

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



The Lights of Manchester

Tony Warren

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About the Author

Tony Warren is a former actor who turned into Britain's youngest scriptwriter. In 1960 he created *Coronation Street* and wrote all the early episodes. He also devised the film *Ferry 'Cross the Mersey*. At the end of the 60s he disappeared from the public eye, though the following decade of drink and drug addiction has been well chronicled by the tabloid newspapers. He abandoned these addictions over ten years ago. *The Lights of Manchester* represents his first piece of major creative writing since his recovery. Nowadays Tony Warren is consultant to *Coronation Street* and lives in Manchester.

THE LIGHTS OF MANCHESTER

Tony Warren



arrow books

For Mary Redman with love

Author's note

Angel Dwellings is not *Coronation Street*. Sorrel Starkey is no actress I have ever known. I am not Mickey Grimshaw. Manchester *is*, I hope, Manchester.

Tony Warren

BOOK ONE

SHEILA INTO SORREL

Prologue

You're nowt a pound, in Manchester, if the flower seller in St Ann's Square doesn't nod as you pass. This morning he waved. Heads turned to look at the object of his interest just as people will bend and peer to see who is inside a passing Rolls-Royce.

Sorrel Starkey did not mind this attention. She had not gone into showbusiness to pass unnoticed. Manchester was welcome to stare as much as it liked, for Manchester had made her.

Sorrel paused and looked at her own reflection in Mappin and Webb, the jeweller's, window. Did it show? The happiness inside her was so new and so strong that she felt it should be shining out of her, like a searchlight. Once in a lifetime, everybody should be allowed to feel like this. She felt in tune with the entire world and her feet were on the pavements of the city she loved most on earth.

Sorrel's reflection shone back at her. It was very difficult to put an age on it: slim enough, elegant enough and she had been wise to let the hair go to ash blonde. The face was still all eyes but it didn't shout too loudly of plastic surgeons. She looked what she was, a queen of television soap opera.

With the sun still shining, light snow began to fall as she passed into King Street. Laura Ashley and Next, it could have been any prosperous shopping thoroughfare in England - except for the collapsible music stands on every corner. These are one of the hazards of Christmas shopping in Manchester and one of its delights. Students from three colleges of music fill the air with carols. Solitary oboists in

doorholes, brass ensembles outside the Royal Exchange – the chances are that some of the voices raised in song will end up in the great opera houses of the world. This was not, it seemed, one of the years when the police were willing to tolerate the musicians.

‘Now I’m not going to tell you lot again. Move on.’

‘Don’t be so mean,’ said Sorrel, who had not always been a famous lady in a thousand-pound cashmere coat. She too had been ragged-arsed but merry. She thrust a fiver into a tin can and smiled at the four musicians who looked like intelligent Hell’s Angels carrying silver trumpets.

Had been merry? *Had* been? As some unseen hand switched on the overhead Christmas illuminations and the snow sparkled past the coloured light bulbs, Sorrel stifled the urge to say: ‘You don’t know it but you are looking at the luckiest woman on earth.’

‘I’m only doing my job, Lettie,’ said the policeman anxiously to Sorrel as he pointed to the students of music.

‘I am not Lettie,’ the actress replied patiently. ‘Lettie Bly is a character I have played, for twenty-eight long years, on television. This is real life.’

‘I’m sorry, Miss Starkey,’ said the policeman. Lettie Bly or Sorrel Starkey, the wrath of either was famous. Not for nothing did her enemies call her Madam Manchester.

‘Look, you lads, I’m going once round the block, once mind you, and when I come back...’ The policeman winked at Sorrel.

‘What’s going to happen in *Angel Dwellings*, Lettie?’ asked the trumpet student with the shaved head.

‘Keep watching every Tuesday and Thursday and please don’t play the theme music.’

All grins, with one accord they raised their instruments and broke into ‘Tenement Symphony’.

‘Bastards,’ said Sorrel. But she said it with love. Long experience also caused her to glance around. It would only

take one person to ask for an autograph for half the street to come running.

A woman smiled at her, nodded across the road and said, 'I see our celebrities are out in force this morning.' She was beaming in the direction of a portly man tipping his suede trilby hat politely at Sorrel.

It was Bryan Mosley, Alf Roberts from *Coronation Street*. Sorrel waved back. These days there was little rivalry between the two shows. Both were institutions in their own right. But what was Bryan pointing at?

