WHSMITH

Feint

ASPHALTE 2-886.

by S. FOLEY.
~~HOME FARM.~~
~~HUNTLEY.~~
~~GLOS.~~
PEAR TREE COTTAGE.
THE ROW
CLIFFORD MESNE
NR NEWENT
GLOCS.

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1924

S. Foley.
Huntley. GLOS.

Nothing can be seen of it now, not a cobble. When you walk round you can hardly imagine it was there, but as the shafts of memory pierce the mists of time it all comes back in pictures. A curious rectangle of cobbled streets, so narrow you could nearly jump across; bounded by the humming, smoking power-station, and the clanking, steaming coal-wharf; six blocks of withering, three-storeyed, terraced houses, with a pub on every other corner. The whole place was dying of old age. Right in the middle of it, Mum and Flo and I lived in one room, a first-floor front. The rent for this was five shillings, and Mum used to leave it under the clock for "Dr. Crippen" to collect. No-one knew his

real name, but he looked like that famous folk-villain, pince-nez and all, and he was almost as ruthless, chasing his quarry even to the lavatory door. He knew some tricks, and he needed to.

One Monday he left a note under the clock to tell us that owing to shortfall in rents, and to our deplorable habits of smashing up our own homes, there would be no more repairs done except by order of the sanitary, and we all knew what that meant. I asked Mum who really owned our house, and she said "Lord Bleeding Portman." Not only ours, but all the rest, and a lump of Edgware Rd. and Oxford St. as well. It was ridiculous! How could one man own a great lump of Oxford St? He must be so rich! Why was he not King?

Mum said well, he wasn't,

that's why, and we'd never see him as he was so busy, not that she wanted to anyway. Lord Bleeding Portman still lived in Marylebone, but down the posh end in a big quiet square. Somehow I felt that Mum was rather ungrateful; it was quite an honour for me. I was proud to live in a lord's house, although the leg of Mum's bed did keep sinking through the floor boards and Uncle Bob had to patch it up.

Fifty yards or less from the chimneys of the power station stood the school, elementary in every sense, and dyed by the swirling sulphur smoke to a nice shade of clerical grey just right for a church school. It was not graced with a saint's name, none of them would have owned it; nor

hallowed by tradition, not hampered by reputation.

But we liked it; it was warm and dry and clean. Twelve o'clock, dinner-time so called, came all too soon. Out we had to go till two, and there were no school dinners or milk unless you had consumption, which was hardly worth it. Hunger sent us home hotfoot, trotting, hopping, jumping, counting the paving stones, breathless up the stairs and through the ever-open door of our one-room home. Mum was at work, as usual. A young war widow with two children had to be at work anywhere she could get it. In winter she washed up and peeled in Dan's coffee-shop, and in summer the same at Lord's Ground.

The little grate was empty but not clean, the two beds unmade, the lamp unscrewed ready for filling, the glass chimney dirty by its side. The big china water-jug on the wash-stand was empty. The little house was so quiet you could hear the clock ticking. Why wasn't Mrs. Mack moving about upstairs? Where had Gran Smith gone from the back room? Why was Aunt Mag so silent downstairs

On the table were two plates of margarine sandwiches under a tea-cloth. We studied them for a time to be sure they were absolutely equal, then sat down and began to munch. The meal was soon over and the last crumbs picked up with a licked finger. Flo got up, went to the cupboard, and shut the door with a sigh.

"Wotcher reckon's fer tea, then, Flo?"

"I dunno, s'no good askin' me, 'ave to wait 'n see, I s'pose."

"I'm still 'ungry."

"Oh, you! You're always 'ungry! 'Ungry, 'ungry, 'ungry! I reckon you got worms. Anyway, go'n get the water. It's your turn!"

She swung round on me fiercely, expecting resistance, so I took the other tack.

"Alright, gi's the bloody jug, big 'ead", and I ran downstairs to the tap in the yard. She had the last word, shouting, "Don't spill it all over the stairs as usual, you big baby."

