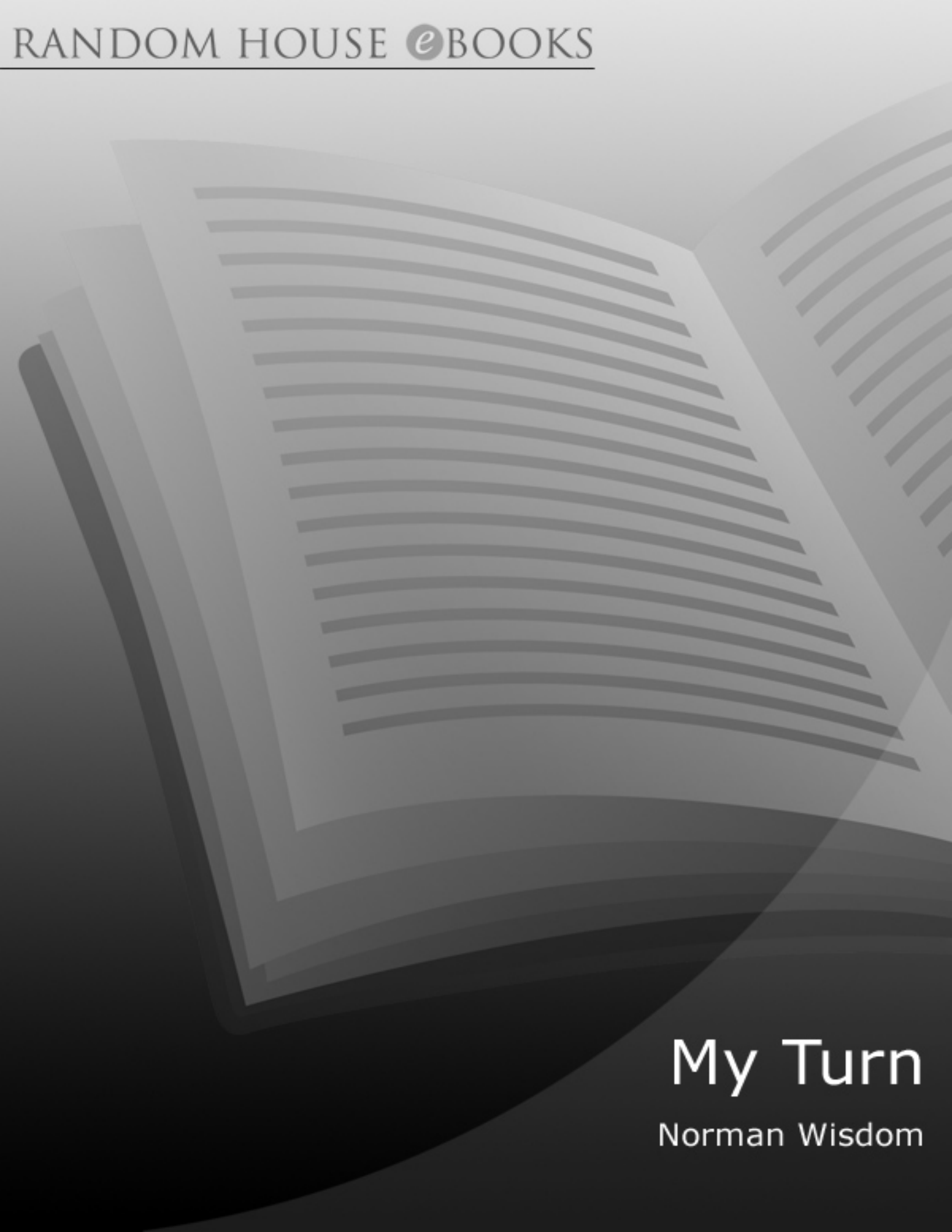


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My Turn

Norman Wisdom

MY TURN



Memoirs by
NORMAN WISDOM
with
WILLIAM HALL



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This is for my lovely Mum,
for my dear brother Fred,
and for my kids, Nick and Jackie

My Turn

William Hall, who assisted Norman Wisdom in the writing of his life story, is a biographer, broadcaster and critic. He is the author of more than a dozen biographies, including those of Michael Caine, James Dean, Frankie Howerd, Larry Adler and Dick Emery.

