— ONE —

BORN INTO THE BUILDINGS

The extent of my world was the distance I could walk and, by the age of six in 1935, I had explored all the streets of the island. They were my playground and I tasted the tar from them before I tasted chewing gum. Their names reflected the town's shipbuilding origins: Schooner Street, Barque Street, Sloop Street, Ship Street, Steamer Street. Although identical in appearance, each street had its own character, which it owed to its inhabitants, past and present, dominated by tenement flats and collectively known as 'The Buildings'. Stark, brick-built, four-storied, gas-lit, heated by open fire ranges, with balconies-cum-washrooms, overlooking communal closes, eight flats to a close, built by workers for workers.

This was 'Old Barrow' Island, lying off the Furness peninsular in Cumberland, previously farmed by the Cistercian monks of Furness Abbey and later industrialised by Vickers Armstrong, shipbuilders, armament manufacturers and engineers. Brig Street was my street and 8c, the flat where I and my eight siblings were born, was third close along, second floor up. With seven brothers and sisters older than me and Reg, the baby, I knew of no families larger than mine. Fortunately, with only one bedroom, we were seldom all home at once.

As well as the bedroom, there was a living room, a small kitchen, a washroom and a toilet and, although we accepted our lot as ordained, we were not blind to the fact that some people were better off; they lived in flats with two bedrooms. Our parents had moved from Workington to Barrow for our father to find work and one bedroom answered to their needs and income. Unfortunately the size of the flat did not keep up with the size of the family.

Below us lived a wild Irish family, the Sidleys, not very clean, emitting a permanent smell of Irish stew and best avoided. Mam said they had cockroaches, so I never went in. Bed bugs and cockroaches were the most feared interlopers by Mam but, despite searching for them, I never found any. Mrs Sidley was obese and argumentative and lived most of her life sitting in a chair in the close, minding other people's business.

Next to them lived Mr & Mrs Holmes, who were old and had lived there forever. Mrs Holmes would give me a slice of bread and jam if I visited them, and Mr Holmes would light up his pipe and talk to me. Once he asked me to suck his pipe but it made me sick, and he said I would never want to smoke again.

'But my Dad smokes,' I retorted.

'Yes, Woodbines. Coffin nails,' he said derisively.

Across the landing from us, in a two bedroomed flat, lived the Kellet family, whom we all liked. Ma and Pa with a son and daughter. Pa Kellet drank tea from his saucer and slurped, but no one seemed to mind. When I did it, I was told off by Mam. Ma Kellet said she was my godmother but I never really understood what that was. How could I have two mothers? She told me she had helped to deliver me, which I never understood either, as I thought it was only the postman who delivered parcels, and Dad had said I came in a parcel. The Kellets were very friendly, and liked me to call on them, which I did very often.

Once, when I did, I got a big surprise.

'You will be having a baby brother or sister soon. Did you know?' said Ma Kellet.

No, I did not know. How could I, if no one had told me?

'Will it come in a parcel too?'

Both Ma and Pa laughed at each other. I was perplexed.

‘Your mother’s a good woman, but she’s got her hands full, and you must help her all you can.’

‘When is it going to be delivered?’

‘Oh, it will not be before Christmas.’

Now why could it not be delivered at Christmas, along with the other presents, I wondered? But I refrained from asking. The news had left me speechless.

I crossed the landing and found Sarah, my sister, at home, attempting to knit.

‘Am I having a baby brother?’

‘You will be having a baby brother or a baby sister, or perhaps both.’

Ma Kellet had not mentioned that possibility. Could you have more than one baby?

‘What can I do to help Mam?’

‘Be invisible. Keep out of the way,’ said Sarah, much to my surprise.

How could I become invisible?

It was January when I awoke one morning, and Mam, who unusually was still in bed, showed me two babies by her side.

‘Hello Joe. You’ve got two little brothers now, Reginald and Ronald. Aren’t they lovely?’

They did not look lovely to me, with their red screwed-up faces.

‘Have they just come?’ I asked, ‘And where from?’

‘No, they were delivered during the night.’

Another surprise. I did not know the postman delivered at night, but to have two brothers suddenly appearing was a much bigger surprise.

Mam stayed in bed for days afterwards and we had many visitors and neighbours calling to see the babies, and I did feel invisible as people did not seem to see me. Then one morning when I awoke, Sarah said that I would not see

Ronald again.

'Why not?' I asked. I had already got to like the twins.