The filled jug was heavy, and I had to carry it with one hand in the handle and the other under the lip, and waddle up the stairs not to spill it.

Flo had cleaned out the grate and laid the fire. I grabbed the paraffin to fill the lamp, but she leaped up at me like a gazelle. "I'll do that, clumsy. You wipe the glass. Oh, for Chrissake be careful! You break that Mum'll skin yer."

We were never reluctant to go back to school; afternoons were short, easy, and sleepy. In the Infants, the work was done in the mornings. We had done our sums, torn the Catechism apart, and shouted out in concert to the Almighty to forgive us our sins. Now we could do what we pleased, and often nothing, which was quite in order so long as we did it quietly. Sometimes we were told to lower our heads and

feign unwanted sleep while the nuns stood by the fire whispering.

After school Flo hurried home but I was diverted by my mates into a gang fight. There was a deal of chasing and shouting, insults and stones were hurled, but the fracas was broken up by the sight of a policeman. Disappointingly, no blood was shed, but there was promise of another battle when it grew dark, so we all went home victorious.

Mum was in, and the place was clean and tidy. The lamp was lit, turned low for now, and Flo sat by it straining her eyes to read an old comic that we knew by heart. Two saucepans simmered on the hob. Two! Whatever was in them, I was ready

for it, but it was not quite ready for me.

"Oh!" said Flo, all aggrieved, "'is royal bloody 'ighness 'as turned up now, now it's all done!"

I struggled for an answer that would absolutely crush her, but Mum interposed. "Never mind all that. You got a treat to-night. There's neck o' mutton stew, an' boiled rice 'n jam. Only, you got to get the jam. Nip round Finucane's an' get a penn'orth o' jam in this cup. Only, 'fore you do, better get some coal off Clarky. Bucket's empty, 'ere's the fourpence, fourteen pound o' coal, an' beg a few sticks. Don't forget"

Errands done, and back home again, and Mum had turned the lamp up and was dishing out the stew. It went round

twice, and a good job it did. That was really our dinner tea and supper, and we made the most of it. We ate in silence, Flo reading her old comic while I read the newspaper table-cloth upside-down. An old paper was a good table-cloth; no-one cared if it got dirty, you could read it, and it lit the fire next day. In the sheen of the polished body of the lamp you could see the gleaming bedknobs, and again in them the lamp, and in that the bedknobs, and so infinity was present until your eye grew tired.

The house was alive now with domestic content. Upstairs Mrs. Mack was shuffling about getting something tasty for Old Mack's tea. He would come home drunk, and like as not throw it on the fire, plate and all, but she always did it just the same. In the back room Annie

the ironer had come home and we could hear Gran Smith scolding her for being late and her bloater spoiling and all. Downstairs Uncle Bob had his gramophone going while Aunt Mag clattered and nagged.

Flo washed up and I went down in the dark twice to fetch water. The street was full of kids, skipping and hopscotching, swinging round the lampposts, fighting in the gutters, and we ran out eagerly to join them.

Bedtime, Mum went through my cropped hair with a toothcomb. "Siddy, you got nits again," she said wearily, cracking them with her nails, "you better get a penn'orth o' soft soap tomorrer, an' I'll 'ave another go at 'em. Otherwise, you'll 'ave to go to the bake, an' I won't 'ave the shame of it."

"Dirty little sod," cried Flo, whose long dark hair never had nits. I screwed round to poke my tongue at her. I did not care anyway, as long as Mum was combing my hair. Mum turned the lamp down, threw some coal dust on the dying fire, and went into the Phoenix with Aunt Mag for a half of porter. Flo went in the back room to sit with Gran Smith. I got into the bottom end of the little bed and arranged my legs along the wall so as to leave room for Flo at the top end.

