

# ALMOST A BOFFIN

*E.E. Vielle*



**WHY HE INVENTED THE CRUISE MISSILE**

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**The memoirs of Group Captain  
E.E.Vielle, OBE, RAF (Rtd)**

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## **Acknowledgement**

*I would like to express my thanks to the Museum Managing Director of the Farnborough Airsciences Trust and his staff for the photographs of the former scientists who served at RAE.*

## **Dedication**

*I humbly dedicate this book to all those courageous aircrew in Bomber Command during the Second World War. In particular, this Dedication is to those who lost their lives – many needlessly – through the treachery of a few scientists who had misplaced loyalties and aspirations, whilst trusted by their colleagues at the Royal Aircraft Establishment, Farnborough, which I have revealed in the pages that follow.*

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# **Almost a Boffin**

## **The memoirs of Group Captain E.E.Vielle, OBE, RAF (Rtd)**

### **Preface**

I started writing this in 1962 - relatively soon after I left the RAF. But the contents regarding the communist activities of certain highly placed officials, and my miraculous escape from their attempt to kill me in December 1949, has influenced me to delay publication until they (and their likeminded comrades) were less likely to cause me any trouble as a result.

If, however, I should now suddenly die or be seriously injured, you may guess the reason.

**E.E.Vielle.**

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

I was born in London in April 1913 - 100 years ago. Now, to my 15 great grandchildren I am a relic of a bygone age. They regard me rather like an ancient monument - Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, for example - except that, when prodded, I can still talk. They (bless them) regard the world in which I grew up to be almost as remote to them as the Ice Age does to me. Nevertheless, they (and their parents) express interest in my life. So, rather than relating the same things to each of them, I have decided to write it out just once for all of them. Hence these memoirs.

But my memoirs also have another purpose - to explain that, but for the activities of three communist British scientists, the Germans would probably not have started the Second World War. They certainly would not have been able to invade France in 1940 and would probably have lost the war that year.

Starting in the 1920s, those three scientists deliberately sabotaged the ability of the RAF to operate efficiently. They prevented Bomber Command, in particular, from being properly equipped to do their job. Furthermore, I am probably the last person alive with detailed knowledge of that fact.

Everyone lives an interesting life. But some, by sheer chance, are more varied or unusual than others. Most are affected by big events. In my case, the Great Depression of 1929-1931 resulted in me joining the Royal Air Force instead of going to university. The Italian invasion of Abyssinia caused me to get married when I was 21 - long before I had intended. The fall of France in 1940 decided me to evacuate

my wife and daughter to Canada. Many families have experienced similar upheavals due to big national, or international, events.

But it is often quite a tiny thing that results in big changes and makes life so much more interesting. And I have had far more than my fair share of these. For example, it was mainly the result of me inheriting a telescope and sextant from my grandfather that the RAF transferred me to the "Special Duty List" on three separate occasions (totalling nearly 7 years) to work with scientists on various Top Secret projects. That partly resulted from my various inventions - including one which led to the development of the Cruise Missile. Another (later) invention resulted in me being offered twice the salary of an Air Marshal to leave the RAF at age 43 to become managing director of a company set up to exploit it. A flying incident in 1935 resulted in me becoming privy to a matter of historical interest (affecting the Princess Diana drama), which the "Establishment" has tried to deny ever occurred. The loss of a fishing rod in the St. Lawrence River in Canada led to my involvement in a search for the Rommel Treasure in the Mediterranean. The escape of a Russian count from the firing squad in Moscow in 1917 affected my life during the last war. In 1956, a flying incident gave me the idea for a novel for which Hitchcock later bought the film rights - which in turn caused me to take up residence in Switzerland and write more novels. A chance remark in 1960 led to my association with a Swiss bank and my development of a system of investment that turned £32,000 in 1974 into £7,000,000 ten years later. And so it goes on. Tiny events have led me into what I believe has been an unusually interesting life.

I was privileged to meet and work with many wonderful people - particularly some of the top scientists in the UK and USA (including, for example, Albert Einstein), and I made many delightful friends. But I have also met some

really awful people. Four in particular, each of whom I trusted, have tried to swindle me. It is uncanny, and quite frightening, that in two cases their only sons met tragic deaths and the other two died of cancer soon afterwards.

