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# Clouds Of Glory

Bryan Magee

# CLOUDS OF GLORY

*A Hoxton Childhood*

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BRYAN MAGEE



PIMLICO

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## Afterword

to  
Norman Tillson



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CLOUDS OF GLORY

Bryan Magee has had a many-sided career. In the 1960s and 70s he worked in broadcasting, as a current affairs reporter on ITV and a critic of the arts on BBC Radio 3. At one time he taught philosophy at Oxford, where he was a tutor at Balliol College. His best remembered television programmes are two long series about philosophy: for the first he was awarded the Silver Medal of the Royal Television Society, while the book he based on the second was a bestseller. From 1974 to 1983 he was Member of Parliament for Leyton, first as Labour, then as a Social Democrat. He is now a full-time author and this book is his twentieth. The others have been translated, altogether, into more than 20 languages.

'Larkin called his childhood "a forgotten boredom", but Magee remembers everything with vivacity ... He was so alive to the moment that he makes the moments come alive for his readers.' *Literary Review*

'A perceptive intelligence has recreated this rich Hoxton memoir.' *Guardian*

'Magee does more than recreate a vanished London of tea boys and navvies ... He explores questions about his childhood impressions, and the way his mind has retained them, which deepen their interest for the reader.' Glyn Paflin, *Times Literary Supplement*

'In *Clouds of Glory*, Bryan Magee regrets not having Wordsworth's powers of language. Yet his book is meticulously written and gives a memorable picture of his early years.' Michael Holroyd, Books of the Year, *Guardian*

'A loving report from what was often a loveless terrain.' *Independent*

'Above all, as Joseph Conrad insisted about good writing, *Clouds of Glory* makes you see.' *Spectator*

'An engaging memoir.' Anne Chisholm, *Sunday Telegraph*

'A beautifully written account of London slum life in the 1930s.' Caroline Gascoigne, *Sunday Times*

'If this is the first of a series of autobiographical accounts, told, as the author claims, with all honesty, then future volumes should be equally vivid and evocative.' *Tribune*

'Bryan Magee's memoir ... of his childhood in Hoxton, East London, is as erudite and engaging as would be expected

by anyone who has read any of his previous books.' *Play*

'An attractive memoir ... a loving report.' *Independent*

'[Magee] puts his prodigious memory into this wonderfully readable memoir, full of colour and immaculate detail, to explore the vanished world of his childhood. Highly recommended.' *Choice Magazine*

'Very entertaining.' *Oxford Times*

# CHAPTER ONE

One of the most extraordinary things about being a human being is that we just wake up in the world and find ourselves here, though what 'here' is is something we never discover. Existence is something that happens to us, and then remains a mystery. There is no question of our having any say in it: a light comes on in a new centre of consciousness, and it is another one of us.

We find ourselves not awareneses only, but bodies also, and perhaps other things besides - whatever we are, it is certainly complex. And we inherit a going concern. We know nothing about any of it until after it is well under way, by which time we are already a particular person, born a while back to two other persons embedded in particular circumstances; and everything that has happened to us since then constitutes what is already a life; and already we are partially-formed personalities. Everything about the situation is specific in the highest degree, a fate, a destiny, already in full swing when it is imposed on us, so that we ourselves are a *fait accompli* with which we are presented.

Later this will confront many of us with the question: 'What is this "I" that I am?' But to begin with, at any rate, our consciousness is not a consciousness of self. The reality of the situation is not that our awareness starts by being an awareness of our own existence as unique persons, and then extends outwards from this as a starting point to become an awareness of the world around us. The process moves in the opposite direction: we start by being aware of things outside ourselves - light, space, movement, objects, colours, people - and at first these fill our consciousness;

and it is only by degrees that we become aware of our selves as centres of these experiences, as entities distinct, and to that extent separate, from what is going on outside us. Quite a lot of people, either underdeveloped people or people in underdeveloped societies, never securely establish a sense of self. But whether we as individuals become self-aware or not - and whatever we do, and whatever happens to us - it is inescapably us that we are, and this is the life we have; and whether we die in infancy or live to be a hundred, it is for all time true that each of us has existed in the world as a distinct human being who lived that life.