'He's gone back to where he came from,' said Sarah, between tears. 'He's died.'

I did not like to see Sarah crying, so I did not ask if he had gone back in a parcel.

Above us lived a lady on her own, Maud, who gave me a sweet whenever she passed me on the landing. I liked Maud, and I know she liked me. She was blond, wore red, and always smelled nice. Sometimes she went up to her flat with a man, and she never gave me a sweet then, but always a smile. Mam said that what she got up to wasn't right, and that I was never to go upstairs.

On the top floor lived two boys, William and his younger brother, David, but they were both older than me. Their mother was poorly and one day she died and their father had to bring them up. Mam used to ask them in sometimes to have a meal with us, or ask me to take them bread she had just baked. William and my sister Lena were the same age and very friendly. When he became sixteen and David was fourteen, a woman from Dr. Barnardo's arranged for them to go on a farm in Canada, and we were all very sad when they left, particularly Lena, who cried, but William promised to write to her as soon as he arrived.

I never got to know the other people above us as I only saw them when they passed me on the landing, and they were not very friendly. We played on the landing when it was raining and in winter nights with candles in lanterns, or in turnips hollowed out with slots cut to represent the eyes, mouth and nose. Sometimes, if it was wet, my older brother, George, would meet his friends there, and they would smoke cinnamon sticks and play the Jew's harp, pitch and toss, or just talk and laugh at each other's jokes. They laughed too, when Maud passed them on the stairs, and would call out after her, but never when there was a man with her.

The washroom too, was a good place to play when it rained. A zinc bath tub hung on the wall, which we filled with hot water and bathed in once a week. The water was not changed but topped up with a kettle of hot water for the next one to bathe, but my older brothers and sisters who worked went to the baths. The zinc bath was good to play in, and with the wooden dolly legs inside it, I could stand on them and imagine that I was a captain of a ship. The washroom had an opening, with a handrail, through which I could look out onto the close and the street below, and see what was happening. On Mondays, when everyone did their washing, and it was dry, the close would be filled with washing hung on clothes lines operated on pulleys stretched across the close.

The cries of street vendors pushing handcarts could often be heard. Cries of ‘Fish alive o’, ‘Live cockles and mussels’ and ‘Ice cream’ would have women and children running out to buy. As winter approached the ice cream man turned to selling mushy peas and his cry gave way to ‘Hot peas, hot peas, penny a pint’. A street singer, known as Danny Boy, because that was the song he always started with, would stand in the street, cap in hand, and some people would throw down pennies to him. A man with a flat wooden cart pulled by a thin grey horse, cried out ‘Rag an’ bones’, and in exchange for a bundle of rags, he would give a goldfish or two in a jam jar. I got many goldfish but they never lived long.

Everything had its season. Children lived more in the streets than in their flats. Hopscotch and skipping was favoured by the girls. Marbles, football, tin can turkey, tag and conkers by the boys. Any attempt at cricket meant playing on a concrete or gravel surface. Between the backs of the tenements there were grassed spaces, which would have made ideal playgrounds, but they were railed off and inaccessible. I could never fathom out why there were no trees growing.

In hot weather, the boys made for the docks to swim in, but the docks' policemen would chase them away. My older brother, Alfie, was terrified of policemen, and always crossed the road to avoid them. If he had been naughty he was told that a policeman would come for him. If I was naughty, I was told a black man would get me, but I never saw any, except at the pictures. We had a picture house on the island, where we would go on Saturdays for twopence. It was called the 'Bug Hut', because of the fleas that bit you.

On Sundays, Mam would send Alfie, Sarah, George and me to Sunday school at St John's, where we were all baptized, but we rarely arrived there. George never went, but played round the docks with his mates instead. Alfie, Sarah and I preferred the Mission Hall, run by Mr and Mrs Quiggin, who had a sweet stall in the market. The Mission Hall was a small angular building on a corner, with tiered seating around a small room, and the Quiggins told us biblical stories, and of missionary work in Africa. It was much more interesting than St John's. We were given little books on the scriptures and a bag of sweets, fruit drops, acid drops, and 'Mint Cake', which the Quiggins made.

We did venture to St John's, with feelings of guilt, when they gave a Christmas party for children, and in summer, when we had an outing by train to Greenodd on the coast. There we had egg and spoon races, and three leg races, when two children raced with a leg tied together. We were each given a bag of food and a bottle of pop, and the train journey made for a very exciting day.