William Hall lives in London, and is currently writing his own autobiography.

I would like to thank Richard Dacre for the invaluable information contained in his book *Trouble in Store*, which helped me with the accuracy of this autobiography. I'd also like to thank my dear old army chum, Patrick Dickinson, for helping me with so many happy memories.

FOREWORD



I first saw Norman Wisdom at the Hippodrome, Brighton, after an urgent phone call from Billy Marsh, one of my associates for many years, sent me hurrying down on the train to catch the evening show. That was in March 1948.

Within minutes of seeing this extraordinary young comedian I knew I had to have him on my books. It marked the start of a long and fruitful association which has lasted to this day.

We are also great friends. Which is why I am particularly delighted that he has at last written his long awaited autobiography. With Norman, there is no generation gap. People of all ages warm to his unique appeal, and wonder at a talent that has taken him from the old variety days to ice-skating spectacles, lavish musicals and on to world-wide stardom in films that still bring laughter to millions.

He has reached the heights of comedy, and been compared to Chaplin. But for me, and I suspect for his fans all over the world, there can only be one Norman Wisdom.

I'm proud of him.

– BERNARD DELFONT

INTRODUCTION



Wednesday, 6 February 2002, 12.30pm. The Lancaster Room of the Savoy Hotel, London.

Six hundred of the great and the good, the creative artists, culture vultures and intellectuals, gather for the annual awards luncheon of the South Bank Show, that bastion of British culture which, this year, is a very special occasion indeed. It marks twenty-five seasons of the TV series that has written its own place into our national heritage as a reflection of the arts and culture of the country. A clutch of opera singers, conductors, painters, pianists, actors and ballet dancers mingle with TV's top brass.

So what is Norman Wisdom doing among the celebrated names filling the chandelier-hung banqueting room?

Answer: getting a standing ovation, that's what.

He threads his way through the tables on the way to the stage to shake hands with Melvyn Bragg, chairman of the judges, at the rostrum. Knight of Laughter meets Lord of the Arts.

It is turning out to be quite a week for Wisdom ('Don't call me Sir ... Norman's just fine!') Two days earlier he had packed his bags at his home on the Isle of Man to celebrate his 87th birthday with his family, flying in to be with them for an informal get-together. Nothing special, just a curry

from the local Indian take-away round the corner from his flat in Epsom, Surrey.

Now here he is, presenting the trophy for best comedy to Ricky Gervais for the popular BBC2 show *The Office* – and finding himself the only star to get people rising out of their seats to cheer him all the way to the stage.

At the star-studded champagne reception beforehand, celebrities such as Jane Asher, Honor Blackman, painter Frank Auerbach, Elvis Costello, Angus Deayton, opera legend Kiri Te Kanawa, Wayne Sleep, Ben Kingsley, Lynda La Plante, Johnny Vegas and Ken Russell smile across at him, wave or come over to shake his hand. Photographers crowd round.

Mel B passes by, stunning in a bright red dress. ‘Will you pose with Mel B?’ a photographer requests.

‘Sure,’ says Norman affably. ‘Where is he?’ Mel B tosses her dark locks and stalks off.

Just kidding. The Spice Girls adore Norman, or so they said when they all appeared together on a Des O’Connor Show, and he admits he rather fancies them. Which one? ‘All of them! Pity they had to split up.’

On the stage he pretends to trip, which has been expected of him ever since he did just that in front of the Queen when Her Majesty knighted him in Buckingham Palace the previous year. He gets the laugh. And he offers to sing *Don’t Laugh at Me* but, alas, explains Melvyn Bragg, the event is being televised and the clock says there isn’t time for unrehearsed songs, though a spot of ad-lib patter goes down well.

Shame, really. Our Norm is timeless, ageless, and the clock has yet to be invented that will curb his boundless enthusiasm.

Back at table 11, with more cheers and laughter following like an obedient bloodhound, he winks at me.

‘Did I do all right, then?’

Yes, Norman. You did.

Do you really need to ask?

William Hall, London 2002.