At the outbreak of the Second World War, and later during the "Cold War", I was in a unique position to observe the tremendous (and little realised) damage done to our national interest by some communists in our civil service.

During my lifetime I have witnessed - and experienced - vast changes. When I joined the RAF I was taught to fly on a type of biplane that was designed in 1912 (just 9 years after the Wright brothers' first flight) and was used throughout the First World War. Its top speed was normally 70mph and, even in a vertical dive with the engine at full power, it had a terminal velocity of only about 120 mph - considerably less than the 155mph speed at which I later used to cruise my Mercedes on German autobahns. During my 25 years' RAF service, I flew 150 different types of aircraft, including, shortly before I retired, a fighter at supersonic speeds, which resulted in a terrifying discovery of great importance to other pilots. Needless to say, I have been extremely lucky in surviving that incident and numerous other "near misses" as a pilot, and then had another miraculous one while out walking at age 96!

After leaving the RAF, my life became even more varied, just as exciting, and - as my age increased - in many ways more enjoyable. I can now look back and relate any interesting events without enduring the awful tensions, stress and emotions that I experienced at the time. Instead, until recently, as I relived any event by describing it, or recorded it on my computer, I used merely to ask my loving partner to refill my glass with: "Another Black Label please, darling." But two years ago an accident to her forced me into a retirement home, where I am now completing these

memoirs and wondering what the contents of the final chapter will be.

Being a resident in this Retirement Village (Chantry Court in Westbury, Wiltshire) is quite like living in a suite of rooms in a luxury hotel - except that we all carry a press button alarm which summons help if urgently needed. One evening recently, I was downstairs chatting to the duty receptionist when her buzzer rang. She quickly phoned to check that it was not a false alarm and then got up to go quickly to the assistance of a charming old retired Army General and his wife.

“This is a REAL emergency!” she exclaimed, causing me to visualise a serious accident, with broken bones and blood everywhere.

She then explained: “He can’t get the cork out of his wine bottle!”

Happily, although I am 15 years older than the General, I still do not yet contemplate experiencing an emergency of that magnitude.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Early days**

**(1913-1931)**

The first memory of my life is a feeling of fear. Intense fear.

It must have been transmitted to me by my frightened mother, who was cradling me in her arms and clasping me to her breast.

I remember hearing bangs. Then more bangs – and feeling my mother clasping me more closely. She was probably trembling. My brother remained silent. My sister was whimpering. I began crying.

We were sheltering in the cupboard under the stairs. My father, a Naval Officer on leave, who had been outside, opened the door of our cupboard and said something to my mother. He took my brother and sister by their hands and led them out through the front door into the street. My mother, with me in her arms, followed. The bangs seemed much louder.

My father shouted over the noise to me to look up into the sky.

I stopped crying and opened my eyes. My father was pointing along the road to the sky above the houses on our right. The sight I then saw was imprinted as a vivid picture in my memory which remains indelible to this day. Whenever I think back to my childhood that scene always reappears. It is the first event in my life that I remember with clarity. It still remains the most awesome spectacle I have ever witnessed.

Beams from the searchlights were angling across the night sky in all directions. Bangs and flashes from the guns and bursting shells were almost incessant. Some of the searchlights had converged on a large object which was on fire, way above the housetops. It quickly became an enormous furnace in the night sky, with flames rising to a great height above it.

It was as though the sun had suddenly exploded into a giant fireball. It lit up the whole area and almost hurt my eyes to look at it. I then watched the skeleton framework, outlined against the brilliant background, begin to descend. It fell slowly at first, but with gathering speed, until it finally disappeared below the housetops, leaving no more than a glow in the sky.

The bangs had ceased and were replaced by an eerie silence, soon to be followed by the steady screech of the "all clear" sirens. With fear no longer being transmitted to me from my mother, I probably fell contentedly asleep.

But that picture of the German Zeppelin in flames over London in the First World War (I think in 1915) is as clear to me today as it was at the time. And the memory of it, suddenly flashing in front of me many years later, caused me to react quickly enough to save my own life and that of a friend in the far-away South Island of New Zealand. It seems to me now that I also saw people falling, or jumping, from the gondola beneath the Zeppelin; but this may be because I have since watched people jumping to their deaths in another conflagration.