What I want to do in this book is tell the story of one such life, the only one I know better than anyone else knows it. I shall do everything in my power to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth; but I shall not attempt to write the whole truth, for that would be boring; in fact the most important task of all will be the task of selection. Everything here will be as I carefully remember it, but not everything I remember will be here. Memory can err, of course, so I shall make use of all the checks on mine that are available, chiefly older relatives and surviving documents. If, in spite of this, mistakes occur, I apologise in advance. If the reader thinks of the book as being called *As I Remember*, that will give him the right perspective. It is a report of experience, not a record of events.

The earliest recollection I have is of being surrounded by a fuzzy yellow light, known somehow to be in an enclosed space like a room, I think our kitchen, in which there were two giant figures standing, blank as silhouettes but blurry as the light, and slate grey, as if they were solid shadows. I was perceiving them from somewhere around their feet. High above me, from the tops of these giant figures, were coming noises that were directed not at me but at one

another, top to top, like signals passing between radio masts. I understood that some kind of communication was going on between the two of them, and it absorbed them, so that they were not aware of me. It was all taking place above my head in both senses of that phrase. But I knew, somehow, that these high objects that were making these sounds were different from other objects, and were what mattered to me; and I have an idea that speech became, or already was, of commanding interest to me, even when not directed at me.

I remember a much loved companion of the same size as me who was a black dog called Robert; and I remember what he looked like, though he was no longer with us by the time I was three. I have an incisive memory of crouching in the darkness inside his kennel under the kitchen table, no one knowing where I was, and feeling breathlessly excited that I was genuinely hiding – not playing at hiding but really hiding, successfully. I could hear people running about and raising the alarm at my disappearance.

The first extended scene I recall involves a girl called Pam Ainsworth, who was probably between nine and eleven, and used to wheel me about in a push-chair. Once, at the door, as we were on our way out, my mother said to her: 'Don't give him any sweets. He's got a tummy ache.'

I piped up: 'I haven't got a tummy ache.'

'Yes you have,' snapped my mother. 'Shut up.' And my whole body boiled over with resentment that she was lying to prevent me getting any sweets. As soon as we were out in the street and passing the sweet shop two doors away I twisted myself round in the chair and called to Pam: 'Buy me some sweets.'

'Your mum says you can't have any. You've got a tummy ache.'

'I haven't got a tummy ache.'

'Your mum says you've got one.' And on we pushed, past the sweet shop. I remember every aspect of both of these scenes: the three of us at the door and the two of us in the street – the visual settings, Pammie Ainsworth and what she looked like, our words, and my consuming frustration and rage at what was happening.

When I was as small as that my face was so near the ground that I saw in vivid close-up everything that was under my nose. I knew each paving-stone in the street immediately outside where we lived, each with its own actual shape and colour. The existence of each seemed to be important, as if I had a relationship with it. Then there were the kerbstones, longer and thinner but harder and chunkier, and of a different stone – one had a plum colour, and I liked that one particularly: I often used to give it a special kick, or something of that sort. Once, standing there, I looked over the road and saw my father on the pavement opposite, talking to the man who lived in the flower shop facing us. My inside irradiated with joy at the sight of him, and I darted out across the road to be with him. An almighty screaming of brakes overwhelmed me, and a car was almost on top of me. It hit me, and knocked me sideways, but not off my feet; so, uninterruptedly, I ran curving round to my father's side and stood there, shaken but smiling up at him, putting my hand into his. He gripped my hand hard and jerked me to his side, and to my total incomprehension exploded down at me with a violent roar even louder than the brakes.

*'What are you doing?'*

I was thunderstruck. He was red-faced with rage, and I had taken it for granted that he would be pleased to see me, and would enjoy my being with him. Why didn't he want me there? I stood bewildered.

*'You could have been killed. You nearly were.'* Still shouting, beside himself. *'Don't you EVER do that again.'*

*Never, never, never cross this road by yourself again. Never. Do you hear me? Listen to what I'm saying to you.'*

And then I understood that his anger had something to do with the car hitting me, which I could see might have been dangerous; and I realised that he would be even angrier if I were to get myself run over; so obviously I mustn't.

