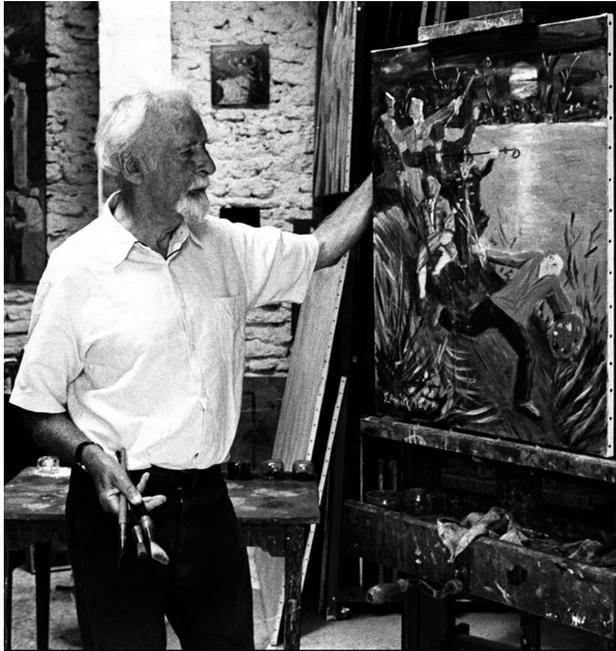


For Barnaby



FOREWORD

Bishops, and other species of clergy, have loomed large in my life. In France, where I live now, I am known for my paintings of bishops in unconventional situations; and my name is chiefly associated with “*All Gas and Gaiters*”, which Pauline Devaney and I wrote between 1965 and 1972.

It was the first television comedy series about the Church of England that struck a chord with viewers, both in Britain and elsewhere. There had been several earlier attempts that failed due to lack of understanding and knowledge of that singular institution, and there have been others since. When the journalist, Miriam Maisel, interviewed us in December 1967, she wrote that she had:

“... Expected to find a middle-aged, rather hearty couple. I even expected a clerical background on one side or the other and a couple who had spent most of their lives in the country.

What I actually found was a couple of young, sophisticated and highly decorative actors who live in a flat in Blackheath. And as for a bishop in the family – neither Edwin nor Pauline had actually met one.”

In fact we neither of us went to church and we were married in a registry office. And yet bishops and the clergy had figured in my life due to an unexpected event, or rather several unexpected events. But my whole life seems to have been composed of unexpected events, some of which have proved more fruitful than others.

I have written at some length about my family background because I believe that we, like trees, have as much of us underground as above it and that our roots colour and shape everything we do. In my case, I have come to see that everything I have done, the way I have reacted to events, even where I have lived, have all been influenced not only by my background and my childhood, but by much that occurred before I was born.

It happened that I was separated from my parents for long periods from an early age and that contact was maintained by regular correspondence. Almost all these letters have survived and they have enabled me to check my memory of events against accounts written at the time. Even allowing for the fact that writing to parents involves a certain amount of presentation, I have been surprised how often my memory of events has been at odds with these contemporary witnesses.

Digging back along the path I have travelled, I have been forced to turn over some of its stones and reveal certain things I should have preferred to have left where they were. But for better or worse it has been my path, so, spade in hand, let me begin.

* * *



CHAPTER ONE

*“Be happy in the moment, take no thought
For hidden things beyond, be firm to test
And turn the edge of troubles with a jest,
For bliss unmixed was never earthly lot.”*

From Edward Marsh’s translation
of Horace’s Ode XVI Book II

Two o’clock in the morning and I am still painting. For many years I have worked into the early hours, the hours when everyone is asleep, the telephone is silent and there are no distractions. On this particular night I am working on one of my bishop paintings. Since I came to live in France almost forty years ago and began to paint seriously, bishops have been one of my principal themes.

There is a ruined cathedral in the next village whose bishop at the time of the Renaissance had François Rabelais as his chaplain. I like to imagine the two of them still riding round the marsh together, the bishop on a horse with Rabelais beside him on a donkey, figures seen fleetingly in the mist, by the light of the early morning sun.

I break off for a moment and look at my watch, thinking there might be a late news bulletin on the television. I have a television set in the studio that is tuned to English speaking stations, as we only have French stations in the house.

When the set warms up, an old black and white film is just ending. The credits roll and I notice a name, John Loder. *Loder*, I think, *Loder*, and my memory stirs, as did Marcel Proust’s when he tasted the madeleine that took him back to the world of his childhood.

For me, seeing the name John Loder on the television in the corner of my studio has the same effect: it takes me back instantly to the first time I went to the cinema.

We drove to Canterbury in the Lanchester with my mother driving, my father sitting beside her and Gladys Pepper, my nursemaid, and me, seated behind. The cinema was called *The Friars* and my

father, who knew the manager, had organised the expedition. We parked the car and, holding Gladys's hand, I followed my parents along the pavement and up the steps into the vestibule. The manager came to greet us and, looking at me curiously, led us through the doors into the darkened hall. There on the screen was the enormous face of a man with a moustache. My mother turned to the manager:

"Is that him?"

"Yes" he replied.

"Look, darling," said my mother "That's Loder."

"It's not." I said "That is not Loder."

"But it is," they all insisted, "That is Loder."

"It is not," I shouted "That is not Loder – he doesn't look a bit like that".

It was my first glimpse of the unbridgeable gap between reality and the world of the imagination.

As an only child in the country with no one to play with, I had invented an imaginary friend called Loder. Nobody knew where the name came from, but I would endlessly recount his life, his troubles with his wife and his many children, his lack of money and much else besides. Surrounded by adults, it was a way of keeping my end up. While they might not want to hear the opinions of a child, I found that when I began my sentence with "Loder thinks" or "Loder says" or "That's just what Loder feels", I was more readily listened to. So, Gladys, Edith the cook, Attaway the gardener, Mrs Pepper, Gladys's mother who came in to clean each day and even Tutt, the back-door-boy who cleaned the shoes, brought in the logs and ran errands, as well as my parents, were familiar with the sayings and doings of Loder.