The other main incident indelibly imprinted in my memory occurred when my parents were giving a lunch party for about a dozen people. I was seated in my highchair to the right of my mother at the end of the table. For dessert she had prepared trifle and had instructed me to wait until she had served all the others first. I loved trifle and had waited anxiously, fearing that there might be none left for me. So

when at last my mother turned to me and asked: "Would you like a little?", I gave my logical reply, hammering on the tray of my chair with my spoon to emphasise it, and making what I was later told was my first ever sentence:

"No!" I shouted. "Not a little - only much."

To my astonishment the whole company burst into loud laughter. To this day I can remember the surprise I felt. I could not understand this outburst. I felt deeply hurt and began crying.

That small incident left me with a complex for life - a fear of doing, saying or writing, something perfectly logical but which might lead to criticism or ridicule. That fear was later largely responsible for me arranging my first two novels (both of which became worldwide best sellers and were translated into more than 20 languages) to be published only under pen names.

My mother later claimed that that first sentence of mine was also an accurate indication of my whole attitude to life. My acquisition of the nickname "Tubby" tends to justify that view.

In 1917, aged four, I happened to be at the top end of our road (probably playing with a ball, as there was not much space for that in our garden) when I heard aircraft and saw in the distance a formation of quite large ones approaching. I watched them with interest. I had never before seen so many aircraft together, nor such big ones. They were coming from the direction in which I had seen the Zeppelin. I continued watching them, quite fascinated, with no sense of fear, even though shells were bursting in the sky. My mother came screaming to me to come back quickly and managed to get me into our shelter in the cupboard under the stairs before the louder bangs reached our area. Afterwards, my collection of shrapnel became bigger. That was the daylight Gotha raid on London that June which caused over 600 casualties.





***My last day with long hair***

In the autumn of the following year there came a day when I was given a small stick with a coloured flag on it and was told there would be no more bangs. We were going out into the street at 11 o'clock with all our neighbours to wave our Union Jacks and cheer. My parents seemed so excited and happy that I was infected with their obvious joy - in spite of being told there would now be no more shrapnel for me to add to my collection.

Being part of the crowd in the street, waving my little flag, singing the National Anthem and Rule Britannia and clapping with all the rest gave me a sense of pride that has stayed with me always. Standing beside my father, wearing his RNVR officer's uniform and medal ribbons, added to that

great feeling. I sensed that something terribly important had happened. Without understanding it, I somehow got the impression that our lives were to be dramatically changed for ever. I waved my flag even harder. That was Armistice Day - 11th November 1918.

“That was the end of the war to end all wars,” I was told. At the time I did not have the faintest inkling of what that really meant. I still don't!

Quite a few other events stand out in my memory of the First World War. The lovely taste of dripping on hot toast (which remains a great treat); being bathed in a copper bath in front of the kitchen range; whooping cough (twice); the pain of ingrowing toenails; roasting chestnuts on the kitchen range; the different cries of the street-traders (coalman, milkman, rag and bone man, etc) as they passed down our street (Dalmore Road, West Dulwich) on their horse-drawn carts; listening in particular for the “All-realm” call when we ran short of coal for the kitchen range; holding out the jug for the milkman to use his different- sized ladles to measure the amount he put into it from his large urn; stroking the cats that waited expectantly for him to spill some onto the pavement; going with a shovel and pail to collect horse droppings from the road as manure for our vegetable garden; helping my mother count the number of sacks of coal that the coalman tipped down the chute into our cellar and making sure the sack was really empty when he folded it to put it back on the cart; searching our road for pieces of shrapnel after an air-raid; and, while on holiday in Herne Bay, watching an aircraft which had landed at low tide on the sands being swamped by the rising tide.

I lived in a completely different world from children today, with that enormous difference being basically explained in two words. The first is MOBILITY - whether of people, information (instantly), sounds of music, and things. This resulted from the almost complete absence of motor cars,

telephones or, until I was at Dulwich College Prep School, any radio communication, except by Morse Code. Anywhere more than about three miles from a railway station was rarely visited by anyone without a horse or pony to take them. Nearly everyone lived in a small, compact community, knowing each other – but rarely even knowledgeable about what went on in other areas, although the use of bicycles was gradually beginning to remedy that.

