obviously from a long line of mongrel terriers.

'Doesn't look much like a Great Dane to me,' said Gordon, 'It's not big

enough for a start.'

'It's what's called a Small Dane,' I said 'It's the same make though.'

Gordon looked at me, and I managed not to blush at the lie I had told. 'Tell you what then,' he said 'Since you've got to take it back. I'll give you one of my baby rabbits for it.'

'Alright then.' I said, thinking Aunt Flo might not mind a rabbit.

The rabbits were black and white and huddled in the corner of the hutch. They looked perfect but as I chose which one was to be mine, something else caught my eye. The pigeon shed.

' A dog for a rabbit is hardly a fair swap,' I said, 'Especially since it's a Small Dane. How about you give me one of your pigeons as well.'

'They are all champions in there,' he said' They're worth millions.'

'No pigeon, no dog,' I said.

Gordon sighed, 'Okay then,' he said 'But I'll give you the stray one that flew into the loft with my other birds yesterday.'

It was only when I was half way home that I began to think about the ways in which I could house my two new pets – always assuming Aunt Flo and Uncle Bill would let me keep them.

I felt sure that Uncle Bill would knock together a small hutch for my rabbit, but how would I house the pigeon? Like many of the events in my young life, I had not thought it through properly.

Suddenly I had the answer – Norman Mason's hen coop. Norman was my best friend and as Norman's back garden faced on to Aunt Flo's back garden, I would be in close contact with my new pet. My problems were over.

I had not felt so cheerful in ages. To have one pet was a joy; to own two was beyond my wildest dreams. Unfortunately I had not reckoned on Frank Pearson appearing on the scene.

I opened the little metal gate that led to the back door of Aunt Flo's council house and immediately spotted Norman and Frank..

'What have you got there, Ronnie?' Norman asked. When I told him about my good fortune, Norman was quick with the vital question. 'Where are you going to keep them?'

'I'm going to ask my Uncle Bill to make me a hutch for the rabbit,' I said, 'and I was wondering if you would let me keep my pigeon in your mum's hen coop.'

'Course you can,' said Norman, as generous-hearted as ever. Frank Pearson had other ideas.

'Hang on a minute,' he said. 'You can't expect Norman to let you use his property for nothing. I reckon that you ought to give Norman that rabbit in exchange for the use of his mam's hen coop for your pigeon.'

I looked at Norman, hoping he would reject the suggestion, but the thought of gaining a rabbit at no cost to himself was too much for Norman.

And so the deal was struck. As I removed the pigeon from its cage and put it in the hen coop, Norman and Frank went indoors with the rabbit, presumably to show it to Norman's mother.

I had been standing there for about five minutes when Mrs Mason's back door opened and out trooped Norman and Frank. Both looked glum, with Norman clearly on the verge of tears. Norman was holding the rabbit by its ears with its limp body out at arm's length in front of him.

'You should never hold a rabbit by its ears,' I said. 'It's cruel, and what's more, it addles their brains.'

‘No need to worry about that,’ said Frank, recovering his composure. ‘It’s dead.’

‘Dead?’ I echoed. ‘But you only had it five minutes. How can it be dead?’

Tears rolled down Norman’s cheeks as he told the story. It appeared that his mother’s much-pampered ginger cat, Precious, had killed the rabbit with one swift bite to the neck.

It was as Norman finished his tale of carnage that the next disaster happened. We heard a creaking noise and turned to see the door of the hen coop slowly swing open. The pigeon soared into the air, never to be seen again.

I was too upset to stay to watch the burial of the rabbit. I went to Mrs Greenaway, hoping there was a chance she would let me take Patsy the spaniel for a walk.

When I turned up on the doorstep, a curious expression crossed Mrs Greenaway’s face. ‘Well Ronnie, it’s not possible to take Patsy for a walk at the moment,’ she said, “Come with me and I’ll show you why.’

She ushered me through the bungalow and out into the back garden towards a garden shed. As she opened the door, Mrs Greenaway said ‘Look in there Ronnie.’

I peered in and saw Patsy curled up in a basket with four puppies huddled close to her. As I stood there, looking down at Patsy and her puppies, I sensed that Mrs Greenaway was studying me closely.

‘Ronnie,’ she said, ‘are you sure that you never let Patsy off her lead when you took her for walks?’

‘No, Mrs Greenaway,’ I said. ‘Never.’

She patted my head affectionately ‘Well there must be a gap under the fence down there somewhere,’ she said then added ‘Now, I’ve got some good news for you, Ronnie. Since you always took Patsy for walks, Mr Greenaway and I have decided you can have the fourth puppy. Would you like that?’

I was so overjoyed to be offered one of Patsy’s puppies that all I could say was ‘Yes’, my mind racing overtime on how to tell Aunt Flo about this most welcome gift.

However when I arrived home, I was in for a surprise. My mother and Ray were in the front room waiting for me. As soon as I got in, my mother told me to sit down as she had something nice to tell me. She began by asking, ‘How would you like a new dad?’ I must have looked a bit puzzled, as she went on to explain that she and Ray were to be married in four weeks’ time. It was then Ray came in, telling me we would move into a new house with a bathroom and a garden.

‘How do you feel about that Ronnie?’ he asked.

I said I was happy about it, and then, quite without thinking, I said ‘Can I have a dog when we move to the house?’ Unbeknown to me, of course, this was the ideal time to ask for something like this. My mother and Ray were anxious to start off their married life without any problems, and, of course, Ray hitting it off with me was a major bonus.

‘Of course you can Ronnie,’ said Ray.

I didn’t tell them I already had the puppy earmarked at Mrs Greenaway’s house. At last I was to have my own proper pet. And a proper father. What more could a boy want?