CHAPTER ONE



I was born in very sorry circumstances. Both my parents were very sorry! That's an old music hall gag, but in fact it wasn't very far from the truth.

When I talk about my childhood, friends inevitably compare me to Oliver Twist. And that wasn't so far from the truth, either.

I was actually born in Marylebone, London, on 4 February 1915. I've usually kept that date quiet. But now I'm getting on a bit, why not chance it and be honest! I weighed 7 lbs 2 oz at birth and as I grew up I was always small for my age.

My father Frederick was a chauffeur, and my mother Maude was a dressmaker at Nabob's in Curzon Street. She was pretty and petite, with warm brown eyes and a great sense of fun. She once made a dress for Queen Mary, and she was mighty proud of that. I would sit at her feet for hours in fascination just watching her sew and weave.

It was a small flat, just one bedroom on the ground floor of a run-down old house in West London, with a parlour, a small kitchen and a toilet - but no bathroom. We had to wash in the kitchen sink and take our baths in a tin tub in the parlour at the rear. The actual address was No. 91 Fernhead Road, Paddington. We all slept in that one

bedroom, my parents in a double bed, while I shared a single bed with my brother Fred, who was two years older.

Outside in the street the gleaming Daimler my Dad drove would be parked, but inside we were close to the poverty line. My father would repair my one pair of shoes by cutting up old tyres and glueing them to the soles. At least I was walking an inch taller. And that was before the bad times came.

It sounds unbelievable, but my first memory is of sitting on the stone steps outside the house looking up at the sky – this was during World War One – when suddenly an enormous German Zeppelin drifted silently into sight. It hovered there like a giant grey cigar, and my mouth must have been as wide open as my eyes as I gazed up at it in fascination.

Then my Mum came rushing out, scooped me up in her arms and ran back inside. I must have been about two years old.

In those early days our family life seemed quite normal, though I was aware that my parents seemed to quarrel a lot. What I didn't realise until later was that my father drank – and when he had a few he became a changed man. He was of average height, slim, but very strong, and when he came home in that condition my brother Fred and I took to our bed. He never hit Mum, but there were the most awful shouting matches that would leave her in tears. Father would storm out again to the Chippenham pub round the corner, and when the door slammed behind him, Fred and I would scramble out of bed and run to comfort Mum. The three of us would just hug each other. I must say my father didn't beat us, not then – but there are worse ways of destroying a family and abusing your children, as we would find out.

At the age of four I went to St Luke's Infant School up the road. I was in a striped jersey, short trousers and a coat with huge lapels. Mum dressed me the same as Fred, and

there was no doubt we were brothers as we walked hand in hand up the road with her for my first day at school – even down to the floppy hats we both wore. The only difference was that I was crying all the way. I didn't want to go to school.

It was a forbidding place, a large grimy Victorian institution with a playground surrounded by high iron railings. That first day was a raw January morning. There was no central heating, but my classroom had a small fire in a huge chimney place at the back of the room.

My teacher was a kindly middle-aged woman with her hair in a bun at the back. She took a small stool, led me over to the fireplace and sat me down behind the big brass fireguard in the hearth. There she allowed me to stay for the whole day – and the next. You could say I found myself warming to school life.

I tended to mix with boys older than myself, Fred's pals, and of course I was the smallest in the gang. They didn't call me Tich as you might expect – I was always Wizzie, a nickname that would stick with me right through my Army days. When they closed the gates on us after school the streets became our playground, with energetic games of football and cricket up against the wall of a builder's yard. Often our ball was just a lump of scrunched-up paper tied with string.

I was nine when the blow fell. Fred and I came home from school to find the flat oddly quiet. Father was sitting in the gloom in the parlour with the curtains drawn. His face was bleak – and he was stone cold sober. 'Your mother's gone,' he said simply, without any preamble.

We couldn't take it in at first. I didn't burst into tears, because I didn't understand it. Our Mum gone? Where? Why?

The 'why' was self-evident. In the next few months my father became more and more brutal towards us. The 'where' turned out to be in Willesden, where she had

turned for solace to another man whom she would later marry and happily settle down with for the rest of her life – but it meant she didn't get custody of us when my father divorced her.