The second word is AVAILABILITY – for example of lighting, which doubles (on average) the time that people can be active, of heating (including hot water from a tap), and generally of ample food supplies.

Another big difference, for example, is that we effectively produced no refuse. That was because practically everything was used (often re-used – like the newspapers which were cut into 4-inch square pieces to provide the toilet paper) or buried in the garden, where it quickly rotted away. The vegetables mainly came either from our garden or the local allotments in a basket with no wrapping and were usually eaten the day they were picked. Dustmen were unknown and the “rag and bone” man who periodically came down our street shouting “ragabone” collected only unwanted garments and the clean bones from the stew with every scrap of food already extracted.

Also, although we had a piano which my sister played quite well, we rarely heard any other music – except from the carol singers at Christmas and on the relatively rare occasions when we went to church. My parents occasionally went to a concert or to the opera, but it was not until we had a Pathe gramophone (which was when I was about 8 years old in 1921) that I first heard the magical sounds of an orchestra. The films were silent (although some cinemas had a piano) and were, of course, only black and white until the 1940s. It is difficult for children today to visualise a world without music!

Sometimes, on frosty nights – and particularly if I had developed a cold – my mother would light a fire in my bedroom. Also, she would hum a tune to help me go to sleep. I would lie there contentedly in bed watching the flickering flames casting shadows round the room and sometimes seeing the full moon moving across the window and silhouetting a branch of our cherry tree. Getting up in the morning in the freezing cold was a different matter.



***My Grandmother born 1827***

Quite often I would walk up the road and round the corner to 39 Carson Road, where I would listen to my maternal grandmother's descriptions of her earlier life. She had been born in 1827 (two reigns before Victoria became Queen) and

had been present at a ceremony connected with Queen Victoria's coronation. I spent many happy hours listening to the stories she told me about life in those days. She laughed as she told me about the strange clothes people wore when she had been a child - not at all like the modern world in which she was then living in 1917. Yet there she was, wearing a flimsy lace bonnet and voluminous black skirt down to her ankles (as was the fashion early last century). Why do I now think that funny?

Unfortunately, I did not have a tape recorder, but regard it as a privilege to have had direct contact with someone living in that era. If any of my great-grandchildren (the fifteenth has recently arrived) should live to my age, then my personal live contacts will together have spanned nearly 300 years! Viewed like that, it does not seem so long since the Romans were here in England!

I soon learned to look forward to each different season, not so much because of the temperature or weather, but for the different treats which each seemed to bring. My favourites were asparagus, then strawberries, and so on - each being available for only just a short period - through to the raspberries and plums, then finally to the apples stored in the loft three inches apart on newspaper, which sometimes kept them edible until Christmas. Each new vegetable, fruit or nut, as it came into season, was a big landmark in the year - looked forward to with great excitement and thoroughly enjoyed during its brief appearance - but then unattainable until it came into season the following year. We even waited for the Brussels sprouts to have a winter frost to bring them to their most tasty condition. We could almost tell the date by the fruits and vegetables which were on display at the greengrocers. Pots of jam, made from the fruits, were very popular - as were the tins of some foods that gradually became more available after the First World War.

West Dulwich, at that time, still had open fields and some had been turned into allotments. Sometimes (at first in my pram, then in a pushchair, then walking) I would accompany my mother to the ones nearby, where we could often get vegetables fresher and cheaper than at the greengrocers. Other times she would take me with her up our road and round to where there was a row of half a dozen shops. They, and the street traders who called out their wares as they passed down our road on their horse-drawn carts, provided everything we really needed to live.

That little row of shops made it rarely necessary for the inhabitants of that area to venture further away. Some with bicycles did make longer trips and for an outing others walked to one of the nearby parks - particularly Dulwich Park, which Queen Mary visited each spring to see the famous blossoms there. The omnibus (with solid rubber tyres) coming from London stopped at nearby Thurlow Road on its way up to the Crystal Palace at the top of Sydenham Hill. That was how, I think in 1918, I was taken to see Charlie Chaplin in "Shoulder Arms" there - the first film I ever saw.

If anyone wanted something that was outside the scope of our local shops to provide - an unusual occurrence - then a bus or train to Brixton, where there were much bigger shops like the Bon Marche, was the probable answer. Otherwise, people rarely ventured outside the district.