I am not sure whether I discussed Loder with my other two friends, Old Bill and Measday.

Bill Sheaff, known as 'Old Bill' to distinguish him from his son, 'Young Bill' who drove the tractor, was the farm bailiff who lived with his wife in a late Victorian redbrick house at the top of the lane. He rode a red bicycle that had once belonged to a postman. Although adept at getting on and riding, he had never mastered the

art of getting off and so would collapse into the hedge or onto the bank at the side of the lane. His other form of transport was a dung-cart drawn by a fat little horse called Topsy. When I got older I would spend happy hours seated beside him on the front of the cart as he smoked his pipe and we made our way slowly up the hill to Hearts Delight. There we loaded up the cart with wurzels from the clamp and brought them back to Wenderton, the scent of shag mingling with the peppery smell of the wurzels. Sometimes he would let me hold the reins, "Gee up, Topsy". Topsy would take no notice and we would continue at the same leisurely pace.

Measday was the stockman and I would help him mix the mash for the pigs while he would tell me about the last night's radio programmes. He was a keen listener and his favourite programme was "In Town Tonight" which included a sketch each week with Richard Goolden as Old Ebenezer the night watchman. I was allowed to stay up and listen to this on Saturday nights and the following week we would endlessly dissect last week's episode, quoting lines and imitating the quavering voice of Richard Goolden.

Monday was market day at Sandwich and my father, in breeches, boots and gaiters, his market coat and trilby hat, would drive off early with Mr Fordham, his clerk, to conduct the sales of pigs, sheep and cattle. Monday was also washday and Dash, the old black and white Clumber Spaniel who lived in the backdoor porch beside the kitchen, would look more than usually lugubrious, knowing that not much fun was to be had that day.

Saturday was market day at Canterbury and in the afternoon my mother, Gladys and I would do the weekly shopping in Canterbury ending with tea at Lefevres, Canterbury's department store. On one of these trips I was taken to the hairdressing saloon as it was felt I should have a real haircut. When the assistant arrived dressed all in white with a white sheet to put over me, I screamed the place down and had ignominiously to be led out, so it was back to Gladys wielding the scissors in the nursery.

Another visit to the cinema several years later was no more successful. The film chosen was Hitchcock's "The Lady Vanishes".

All went well until Margaret Lockwood appeared smothered in white bandages. Again I had to be led out.

The theatre proved more satisfactory. I was taken to see the Canterbury Amateur Dramatic Society's production of "The Pilgrim's Progress" in the Cathedral Chapter House. This was a seminal experience and resulted in my spending days trudging round the kitchen table in a pair of my father's boots with a pack on my back, imagining myself to be the Pilgrim.

Dressing up was my favourite occupation; my father's old uniforms, my mother's riding coat, two early nineteenth century wigs that had belonged to an ancestor, which I'd found in the attic, and a Father Christmas outfit with a hook-on beard, allowed me to be practically anyone I chose, from Nelson to the old man with the white beard and black homburg hat who lived in one of the farm cottages along the lane. On one occasion I was dressed in the riding coat with the beard and a hat, imitating his walk with his two sticks in the middle of the lawn when I saw him walking past the gate. I fled into the house.

Beside the house was the hop-garden, which in winter presented the spectacle of bare rows of poles held together by stretched wires. In the spring, beside each hop-plant, strings were tied to the bottom wires and attached to the top wires by men on stilts. Up these strings the tendrils known as bines climbed, putting out leaves and finally forming the fruit, until the hop-garden was transformed into parallel alleys of overhanging dark green leaves.

Picking time was the big event of the year. The pickers came from London on special trains and were housed in primitive huts, a hut to each family. Picking, too, was organised by families, each family being allotted an alley. The grandmother would sit at the end with the big basket, and a man with a knife on the end of a pole would cut bines down for the members of the family, who, seated on stools or upturned boxes, would drape the bines across their knees and pick the hops into smaller baskets which, when full, they would carry to the grandmother. Hops, to anyone not familiar with them, are pale green and feather light.

The grandmother's job – one might say her art – was to pour the hops into the big basket with such care that they took up the maximum of space so that the basket would be filled with the least possible effort on the part of the pickers.

Young Bill, temporarily separated from his tractor, was the tally-man who kept count of who had picked what and saw that the baskets, when full were emptied into the loosely woven sacks or 'green-bags,' which were then loaded on to the wagon and taken by the wagoner to the oast to be dried. An internecine war was waged between Young Bill and the grandmothers, with frequent loud disputes as to whether or not the baskets were full. His favourite tactic was to accidentally kick the basket as he walked past which made the hops settle at a lower level. At this, there would be a roar of rage from the grandmother, sometimes followed up by a physical attack. On one occasion he was seized by an irate group of pickers, pushed head first into a basket and left struggling with his legs in the air.

The arrival of the hop-pickers was looked upon with mixed feelings in Wingham village. While the publicans and shop-keepers might be glad of the increased trade, the drunken brawls, break-ins, missing poultry and general upset caused by an influx of cockneys in holiday mood unfamiliar with the country and its ways, meant that people locked their doors, kept them locked and stayed behind them.