Now came a period in our young lives that really could have come straight from the pages of a Dickens novel. Father started going away for long periods, leaving us totally alone and uncared for to fend for ourselves. Ostensibly his job as a chauffeur took him all over the country. At one point he got a job in Oban in Scotland with a family firm called Jasper Sinclair. But another time a letter from him dropped on to the mat out of the blue, together with a photograph – from Ceylon! Why he went there I never did find out, but I had a harsh reminder of his home-coming.

Up the road was a dairy called Welford's. When the sun shone they would pull down an awning to shield the milk and cream in the window. They were very tolerant of us kids, and didn't seem to mind that one of our games was to swing upside down on the steel bars at either end of the awning. A few days after the letter from Ceylon dropped through the letter box, I was larking about with my mates, hanging by my legs from the bar, swinging gently and laughing with them, when I saw a familiar figure striding up the street – familiar even though I was seeing him upside down.

'Hullo, Dad!' I called in surprise as he loomed nearer.

His slurred words gave no hint of what was to come: 'Why don't you learn to behave yourself?'

And as he walked past he clenched his fist – and *wham!* He slammed it into my stomach. I fell head first on to the pavement, half-stunned ... and watched dazed as his figure receded up the road. He didn't look round or say another word.

By now Fred and I were going to school barefoot. That was nothing unusual in those days and in that area of

extreme poverty and deprivation. It was only a quarter of a mile up the road, and your feet soon become hardened to the pavements.

We didn't tell any of the teachers when our father went away, because we were both too scared of what he would do to us when he came home. His behaviour became more aggressive as the months wore on. He never took a strap to us, but a clout round the earhole was a regular event. One day when he was in a foul mood, I said something that upset him. He picked me up bodily and threw me from one side of the parlour to the other. My head actually hit the ceiling before I came crashing down on to the sideboard. As I said, Dad was strong - and I was small. At least I was learning to fall.

Fred and I became street urchins, and the streets became not only our playground but our battleground for survival. Our mates were Wally and Arthur Noble and Johnny Taylor and his three brothers. Sometimes their parents would invite us home for tea, so we would get something to eat, ravenously gulping down bread and jam or cakes until we were stuffed.

But often it was either steal or starve. Our target became the street market in Harrow Road, where the traders sold everything from second-hand carpets to fruit and sweets. Greengrocers would display all their wares out on the pavement, which made them particularly easy pickings.

If I was Oliver Twist, then Fred was the Artful Dodger! We would stand close to the stalls with one of us holding out a newspaper to hide the hands of the other snatching the goodies. Best of all with the street traders, we would pretend to listen in admiration to their patter as we swiped the apples or oranges under their noses.

I became a specialist in eggs. You had to be particularly nimble and gentle in order not to leave a sticky yellow trail

as you made off, and I never broke a single egg. Nor, astonishingly, were we ever caught.

Another pastime which took up many happy hours was searching for fag ends in the gutters. I was smoking at the age of nine, but in the teeming working-class streets of the twenties, nobody took any notice or cared. The gang would collect fag ends from all along the streets. Then we would meet up by the builder's yard that also served as our cricket pitch (the lamp-post being the wicket), climb up over the eight-foot wall using each other's backs as stepping stones, and hand the filthy bits of tobacco around. We would then sit solemnly smoking them till we were blue in the face.

An unpleasant memento of that builder's yard has left its mark on me to this day. There were six-inch nails embedded into the top of the wooden gate and along the length of the wall to discourage kids like us getting over. One day our paper parcel football sailed over – and as usual I was delegated to retrieve it. I was just scrambling back with it when a policeman appeared at the end of the road. 'Oi, you kids!' he shouted.

The others scarpered for their lives. I was trapped. In desperation I hoisted myself over and jumped for it – only to feel a searing pain in my left hand and find that I was impaled on one of the nails. I actually hung there with my feet a yard above the ground as the policeman came pounding up. When he saw the blood flowing down my hand and staining the wall he grabbed me round the waist, and eased me up so that I was able to slide my hand free.

'Off with you, sonny,' he said. 'And get that hand seen to.'