For holidays, only those resorts with a train service could normally be considered and my parents chose Herne Bay and Margate in Kent. We used a horse-drawn cab to take our baggage and us to West Dulwich station. At Victoria Station (where we had to change trains) the stench of the dung and urine from the many horses waiting stationary with their cabs outside the station entrance made a notable - but quite friendly - impression on me because it was associated with travelling and holidays by the sea.

Few people on holiday normally ventured more than walking distance from the railway station. Apart from the main holiday resorts which had a railway station, practically all the rest of the British countryside, and coastline, were unspoiled and almost completely free of visitors. Gypsies in their slow-moving horse-drawn caravans had almost a monopoly of that privilege.

In our garden we had a large cherry tree that attracted blackbirds. Food was always in short supply and my father used to shoot some of them with a .177 smooth-bore gun that I later learnt to use. My mother boiled them first in their feathers before cooking them in a pie.

Sometimes, on Sunday mornings, I was allowed to get into bed with my parents and enjoy the cosy feeling of cuddling up to my mother. When they got up to dress, I was told to put my hands over my eyes and not look, but of course I took a peep. I remember seeing my father, with his knee pressed hard against the middle of my mother's back to increase leverage, as he strained to tighten the strings in her whalebone corsets. She was very proud of her wasp waist, but even at that age I thought that women who used such artificial practices must be very stupid - a view reinforced when I learnt about what the Japanese did to their daughter's feet. In spite of not keeping my eyes hidden, it was not until I was 11 years old that I realised there was any real difference between the male and female bodies. Before that there had been nothing that aroused my interest in any such trivial matters.

Soon after the First World War ended my father returned to his business activities in London, only to discover that his partner (whom he had trusted) had taken advantage of my father's absence to swindle him. My father's main failing - which I and my daughter Pat have both inherited - was to be a bad judge of character and far too trusting. Nevertheless, he soon picked up the pieces and we moved in 1919 to a

bigger house (81 Alleyn Park) – just opposite Dulwich College, where my brother and then I were later educated.

The Southern Railway line from London to the Brighton area of the South Coast ran across the bridge in front of the house going uphill and disappearing behind the Post Office a hundred yards up the road in the direction of the Penge tunnel. My brother, who was six years my senior, was always fascinated by trains and kept a log of the times at which they ran – plus their loads – as indicated by the disc on the front of the engine. The times of the passenger trains rarely varied by more than a few seconds, but the goods trains puffed their way along more slowly and unpredictably. We could tell whether they were carrying “meat, cattle and fish”, or coal, or passengers, etc, by those discs. The passenger trains usually stopped at West Dulwich station – a couple of hundred yards down to the left. We listened to the “puffs” from the engine as they restarted to go uphill towards the Penge tunnel and had bets on whether they would make a series of rapid puffs as the wheels skidded – which they frequently did – or the more regular accelerating puffs.

As the train came into sight over the bridge, we could see the fireman and engine driver shovelling coal onto the fire to generate more steam – in the evenings the glow from their fire was quite spectacular. Although they made a noise, the trains seemed to me to be very friendly things and I loved watching them puffing up the hill. We learnt that the way the smoke and steam behaved on belching out of the funnel was an indication of the sort of weather we could expect – straight up and dispersing quickly meant good weather; falling to the ground indicated rain.

We also used to bet on which lamps would be lit first when the lamplighter came round at dusk carrying his pole to light the gas lamps lining our street and the road across under the bridge. Different lamplighters seemed to take different



routes; some going up one side and then down the other, others zig-zagging across. We had little else to occupy our attention in those days. Everything moved at a slow pace and any little thing that happened was of interest.

In the evenings, when my mother and sister were knitting, sewing or making woolly rugs, I had nothing to occupy my attention - so I had to make my own amusement. Partly because my brother and sister were so much older, I became rather a lonely child. I made my main activity that of solving puzzles of all sorts - including those inside a box with a glass cover with tiny balls which needed manoeuvring into their correct holes and, later, mathematical and more complex ones. As a result, I became quite good at solving problems - often by just thinking logically about them.

