

Chapter 5

Life in Canterbury (Later Days - Out of School)

65 Union Street had, at one time, been a shop and the shop front, counters and bins etc., were still there. We couldn't, therefore, use that area as any sort of living room but it was excellent for kids to play in. Other than the shop, the house consisted of a living room cum kitchen with two bedrooms. The lavatory was outside in the yard which was walled in. Next to the lavatory was a lean-to which housed a wooden clothes mangle (this figures later). At the other end, adjacent to the shop was a room fitted with a copper for boiling clothes. Above that was a hay loft. The rent, I recall, was six shillings per week. Just after we moved there, my Dad was posted overseas but was invalided home. For some reason, he was posted back to Egypt in 1924.

Once I was big enough, age six, and over my hospital operation, my Father started teaching me to play cricket. He also taught me the ethics, how to take hard knocks and the importance of fielding. He would fling a ball up in the air as high as he could and give me sixpence if I caught it. As it happened, I was a natural and by the time I was ten, could play with boys much older than myself. There was a problem however. We went to a place called the "Old Park" which was owned by the military. However, lots of it was wild so kids were allowed to play in it. Unfortunately, after we played, I was unable to sleep and I drove my parents mad over this, particularly Dad who had to go to work the following morning. Eventually this problem was overcome by giving me Dr Cassell's tablets. I don't know what was in them but they certainly worked.

After my Dad went overseas, I collected together a band of enthusiasts and played with them. I was lucky because Dad always saw to it that I had a real ball, bat and stumps. One incident perhaps indicated my future character. Once Dad had gone, I found that playing cricket with the big lads meant that my own friends were not able to cope so, I got hold of two of the big lads I liked best and persuaded them to keep the others away on the promise that they could always play with me using my bat and ball; oddly enough this worked and taught me another lesson.

My best friend at the time, already mentioned, was a lad called Jack Hogan and another was a lad called Bourne, however I also played a lot with the street ragamuffins who, in

many ways, I found more exciting. Despite their roughness, they had an integrity and courage which I admired. All sorts of games were played, kick the can, marbles and cigarette cards included. There was also the challenge of hanging on carts with the kids yelling "whip behind" and getting away quickly when the driver turned round. We also played skipping with the girls although at least one boy was accused of playing only because he wanted to look up the girls' skirts! I couldn't quite see why he should want to do this as, after all, I knew what my sister had under her skirt and it didn't seem anything to get excited about!

One year, my Father and Mother went to St. Edmund's School to do some extra work and with the money they bought my sister, Betty, a pram and me a pedal motor car. This was pure luxury and, along with scooters, hoops etc. we were well catered for. Leapfrog, Piggy and Tip Cat were also games we played.

I have already mentioned that I was a good runner and it was a good job because I had to go on lots of errands for my Mum and some areas were full of aggressive, rough older kids looking for trouble. They made the Union Street kids look like angels. Fortunately, they never caught me; as I have said, I could run.

So far, the games I have mentioned have all been played outside; inside my sister and I played happily together for short periods but violent verbal quarrels would then break out.



Betty and Me in 1924

My Mum would break this up by running out of the front door saying she was going to go for good. We in our turn, would go screaming after her, imploring her to stay. Then it was peace until the next time. One day heaven was on our side; it must have been very windy because suddenly as we were quarrelling, a gust of wind blew down the chimney and we were showered with soot. Quick as flash Mum said "That's

what comes of quarrelling"; once more - peace. We used to swap our toys, but the ones I gave Betty I always regarded as mine and I was heartbroken when she broke "my" gramophone which I had given her. It was one of those old cylindrical models. I also used to make her dolls' clothes from quilts and we could both knit after a fashion. Mum made

us help with little jobs about the house, shelling peas etc. we both had to do it and that was good.

I am afraid that me being the older, Betty lost out on most things; while I got the bath and copper stick for a drum, she had to be content with some lesser object. She also kept her best sweets until last whereas I ate mine first. I always finished mine first and then scrounged some of Betty's best ones. Unfair, however when it came to Hop Picking, you will see that she got her own back. At times we had great fun dressing up in one another's clothes.

My favourite game, however, was one I played on my own; this was cricket in the back yard. On the leg of the table supporting the previously mentioned mangle, I nailed a board marked with a wicket. At the other end, I marked a scoreboard over the window (broken by me) of the wash house. I then used to bowl twenty balls at the rollers of the mangle. If I caught the ball direct, the batsman was out; if the ball merely went on the yard, one run; if on the small garden, two runs; hitting the wall indirect, four runs or direct, six runs. The 21st ball I used to bowl at the stumps, a miss meant runs as before but a hit meant the batsman was out. I used to represent Kent who beat every County in England. In fact I could get the ball to do what I liked on those wooden rollers. That was in the days of Frank Woolley, my boyhood hero. Silly as it may seem, this game taught me much about length and direction as well as fielding. Our best wins were against the old enemy - Yorkshire. Another lone game was played with a tennis racquet and ball, patting it hard two handed against the wall; my record was in four figures. "Tops" was another favourite game.