King Street is a paved walkway so it was easy to cross over and join him. Sorrel reminded herself that she must, for the moment, keep her new happiness and excitement to herself. The casts of television serials are like families. It wouldn't do for her news to get round the *Coronation Street* set before anybody knew in *Angel Dwellings*.

"Ow do," said Bryan, still pointing significantly up the street and looking at her expectantly.

'Mornin', love,' replied Sorrel. In private life with one another, Manchester actors always overdo the Lancashire accent. Actually, Bryan was Yorkshire which was another reason why she didn't want to seem thick. So what the hell was she supposed to be noticing?

'He's spotted you now. He's putting on a turn of speed,' said Bryan Mosley, like some racing commentator.

Sorrel heard flying footsteps getting closer and her first thought was that a mugger was on the loose. Then she saw him. A tall man, with a very short haircut and a very large tweed overcoat, scattering indignant shoppers as he rushed towards her with arms outstretched. It was Mickey Grimshaw, the biggest single influence in Sorrel Starkey's whole life. Her best friend too and she hadn't seen him for a long time.

'Thought you'd be pleased,' said Bryan. 'Happy birthday. See you both at the jollifications.'

Now Mickey had his arms around her and they were in a great big tweed and cashmere hug. They were both laughing and Sorrel feared for her makeup because she was crying a bit too but these were happy tears. They were hugging in a way which makes being in the theatre different from being in any other business on earth. Though television had brought them both success they still thought of themselves as of the theatre. There was belonging in this reunion and shared striving and memories of younger years when mutual affection had been all they'd had. Yet they didn't hold one another like people who had been lovers. Whatever it was they shared was something way above physical attraction.

Sorrel loved Mickey and Mickey loved Sorrel and it infuriated people that these two parts of an obvious whole had never married. Sorrel would have viewed such a union as incestuous; besides, Mickey wasn't the marrying kind.

'You bought a ticket and came. Oh Mickey, you came.' It was Mickey who had originally dreamed up *Angel Dwellings* and given her the part of Lettie Bly but they had known one another far longer than that.

'All the way from America. Happy birthday to us. What's more, I've flown in with hot news ...'

'It can't be as hot as my news,' said Sorrel a bit smugly.

'When I've come to change your life?'

Sorrel pulled away from him and looked worried. This was the one morning of a lifetime when she wanted things exactly as they were. No changes; none at all. Mickey could be loving and giving and he could also be totally disruptive. Newspapers were prone to describe him as 'Sorrel Starkey's personal Svengali'. She knew that look of old. As a boy, he had always reminded her of a young eagle. Mickey had come back to Manchester with his mind made up about something.

The snow was turning to sleet and whoever it was who switched on the overhead lights must have decided that the

Christmas dress rehearsal had gone on for long enough, for now they went out. It was everyday King Street again and it was cold.

Sorrel put up her collar. 'Let me tell you my news ...' She hadn't told a soul. She had meant this first announcement to be triumphant, not a defence measure.

'Me first. Have *you* spent a whole month convincing American Actors' Equity that a certain British actress is a big enough star to come out to LA and play the lead in my brand-new American series?' Mickey was ablaze with triumph.

'Let's go to Meng and Ecker and have a cup of coffee,' said Sorrel nervously.

'Dear God in heaven!' roared Mickey. 'I offer the woman Hollywood and all she can think about is morning coffee ...'

'I don't know that I want to go to America,' said Sorrel in a wretched voice which gave little indication of the turmoil whirring within. 'Hollywood, and he means it. Hollywood at this late date.' Manchester was all of her belonging, now more than ever. But Hollywood with Mickey ... That would be another of their childhood dreams come true. She felt awful. It was like thinking with two heads.

'We're going to have an enormous success,' said Mickey, as if that was that. 'I need you. They're even prepared to buy out your *Angel Dwellings* contract. It's the best woman's part I've ever written and I need you. We go back, Sorrel ...'

'I hate that expression,' Sorrel interrupted him. 'I don't know why but I hate it.'

In truth she feared it. In a minute he could be saying something he'd never said. In a minute 'We go back' could turn into 'You owe me'. And it would be no less than the truth.

'Tell me your own news.' His eyes were not unkind but Sorrel knew Mickey through and through. In this mood he would take anything she said and use it to shore up his own

inexorable purpose. Even Mickey Grimshaw wasn't having her happiness for that.