There was always a moment after the novelty had worn off, when the pickers went on strike. Young Bill would plead with them to go back to work and when this failed, Old Bill would arrive on his red bicycle and, collapsing against the wagon, would get off and tell them that it was impossible to pay more. Finally, when they still refused to continue picking, my grandfather would arrive impressively in the black Hillman with Kelk, his uniformed chauffeur, and, after a heart rending speech in which ruin was seen to be stalking East Kent, would offer a farthing a bushel more, which was always accepted -except for one year when they threatened to overturn the car and he was so taken by surprise he offered a halfpenny.

When the time to go to school came, I was sent to Reed Barn School in the neighbouring village of Ash. Two sisters, known as 'The

Miss Elgars' kept it. Miss Edith, the elder, was the dominant partner, the stern headmistress, while Miss Gracie was more approachable and only to be feared when leaning over one's shoulder to see what one had written when a fine spray of saliva was emitted as she talked. The Miss Elgars lived at Wingham and drove daily to their school in a capacious black car, which gradually filled with children on the way. Each morning Gladys would take me up the lane to the turnpike road where we would await their arrival.

School was my first experience of being with other children. The nearest children at home had been those of the farm workers, but I was not allowed to play with them for fear that I might pick up a common accent or "catch something" so I remained a solitary prisoner in my garden surrounded by its tall yew hedge. At one point, a boy from the cottages took pity on me and came to chat through the hedge. This Pyramus-and-Thisbe friendship was too limited to last long, so school was something of a shock.

I was not unlike one of Conrad Lorenz's geese; having always been surrounded by adults, I considered myself to be one, and found the children childish. Unused to playing with others, I had none of the skills such as throwing and catching balls, and absolutely no sense of competition, which made me a perfect butt for the school bully. I could read and soon learned to write, I enjoyed drawing and painting, daydreaming and inventing stories because although solitude had left me physically retarded, it had developed my imagination.

Although I was solitary I was far from unhappy. Wenderton House and garden were the perfect setting to develop the imagination of a child. The house was an accretion dating from the fourteenth century. The main part was seventeenth century, refaced with stock bricks and a slate roof in the middle of the nineteenth century. An additional Regency bow-windowed wing had been added earlier and the whole had been topped off with a late Victorian gothic front porch sometime in the 1870s. The garden consisted of an upper and lower lawn, a wilderness, leading to a rose garden and, beyond, a pond on which were semi-wild ducks. An orchard and a big kitchen garden stretching down to the marsh succeeded this in turn. Tall

clipped hedges surrounded each part of the garden, so that one had the impression of discovering one secret place after another.

On the upper lawn, opposite the front door, was a weeping ash. In the hall, a yellowing photograph showed my great-great-great aunt, Sarah Anne Minter, wearing a bustle, and her brother, William, with mutton chop whiskers standing in front of the same tree when it was half grown sometime in the 1860s. Now its branches touched the ground all round, so that when it was in leaf it formed a dark green room to play in. At the side of the house was a yew tree between three and four hundred years old, which it was believed, had been planted to provide wood to make bows in the days of the English archers. In the wilderness, an ancient mulberry tree said to date from the time of James I, who had encouraged their planting to breed silkworms, twisted in every conceivable direction and was perfect for climbing.

Then there were the attics, which contained the books and toys that had belonged to my father and his seven brothers and two sisters. My mother, for whom books were dust-traps, had consigned them there. The attics, strictly out of bounds because of the accumulated dust and dirt, were naturally my favourite part of the house. There, amidst dust and dead flies, I lived a vicarious late-Victorian boyhood, full of such wonders as the magic lantern, an imposing machine with a chimney for the oil lamp which fitted inside it and by whose flickering light it projected glass slides showing Adam and Eve naked in the garden of Eden, scenes from the Holy Land and, best of all, a wooden slide of a kaleidoscope with a small handle which when turned made the colours on the screen move in and out of each other. Books included the works of Dickens, "Masterman Ready" by Captain Marryat, "Coral Island", Southey's "Life of Nelson" and a long run of bound copies of the first Strand Magazines, with the "Adventures of Sherlock Holmes".

My father's family had all been fond of reading and he himself often read to me. His favourite book was "The Pickwick Papers"; a copy of which he had carried with him throughout the First World War and which he claimed had never failed to cheer him up in his darkest moments. I was five years old when he first read it to me and

at eight I read it for myself. I don't suppose I understood much at five, but his enjoyment was infectious and when I read it today, I hear his voice. He successfully read all sorts of books to me. Two favourites were "Winnie the Pooh" and "The Wind in the Willows, both of which we read so often I knew them almost by heart. The only time we admitted defeat over a book was when he bought a copy of "Uncle Remus". The Southern drawl in which it is written proved too difficult for both of us and he took it back to the shop the next day.

My father's family lived at Tenterden in the Weald of Kent. 'Apps' is a Flemish name and it is probable that the family came to England as weavers. The grazing land of Romney Marsh, renowned for its sheep and their wool, surrounds Tenterden and the neighbouring town of Cranbrook, and the area was the centre of a major weaving industry in the Middle-Ages. In 1336, Edward III invited Flemish weavers to come to work in England under Royal Protection and the family may well have come at that time.

In any case, by 1890, when my father was born, they were well established as one of the oldest families in the town where they had a prosperous ironmonger's business, which had survived several generations. Ironmongery at that time was not simply a matter of selling ready-made products as it is today; everything was designed and made on the premises by a workshop of tin-smiths and the distribution system entailed delivery vans and a stable of horses. Grandfather Edwin was a Town Councillor and Churchwarden, as his father, Edwin Percival, had been before him. He had married Margaret Edwards, the eldest daughter of Obadiah Edwards, who owned the Tenterden Brewery and possessed no less than thirteen pubs. Edwin and Margaret lived in a rambling old house, called Beach House next to the Baptist Chapel. Not that Edwin had any time for Baptists – if he saw the minister approaching, he would cross to the other side of the street. The family was staunchly Church of England and all the boys sang in the choir. In all, Margaret gave him ten children, two girls followed by eight boys of whom my father was the third. He was christened Bertram Robert and was sent to school at Thanet College, a private school on the Isle of Thanet, where he enjoyed

games, especially cricket, and was good at maths. In the holidays he was a favourite of grandfather Obadiah, who took him with him visiting his farms in his pony-trap; he had several farms for grazing his dray-horses.