It was warm and cosy. The fire glowed red under its crust of dust, a pie of flame. Now, on top of the crust a few little pieces set up in business on their own with tiny blue flames and streaming yellow fumes. I could hear Flo's clear

young voice, and Gran Smith's grumpy answers. Doorstairs Uncle Bob's gramophone boomed on. When I left school, I would be a dustman, too, and I would have a gramophone and sit listening to it in my socks, and smoke my woodbines. Everything was going to be alright; we were all going to live like this nearly for ever; nothing was going to change. Slowly I dozed off to sleep, nits and all.

But it did change, very soon, and that change jumped into our lives suddenly, brutally, and wearing two hobnailed boots.

Old Mack dropped dead in the street, and Uncle Bob carried the corpse upstairs on his back. He stopped on the landing by our open door to catch his

breath, then he tramped on up in the dark, and we heard the bedspring squeak as he dropped his grisly burden.

As soon as the old man had been laid to rest in Kensal Green, Mum negotiated with the widow for her back room. A bargain was struck at three--and-six which gave Mrs. Mack sixpence profit, and as she kept saying, she could do with it now. Mum and I went down the market and bought an old iron folding bed for two bob. It grew heavier as we lumbered it round the coal-wharf, so we had several stops, and sat in it in turn, countering the sarcastic jests of neighbours asking where we were going camping.

Mum seemed in a hurry, and

I asked her why. "Never mind", she said, "Flo must have her privacy now. She's thirteen. She's a big girl now. Come on. You know what I mean". I did not, but I banged some nails into the partition & put a stout string across the room. Mum threw a blanket over it, and there we were, private. We took our things up, that was no burden; the moving was finished, and so was our snug childhood.

The next Saturday, the reason for Mum's urgency walked in with her. A soldier from India, on discharge leave, he wore medal ribbons from the war in Flanders. He had tea with us, talked about India, showed us his scars, and gave us a ha'penny each. We went to

bed reluctantly, leaving him down there with Mum. We did not like him, although he was brown and handsome and strong. Soon he was there every evening, and on Sundays we were made to go to Sunday School so he could have his lie-down. When we came home, there he was asleep on Mum's bed, and Mum was by the fire, singing, and combing her hair. Sometimes he was there in the mornings, and I had to fetch the jugs of cold water he threw liberally over his suntanned shoulders.

Well, they got married. The wedding was a very quiet one, practically hushed. Hardly anyone but us was there, only Granddad who had had a shave, and fat Annie who was drunk. There was no reception, no

extra food, no cake, and no honeymoon, but they went into the Phoenix, and there was a grand booze-up.

On the Monday, our new Dad, Alf Sullivan, assumed his role as master, bully, judge, jury and executioner. His word was law, and its instruments were his fist, his belt, and his naily boot. Mum soon realised that she had backed a loser, and she paid dearly for whatever she got out of that marriage.

Alf was a casual worker, very casual, much given to arguing with foremen. When he was out of work, Mum had to work harder than ever, and Flo and I became proper cadgers, taking pathetic notes to the Relief and the Salvation Army, lining up with the scruffs for a pennorth of

soup, tramping to the West End for stale bread, going to the pawnshop for one and another, chopping sticks, running errands at cut rates, waiting around at the back of Lord's Ground for them to throw their waste food out. We plagued the butcher for bones and oddments, and begged credit from all the little shops; Mum always paid up in the end, somehow.

Eventually came the ultimate deprivation; Alf stopped our Sunday asphalte. Mum had always managed to save a few pence for us to have this little treat; it was always something to look forward to, and well worth waiting for. Asphalte was Dinny Finucane's speciality, always in the middle of his shop window to make your mouth water.

They made it themselves; great big square slabs of a sort of jam tart, thick layers of fatty pastry, plenty of oozy jam in between, and topped off and clothed in white icing. The icing turned a little grey as it cooled, and the colour and the texture gave it its name. This confection was one of Man's greatest achievements, nothing like it before or since. Dinny sold it more by whim than weight. If he was in a good mood, or he had a piece past its prime, you might be lucky and get a good helping for your money, though he would not sell less than a penn'orth. Kids with a ha'penny each could club together for a piece, take it round the corner and argue about it, but not in the shop.