'Not here, Mick. Not out in the wet.'

'Then let's go and have that coffee then. You'd better be warned though; I haven't come all this way to let you stamp on yet another opportunity. Not this time. And stop looking at me as though I was the enemy. You couldn't manage a flea circus, Sorrel - let alone your own life. And don't look magnificently hurt either. I know all your tricks. I taught you half of them myself. Come to think about it, I'm probably about the only one left who remembers you when you were still called *Sheila* Starkey.'

1

IN 1944 SHEILA Starkey was eight years old. She was constantly assured, at Sunday school, that Jesus loved her. The only proof she had of this was that he certainly seemed to have spread out her treats, very considerately, over the year. Sheila's birthday always came absolutely midway between two Christmases. A month after her birthday, life took another exciting leap when Sheila and her mother went away on their annual holiday.

As the train chugged across Lancashire the wheels seemed to be saying 'See you today, see you today, see you today.' It was like that woman on the wireless who was always singing that she was going to see somebody today and she was treading on air and the people that she met, as she hurried down the street, seemed to know she was on her way ... *coming to you*. It was exactly how Sheila felt about Blackpool.

The journey had its rituals. She never counted herself as truly on holiday until she'd seen the two men, in the field, carrying the ladder. This was a life-sized, painted plywood cut-out. It advertised The Leyland Paint Co. To a whole generation of Lancashire children that ladder was an arrow pointing to a week of magic; or even a fortnight if you were a little bit on the posh side, like the Starkeys.

Their compartment was in a carriage near to the front of the train. It had faded blue moquette upholstery which smelled of ancient cigarette smoke. The same smell which sometimes hit you if you were first in at the pictures, before the usherettes came round spraying everything with 'June'.

Sheila associated the smell of old cigarette smoke with approaching excitements.

Above the seats were framed sepia photographs. This year they were of Hunstanton and Gorleston-on-Sea. Why were they always places in the opposite direction to which the train was travelling? Always; still, they were confirmation that everything was as it should be. Now Sheila was looking out of the window for the biggest landmark of all, Blackpool Tower.

People who didn't know better would point to some iron pylon, on the horizon, and think they'd succeeded in spotting it. Not Sheila; she knew exactly where the first glimpse came. It was between some hawthorn hedges, at the side of a five-barred gate. Only, this year, they were towards the front of the train and great clouds of steam kept passing the window and obscuring the view ... and there, gloriously, it was; shining in the sunlight. Just as suddenly it was gone again.

'I claim the sixpence,' yelled Sheila triumphantly. 'Shh,' said her mother, out of the side of her mouth. 'We're in first class.'

The other passengers smiled and Sheila wasn't sure whether it was at herself or her mother. Privately, she considered her mother a woman capable of stopping birds from singing. But that didn't mean she wanted other people laughing at her. A man in an officer's uniform, topped off with a parson's dog collar, fished in his pocket and handed Sheila a silver sixpence.

'How you took me back,' he smiled. 'We always claimed sixpence, for being first to see the tower, when I was small.'

Sheila watched her mother relax. If posh parsons did it, it must be OK. They were only in first class because Sheila's father was also an officer and the travel warrant for their journey had allowed them to travel in these privileged seats for the same price as the third-class fare.

Mostly Sheila wished she wasn't an officer's daughter. It set her aside from other children at the council school. Everybody at school had a label and hers was 'Always in concerts. Her daddy's an officer.' There was a downright sneer in the choice of the title *Daddy*. The others had dads and warm, rounded mums who met them with hugs at the school gates. Honesty forced Sheila to admit that her own mother was outside the gates too. But thrust a lovingly painted picture at her and she would just fold it up like something that didn't matter - creases right down the middle. Gladys Starkey was also given to picking imaginary bits of fluff off Sheila's good reefer coat, a garment that drew sniggers in the school playground. Other children wore wartime reach-me-downs. Mrs Starkey hoarded clothing coupons in order to be able to send her daughter to school dressed like an imitation Princess Margaret Rose.

It seemed to Sheila that her mother was, hourly, expecting General Montgomery to turn up at their house and inspect them. Was she scared the General would discover that the wife and child of one of his officers were not quite the genuine article? Loudly as Mrs Starkey protested about the long enforced separation from her husband, Sheila knew his wife was relieved that he was being an officer at a distance. This meant that she didn't have to go to high-class do's where she might show Captain Starkey up. Quite what these do's were Sheila didn't know. She was, however, instinctive enough to realize that Gladys Starkey's fears were entirely groundless. With her looks and candour Sheila's mother could have held her own in Buckingham Palace.