I continued as a normal thing to be out of doors by myself - my mother sent me out every day to get me from under her feet. 'Go out and play,' were the words I heard from her more often than any others, usually as part of a question uttered in a harsh, annoyed tone, like an order: 'Why don't you go out and play?' I needed no further encouragement. From soon after I could run I did a lot of my growing up on the street, even before I was allowed to cross the road.

Between where we lived and the end of the road on our side there were three shops and a bit of blank wall. The shops were small, though not perceived as such by me at the time. When you reached the corner the pavement ran downhill to the right. That new bit was called Whitmore Road, and had another three shops in it before you came to the next street, which was Phillip Street. Among the shops in Whitmore Road was the baker's, Vooght's (pronounced Voots), where we bought freshly baked bread every day, still warm if you were lucky; and also rolls and cakes. In their shop window they had a display that reached down below my eye level, and was differently laid out every day - cream horns, jam tarts, almond meringues, always something made with lemon curd, various things with sugar icing, God knows how many kinds of cakes, and goodness knew what else too: doughnuts, ginger nuts, flapjacks, biscuits, scones ... Cream horns were so much my favourite that there were things I never got as far as looking at. The fact that Vooghts was just round the corner meant that it was out of sight of



home yet still only thirty yards away, and I could get there without crossing a road. I was frequently sent there to fetch things.

I remember going into the shop one day by myself – unlike our shop, you went down a step to get into it – and there in the centre of the space stood the round, heavy Mrs Vooght, with her black hair and her loud voice, chattering with a woman customer. She said something about me to the other woman as I came in, and then addressed me.

‘How old are you?’

‘Free.’

‘No you’re not.’

‘Yes I am.’

‘You’re not free. You’re three. Say three.’

‘Free.’

She was a mountainous woman, or seemed so to me, and she bent down over me until her huge face was immediately over my upturned one, almost touching it. To my astonishment her tongue, yards long, came out right in front of my eyes until the tip of it was resting on her great big bosom – an illusion that must have been caused by the angle I was seeing it at.

‘Thhhhhree,’ she said, with that incredible tongue right in my face, pink and vast, shaped like a pointed spade. ‘Say thhhhhree.’

‘Free.’

I could hear perfectly well what she was saying and thought I was saying it too, so what on earth was all this about? Why did she keep saying I wasn’t three, and then saying I was? However, the dominant element in the memory, the chief reason I remember it, is nothing to do with the word, it is the tongue, which I found alarming. To

this day, in the silence of my mind, this memory remains for me the most concrete connotation of the word 'tongue'.

If I was heading for the baker's I started off down our street. The other way was up. It was up, but only a few yards up, that I had, some time before this, got involved in a fight with the boy from the sweet shop, whose name I eventually knew to be Norman Tillson. I find, incidentally, that most of my earliest memories involve physical, emotional or sensory violence of some sort - no doubt this is why they impinged on me as they did and are now memories. As a street kid I was fairly violent myself, involved in fights every day as a matter of course, and I soon made the discovery that by unbridled fury of attack I could rout boys bigger or older than myself - within a certain size-gap, of course, which I learnt to estimate fairly accurately, though not infallibly. It did not work with Norman, though. He was three at a time when I had not yet reached that age; and although he was no taller than me he was more stockily built. I laid into him with my customary fury - and I have little doubt that it was I who was the aggressor - but was disconcerted not just by the effectiveness with which he fought me off but, even more so, by the untroubled air with which he did it. He was not in the least alarmed by my onslaught. He treated the demands it made on him as if they were a nuisance but all in a day's work, which I expect they were. I rushed back at him again and again, on repeated assaults, each time to be punched off in what seemed to me an insultingly offhand manner. It was as if he were being relaxedly good-natured about it all - no hard feelings, chum, but if you're really sure this is what you want, *biff!* Our fight took us off the pavement and into the roadway. Somebody from one of our families either saw or heard us, and shouted that being in the road was dangerous, and stopped us, and made us go back indoors to our respective homes. The contest was never resolved. But

from that moment Norman was the best companion of my early years, and has remained a friend ever since.