In 1919, food was still short and we kept chickens in our garden - not only to provide eggs but also to help dispose of any food waste. The outer leaves of green vegetables were given to them raw, but most of the other waste food - like potato peelings or bits of meat gristle - was boiled up first. Whenever I smell boiling potatoes, it reminds me of carrying out a saucepan full of peelings and spreading them out for the cackling chickens to gobble up. Each chicken had a name and as far as possible we kept a record of how many eggs each laid. As soon as we heard a chicken cackling it was my job to run out to find and mark on the warm egg with a pencil the name of the cackling chicken. The chickens with the lowest marks went to the top of the list for eating. The breeds were mainly Leghorns, Wyandottes, and Rhode Island Reds, and the champion layer had the name Funny Bunny. Sometimes my brother would dig up worms for them to gobble up. I helped crush the used eggshells into small pieces which, together with a little grit, were fed back for them to eat. The eggs were delicious.

Amongst my main recollections of that period were the awful fogs we experienced. The only heating in most houses was a coal fire – such as the kitchen range. By early October every chimney in that area was belching out black smoke mixed with yellow sulphurous fumes. Even on windy days it often made me choke. Sometimes, when it was foggy, frosty or windless, it was impossible to see the ground, or any obstacle, more than a yard ahead. My mother used to wrap a woollen scarf round my head, covering my nose and mouth, in an effort to filter out the stinking soot from getting into my lungs as I crept cautiously up the road to school. The school had no heating and we sat at the desks wearing our overcoats and mittens. Between classes we had to go out into the playground and jump up and down, swinging our arms, to improve our blood circulation. My toes and fingers were covered with painful chilblains most of the winter.

Just before we had moved into 81 Alleyn Park the house had been redecorated and was damp. Our only heating was the kitchen range. In the spring of 1919 (that was the year after the awful flu epidemic had killed over 20 million people in Europe), I was incapacitated by a form of rheumatism which covered me with purple spots and which was attributed to the damp walls of our house. Our doctor said my only hope of recovery was masses of sunshine. Luckily, 1919 produced a marvellous summer. Every fine morning my sister or my mother carried me out and laid me naked on a mattress in the garden, where I remained for as long as it was sunny. By the autumn I was cured. As a result, I have always seized every opportunity to sunbathe – even in the tropics. I have never used sunscreen ointments and now believe – as the statistics tend to indicate – that the increase of skin cancer can be linked partly to the practice of putting chemicals on the skin and then frying it in with hot

sunshine, instead of letting nature gradually provide protection.

In that connection I have never ceased to wonder at the amazing number of different chemicals that most ladies (influenced by the multitude of advertisements) have now been persuaded to use on their skins. Recently, when one of my daughter's friends visited us, I counted no less than 45 different bottles and tubes that she had laid out for use in the bathroom. She obviously had not read the brilliant book *Silent Spring*, by Rachael Carson. In my youth the only ointments I remember are Cold Cream, Zam-buk and Iodine. As a remedy for colds, we were given a lump of sugar doused with cinnamon.

My mother's eldest sister, "Auntie Flo", was a spinster who sponged off my father and caused friction everywhere; in retrospect, she was one of the most evil people I ever encountered. Together with my cousin Bowditch, she ran a girls' school, "Thurlow Grange", a quarter of a mile away. I was sent to the kindergarten there, but was soon expelled for being naughty - my aunt said that I was twice found kissing one of the girls. I have no recollection of that, but hope it was true.

Instead, I was enrolled at Dulwich College Preparatory School (DCPS), which was a couple of hundred yards up our road. The headmaster, W. R. M. Leake, had played rugby for England and was one of the finest characters I ever met. He ran a splendid school, with strict discipline, and had no hesitation in using his cane on the bare bottom of any pupil who misbehaved. That was an amazingly efficient deterrent; few boys ever risked getting a beating, and those that did never misbehaved a second time.

[Prohibiting that very effective (and less costly) form of punishment, which resulted from the UK joining the Common Market, accounts for much of the rapidly increasing problem of crime today - and the unnecessary

payment by the public for the accommodation and living expenses of wrongdoers. Corporal punishment had been used effectively for millions of years – in the animal kingdom as well.]

At home, however, my parents considered me to be rather a naughty boy – not perhaps entirely without reason. One Sunday we were having midday lunch and the first course was hot soup. My brother and I were sitting together on one side of the table, him on my left. Facing us was my father on the other side. My mother was at the end of the table on my right, between my father and me. My brother whispered to me: “Bet you can’t gargle with your soup.”