I was an avid reader and selected large heavy tomes from the Beany Library. Henty and suchlike authors were my favourites but my all time favourite was a book on Big Game Hunting by Gordon Cummings. He must have killed off half the Big Game in Africa. Looking back, I am surprised that I was so fond of it. One day my father's Officers came to see him at home and asked me what I was reading. I was rather shy and looked at him a bit puzzled. After due reflection I said "a book". Literally true of course but I don't think my Dad was too pleased.

The same shyness got me in trouble at a later date. I had an Aunt who worked as a cook at St. Edmund's School and one day, Mum, sister Betty and I went to tea. Normally we had tea there in my Aunt's room but on this particular occasion, it was held in the

Servant's Hall. Thus, I found myself surrounded by girls from about sixteen upwards. I was so over faced that I put my tea plate on my lap and ate from it there - once more in trouble. Shyness in children is not really understood by adults and can be quite devastating.

The year my Father went to Egypt, I decided that we ought to go hop picking with some neighbours who had a tally. "Can't be done" said my mother, "we haven't any stools". Not to be put off by this I found a small box which she used for pegs and modified it and produced a model stool. Beaten, she gave me one shilling with which I bought two Margarine boxes and from these made two adequate stools. So it was off to hop picking and Betty's revenge. The procedure started with the tally holder's name entered in a draw for row position. The worst positions were the outside rows; hops got bigger and more plentiful as the rows got nearer to the centre of the field. The draw was made and



The Small Family

off we went for about three weeks in August. We did this for two consecutive years, first with the Browning family and secondly with the Small family. We walked to and from the hop field. On the way we bought some Ice - coconut covered square cakes to supplement our sandwiches. On the word "Go", down came the lines and the picking started. I had only made two stools so it is obvious that no-one

expected Betty to pick anything and true to forecast, she didn't. While I picked about five bushels a day, she rushed and screamed around the field having a whale of a time with the friends she had made. As a gesture, she might just pick seven or eight hops, which might have half filled a small cup. At the end of the hop picking, which was virtually our Summer holiday, Mum gave us each 2/6d and bought us a coat each. I always thought that equal shares were unfair but, on reflection, I think that she was right.

Although, other than hop picking, we did not have a holiday, we occasionally had a day out on a rail excursion to Whitstable; there was also the Sunday School outing.

Throughout my childhood, my Mother was convinced that I was delicate. I was certainly

skinny and suffered from sick headaches which were partly cured by wearing glasses. I also tended to feel faint when being treated for a cut, but this ran in the family. I am ashamed to say that I used the headache problem as a means of playing off my Dad against my Mum. If he was cross with me and was threatening dire punishment, I would go into my headache routine whereupon Mum would round on Dad with words such as "Now look what you have done Fred!"

My Mum's worry about health tended to make her act without thinking. For instance, one day jumping over a small stream, my foot slipped and went in the water. Despite my protests that my feet were not wet (after all she always ensured we were well shod), she rushed me home only to find out that I was right anyway. The constant worry unfortunately left me with what I could only describe as a fear of the unknown; this tended to exaggerate the problem I had of feeling faint whenever medical matters were discussed with, or in front of, me.

Although I have said that we did not have a proper holiday as a family, I did. During the times that I was away from school for the three month periods, I used to go and stay with my Grandma and Grandfather at Willesborough Lees near Ashford. After a day's homesickness, I used to settle down and thoroughly enjoy myself. My Grandma, who was my Granddad's second wife, spoiled me outrageously. More of that in the chapter on my Granddad.

We were one of the few families in the street who were able to enjoy Christmas with plenty of food and presents. These were augmented by three "Aunts" who worked at St. Edmund's School. Only one was my true Aunt but that didn't matter as they all managed to spoil me rotten. Each Christmas we had a tree filled with little presents and various children were invited to a party. This was spoiled for me because my Mother would not let me invite the rough kids; this meant that the ones who came were not necessarily the ones I played with. I heard one of these "nice" little girls say "Is this all we get?". She was looking



**"Aunt" Molly, Mum, Aunt Rose, Aunt Triss,
Cousin Daphne & "Aunt" Alice.**

at a 2d Woolworth's toy which she had been given from the tree. I was most upset as I am sure that my rough friends would have been really grateful.