These earliest memories carry within themselves the sense of an already embodied past. Things had been going on for some time before they happened, and I was already somebody. I felt as one feels on waking from a long, nourishing sleep - fresh and alert, and ready to begin, yet aware that a great deal has been going on that cannot be remembered. This, I take it, was some sort of subliminal awareness of the first couple of years of my life, years that I already carried within me as part of the person I was. They must have been years of primal emotion, violent reaction, and intense learning: and now, deep within me, was an obscure, remote, inaccessible turmoil like the apprehension of an unremembered dream, not unhappy-making that I was conscious of, but unrestful. I was all the time avid for something, and I did not know what, so I wanted to absorb everything.

## CHAPTER TWO

I was born into a shopkeeping family in a little community of shops. The year was 1930, a round number that made my age always easy to remember, and was later to make me feel a decade younger than people born any time in the 1920s. Our shop sold men's and boys' clothes, and belonged to my grandfather, whose name stood over the door: E.J. MAGEE. The initials stood for Edgar John. Everyone knew him as Edgar, though he had one or two amazingly old and privileged friends who, to my wonderment at their temerity, addressed him as Eggs. His son, my father - who within the planetary system of the family was the sun round which I moved - was Fred Magee. He worked for my grandfather for a weekly wage of three pounds fifteen shillings, which was about average in the '30s; though he also lived rent-free in the rooms over and behind the shop, which were home for him, my mother, my sister and me.

As a family of four we did most of our domestic living in the single back room on the ground floor behind the shop, which we called the kitchen. The dominant fact about this room was its littleness: when I was fully grown I could come within a couple of inches of touching the side walls simultaneously. When my memories begin there was, in the middle of one of these side walls, a black, open-grate fireplace with little ovens on each side of the fire and a hob on it for boiling a kettle, and a fender all round it with tiny padded seats at the corners on which we children loved to sit. One of my earliest memories is of two loud men in overalls coming into the kitchen and tearing all this out and

replacing it with a light-coloured tiled modern fireplace, me watching with misgiving but also fascination. They, or somebody, installed a gas cooker in the dark corner behind the door that led into the shop. What space was left for the other corner on that side of the room was occupied by a deep, cubic, ochre-coloured earthenware sink with a cold-water tap. Pushed hard up against the other side wall was the kitchen table, round which there was just room for the four of us to squeeze past one another, or sit and eat. A tiny armchair was pinched between it and the doorway into the shop. Against the wall farthest from this door a sideboard stood under the kitchen's only window, which had metal bars outside and faced north-east, so the room was darkish most of the time. There was always a bowl of fresh fruit on the side-board, but I was supposed to ask before taking any of it. There was also a big 1930s radio set, the chief daily source of music. In the remaining corner was the door into the back yard: you opened it and went down a couple of stone steps into an open-air, concrete-covered square not much bigger than the kitchen, surrounded by a high wall; and there in the far corner was the lavatory, where you had to stand holding the chain down till it finished flushing, otherwise it stopped in mid-flush.

Just inside the back door a forbiddingly steep and enclosed wooden staircase led to the rooms above, so narrow that adults had to swing their shoulders to one side to get up or down it. One of my earliest recollections is of lying on my back on the tiny landing at the top and thinking it would be interesting to find out how far it was possible to push myself out over the stairs without falling down them. It did not occur to me that only if I exceeded the limit could I find out where it was. First I pushed my head out, looking up at the ceiling; then my shoulders; and at that point I started to be careful: I pushed my torso out a bit more, and then another bit, and then, concentrating, edged myself out a

little further, inch by inch; and then, I thought, just a tiny squeeze more, holding my breath now, thinking that either this was it or I could manage *just* one more teeny weeny little - *bangety-bang-bang-wallop-crash*, down I went, head first, over and over. By chance, not only was the door open at the foot of the stairs but so was the back door, so after hurtling down all the wooden stairs I carried straight on down the stone steps and out into the back yard. In addition to the racket this made I yelled, and people came running. A quick discussion took place about whether I should be whipped off to a doctor, but this was decided against; and I was bundled in somebody's arms to the chemists up the road to have my cuts and bruises tended, and no doubt to get his expert opinion about whether I ought to see a doctor. When I woke up next morning the bumps on my forehead were fascinatingly immense, and the pain from them was a new experience that might have been interesting too, had it not been so painful.