There was spite in Alf's ban, because he kept it up when he was working and some money coming in, and

we were having butter sometimes, and Miem bought a gramophone on the never-never. He still maintained it when his trouser pocket was stuffed full of notes. He had compounded his pension for eighty pounds, and we did not get a penny of it. He took it into the Phoenix, and to make sure not to lose on the deal, he set about smoking and drinking himself to death.

One day, or rather one night, we got a bit of our own back. It was one of those hot nights when no-one can really sleep, but this was no matter for to-morrow was Sunday. Flo and I lay sleepless and fidgety upstairs, waiting for the boozy singers in the pub to

do 'Nellie Dean' for the last time. We heard them turned out, and soon Alf's drunken lumbering footsteps coming up, and then him and Mum having a dreadful row. Soon he was shouting for me to get up, nothing else would do; so, fearing for the lamp, I ran downstairs.

I was to get him one-and-sixpence worth of eels and mash, and hurry, but not so as to spill the gravy. I was practised at this, so not really minding, I grabbed a basin and trotted off. There was a queue, and it was almost midnight when I got back. Alf had his boots off, but kept one handy to throw at me if necessary. Sitting with his feet in the coal-bucket he

wolfed the lot, and washed it down with a quart bottle of brown ale. Mum leaned over to take the basin off the mantelpiece, then she stood and watched him close, like a doctor, and said "'E's paralytic now, drunk as a lord, don't know what 'e is doin', an' couldn't remember nothin'. 'E can't do no 'arm till mornin'. I'm goin' down to Aunt Mag's; till I'm back you sit an' watch 'e don't tip the lamp up."

Half-asleep I sat and watched, and soon he stirred and began to undress by habit in soldierly fashion. Jacket, waistcoat and belt were hung nice and square on the chair-back. With the control

of a real boozer he teetered over to the bed, took off his trousers, and began to fold them. As he did, there was a pleasant clink of money, and he took a handful out. Looking craftily about, he unscrewed the brass knob of the bedstead, put two coins in, and they clattered quietly down to the bottom. I saw them in the dim light; they were a half-crown and a florin. He screwed the knob back, pulled out the bucket for a great long boozy piddle, fell on the bed in his long-johns, and went to sleep at once.

Next morning I told Mum all about it. "The crafty bastard," she said, "You sure? Perhaps you

was dreamin!" I convinced her. "Right," she said, "we'll bloody 'ave it. 'E owes it. But say nothin', not even to Flo, else we'll both cop a black eye. 'Sides, knowin' 'im, might be a trap, but I doubt it. We'll see." Wednesday morning, Alf was flat broke because he borrowed woodbine money off her, so now she knew for sure.

Dinner-time, we stripped the bed, knocked the spring out, canted the bedhead carefully upside-down, and out slid the two coins, a half-crown and a florin, just as I had said. All Mum could say was, "Well," then after "I'll give these bloody bugs a bashin' now we got it to pieces."

I stood there quiet, looking at her as she looked at the money. She looked at me, then she reached for a big plate. Mum was always one to make up her mind quick. "'Ere," she said, "Nip round Dinny Finucane's an' get a bob's-worth of asphalte; no, get one-and-six worth, le's make pigs of ourselves fer a change."

It was the best errand I had ever run. Dinny was most impressed by the amount and reality of the money in my palm. "Gawd," he said, "your Mum backed a winner? She owes me a bit, let me think, now----"
I snapped him off, "No, she don't Dinny. She cleared you up last Friday; I brought it round meself. Give us eighteenpence

worth of asphalte please."

He must have been in a good mood, or the asphalte gone a bit stale in the heat, because he cut a great big square of the lovely stuff, and the corners of the soggy pastry bent over the side of the plate. The jam dripped out, and I caught it on my finger not to waste it. We three ate the lot at once, every atom, and I felt sick.

Through the years Alf had his four-and-six back over and over again

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Thank you for reading this.