I ran home to bathe it in hot water, lucky that it never became infected. I was even luckier my father was away.

In those times the police were extraordinarily tolerant of the noisy kids who ran riot in the streets. They had the

sense to herd us into nearby Queen's Park where we could get rid of our energy without the risk of being run over.

In fact, we often evaded them and enjoyed the street life, making nuisances of ourselves with our games of 'Chicken' - like running across the road in front of a car, or hanging on to the back of a bus and jumping off when the conductor came at you. Once I jumped off facing the wrong way, and nearly knocked myself out as I bashed my head on the tarmac and rolled into the gutter - more useful practice for the future!

One game that nearly went dreadfully wrong was when Fred balanced on a window ledge at least twenty feet above the ground while the other boys dared him to jump. I can still hear the others chanting: 'Windy, you haven't got the guts!'

But he had. Fred didn't answer, but I knew he would do it. He jumped - and hit the ground with a frightful thud. When he got up his eyes were staring, and he was bent double like a little old man as he limped away trying to disguise his pain. Oddly enough, I felt in some way it damaged his eyes - because after that they seemed to bulge out in a strange way. I suppose he was lucky he didn't break his back - but sadly it led to a glandular problem later on in life.

It was a tough area, and as well as being street-smart we had to be prepared to stand up for ourselves.

One day after school Fred got into a brawl with a boy who was much bigger than he was. It started out as a quarrel over some sweets, then two more lads joined in and started hitting Fred really hard. A ring of shouting youngsters formed round them - until without thinking I burst through, laying into the bullies with fists and feet for all I was worth.

When I came round I was on my brother's back being carted off home - but I was the hero of the hour. I found out that the biggest bloke had thumped me once and knocked

me clean out, which scared all the others into stopping the fight.

It taught me one important lesson, even at that young age: I always believe that if you're being bullied – hit out once, smack him on the nose, get one in. He may half kill you, but he won't pick on you again. Sometimes you've got to take a chance, risk getting hurt. Up to then a lot of the lads had picked on me from time to time because I was the little fellow. But after that day word spread round the school, and from then on both Fred and I were left in peace. I reckon it was worth the headache!

We never had any toys, not even a teddy bear. The first and only one that came my way was when I reached the age of ten. Mum had been seeing us secretly, perhaps half a dozen times in a year, suddenly appearing at the school gates just to take my hand and reassure me she was there, and thinking of us even if she couldn't get nearer than a kiss outside the playground.

She would say: 'Don't tell your Dad, whatever you do.' But once she brought me a small pedal cycle, a present for my tenth birthday, and the first thing I had ever owned in my life. I took it home in triumph, pedalling away like mad along the pavement. My father saw it that evening when he came in from work – via the pub.

'Where did you get that?'

I forgot my mother's advice. 'Mum gave it to me. For my birthday.' Before I had finished my father grabbed it in one hand – and smashed it against the wall. Then he threw it on the carpet and stamped on it till it was bent and mangled. My tears of protest meant nothing.

I made my second mistake when I picked up the battered bike and tried to mend it. My fingers became caught in the chain, and started bleeding. In the end I gave up and went indoors to the sink to wash off the blood.

Father said: 'How did you do that?'

'I'm trying to repair my bike,' I told him - and *wallop!* His hand exploded against my jaw. Dad believed in rough, instant justice ... The sad thing is, looking back, I can honestly say that I never got any love from my father, ever.

I stayed at St Luke's School until I was ten and a half, and although I did not exactly excel in the academic area I was able to hold my corner. My headmaster was Mr Hill - do we ever know our teachers' Christian names? Mr Hill cut an impressive figure, rather like Arthur Lowe in Dad's Army - haughty, small of stature, always impeccable in a long jacket, grey trousers and a top hat.

One day another boy gave me a great big sweet, a real gob-stopper. I put it in my mouth, and was happily sucking away when Mr Hill suddenly took it on himself to inquire: 'Wisdom, are you eating, boy?'

All I could answer was: 'Mmmpph.'

'Open your mouth!' he ordered.