There were train lines alongside the roads bordering the shipyards, with steam trains shunting to and fro, often with cargoes of iron ore, coal and steel. This industrial activity was fascinating to a six-year-old boy, and I remember venturing up the steps of a signal box and making friends with the signalman. He seemed to be master of all, with a bird's eye view of the area, and being able to direct engines with his numerous levers. He said when I was old enough I could be trained to be a signalman, and for many weeks I thought of little else.

In summer we made for the coast, and this meant crossing to Walney Island, a twelve mile long island lying off Barrow. It cost a penny to cross the bridge until 1935, the Silver Jubilee year of George V, when it was renamed the Jubilee Bridge and made free. Mam would make up the sandwiches, usually egg and cress, wrap the teapot in a tea cloth, put tea and sugar in twists of paper, and, pushing baby Reggie in the pram, we walked to the shore. Hot water to make the tea could be got for a penny a pot, or with a little patience, a fire could be made on the beach to boil a tin of water.

There was a choice of three beaches, but to call them beaches was a misnomer, as they consisted almost entirely of stones. By removing the larger stones and using these to build a wall, around knee height, allowed one to undress discreetly. They also served as a windbreaker from the prevailing winds from the Irish Sea, and it was usual to find a wall already made. So we settled into it, made it more habitable with towels, and proceeded to change into swimwear. Tiptoeing gingerly over stones, perhaps hand in hand with Sarah, feeling the cold water covering my feet, then experiencing a wave pounding against me, before the sea covered my head, did not make me want to learn to swim, and I never did, despite Sarah’s attempts. I could not get back to the shelter of the windbreaker quickly enough.

Our favoured beach was on the north of the island where there was a shingle beach and sand dunes. A man had built a small wooden shack in the dunes to live in, and we knew him as the hermit. He was unkempt with long straggly black hair and beard, and sometimes we met him in the lanes, where he would stand and preach. There were winkles and cockles in abundance when the tide had just receded, if we could get them before the seagulls. Nearby was a hamlet of whitewashed stone houses, known as ‘North Scale’, so different to the brick buildings we lived in and with the remains of an old windmill and an iron horse trough still in use. There was also a wheelless charabanc which had been converted into a shop, where we spent our last remaining pennies on ice cream or sweets. This meant a long walk back home, tired and hungry, before we gathered round the kitchen table to feast on the boiled winkles and cockles, each with a pin in hand, to pick them out of the shells and sandwich them between slices of Mam’s bread. A simple supper, but oh, the satisfaction of feasting on what we had gathered from the sea shore was the culmination of a day of riches.

— Two —

HARD TIMES

Names of streets associated with ships included the one and only shopping street on the Island named Anchor Road. As young as I was, I was beginning to be interested in shops and the business that went on inside. It was not always evident on the surface. My friend, Reginald Raybould and I, would often play in his father’s fledgling wireless shop or in the stockroom behind, a mystery to a six-year-old, with its coils of wire, switches, wireless sets, batteries and gadgets. His uncle had a butcher’s shop in the street and when it was closed he let us play in it after giving us sawdust to put on the floor to soak up the blood. Carcasses and bones made an interesting contrast to bells and batteries, but it was the draper’s shop next door which held more of a fascination for me. It had an air of respectability at the front, so different from the business done at the back.

Above the front window was a varnished fascia board and the names ‘Tooner & Dennison, Clothiers & Drapers’, in elegant black script. It was the only clothing shop on the Island and unlike the butchers, bakers, grocery, sweet, fruit and vegetable shops in the street, customers seldom entered, giving it more of an air of mystery to me. I could never pass without looking into the window to see its odd display. There were always the same two disfigured models on view, a woman and a man, which were never moved. The mannequin leaned forward, appearing ready to fall over, which, much to my disappointment, it never did. It had one hand raised, as if in acknowledgement to a passer-by. Its nose was chipped and on the top of its head was a blond wig which was usually askew.

In summer it would have on a floral dress, which failed to hide the cracks and chips on the arms and legs, which even to my young eye, detracted from its appeal. In winter it would be wrapped in a coat and sometimes with a fur muff on the hand, which previously raised, would be brought down to waist level. The other arm never moved from its rigidity alongside the body, evident to me that it was broken at the elbow. To the back of the window stood a man's model, without hair or shoes. Its nose was cracked, obviously having taken a knock, but as its head was turned towards the wall, it was only by stepping inside the entrance that the crack was revealed. In winter it was invariably dressed in a blue serge suit, sometimes with a white silk scarf hanging around the neck. As this was standard Sunday wear for the shipyard workers, it scarcely turned a head from any passer-by. In summer, jacket and trousers in beige and grey replaced the suit. Bright colours rarely made an appearance.