Gladys Starkey looked a bit like Bette Davis but it would have taken Technicolor to do her real justice. The hair was dark red against white skin and her eyes were green. Not halfway green but genuine green, like a sucked Rowntree's wine gum, only beautiful.

The ten o'clock was a fast train. It sped past the windmills on The Fylde and Sheila's heart beat faster at the first glimpse, through sandhills, of the Big Dipper on the Pleasure Beach. She always felt that the approach to Blackpool North station was heralded by trumpets in words. These were painted onto the sooty brickwork of boarding houses backing onto the railway line.

Holmleigh - Friendly and Comfortable. 'Maybert' (Visitors from Oldham Especially Welcome) Mrs Tinsley - Boarding Establishment - Thirty Shillings per week: 'All Found'.

The train was grinding to a halt with an iron noise like twenty squealing dogs. Sheila and her mother were already on their feet and making for the corridor. First class not being chatty there were no goodbyes but Sheila managed to smile at the parson who understood about the sixpence.

The station's great span of glass archway had been blacked out with paint for the duration of the war. The only illumination came from dim gas mantles against sign boards and the occasional naked electric bulb, high up above. Sheila already had the door window down. Huge belches of steam, notorious for carrying blobs of soot and big bits of grit, were pumping back from the engine. Sheila found it all wonderfully exciting.

Slipping into a familiar routine, she held onto her mother's hand as they descended from the wooden running board onto the platform. Together they ran for the barrier. Their one passionate aim was to get to the top of the taxi queue before anybody else. That's why their luggage was always sent on ahead by Carter Paterson's van.

Getting through the ticket barrier was easy enough but the main booking hall was crammed solid with soldiers and airmen and snaking queues of families sitting on their own suitcases. The sight of returning holidaymakers always made Sheila feel temporarily sad, Their fun was over whilst hers was just beginning - and they were singing 'It's a

Long Way to Tipperary', which somehow made things even worse.

Now they were through the crush and outside. The gloom of the station and its dank smell gave way to brilliant sunshine and giddy Blackpool air. There was a breeze coming in from the sea. Sheila filled her lungs with air that was newer than the air in Manchester but already, excitingly, mingled with the aromas of chip-shop vinegar and beerhouses with their doors open.

The tower was very near now and absolutely enormous. Only minutes ago it had been like a sharpened pencil on the horizon. Now its maroon-painted cast-iron rigging seemed to reach up into the air for miles. Getting to heaven must be a bit like this, thought Sheila. What's more they were right at the head of the taxi queue and there was one coming up from the seafront. This should surely put her mother in a good mood?

'When the papers fly round in Blackpool,' said Gladys Starkey, 'it's a sure sign it's going to rain.'

The taxi carried them up the back road, behind the big hotels which fronted onto the promenade, and on towards the Derby Baths. All the larger hotels had been requisitioned by government departments and turned into temporary offices.

'Funny to think of the income tax being in Blackpool, isn't it?' said Mrs Starkey conversationally to the driver.

The driver was plainly the kind who liked talking over his shoulder. 'We've had the lot here. Everything from cockney evacuees to Yanks. Polish airforce, they're the latest. Blackpool? Some afternoons that Tower Ballroom's more like the League of Nations.' Then he mentioned something puzzling about the birthrate. Mrs Starkey stiffened at this and plainly went off him.

The taxi was turning into Balsam Road and Sheila experienced that wonderfully complete feeling of being at the right time in the right place. Nothing had altered since

last year. Balsam Road was terraced. But terraced in a lofty Edwardian, glazed red brick trimmed with sandstone, manner. Each house had a short front garden. The iron railings had of course been taken away, when Sheila was still a baby, to be turned into armaments.

French marigolds, white rock and blue lobelia - all the garden paths were edged with little clumps of these same flowers. Sheila was checking her landmarks; plumes of pampas grass in the garden of one house, a stained-glass window, decorated with a bunch of purple grapes, set into the front door of another. Many of the doors were covered with faded curtains of striped deckchair canvas. This was to prevent the paintwork from blistering. Gloss paint was as scarce as sugar. All of these houses were boarding establishments but there wasn't so much as a *No Vacancies* card, in a front window, to suggest it. This was, after all, North Shore. Why, it was almost Bispham. It went without saying that wet bathing costumes were never hung out of the window to dry in Balsam Road.