Obadiah was the image of a prosperous mid-Victorian; he had first bought the brewery at Tunbridge Wells and then sold it to buy the brewery at Tenterden, which he had turned into the major employer of labour in that part of Kent. He had twice been mayor and was a justice of the peace (although he refused to sit on the bench on Mondays, saying he could not sit in judgement on people who had drunk too much of his beer the previous Saturday night) and had been instrumental in bringing the railway to the town. During those drives in the pony cart he no doubt sought to instil ambition in his grandson.

My father's other influence was his Uncle Bob, Robert Edwards, who owned the first motor car in Tenterden, was a member of the Fire Brigade and who taught him to shoot. Shooting was his passion and it was when he got home after a day's shooting with his Uncle Bob during the school holidays, at the age of fifteen, that Edwin told him he had been articled to Mr Judge, the auctioneer and land-agent, and would start work the next day.

That year, my father had passed the Oxford Local Examination in "Writing from Dictation, Arithmetic, Religious Knowledge, History; Grammar, Literature, Essay; Geography and Mathematics", with right answers to such posers as—

'Where are the chief coal-fields of Scotland and what important towns are situated upon them?'

'Distinguish the four classes into which the hearers of the Word are divided in the explanation of the parable of the Sower.'

'Find the rent of a farm 25 acres, 3 roods, 16 perches in extent at £1. 16s. 8d. an acre.'

'What happened at the following places? Bannockburn, Acre, Bretigny, Falkirk, the New Forest, Alnwick.'

His eldest brother, Harry, was training as an engineer, and the next brother, Arthur was learning the ironmonger's business, while

there were the twins, Charles and Leonard as well as Fred and Stuart still to be educated, not to mention Gordon aged two.

Considering he had no choice in his career, my father was a round peg in a round hole. His four years as an articled clerk passed off well; he helped Mr Judge with weekly sales in Ashford market, farm sales, private house sales, and the annual Kent lamb sales, which was the usual routine of a country auctioneer at that time.

At the end of his articles, as he was looking for a firm to join as “an improver”, a friend suggested that Arthur Marchant at Ash was looking for someone. They were introduced to each other in Ashford market and the deal concluded; so at the age of eighteen, my father went to work with his future father-in-law.

As Grandfather Apps died before I was born and Grandmother Apps when I was only four, I knew neither of them. Nor, until much later, did I know my father’s brothers, who had married and moved away from Tenterden. Thus it was my mother’s family, the Marchants and in particular my grandmother’s family, the Goodsons, that I came to identify with in my childhood.

The Marchants were as un-bookish as it is possible to be. At Guilton, my grandparents’ house, the only books I ever saw were, “The Compleat Farrier”, R.S. Surtees’ “Handley Cross” and “Jorrocks’ Jaunts and Jollities” by the same author. Horses were everywhere, from the stables to the drawing room. Pictures of them covered every wall, furniture was made wherever possible to resemble them and, once dead, ashtrays made from their hooves prolonged their memory. My grandfather, Arthur Marchant, in spite of being six feet tall and enormously fat, was an intrepid fox-hunter “No five-barred gate ever stopped me” he would declare in old age. That it was not an idle boast, I learned years later when I found a copy of the memoirs of Harry Selby-Lowndes, who had been the master of the East Kent, the local hunt during the 1920s. In it he recounts how, with hounds running, he found himself between my grandfather and Troward Spanton, another farmer of similar girth, approaching the level crossing on the Sandwich road;

“Without hesitating, these two heavyweights jumped over the first

six-foot gate, on to the line and straight out over the other,” adding, “being the Master, I felt bound to follow.”

My mother’s brother, uncle John, was an amateur jockey and my early memories of him are of his being continually in hospital with broken bones. His greatest success was when he won the Stock Exchange Plate, but he was a familiar figure at the local point-to-points, where he frequently came in first on a horse called Jack Frost.

Later, when I went to school, I met a boy who told me he had systematically put his pocket money on Jack Frost and never regretted it.

A friend of Uncle John’s, who was veterinary surgeon to the Jockey Club, had often asked if he might have Jack Frost’s front legs to dissect when he died. The request was of course agreed to, but the melancholy event occurred in the first year of the war while my uncle’s friend was in the United States and unable to return. So Jack Frost’s legs were preserved in formaldehyde in a milk churn, which stood beside the backdoor of Gilton throughout the rest of the war.

My mother was the eldest of the three Marchant children and totally horse-obsessed; the despair of her mother, she was rarely seen out of the stables. Hunting was her passion where she was known as “The Leading Hound”. Riding astride at a time when it was not considered suitable for women, her greatest regret was that her parents would not let her compete in point-to-points

After her marriage my mother no longer hunted, but this did not stop her following the hunt on foot. She had a remarkable sense of how the hunt was going, where the fox would break cover and so on. She could smell a fox and, walking in a wood, would suddenly say, “There’s a fox here”. On one occasion she was following the hunt by car with me aged five when she suddenly stopped, shouted “Come on!” picked me up and half carried me across a field, arriving just as the hounds killed. When the master, huntsmen, whippers-in and the rest of the field rode up, there was general laughter. I was blooded, the ceremony of wiping blood on the forehead of someone at his first kill, and, whereas the tradition was to give the brush to the first person

to arrive, the mask to the second and the pads to the others, all these gruesome trophies were given to my mother.