He actually put his fingers into my mouth, pulled out the offending sweet, and flung it on the fire. At four o'clock when the bell rang for the end of lessons I waited for the classroom to empty before quietly going over to the fire to rake among the cinders and rescue my half-chewed gob-stopper. I washed it under the tap, then thoroughly enjoyed it.

St Luke's was a mixed school. When I was feeling hungry I would raid the girls' cookery class on the first floor and scrounge the remnants of their culinary endeavours. Sometimes it tasted awful - but when your stomach's rumbling you don't stop to ask too many questions. At least it was something to eat.

As soon as I was old enough to realise the value of money I started running errands. We kids would roam over a wide area, from Kilburn all the way down to Hyde Park. We also soon found our way into Paddington Station, where we would carry passengers' bags for a few pennies.

On Saturday mornings we would walk across half of London to the British Museum. We could get in for nothing, and spent hours wandering around staring at objects that made my young mind boggle. It was on one of these outings that I stumbled on a novel idea for making money. I was dashing across Bayswater Road when I ran straight into a bicycle being sedately ridden by a well-dressed lady in a wide-brimmed hat. I was knocked flying – and somehow my ear got caught in the spokes of the spinning front wheel as I lay in the road!

My pathetic yells of pain filled the air, and the lady was crying too, obviously concerned for me. ‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, and fished in her handbag to produce a sixpenny coin. ‘Please take this. I hope you’ll be all right.’

Sixpence in those days could buy a lot of sweets. I treated my mates to bullseyes and ice-cream, and became extremely popular. For the next few weeks I spent Saturday mornings running across Bayswater Road whenever a cyclist appeared, trying to get knocked down. Finally a policeman appeared and grabbed me by the collar.

‘I’ve been watching you,’ he said. ‘Just what do you think you’re trying to do?’

Meekly I told him the truth. ‘I’m trying to earn some money.’ He gave me a quiet kick up the backside and told me to get moving and not show my face there again.

This guttersnipe life went on for almost two years. Finally my father came to his senses and realised his sons were turning into vagrants. He placed us into the care of guardians who had a farm in Roe Green, in what is now the green belt of Hertfordshire. The family’s name was Denmark, and a whole new vista of country life opened out for us, totally removed from the squalor of the city streets.

Fred and I helped milk the cows and feed the goats. The farm was a noisy, squawking mass of cattle, goats, chickens and ducks. One odd memory I retain is of putting my small

hand inside a cow's mouth and feeling its rough tongue sucking on it!

Our local school at Hatfield was three miles away, which meant an early start each morning. I loved it, gulping down my breakfast so that I could set off across the fields with Fred – in fact we would always run rather than walk, for the sheer joy of it, in a daily race to the school gates.

Fred invariably won. Two years makes a lot of difference at that age. School broke up at four o'clock, and I would start before him across the fields, and look over my shoulder to find Fred panting along behind me, determined to catch up. If he thought I was going to win he would, in fun of course, grab me by my jersey collar and trip me and send me sprawling before racing on with a loud horse laugh.

There was one master at that school who took an intense dislike to me, and took a sadistic delight in making me squirm. He was a big man with thick black eyebrows and a nasty expression that seemed to blend into his face. He used a heavy old-fashioned round ruler to keep us in check, and he would stalk up and down the classroom and tap a boy sharply on the head if he thought the lad was not paying attention. One morning I was silly enough to answer him back, and, when he beckoned me up to the front of the class, I knew I was in for it.

'Hold out your hand,' he commanded. When I obeyed he lashed out with the ruler. The pain was almost unbearable, but I didn't utter a sound or shed a tear. Almost immediately the hand began to swell, and became puffy and red. He had broken my finger – and the bone on my right forefinger has been weak ever since.

I managed to stammer: 'Can I go to the lavatory please, sir?'

When I got there I caved in and cried. Nobody else ever knew. The only good thing was that the teacher realised he had gone too far, and never hit me again.

In truth, Fred and I were a couple of little devils. We would go scrumping for apples in local orchards. But unlike in the Harrow Road street markets, we would get caught time and again by the enraged owners, who would grab us by the ear or collar and march us back to our guardians. After six months the Denmarks couldn't stand our bad behaviour any more. They sent a message to our Dad, who had to come and take us away and find new guardians for us.