Not that Balsam Road swanked. Number 28 may have had *Juliana* chiselled into the stone gatepost but it was always known to paying guests as 'Mr Tuffin's'. And there he was on the front doorstep, big and bald with muscular arms folded over a generous belly. Seaside landladies' husbands were said to go down into the cellar at Whitsuntide, begin peeling potatoes, and never see the light of day again until October. Not Mr Tuffin. His wife only had one eye and she walked with a stick so her husband ran number 28 himself. And he ran it with a rod of iron.

As Sheila and Gladys emerged from the taxi Mr Tuffin already had one hand outstretched: 'Ration books please.'

Sheila flew up the garden path and flung herself at him with love. Mr Tuffin affected a very gloomy disposition but she knew that this was an act, designed to conceal a warm heart. His apron smelled of the same bleach he used to

scrub down the kitchen. Sheila knew the kitchen well. Starkeys were privileged guests who were allowed behind the green baize door, to help with the washing-up. This was a signal honour at Mr Tuffin's.

'Have you got Polish airmen?' asked Sheila excitedly. 'We've just heard they're the latest.' All holiday landlords were expected to take their quota of billetees.

'Guinea pigs,' said Mr Tuffin. 'Morning, Mrs Starkey. Your luggage is upstairs. I'm just saying we've been landed with guinea pigs. Civil servants. The government pays me a guinea a week.'

'Aren't there any real visitors?' Sheila asked anxiously.

'Too many,' said Mr Tuffin dourly. 'One more season and I'm shutting shop.'

He always said that. It was all gloriously familiar. The same people tended to take the same rooms for the same weeks each year. The varnished paper sunshade was still in the hallstand, the garden chairs were stacked in the recess behind the door. Buckets and spades and paddling shoes had to be left there too.

'All the regulars here?' asked Mrs Starkey.

'Not Mrs Gash. She's gone to God. None too soon if you ask me. Mr Gash must have got nearly sick of waiting for her.'

'I put clean sheets in our luggage,' said Mrs Starkey. 'I know the war's put a great strain on your own.'

'Can I go and get Dinah?' asked Sheila.

Dinah had belonged to Mr Tuffin's married daughter. As Mrs Starkey never allowed Sheila to pack her teddybear, she always borrowed this black plush doll.

'Bit of a problem there. A boy's already got it.'

'A boy? What sort of boy?' Disbelief and jealousy were mixed in Sheila's question.

'Manners!' said her mother warningly.

'A rum sort of boy and no mistake. They're new people. Always went across the road to Mrs Mather but she's

chock-a-block with landgirls. I'm only obliging. The mother's the size of a gasometer.'

Mrs Starkey handed over their ration books and asked, 'Are we in our usual rooms?'

'No. I've put her and the boy in there. Wasn't giving you the chance to go putting a towel over my good Jesus picture again.' This was said with narrowed eyes.

So he knew about the towel. Sheila's mother had said he would be bound to find out. The Tuffins were a bit High Church. The framed picture in question was of the face of Jesus. An inscription on the mount read *St Peter's Pocket Handkerchief: Gaze into the eyes of our Lord and they will follow you around the room.*

It even watched you while you got undressed. It terrified Sheila so her mother had covered it up with a little handtowel. It was all part of the holiday, though. Why should this new boy have the scary picture as well as having Dinah? It wasn't fair.

'I've put you in the first-floor front. And *you* can borrow a china pig,' he said to Sheila.

How could you cuddle a china pig? Mr Tuffin usually showed more imagination than that.

'Tell you what,' he said, 'I'll take your mother upstairs. Go in the front room and have a word with the little lad. Perhaps you can come to some sort of understanding. But don't hit him, Sheila. I won't have fisticuffs.'

Sheila felt better. It was nice when somebody understood you as well as Mr Tuffin did. She pushed open the door of the front room. A boy was sitting on the red Turkey hearthrug. He had the Dinah doll in one hand and a cast-iron doorstop, in the shape of Mr Punch, in the other.

'I'm thinking of having a puppet show,' he said. 'I'm Mick.'

And that is how Sheila Starkey met Mickey Grimshaw for the very first time. She was immediately fascinated by his eyes. They were the first thing everybody noticed about

Mickey, for one was blue and the other eye green. It had the effect of making him seem to be brimming with excitement. Once you got used to it, it was as though he could never, conceivably, have been designed any other way.