Other clothing was draped on hangers, strung from the ceiling or, like scarecrows, hung on T-shaped stands. One week when I passed, a clothes line had been put up across the window with garments hung from it like washing but it had gone the following week and I never saw it again. The side and front of the window were given to displaying stacks of towels and bedding which did not change with the seasons. A sign on the window stated 'Club Cheques Taken', which puzzled me until Mam said they were instead of money and she couldn't do without them. Other than this, the window display gave out no welcome or enticement to enter. Mr Dennison looked after the shop. He was a staid elderly man who, summer and winter, dressed in a black jacket and pinstripe trousers, which gave to the shop a respectability above itself, and not seen worn by anyone else in the town except by the undertakers.

However, whilst any business conducted at the front of the shop was done with the minimum of deference by Mr Dennison, it was the business done by Mr Tooner at the back which excited my curiosity. I first entered it with my mother who was carrying a bundle of clothing. In its dim light we were confronted by a high counter, above which I saw the head of a man with spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

‘Can you tell me what you can give me on this, Mr Tooner?’ asked my mother, handing over the bundle.

‘Five shillings,’ he said. He looked down at me with disdain. ‘That’s the best I can do.’

Mr Tooner took the bundle and turned his back on us. The counter was too high for me to see over.

‘I’ll take that,’ said Mam without hesitation. ‘Hopefully it will only be for a week.’

Outside the shop, I asked my mother what it was they sold.

‘Nothing. They lend money in exchange for things.’

‘Lend money?’

‘Yes, pawnbrokers,’ she said, and looking up at her, I could see her face flush with embarrassment as a passing neighbour smiled knowingly at her, so I kept silent.

It did not make sense until after several visits with my mother, usually with Dad’s suit, to take it in or to collect it. Of far more interest to me were the visits on a Monday afternoon, when auctions were held in the back room. An air of excitement, mixed with the smells of mothballs and stale sweat, filled the room. It would be crowded with the locals hoping to pick up a bargain, or to retrieve an item on which a pledge had lapsed. Mr Tooner became much friendlier when he took the auction, making jokes as each item was held up.

‘A bundle of bedding! Never seen a bug. Looking for a good home.’

‘An almost new suit! Worn only once, for the wedding.’

‘A nine carat gold wedding ring! Looking for its owner.’

There were titters but little laughter as we already knew his jokes. He obviously enjoyed auctioning the items off, more than he did taking them in. Then he was not open to offers. His first offer was his final one, and Mam said he knew the value of everything, but never offered more than half of it. Many times I accompanied my mother, either in apprehension to pawn something, or in excited anticipation of her bidding, but when venturing through that back door, I learnt too, that my mother's pride was always left behind.

Weddings took on a communal aspect when word went round that there was one on, perhaps in a nearby street. Women and children gathered eagerly to see the bride resplendent in white emerging from her home. Oo's and ah's rose approvingly from the women. Usually, coins were thrown to the onlookers. If none were forthcoming the cry of 'Shabby wedding, hard up, hard up. Shabby wedding, hard up, hard up', was repeatedly chanted by the children. Sometimes the pennies were heated on a shovel before being thrown, which caused an outcry but much laughter too when the foolhardy rushed forward and got their fingers burnt.

Weddings were not the only adult activities children involved themselves in. No excitement was missed. One flat in particular held a morbid fascination for me. In the dark of a winter's evening a rent collector had been murdered on the landing outside a flat and all the rent money stolen. My questioning of my siblings as to who had done it only met with silence, which only increased my curiosity, and I never did find out. Neighbours' quarrels, street fights, drunken behaviour, police visits, all brought inquisitive children running to the scene. Life in The Buildings became easier in the summer when families spilled out of the flats onto the streets. Chairs would be brought out and much gossiping went on amongst groups of neighbours. Mam said she had no time for gossiping but gave an ear to it nonetheless. Election time saw the participation of groups of children going round the streets shouting in support of a candidate, and not always a Labour one, but echoing their father's choice with the usual battle song, 'Vote, vote, vote for XXX. Put old XXX in the dock!'