At my birth, the doctor had handed me to her with an exhortation not to use the currycomb on me, and it always seemed that in bringing me up she was guided less by books on baby-craft, than by her favourite treatise on stable management. My horsemanship was considered a foregone conclusion and from the earliest days I was lifted on to horses whenever possible and there was a good deal of talk about my having a natural seat. A rocking horse was early acquired for the nursery and at the age of four, my first pony, a Shetland. Once in the saddle, I promptly fell off. "Get up, get up and get back on at once!" cried my mother. Feeling safer on the ground I felt a reluctance to obey and I'm ashamed to say this reluctance has tended to persist.

My mother's pelvis had been deformed by riding, which meant that my birth was something of a trauma with my struggles to see the light lasting over twenty-four hours, during which my father claimed he had walked round the hop-garden several hundred times. The situation had not been helped by the fact that, once pregnant, my mother had ceased all physical activity and "eaten for two" – with the result that may be imagined.

My birth had been so traumatic that the doctor warned her not to have another child because it was too dangerous. When she immediately became pregnant again, she went to him in a panic, but he had changed his opinion and assured her everything would be all right.

In those days hospitals were viewed with suspicion. If anyone in the family needed an operation, a London surgeon was brought down and the operation performed on the dining-room table, while in the kitchen a gargantuan luncheon was prepared for the distinguished guest. However, on this occasion, the doctor refused all demands from the family that he bring down a gynaecologist to help him and the second birth, thirteen months after mine, again took place at home with only himself and a midwife in attendance. I had been a big baby, but my brother was bigger and the doctor crushed

him. Thus my mother, who had always wanted six sons, had to make do with me.

I believe that after the loss of her baby, my mother suffered a depression although it was not called that. She spent a lot of time in bed and I remember being taken in to see her. In any case I spent most of my time with my nurse and saw relatively little of my parents.

Until I was five, I had my meals in the kitchen sitting between Gladys and Edith, Gladys in her uniform of white mob-cap, blue and white striped dress, with a white bib and apron, starched collar and cuffs, and Edith in a cream cap and dark blue dress. I listened entranced to their conversation about their families and from time to time the bell would ring and they would go to wait on my parents who were having lunch in the breakfast room. When I was five, the moment came when I was considered sufficiently civilised to eat with my parents. I remember feeling rather nervous and very grown-up. As I was a thin child, I was given a mug of beer with my lunch to strengthen me and later, as the beer did not seem to have had much effect, this was changed to a glass of port. I have never liked beer, but I still enjoy a glass of port.

At about that time I was sent with Gladys to stay with my mother's grandmother, Harriet Goodson, who, widowed in 1920, had moved out of Upton, the Goodson family home near Broadstairs, into the original little mediaeval farmhouse which had been modernised for her. It was called Little Upton and she lived there with her cook and gardener, Caley. My chief memory is of the custards her cook made and going down to the beach with Gladys and the cook armed with bucket and spade.

When I was a little older, I was sent without Gladys to stay with Auntie Peggy, my Mother's younger sister. She had married Uncle George Stevens who was the managing director of a family firm, on the Isle of Sheppey, which made glue and artificial manure. Uncle George's grandfather, who had seen possibilities in the barges bringing rags and bones down the Thames from the rapidly growing capital, had founded the company. The business had prospered and Uncle George, although he had set his heart on going into the Navy,

had been constrained to become the Managing Director. His hobby was making models of all kinds and he made me a model castle that opened up and had rooms and stairs inside. Uncle George had a Peter Pan quality, a sense of never having really grown up, which made him a matchless uncle. He and Aunty Peggy lived in a mock-Elizabethan house, called Little Gilton near Sittingbourne, which he had designed. It was built from old ship's timbers. Aunty Peggy, who greatly resembled my grandmother, was fanatically house-proud and the house, like Gilton, was over-cleaned and over-polished.

The stink engendered by Uncle George Stevens' factory was not appreciated in Queenborough, the principal town on the island, so to avert public hostility it had been the family tradition that a member of the family should be the mayor. Uncle George's father had handed on the charge to him soon after his marriage when he was thirty and Aunty Peggy was eighteen. They were thus the youngest mayoral couple in the country and led a full social life as a result. Aunty Peggy was even more austere and disciplined than my grandmother and when my stay came to an end I was glad to get home.

Among the figures of my childhood Great-aunt Maggie, my grandmother's younger sister, held pride of place. Maggie was drenched in moral turpitude, had a lively sense of humour and brought a much-needed breath of fresh air to the prevailing respectability. Disowned by the rest of the family and disinherited by her uncle, G. M. Goodson, who was rich and unmarried; ("a mother who deserts her child will get nothing from me!") she remained my mother's favourite aunt and our most frequent visitor.

The moral turpitude was hardly her fault; married at eighteen to a man who gave her syphilis and himself died of it a few years later, she had fled the family home, leaving her baby son behind her to be brought up by her sister-in-law. After the divorce, she kept house for her unmarried brother Frank until her brother George found her a second husband, the son of a Lincolnshire parson, but he turned out to be gay. Finally, determined to choose for herself, she lived unmarried with the young man who delivered the vegetables. He was twenty years younger than she, and they were blissfully happy.

They had a farm at Headcorn and Gladys and I used to go to stay with them. It was by far the happiest house I knew in my childhood. Maggie gave everyone nicknames, so I was Baboo, she was Yaya and Harold, her companion, was OK, short for OK Chief. He had an old grey van, (probably the same in which he had delivered his seductive vegetables) which seemed to me the acme of motorised transport. I did not like cars and deeply regretted that I had been born too late for horse-drawn transport that was obviously preferable, but I made an exception for OK's van. It rattled and banged and you had to hold on tight; driving became an adventure, just as it should be.