‘Where are you from?’ asked this very confident boy.

‘Outside Manchester. You go through Salford and through Pendleton and just beyond Irlams o’th’ Height ...’

‘But we live at The Height too.’

‘Where?’ Sheila was nearly shouting with excitement. This wonderfully odd-looking boy who could do puppet shows in Mr Tuffin’s front room wasn’t just going to be a friend for the holidays. He came from The Height. Sheila would always remember that, the moment she met Mickey, she *knew* him. It was almost as though some hidden part of her had been waiting for him to turn up. What is-more she knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that she would care for him enormously. Not like she loved Peter Bromiley, the best-looking and kindest boy in her school – more the way she felt about next door’s dog Duke Tatton. She wasn’t allowed to have a dog of her own so her feelings for Duke ran very deep and she always craved his approval. Only Mickey wasn’t a dog, he was a catlike animal inside human skin. She knew that too.

‘We live in Paloma Drive on the Dogdene Estate,’ said Mickey.

‘We live in Rookwood Avenue on Ravensdale Estate,’ gasped Sheila. They were only divided by two main roads and a public park.

‘I hate estates,’ said Mickey. ‘Why do they have to paint everything green and cream?’

‘Except for the houses that are painted brown and cream,’ said Sheila. ‘And why do all the garden hedges have to be privet? Nothing but gloomy privet for miles and miles. It even tastes awful.’

‘Have you tried it too?’ asked Mickey. ‘One day I’m going to get away. I’m not much struck on respectability.’

‘Me neither,’ said Sheila fervently. This boy was putting into words a lot of things she had always felt.

‘When I grow up I’m going on the stage.’ Mickey put Mr Punch by the door and handed Dinah to Sheila. ‘You can have this if you want. Not for keeps. It’s theirs.’

‘I know.’ What did a doll matter now? ‘You mean you’re going to be in concerts all the time for a living?’

‘Plays, concerts, everything.’

‘Could I do that too?’ This was the most solemn question Sheila had ever asked. ‘Could I? I’m the best in our school only I never say so because people call it swanking.’

‘They call me precocious,’ said Mickey glumly. ‘Yes, you could do it too. I expect one day we’ll both be famous together. Did you know that, if you get up early enough, you can see them taking camels from the Tower Circus for a walk along the beach?’

The sitting room door was pushed further open and one of the largest women Sheila had ever seen came into the room. Her great size was emphasized by the large blue and black printed design on her crepe-de-Chine frock. She had an air of confidence, even of power, about her.

‘I’m Mickey’s mummy,’ she said.

Sheila marvelled. Somebody else in Irlams o’th’ Height was forced to say ‘Mummy’ too.

‘I expect you’re thinking I’m a very big lady?’

‘No,’ said Sheila politely.

‘Course you are,’ said Mick. ‘My eyes and her size – we should be in a sideshow on the Golden Mile.’

Mickey was plainly allowed to get away with far more than Sheila because all his mother said was ‘It’s glandular. I always think it better to mention it first.’

‘Do they allow you extra clothing coupons?’ asked Sheila, fascinated.

Gladys Starkey had slipped into the room quickly enough to hiss 'Manners!'

'I was just explaining my size.' Mickey's mother was quite unperturbed. 'It runs in the family but skips a generation. I expect Mickey's children will be enormous but maybe they will have found something by then. I'm Mrs Grimshaw, call me Beryl.'

Sheila held her breath. Under similar circumstances she had known her mother to say 'I'd rather wait, thank you.' Today she was plainly in holiday mood because she simply held out her hand and said: 'Gladys Starkey.'

'I shall call you Glad,' beamed Mrs Grimshaw.

'I'd rather you didn't. I take it hubby isn't with you?'

Sheila thought this was awful. For all her mother knew the man might be dead.

'Work of National Importance,' said Mrs Grimshaw.

'At the gas works,' piped up Mickey.

'Captain Starkey's with the Eighth Army.'

Sheila began to pray, inwardly, that her mother wouldn't start putting it on and ruin everything. The odd-eyed boy just grinned conspiratorially.

'I expect he rose up from the ranks,' said Mrs Grimshaw confidently. 'In the First World War they called them "temporary gentlemen".'