Off the landing from which this venture had begun, three rooms opened. On the left, in the smallest one, which looked out over the back yard, I slept in a large single bed with my sister Joan, who was three and a half years older than me. The room straight ahead, facing over the street, was our parents' bedroom, and they had a double bed, in which I had been born. But we were never allowed to go in there. This was far and away the most forbiddingly expressed and reiterated domestic taboo of our child-hood: never, ever, no matter what the circumstances, were we to open the door of our parents' bedroom. But I was occasionally summoned in by them, so I knew what was there. The chief thing was a large, free-standing sewing machine referred to as the Singer. It was worked by a treadle, and on it all the family's clothing repairs (and perhaps a few simple alterations for the shop) were made. I longed to play with it, but was forbidden to touch it. The other main item was a dressing-

table with three high mirrors that moved on hinges. One of my earliest memories is of standing in front of this dressing-table screaming with agony: I had drunk a bottle of eau-de-Cologne that I found there, and my insides were on fire.

The room to the right of my parents' bedroom, up a step from the landing (my bedroom was down a step) was the living-room, also facing out over the street, and bigger than the others. Against the far wall as you entered was a black open fireplace, and to the right of this a bookcase. By the right-hand wall was an upright piano, and opposite that, running along the wall under the window over the street, a sofa. Into the two far corners snuggled comfortable armchairs. Against the wall immediately to your left as you went in was a sideboard. In the middle of the room stood a dining-table, with leaves at each end that opened out; normally it stood shut, with upright chairs pushed in under it and standing there unused, stiff, like sentinels that you had to edge past. The fact that you could pull the leaves of the table out and make a bigger table was something that fascinated me, and my interest was intensified by the fact that there were three choices: you could pull one leaf out, or the other, or both; and this plus the table in its original state gave you four options. Sometimes I would pull a leaf out and just stand there looking at the table as remade. The contemplation of it gave me a pleasure that I often felt with anything in my environment that was unobvious or could be changed. But if I then just went off and left it I would get a serious ticking-off from my mother, so it could be a dangerous thing to do.

Actually there were a lot of things in that room that fascinated me. Across the shelf over the fireplace walked elephants, and at each end of it horses reared up with reins made of wire held by naked men. Somewhere in a different position each time you went into the room would be the wind-up gramophone, in its royal blue box, so heavy I could

lift it but not carry it. Actually I was forbidden to touch it at all, but that only made it an object of greater interest. Hanging from the walls were two pictures. One was of a man whom I identified with my father: he wore a stovepipe Puritan hat and was standing looking alarmed, with a woman on either side of him. When I learnt to read I discovered that it was called 'Between Two Fires', and this surprised me, because I had never noticed any fires in the picture, and even now I was unable to see any. The other picture was called 'The Boyhood of Raleigh' and showed an old man, whom I identified with my grandfather, pointing out across the sea, his muscley arm extended to its full length, while he was talking to two boys squatting at his feet. I identified myself with the farther one of these, the one in black, and assumed that the old man was pointing something interesting out to them: it never occurred to me that he was holding them spellbound with stories of distant lands beyond the horizon. I cannot put into words the piercingness or depth of the nostalgia I felt when I stumbled unexpectedly across the originals of some of these things, which I began to do in my teens. The first were the equestrian statuettes on the mantelpiece: at seventeen I found myself looking at them as the large statues on either side of the entrance to the Champs Elysées in Paris.