Various fragments come into my mind of things that made an impression on me and which I still remember:

- *My decision at the age of seven never to cry again. What is more, as a child, I never did.*
- *The currant cakes my Mother made; I used to pinch great lumps on my return from school.*
- *The leg ache which I felt one day; I was promptly put to bed and the doctor summoned to examine me. I didn't know what it was all about but, on reflection, I think my poor parents thought I had polio.*
- *The day we walked to the Station via The Mill and looking over the wall at the mill stream to see a dead man floating in the water. The poor man had committed suicide. It spoiled my day at Whitstable and preyed on my mind for some time.*
- *Falling off the go-cart, my Dad had just made me and banging my head. He threatened to break it up and me saying no.*
- *Picking daisies in a field one day and realising, just in time, that an adder was about to strike.*
- *Helping at a church to clean all the hassocks and coming home very late to find my Mum playing pop because she was worried as to where I had been.*
- *Drinking water from a stream and worrying for days that I might have picked something up.*
- *Having threadworms removed from my bottom by my Mother wielding a hair pin; eating the horrible chocolate that treated the condition.*
- *Walking with my Mother to St. Stevens to watch the village cricket (Mum loved cricket when the big hitters came in).*
- *Mrs Fryer, the autocratic housekeeper at St. Edmund's School.*
- *Playing patience for hour after hour.*

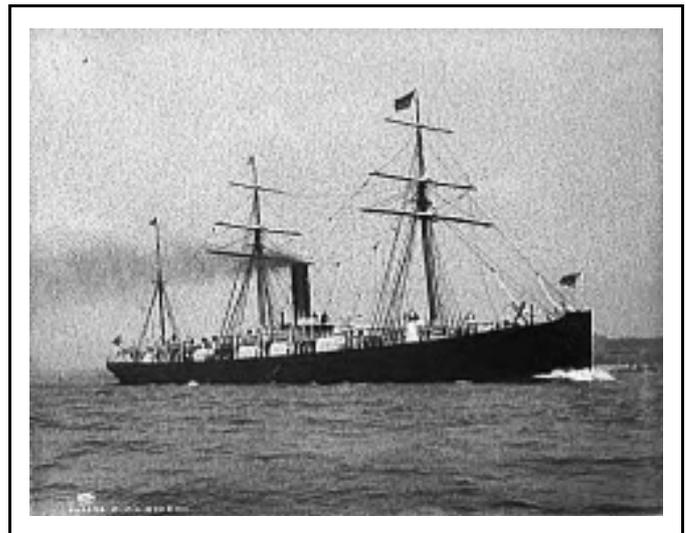
- *Attending Evensong at the Garrison Church and, of course, Sunday School (Religion, however, was not deeply rooted at this time).*
- *The beautiful Red Admiral butterfly I caught and which subsequently became part of one of the collections of a Master at St. Edmund's School (very sad).*
- *Watching a bad-tempered cavalryman being bitten by his frightened bad-tempered horse.*
- *Watching a Sergeant Cavalry Riding Instructor drilling a bunch of young officers in the riding school and using the most appalling language to describe them and their antecedents.*
- *Watching an Army Sergeant shoot a blackbird with a rifle at a range of six feet and being caught by an officer, who bawled him out to some tune.*
- *Watching the Buffs (My Dad's old regiment) storm the Bullet bank in the Old Park against soldiers dressed up as Zulus. This was an annual tattoo.*
- *Going like mad on my scooter down St. Martin's Hill and also round and into the cloisters at Canterbury Cathedral.*
- *Deciding that my Father was a jolly sight more gentle when washing me than my Mother.*
- *My Mother buying me patent leather shoes and me deliberately ruining them on a visit to my Granddads by kicking a tin can to my Uncle Jack who happened to be there.*
- *My Mother, at my request, buying a grey school cap for me and then me feeling different because it wasn't blue.*
- *Finding that I had been bitten by a flea all around and on my penis just before going on a Sunday School trip.*



Canterbury Cathedral

- *Watching a really poor family being evicted from their home with only the Workhouse to go to.*
- *Watching for my Grandfather passing the house in a charabanc and him throwing out half a crown and my Mother taking it out of the hand of some kid and replacing it with a penny which I had picked up. (The game of throwing coins out of charabancs by men on trips went on for some time; they used to enjoy seeing the kids scramble for them. Eventually this was stopped by some law or order, presumably due to the number of accidents)*
- *My Dad's whistle to call us in.*

Enough of nostalgia. In 1926, Mum had one last fling at getting me into a good school and entered me as a chorister in Canterbury Cathedral. I had an interview and might well have been accepted but, before this came about, the War Office informed us that our passage was booked on the SS Circassia of the Anchor Line to travel to Egypt in November. Although entry into the Chorister's School, and a possible scholarship to the King's School Canterbury, would have presented a wonderful opportunity to a working class boy, I never regretted taking the ship to Egypt. It was a different opportunity but one which held me in good stead later on.



SS Circassia

As I have said, although we attended church, we were not religion mad. I think we must just have had a quiet inward belief, but the expression was more in the love and affection within the family.