Another reason for our short-lived stay turned out to be that Father had fallen behind with the weekly fee of five shillings apiece for our board and keep. So with a lot of heartache my brother and I turned our backs on the delights of the countryside and headed for Deal in Kent.

We were starting to feel like gypsies. Father found us fresh guardians, a coal-mining family in a pleasant little house in Isleworth Walk, a quaint alley-way off the main street. They soon found that the pair of us were too much to handle, but at least they were more tolerant than our previous custodians. They kept my brother – and slung me out!

By good fortune I ended up in the care of a Mr and Mrs Blanche who lived nearby in a small house in Downs Road, Walmer.

By now I was learning better manners. There were no social workers in those days, and if we were a nuisance, our temporary keepers simply threw us out. The Blanches stood no nonsense, and I would get a swift clip round the head if I was cheeky. They were firm but fair. So fair that when eventually my father failed to come up with the payments they still allowed me to stay on, for free.

That picturesque old Cinque port would become a focal point of my life, with its bracing sea air, colourful timbered streets and a sense of permanence I had never really felt till then.

There was also a busy little railway station where I found I could earn a bob or two carrying passengers' luggage. Everyone had been in too much of a hurry at Paddington Station to make the job worthwhile, but in the sedate atmosphere of Deal it seemed much more promising. And so it turned out to be: on my first morning I went down to the station and carried four bags, calling it a day when the last passenger gave me the unheard-of tip of a shilling. I was getting rich! But other times I carried two cases fully half a mile for fourpence; so it evened up in the end. My method was simple:

I hung around the station until a train came in, then darted up the platform searching out the pale, weaker looking passengers I could approach with a cheery: 'Carry your bag, sir (or ma'am)?'

Canada Road School, where the Blanches sent me, was a much happier place than either St Luke's or Hatfield. I found I was becoming skilled at painting and sketching, and even won a prize for a water-colour of a landscape.

Even better from my point of view was that the school was mad on sports. Several of my pals were the sons of Royal Marines stationed at the local depot, and they were able to use the barracks gymnasium for nothing. I became crazy about sport in no time at all. I was never a great academic – but I was the keenest sportsman in the school.

I was actually starting to enjoy school. In fact, I had never been happier in all my childhood. I joined the Sea Scouts, and along with the other lads I built up my arm and shoulder muscles rowing the long-boat around Deal sea front.

One day I was walking home in my Sea Scouts uniform after a meeting, and on the quayside I came across a group of people milling around a camera on a tripod, with lights and steel boxes. It was a film unit, and the place was awash with actors and extras. They were filming a scene around the Walmer Lifeboat, and nobody seemed to mind when I

hung around, fascinated at the bustle and confusion of my first glimpse of show-business.

I ran home to tell Mrs Blanche. 'Could I stay out and watch them tonight?' I pleaded.

'Certainly not,' she said briskly. 'It's bed for you at the usual time.'

I climbed into my pyjamas, and got into bed. Mrs Blanche saw me safely tucked in – and I waited a whole hour before I slipped out of bed and quietly got dressed again. My room was on the first floor. I clambered out of the window and hung from the sill by my finger-tips before letting go and plummeting into a flower bed.

On the quayside they were night shooting a storm scene, with a rain machine sending squalls of water into the faces of the men in the lifeboat as it rocked up and down in the sea. The film crew were so friendly they even offered me tea and sandwiches in their break. I stayed there all night, and it remains one of the great nights of my life, as vivid now as it was then.

Somewhere around 7.30 in the morning I crawled home – and to my horror found Mr and Mrs Blanche up and about in the kitchen. With typical schoolboyish enthusiasm, I hadn't actually given any thought as to how I was going to get back into my room.

I tapped timidly at the back door, and the pair of them gazed down at me incredulously. 'Where on earth have you been?' boomed Mr Blanche.

'Down at the harbour,' I owned up. 'Watching them film –'

Mr and Mrs Blanche almost elbowed each other out of the way to see who could get to me first. Mrs Blanche won. 'You disobedient little devil!' she yelled. And – *Whack!* My ear stung. But it was worth it.