I filled my mouth with a large spoonful, put my head back and started gargling. My brother then dug me in the ribs – causing me to burst out laughing. All the soup in my mouth shot across the table and splashed over my father. Roaring with anger, he leapt to his feet and took a swipe at me. I ducked and he missed. But his arm swung with such force that he hit my mother instead. That spilled her hot soup all over her. She leapt to her feet, berating my father. That gave me a couple of seconds’ grace. I made one of those instant decisions that have so often saved my life. Like a flash I dived under the table, emerging the other side near the door, rushed out, slamming it behind me, and raced upstairs to the lavatory, where I locked myself in both with the key and extra catch. For the moment, at least, I was safe. Furthermore, I reckoned I was in a good strategic bargaining position – because the only other “convenience” on the property was a smelly bucket in a damp shed at the end of the garden, and it was raining.

Within less than a minute my father was hammering on the door, ordering me to come out. I was far too frightened to do so. I heard my father arguing with my mother about breaking the door down, so I quickly downed my pants and sat on the toilet – hoping that thereby it might at least delay

my father spanking me. But my mother (thank God!) persuaded him against damaging the door.

Both my parents continued shouting to me to come out. But as time passed I noticed a slight change of tone outside. Instead of them periodically ordering me to come out, it became rather more like them pleading with me to do so. I realised the strength of my position and began formulating my terms. By 6 o'clock that evening the pressure (quite literally) on them was so great that they gave in to my demands - no thrashing, and supper in bed. My brother, I later learned, had not been so lucky!

In 1921, we moved to a much larger house up the road - 17 Alley Park. That had eight bedrooms, a ballroom, a billiard room and stables that had been converted into what became a garage. The large garden included a tennis court, fruit trees, vegetable area and greenhouses. Our staff included a butler, housekeeper, cook, maid and gardener. Soon after we moved in, workmen installed the latest magic - electricity. I was absolutely amazed that by moving a little switch on the wall at the top of the stairs, I could cause brilliant sunshine (even at night) suddenly to illuminate the hall below. I remember wondering what the savages in Africa would make of this apparent miracle. One evening in my bedroom, I wanted to unplug one of the electrical leads from the wall, but found it stuck in too tightly. So I used my penknife to help me lever it out. The blade of the penknife must have touched both terminals and the shock sent me reeling half way across the room, and my penknife had two blackened dents in its blade. That taught me a lesson never to be forgotten, but at the price of nearly being killed.

Later, as well, we had our first telephone installed in a cupboard in the hall. We had to turn a handle and wait for the operator to answer. She knew everyone in that area by name who had a phone and usually had a brief chat before connecting us to whomever we wanted to speak. She was

often able to tell us that the person we were calling was, for example, out shopping. But, quite soon, with more houses having phones installed, we had to use only numbers.

To communicate with the staff downstairs, the main rooms all had a bell-pull handle by the fireplaces which caused the appropriate one of a row of bells to ring in the kitchen downstairs. Beside that bell-pull was a speaking tube with the mouthpiece sealed by a whistle to enable the person at the other end, by blowing into it gently, to “ring up”. After lunch one Sunday I noticed that my father was sound asleep by the fire with his head near the whistle. So I stole down to the kitchen, put my mouth to the appropriate tube and blew with all my might. I could run quite fast, but he eventually cornered me between two greenhouses at the end of the garden. I still remember the thrashing that resulted.

Soon after we moved into that bigger house my father bought a De Dion Bouton open four-seater (at that time the “Rolls-Royce” of French cars) that we kept for many years. We toured around southeast England in it and, most summers, down to my father’s old home near Evian-les-Bains on Lake Geneva. He also brought back from France a small two-seater that had an air-cooled engine at the front – a Sara – that eliminated the problem with the water freezing in cold weather. Both cars caused him to spend many hours (with help from my brother and me) fiddling with them in our garage.

Starting the engine on cold mornings, particularly the De Dion, was quite a lengthy process and sometimes took an hour or more. On cold evenings, all the water had to be drained from the engine and radiator, for fear of it freezing. Warm water (not too hot because that could cause differential expansion and crack the cold metal of the cylinder block) had to be carried out. Also, the spark plugs had to be unscrewed, taken out and heated up (usually by