Yaya herself had a baby Austin which she drove wearing a pair of sheep's wool backed gauntlets, with a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, eyes half closed because of the smoke and the window wide open. She would come to Wenderton and take Gladys and me for a drive round the villages and through the marsh, shouting "Bumpety bump, Yaya" every time we went over one of the little hump-backed bridges.

At school we were doing a play, "Father Christmas Comes to Supper", and I was to play Father Christmas. I had to climb up steps at the back of the stage and come in through the window with my sack and distribute the presents. Dressed in a red robe with a big hook-on beard, I was in my element and the day of the performance, when everyone clapped, was wonderful. Not that anyone would have dreamt of my becoming an actor; my future was already mapped out. I was to be a farmer and auctioneer following my father into the business; the cards were dealt. Nevertheless, things had been happening at home, which were to change the hand.

I suppose the first inkling I got that something was wrong, was when I was told I must not go on to the farm and asking why, was told that grandfather would not like it.

Then, one day when I was dressed as Nelson, with a patch over one eye and an arm inside my father's old tunic, I came into the breakfast room and found my parents talking seriously together.

"We should ask him", said my father, turning to me. "We are

trying to decide if I should start my own auctioneering practice, or take a farm”

“Be a farmer,” I said without hesitation.

It was sound advice, and had he taken it, our lives might have been very different. In fact what had happened, as I was to learn later, was that there had been a falling out between my parents and the rest of the family. My father had joined my grandfather in 1908 and, apart from the war, they had been together ever since and built the business up together. Throughout the twenties he had never taken a holiday and when times were bad, as they often were, left part of his salary in the business. It had long been agreed that my grandfather was to make him a partner. A deed had been drawn up and was waiting at the solicitors to be signed. It continued to wait.

The problem was that relations between my father and Uncle John had become strained. My father had joined the firm the year John was born, he had watched him grow up, bought him his first air-gun, taught him to shoot and generally been a sort of unofficial uncle. But one grows out of uncles and John, in his early twenties, anxious to experiment, headstrong and ambitious, saw my father now in his forties, with his war experience and a cautious approach to life, as an obstacle. Moreover John was conscious of being his father's son and found it intolerable to have his ideas questioned and to be treated as a mere boy by someone who was only a son-in-law. In short they had become incompatible. All the members of the family took sides, and the atmosphere became poisonous and could not continue. A final family conference in the dining room at Guilton, resulted in my father agreeing to leave but demanding to be repaid the money he had left in the firm over the years, a sum not easy to find in the mid-thirties when farming was in great difficulty. After this, my parents left shaking the metaphorical dust from their shoes.

The first thing my father did was to take an office in Wingham and set up his practice, selling in the Canterbury and Sandwich markets in direct opposition to grandfather and uncle John. This put the clients in the difficult position of having to choose between

people they knew and liked. Many of them solved the problem by going to other firms, so that both sides lost.

It was at this time that tomatoes came into our lives. Farming being in difficulty, my parents were tempted by the idea, becoming popular at the time, of growing tomatoes under glass. They rented part of Betteshanger Park, the seat of Lord Northbourne, where they constructed glasshouses and, as their knowledge of the subject was limited, engaged a manager to run it, while my mother, determined to play a part, rushed about being busy in a small van with "Betteshanger Nurseries" painted on the side.

Suddenly Kent was in the grip of a Foot-and-Mouth epidemic. After staying a weekend with Yaya and OK at Headcorn, we drove home through a countryside lit by fires on which the cattle were being burnt. All the markets were closed and remained closed, eliminating at a stroke the main source of my father's income.

Happily there were still the tomatoes, but curiously, although the crop looked promising, the harvest was meagre and, as the glasshouses were not paid for, the situation began to be worrying. Economies were needed and Edith Weller, our cook, had to go. The morning she left, I went to say goodbye and found her in the dining room, in front of the sideboard polishing the silver. She was crying and bent down to kiss me; I can still remember the feel of her wet cheeks against mine.

The markets remained closed and the tomatoes continued to give disappointing results. Much later it was learned that the manager had cheated. When the lorry came to the front door of the glasshouses to collect the boxes for Covent Garden, the manager's lorry came to the door at the other end and took a lion's share of the crop.

The relations with the family at Guilton had by no means been improved by my father's setting up in opposition in the markets. Wenderton House was part of the farm and my parents rented it from grandfather, who now began the process of ejecting them. Uncle John took matters in hand and turned off the water. My grandmother objected that there was a child in the house, so the water was turned back on. But the incident decided my parents that it was time to move.

I can remember visiting several empty houses in the district at that time.

“How would you like to live here?”

“I shouldn’t. We can’t leave Wenderton –it’s our home.”

“We may have to.”

“Why?”

“Grandfather says so.”

One of my favourite books at that time was “Little Lord Fauntleroy” with whose hero, Cedric, I closely identified, both of us having cruel and unfeeling grandfathers. He, however, had managed to charm his grandfather but I could not see much hope of charming mine, as I watched him drive past, sitting in the back of his car, not so much as looking in my direction. As for the reconciliation with ‘Dearest’, Little Lord Fauntleroy’s gentle mother, that looked even more improbable given the hunting-field expletives that my mother emitted whenever her father’s name was mentioned.

The bank foreclosed and Betteshanger Nurseries ceased to exist, leaving my father with debts that weighed him down for the rest of his life and a great many boxes of printed stationery that had been ordered in a fit of optimism and that were to remain with us as a reproach for many years to come.



CHAPTER TEN

It was the 21st January 1949; I was on my way to Southport to join Rex Deering's Crown Players in a repertory season at the Casino Theatre. Open on my lap was French's Acting Edition of "George and Margaret" with the part of Dudley underlined. As the train puffed its way northward from Gloucester, I leaned back against the dusty, acrid-smelling upholstery and thought of all that had happened in the last month.