The table and the upright chairs matched the sideboard, and the armchairs matched the sofa. The upholstered furniture started out as a rather depressing gingery-brown leather with rounded backs, but one day it had all changed into something covered with a light-coloured new-looking fabric and square corners. A lot of my early memories have this character of something that I knew as having been always there changing suddenly into something different. Presumably it was the change that impinged on me and was the experience that is now the memory. I nearly always had a preference for the new over the old, so although I was



startled by these changes I usually liked them. I now understand that those were years in which Britain was coming out of the Depression, and the living standards of families such as mine were going up steadily throughout the '30s (and were then to leap sharply upwards during the Second World War, never to return to the pre-war poverty that was the normal standard for most British families), so that I was experiencing, at the coal-face of childhood experience, the beginnings of a long-term social shift of historic proportions. Needless to say, I knew nothing of this at the time.

My parents would often spend evenings in our living-room after my sister and I had gone to bed, and we could hear their voices in our darkness, which I liked. We children played in the living-room on rainy days, and when other children were visiting us. And the whole family used it whenever all four of us were together for more than just a meal, which meant that we spent all day Sunday there, and ate our midday Sunday dinner at the dining-table. We used it also whenever we had guests or visitors, so it was automatically the room for special occasions, like Christmas and birthdays. Although it was in constant use it came to be associated in my mind with treats. Workaday life was carried on down-stairs in the kitchen, but fun was more usually upstairs in the living-room. The reason we all made so little use of it during the daytime on weekdays was that people needed to be popping in and out all the time, either in and out of the shop, or the street (for which you needed to go through the shop), or the lavatory in the back yard; and the stairs were a disincentive, especially to someone carrying dishes of hot food, or for that matter carrying anything at all. There were no utilities upstairs except for the electric light: we had no indoor lavatory or bathroom, and our only water supply was the cold tap in the kitchen sink. But all this meant that during the day on most days we were

perpetually squeezing past and round one another in that tiny kitchen.

Because of this, the kitchen was the only room that was always heated – by the cooking, whether we liked it or not, and by a coal-fire whenever we wanted one. The bedrooms were never heated, and the living-room only in winter when the room was being used. So for half the year there was a practical question attached to going upstairs, namely: ‘Is it worth lighting the fire?’ Inertia on that point saw to it that we made much more use of the room in the warmer half of the year.

In the cold half we would get out of bed and put our clothes on straight away in the mornings, and then go downstairs and wash. Our getting-up times were staggered so that we could take it in turn at the kitchen sink; and while each of us was washing, the kettle would be boiling for the next one. Saturday night was bath-night, at least as far as the children were concerned. A zinc bath would be carried into the kitchen from the yard and set on the hearthrug in front of the fire. Water was boiled up in every available cooking utensil simultaneously. My sister, being a girl, was given the clean water, and I would clamber into it the moment she got out so as to catch it while it was still warm. (*‘Come on, hurry up, it’s getting cold!’*) We had two zinc baths, a small one for us children and a full-length one for our parents. Both hung from iron nails in the brickwork of the house’s back wall, where their position helped them to dry out, though they got rained on a lot. Our parents always bathed when we were not around, and I simply do not know when they did it: I think they must have bathed more often than we did, for they always seemed to me unnaturally clean. But I never saw either of them naked.

Because we had no indoor lavatory, the use of chamber pots was part of our everyday life, and I took them for granted. There were always two under each bed upstairs –

my sister and I each had our own, as did our parents. They were referred to as 'the po', as in 'I want to use the po', and were the first focus of repression I can remember. I was supposed to try hard not to use the po, and to use it only when I had to, and to crap in it only when I *absolutely* had to, and given clearly to understand that the whole thing was really a bloody nuisance, which obviously it was.

## CHAPTER THREE

The reason we had three rooms upstairs and only one down is that the shop had once been two shops that were then knocked into one, and in the conversion one of the two ground-floor back rooms had been incorporated into the new shop, making it L-shaped, quite large by local standards. So we had the upstairs rooms from two shops but the ground-floor room from only one.