I expanded the scope of my odd jobs. A newspaper round brought in one shilling and sixpence a week, but lasted less than a month after I stayed away with a chill. On

Saturdays I ran errands for a butcher, rarely finishing before eight o'clock at night, but earning half a crown for my time.

When I left school at fourteen I became a full-time delivery boy for a local china shop, with a barrow load of cups, saucers, plates and ornaments I would take from the warehouse to the shop. I walked v-e-r-y carefully, and never dropped or broke a single plate. For this I was paid a handsome ten shillings a week - and handed over 9/6d to the Blanches. It seemed fair. After all, they had looked after me for so long - for nothing. In retrospect, I suppose this can be seen as acclimatizing me to the rigours of the tax man in later years. In those days it just meant that I stayed poor.

By now I couldn't wait to get a better job. A month later a vacancy came up a few doors down the High Street at Lipton's the Grocers on the corner of Park Street, and I was round within minutes of hearing about it. To my delight a bicycle went with the job. A plate under the crossbar displayed the famous name, and in front of the handlebars was a basket for the deliveries.

The manager, an angular man with a pencil moustache, took one look at me, and didn't seem to like what he saw. 'A little small, aren't you?' he said, looking from me to the bicycle and back. He was right. When he stood back to supervise my riding test I found to my horror that I couldn't reach the pedals. Thinking quickly I shifted from the saddle to the crossbar, and just managed to get a foothold. The manager looked dubious, but he agreed to give me a try.

The streets of Deal became a race-track, with every delivery a personal challenge to see how fast I could get there and back. Soon I achieved the reputation of being the fastest errand boy in town, bar none.

In the next six weeks my fame spread. One day I was riding up the High Street when the manager of the Home and Colonial, the great rival to Lipton's, stepped out from

the pavement and signalled me to stop. 'How would you like to come and work for me?' he asked.

I said: 'How much will you pay me?'

He said: 'How much are you earning now?'

I said: 'Ten shillings a week, sir.'

He said: 'I'll give you twelve shillings.'

I hurried in to the manager at Lipton's and blurted out: 'I've been offered twelve shillings a week by the manager of the Home and Colonial.'

He looked up. I noticed that his moustache was quivering. He said: 'All right, I'll give you twelve.'

I rushed to the far end of the High Street and burst in on the manager of the Home and Colonial. 'Sorry, sir,' I said. 'The manager at Lipton's is offering me twelve shillings.'

He said: 'All right, I'll make it fourteen.'

By now I was getting to realise the value of competitive negotiation, so I belted back to Lipton's.

'The manager of the Home and Colonial says he'll pay me fourteen shillings a week.' Breathless and confident, I waited for the next offer.

The manager of Lipton's looked at me, and said: 'All right, shove off!' And that was the end of that.

On my new Home and Colonial bicycle I pedalled the country roads around Deal, whistling cheerily as I took deliveries to farms and villages within a five-mile radius of the town. The crunch came six weeks later when Home and Colonial bought a brand new delivery van – and I was out of work.

So much for a fourteen-year-old entrepreneur trying to better himself.

CHAPTER TWO



It was time for a change. I called in at the Deal Labour Exchange.

After a lot of riffling through papers, an official said: 'Like to try your hand at being a commie-waiter? Nice place called the Artillery Mansions Hotel.'

He then broke the news that it was in London.

I took the train to London on a ticket bought by the Labour Exchange. All my belongings were crammed into one very small case, but my step was light as I made my way to Victoria Street, and I was looking forward to a new start and a new challenge.

I was taken on as an apprentice at twelve shillings a week, and was given a small room of my own about the size of a boot-box with a bed, a chair and a wash-basin. They also decked me out in a waiter's uniform. As I adjusted my bow tie in the mirror, I couldn't help thinking I'd come up in the world from a barefoot urchin scrounging in the gutter for fag ends, and I determined that I would look as well-groomed as possible.

I was living in, eating well for free, sleeping in a comfortable bed, and had more money than I knew what to do with. Twelve bob seemed to go a long way, and at the end of my first week I thought I would show off a bit. I bought myself a second hand navy blue suit with a double-