Gladys Starkey didn't answer back with words. Instead, she took a firm step towards Beryl Grimshaw's great bulk, raised her nose significantly, and gave a very cautious sniff.

It was below the belt, thought Sheila, but she had to admit that her mother was winning on points. Mrs Grimshaw did not appear discomfited except for her neck. It was mottling furiously.

'It's war,' said Mickey, under his breath.

'Gangway for a wounded soldier,' came a cry from the hall. The table in the bay window was already set for one o'clock dinner. Poor pale Mrs Tuffin limped in, on her stick, carrying a plate of ready buttered bread. Mrs Tuffin was

famous for cutting bread. She could get it like wedding veils. Bread wasn't the only thing she dispensed. She also kept people abreast of the latest war news.

'Sound the gong, Sheila,' she said. 'Them as is late down will simply have to do without the headlines.' She cleared her throat and then announced in an important voice: 'Hitler has lost his trousers.'

'I'm not being indelicate. It's not my style. Some German generals, it seems, tried to blow up the Führer but they made a pig's knee of it. They said on the wireless that reports are reaching them that the bomb blast blew off everybody's pants - Adolf's included. He is said to be rattled, angered and awaiting the arrival of Mussolini.'

'Shall we have a quick chorus of "There'll Always Be an England"?' asked Sheila.

'But is it just government propaganda to make us feel better?' cried Mrs Grimshaw.

'It was Stuart Hibbert reading the news,' said Mrs Tuffin reproachfully.

'And when it comes to inside information' - Gladys was very much the serving officer's wife - 'our fifth column is every bit as good as their fifth column.'

Beryl Grimshaw broke wind very delicately. 'I beg your pardon,' she said. But she didn't mean it.

A fortnight, of course, goes on much longer when you are eight. In that space of time Sheila absorbed most of Mickey's stage-struck attitudes and ambitions. It was as though she already owned one of those Pollock's cut-out theatre books and he was showing her how to use the scissors and glue it together and make it work. That summer holiday Mickey Grimshaw handed Sheila Starkey a licence to be herself.

She had always loved the golden glow that came from the audience at school plays and Sunday school concerts. Mickey found this entirely natural - it warmed him too.

They were still young enough to try to put these thoughts into words without inhibition.

'Being on the stage is like paid showing-off,' said Mickey, 'so don't expect your mother to like it.'

Gladys Starkey did not like it. She didn't like it one little bit. She had already taken to referring to Mickey as 'that boy'.

'They're not his own ideas, Sheila.'

'They are!' said Sheila, already fierce in her loyalty.

'He gets them from his mother. She's already told me, but for her size, she'd have been the next Anna Pavlova. She even makes him go to tap dancing classes.'

'She doesn't make him. He wants to. Can I go too?'

'No you can't. Tap dancing's common. But don't you dare tell Mrs Grimshaw I said that. Tap dancing? Where d'you want to end up? In the Tower Children's Ballet?'

'I'd love it,' said Sheila.

Mr Tuffin, however, was not against the new friendship. He was a man of firm likes and dislikes and he had decided that Mickey Grimshaw was all right. That was as enthusiastic as Mr Tuffin ever got but he ruled in his own kingdom, so Mrs Starkey could hardly refuse to let her daughter play with the boy. In 1944 children were allowed to roam very freely. Blackpool had eight theatres, a circus, and a skating show at the Icedrome. Mickey and Sheila examined all of these buildings closely, as though the very bricks and mortar might give off some of the theatrical magic hidden inside.

Sid Fields, the comedian, was at the Opera House in *Look Who's Here*. Sheila and Mickey knew every detail of the photographs outside the theatre. They were very glossy and retouched, with each eyelash painted on separately. The stage door was up a glass arcade leading into the Winter Gardens. A grumpy old commissioner, in a blue uniform with gold braid, seemed to have been employed especially to chase the two children away.

Nothing daunted, they would bounce downhill to Feldman's Music Hall, an altogether lower class of establishment where standards were more lackadaisical. The photographs in their display cases were sometimes a bit battered and held in place by drawing pins. Unlike the other Blackpool theatres, shows at Feldman's only played for one week before moving on to another town. This music hall had one very definite lure. Go round to the back of the theatre and there was both a stage door entrance and another pair of doors - huge wooden ones. Scenery could be carried through these and down a ramp onto the stage. At just the right height for an eight-year-old, somebody had pushed in a knot in the grain of the wood. It had created a very generous peephole. Mickey and Sheila took it in turns to peer down onto performing xylophonists and crooners and even onto a lady taking her clothes off, to music, in a beautiful pink spotlight.