Outside, narrow alleyways ran along both sides of the enlarged shop. One of them, no more than a slit, cut through to what had been stables at the back and were now two minuscule cottages in a space next to our back yard. In the corresponding space on the other side lived a cow which belonged to the Jenkinses. They kept what everyone called a dairy. From the street, a tunnel you could walk through ran alongside our shop and opened out into the yard where the cow lived. In the rooms above this tunnel lived the Jenkinses. At the tunnel's mouth was a nook of a shop with not even a door on to the street but only a window, through which old Mrs Jenkins sold milk and her other dairy products to people on the pavement. Her own front door was in the tunnel. She was a fat, much-chinned old woman with gold-rimmed glasses and piled grey hair, and she always wore a loose black dress down to her ankles, as did most elderly women in the Hoxton of that time. For almost the whole of every day she would sit unbudging in her window at the point of sale. When I caught a sight of her walking I saw she limped heavily, dragging one foot in a built-up surgical boot. I was often sent with a jug to buy milk from her, but although I had frequent exchanges with her I did not like her

- she was too snappish. She spoke differently from everyone else, with what I now realise was a Welsh accent.

She had a grown-up daughter called Bessie, whom I liked immensely but who was only seldom on duty in the window nook. Bessie did all the work behind the scenes, including not only housework and shopping but looking after the cow. Sturdily built and handsome, she was a country woman rather than a townie, with a strong physical presence and an outflowing warmth that children especially responded to: talking to Bessie gave me a glow. From what my parents said about her I picked up the fact that they regarded her as stupid, but to me this appeared either untrue or unimportant. She had a daughter, Mary, a year or two older than me, who skipped everywhere instead of walking, and was always referred to in our family as 'Mary in the dairy'. The Jenkins household contained no men. When I asked Mary where her father was, she told me he was in prison for stealing old Mrs Jenkins's money. Looking back, and remembering remarks overheard from my parents, I realise now that Mary was illegitimate, and that the prison story had been given to her as a cover.

When I was sent for milk I would hand the jug up to old Mrs Jenkins and she, with a cylindrical ladle that was also a half-pint measure, would dole the milk out from a churn at her side, a churn bigger than me. I enjoyed watching the milk overflowing the measure and pouring back into the churn. Usually I was sent to buy half a pint, so I would see this happen only once, but if I was lucky enough to be buying a pint I saw it twice. Half a pint was three farthings, a pint a penny farthing. Farthings were beginning to lose their grip even then, and I remember only three things for which I used them regularly: milk, the cheapest sweets, and the cheapest cigarettes.

However, in the shop on the other side of ours from the Jenkinsees they were standard currency. This sold women's

and girls' clothes, and everything in their display was priced at so many shillings and elevenpence three farthings. The idea was that if you bought something priced, as half their items seemed to be, at nineteen shillings and elevenpence three farthings, you got change from a pound. This shop had once been my grandmother's. She and my grandfather had run the two shops side by side, complementary in their merchandising for the two sexes, ready between them to clothe persons of all ages from the nape of the neck to the ankles. (Neither of them sold hats or shoes.) When my grandmother started to have children - two girls and two boys, one of whom died in infancy - she found it impossible to bring up a family while at the same time running a business separate from my grandfather's. So she sold it to an immigrant Jewish family whose name had been Zuckermann and was now Sugar. I vaguely remember an elderly couple who, by the time my memories begin, were semi-retired and took so little notice of me that I hardly knew them. The driving force of both family and shop was their grown-up daughter Doris. Nothing against the Sugars was ever said in my hearing, but I grew up realising that my family regarded them as selling shoddy stuff, and having shoddy attitudes, no longer providing for women a complement to our shop, where plenty of things cost less than a pound but a garment was more likely to be made of green cheese than to sell at nineteen shillings and elevenpence three farthings.

On the other side of Sugar's was a newspaper shop run by Jim Cohen and his wife Mabel. Everyone referred to this as Pemberton's, which was the name over the door, but the Pembertons had gone away for ever, and I never set eyes on them, though I often heard them talked about. Mabel Cohen was Mrs Pemberton's sister. Not only did the shop have to cope with a crack-of-dawn delivery of morning papers, but London at that time had three evening papers