To begin with, the school production of James Bridie's "Tobias and the Angel" in which I had played the archangel Raphael with some success. Then there had been the "carrying" – a rite of passage in which those boys who were leaving the school were carried by their peers up and down the cricket pitch while everyone sang, "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow", and the staff looked on benignly.

In reality this touching ceremony was a blood-thirsty settling of accounts, in which those who had suffered at the hands of the leaver in question would get in underneath him as he was stretched out on the shoulders of his friends and stab at his unprotected buttocks with a sharp instrument, usually a compass, while his cries were drowned by the singing. Popularity was gauged by how many times one was carried back and forth. This enabled those who had a big account to settle to shout "Again, Again!" and thus prolong the torture, while the watching staff remarked that they had not realised that So-and-so was so popular.

Carrying was a great leveller. Monitors who abused their power would be politely asked if they were leaving at the end of the term and the downtrodden would be buoyed up by the thought that the day of reckoning was not far off. I had been a house monitor during my last term and so was apprehensive that I might have been thought unjust. But if so, the victims were forgiving and the ceremony left my buttocks intact.

Then there had been the business of saying goodbye to the staff and friends and in particular the highly-charged goodbye to the boy on whom all my burgeoning-emotional life had been centred during the preceding two years, a fact of which he was quite unaware.

The journey home, with a night in London to see John Gielgud and Pamela Brown in "The Lady's not for Burning", had been a treat sanctioned and paid for by my parents. Christmas had brought with it uncomfortable questions about what I was going to do before my call-up in August, to which I could think of no adequate reply. Then, in the first days after Christmas, a telegram from Holly came telling me to start rehearsals for "George and Margaret" at Southport the following week to play the part of Dudley and to be the assistant stage manager, or A.S.M., for £4 a week.

Southport! I hurried to an atlas and saw that it was in Lancashire on the coast near Liverpool. My father muttered something about it being the Brighton of Liverpool, but as I had never been to Brighton I was none the wiser.

There had followed a rush of preparations; I was adamant that my school suit was not sufficient, so with reckless disregard for future emergencies, the family's clothes coupons were expended on a new suit from the Gloucester departmental store, 'The Bon Marche'. Admittedly the choice was not great and, after eight years of school uniform I was understandably eager for something brighter, but the rather-too-loud check that I insisted on against my mother's advice, I was to live to regret.

Repertory actors had in their contract a clause demanding that they "dress well on and off" and the details of the wardrobe they must provide. This list included; a suit, flannel trousers and sports jacket, dinner jacket and, where possible, tails. These last items were easy. My father had both and could no longer get into either, so with a selection of cast-off shirts from Uncles George and John, my holiday sports coat and trousers all packed into my school trunk, I was more or less equipped and felt that I was really an actor, although very conscious that my school trunk was a let-down. It should of

course be a skip, one of those large laundry baskets that accompanied every provincial actor wherever he went.

I had to change at Crewe and the train arrived just in time for lunch. In the dining room, an elderly waiter with flat feet and a tail suit green with age, served me with steak and kidney pudding making me feel like Nicholas Nickleby on his way to Dotheboys Hall.

I changed again at Liverpool and arrived at Southport, where I was met by Rex Deering in person. It was our second meeting and I was slightly apprehensive because at our first in Holly's room, he had advised me to read as many plays as possible, advice I had not followed because I found plays difficult to read. Now, he was standing on the platform to greet me, an impressive figure, with a large, red face and black hair, greying at the temples and worn long for those days, brushed back and hanging over the shirt collar. He was splendidly dressed in the same double-breasted black and white suit as before. I was to see a lot of that suit in the next few months.

He greeted me warmly with an elaborate old-fashioned theatrical courtesy and, arranging for my trunk to be delivered to the theatre, led me to my digs. They were with Miss Hinton at 9, Portland Street. The house was in a tree-lined road that led off Lord Street and Miss Hinton was a rubicund woman with white hair and a pleasant, motherly manner. She showed me to my room and explained that the only other lodger was Mr Critchley, a retired clergyman, and that we would be having meals together in the dining room, a large room with heavy Victorian furniture.

As we left the house, Rex looked worried, "A retired clergyman," he mused, "You'll have to watch him." I assured him that I could defend myself from any inopportune ecclesiastical manoeuvres. Our next stop was the theatre.

I cannot imagine that any stage-struck boy of seventeen could have his dream of a theatre better fulfilled than mine was by the Casino Theatre Southport. Standing at the entrance to the pier, it was a perfect little wooden Victorian theatre with a rounded proscenium arch, and a balcony decorated in gold stucco with red plush seats and a red plush curtain. Rex showed me round and then suggested I go

home and have tea and meet him later at Yates' Wine Lodge, a pub in the road leading up to the pier where we were to rehearse.

Back at the digs, I met my co-lodger, Mr Critchley. He was a spare, bald man in his sixties with a dried up, bony appearance. He had been the incumbent in a parish on the south coast and when I told him I had been to school at the clergy orphanage, his approval was evident.

Afterwards, at Yates' Wine Lodge, Rex bought me a beer and introduced me to the producer, Michael de Barrass and his wife, Sylvia. Michael was tall, in his late thirties or early forties, with the sort of dark good looks much in vogue in the forties and usually described as saturnine. Sylvia, his wife, was small, neat and pretty. They had worked for Rex before, when he had a string of small repertory companies. Recently they had been in management on their own account at Redcar, where, I gathered, things had not gone well. This impression was later confirmed by their appearing in play after play in the same clothes complaining loudly that their skip had been stolen and with clothes being rationed they were unable to replace their wardrobe. Clothes rationing was a God-given excuse for actors on hard times.