'I think we can see more of her titties than people who've paid,' said Mickey. 'Better not mention this at Mr Tuffin's.'

Sheila very much admired the way Mickey called a titty a titty. He didn't make it sound like talking rude. He was just matter-of-fact. Her own mother wouldn't so much as mention the word 'bust' without first clearing her throat.

From Feldman's they always went to the North Pier which was admission one penny. In their considered opinion, well worth it because the stars of *On With the Show* had to walk the full length of the pier, on open view, to get to their theatre. Happily copying Mickey, Sheila had used some of her holiday spends to buy an autograph album. They both had the leading comedian Dave Morris's signature, five times over. He was a jolly man in a straw boater, with thick glasses like the bottoms of pop bottles. He didn't seem to notice that they dogged his footsteps and tried to overhear what he was saying to his henchmen. Intriguing snippets like 'She's a disgrace to the bloody

profession. One night I'm going to throw the gin bottle, onstage, after her.'

Today there would be no following anybody. It was nearly half past four by Woolworth's clock, over on the promenade. All the performers would be in the pier pavilion giving a matinée. It was a grey afternoon, of high tide and crying seagulls, circling the lead domes and minarets on top of the wind shelters of the North Pier. Sheila remembered to be afraid of the pier again. She had no qualms about the iron framework, that was sturdy enough. But you walked on planks, laid edge to edge, and between the planks were narrow gaps and through the gaps it was possible to see the sea, swelling and churning, a hundred feet below. Although there were always men repairing and replacing the planks, what if you put your foot on one they'd overlooked? What if you went *through*?

It was the Friday of the second week of the holidays. Last weekend it had seemed as though they would last for ever. By Wednesday the days were beginning to be tinged with a little 'going home' sadness. Come Friday afternoon everything had a last-time quality to it. This had been morbidly emphasized by Gladys Starkey who had instructed her daughter to go out and breathe in the ozone: 'It's the last you'll smell of it for another year.'

The pier was almost deserted as Sheila and Mickey clomped along it towards the fishing jetty. A pale old man with mad hair, pushing a bicycle, walked past them. He was better than nothing. This was Toni who ran the North Pier Alfresco Orchestra. They didn't ask for his autograph, musicians didn't count. Anyway, they were deep in a discussion about the fancy costumes and would they get them?

One of Mr Tuffin's guinea pigs had a mother called Mrs Adair who was also staying in the boarding house but paying the full rate. The only thing Mickey and Sheila's mothers were united in was their dislike of this woman.

‘She doesn’t explain her complexion, to my satisfaction, by saying she’s lived in Calcutta. There’s a touch of the tar brush there,’ said Mrs Grimshaw accusingly.

‘Her stories of Dieppe are very far-fetched. I think the woman’s a bit of a romancer,’ charged Gladys Starkey. It was a polite way of calling her a liar.

Mrs Adair may have been vague and untidy and given to trimming her own hats whilst claiming they were Paris models – but had she fibbed about the costumes? She came from Putney Heath where, she maintained, she had mounted glorious dramatic pageants. All of this had been before the war. As a result, she now had a garage simply crammed with fancy-dress costumes. To Sheila and Mickey, the idea of these was infinitely more desirable than endless toffee coupons.

‘It’s like Aladdin’s cave in that old garage of mine,’ said Mrs Adair. ‘You can’t move for spangles. Tell you what, when I go back, I’ll pick a couple out and forward them on to you.’

The two children had eagerly written their addresses down in her pocket diary. Their mothers were openly sceptical of their ever seeing the colour of Mrs Adair’s sequins. Gladys Starkey sniggered and said, ‘I wouldn’t go giving her postage!’

‘I’m only worried that she’s got our address,’ said Beryl Grimshaw. ‘She’s the kind who might turn up on the doorstep and want something.’

Mickey was of the opinion that Mrs Adair was a giver not a taker. After all, she’d bumped into them on the tram, one day, and insisted upon paying their fares.

‘And she gave that photographer’s monkey a bit of her chocolate ration,’ said Sheila, who thought this spoke volumes for Mrs Adair’s character. But would she send the costumes? As soon as they got back to Manchester they planned to put on concerts, in Mickey’s back garden. With Mr Churchill’s government telling everybody to *Make Do*