Rex, for whom things had not been going well either, had managed to persuade the owner of the Casino Theatre to give him a lease and finance him, and he had formed a company from people he had worked with before. All this, of course, I was to find out later. At the time I had to keep pinching myself to realise that I was in the company of real, professional actors.

We chatted for a bit and then Rex said he had a request, he was going to the Garrick Theatre, Southport's touring theatre, to hand out playbills to the members of the audience as they emerged after the show. Would I accompany him? I didn't have to, he would quite understand if I refused. I said of course that I should be delighted and after I had drunk another half pint, and he another double whisky, we set off.

Among the many, many things I learned about the theatre in my first season at Southport, I have often thought that the experience

of handing out playbills on the first evening was one of the most valuable. It taught me that even before you begin rehearsing a play, the first and most important requirement is to be sure it will have an audience.

On the Sunday I met John Lewis and his wife Doreen. John was the scenic artist and Doreen the stage manager whose assistant I was to be. John was a raw-boned, quick-tempered, sentimental Welshman whom I liked immediately and Doreen, a down-to-earth, pleasant, fair-haired woman, several years younger than John, with whom he was clearly besotted. They made a good couple and I liked them both.

Walking into Yates' Wine Lodge at half-past nine on the Monday morning, I was struck by the smell of stale beer and tobacco smoke that characterises pubs in the morning. It was a smell I was to get to know well and to associate ever after with rehearsals. Even today, if I pass the open door of a pub in the morning, that smell gives me a little feeling of excitement.

Michael de Barrass had told me to be there at half past nine and I arrived on the dot to find Doreen already there setting out chairs and tables to represent the furniture according to the plan of the London production in French's acting edition of "George and Margaret".

In weekly rep there was no time for a preliminary reading of the play; work began on plotting the moves immediately. Soon after, Rex arrived and Michael and Sylvia, then; towards ten o'clock, the other members of the company made their appearance – or rather their entrances, for provincial actors in the late forties were conscious of their status. They exuded a distinct air of apartness, and let it be known that they considered they were doing any town in which they chose to appear a distinct favour by gracing it with their presence.

So much has changed in the theatrical life of Britain over the last sixty years, that it is hard to revive the attitudes of that time. It was the world before television; today it is common to see several plays in the course of an evening, but then many people had never once seen a play, and even the most enthusiastic playgoers, those who bought a season ticket for their local rep, only saw one play a week. So there was a *naïveté* about their reaction which included the total confusion

of the actor and his part; when I returned to my digs after the first-night of “An Inspector Calls” in which I played the son who gets the girl, the victim of the play, “into trouble”, Miss Hinton looked at me fiercely and said, “I would not have thought it of you,” and she meant it and treated me with suspicion for the rest of the week. Many people thought we made the plays up as we went along. Actors were mysterious, a subject of fascination, and to see real live actors walking the streets of the town, gave people a feeling of excitement. The profession carefully nurtured this attitude; no actor would ever let himself be seen by the public in costume and make-up except on the stage; to be spotted at the stage door or in the wings was to break a fundamental taboo.

The first members of the company to arrive were Isobel (pronounced “*eyesobel*”) Grist, the juvenile, and Catherine Harding, the leading lady. Isobel, a black-haired, plump girl, was artistically dressed in a dirndl, and Catherine Harding, in her mid-twenties, tall and fair with a rich, dark voice, had been to a London theatre school and was neither impressed nor pleased to be working in weekly rep.

Ken Morey, in his thirties with a Clark Gable moustache, a belted raincoat and what was obviously his demob hat (people leaving the forces were each given a hat as part of their civilian wardrobe) made his entrance in a manner that showed his attachment to Hollywood films.

Work began at once on plotting the play, with everyone carefully writing in any changes to the moves that were printed in the book. Doreen sat at a table with the prompt copy in which she wrote down all the moves – the prompt copy being the official version and arbiter of any disputes during the rest of the rehearsals.

As assistant stage-manager or ASM, my job (when I was not actually on the stage) involved sitting beside Doreen and making a list of any props that were needed, prompting, helping her to change the position of furniture between scenes and making coffee for the break. The plotting went fast and was over by one o’clock when we broke for lunch. In the afternoon and the afternoons that followed, Doreen and I would go round the town either separately or together trying to

borrow the furniture and props, offering publicity in the programme as bait.

This being the first week of the season, we had the evenings free and more time than usual for 'study,' as learning the lines was called. In the normal course of events the rhythm of weekly rep was to say the least dense. The plotting of the following week's play took place on Tuesday morning, after the Monday first night of the current play. Tuesday evening saw the second performance of the current play and Wednesday morning the rehearsal of the first act of the next play without books, which meant that everyone was expected to know his lines. If there was a mid-week matinee, it would mean doing the current play that afternoon, and again in the evening, leaving little time to learn the second act that would be rehearsed on Thursday morning without books. Friday morning the third act would be rehearsed without books and on Saturday morning the whole play would be run, in what was the final rehearsal before the dress rehearsal on Monday. The rest of Saturday was taken up with a matinee or early house followed by the last performance, after which the 'strike' when the stage management would take down the set and clear the stage.

On Sunday the actors would be free to read the next play, sort out their wardrobe for the dress rehearsal and draw breath. The stage management would spend the day putting up the new set and preparing furniture and props. Preparations continued on Monday morning and the dress rehearsal began at two o'clock and went on until curtain up. After the first night there would be notes from the producer before getting back to the digs for supper and bed.

At the first rehearsal of "George and Margaret" it was a topic of general rejoicing that the season did not include mid-week matinées

As I was engaged as the "juvenile" as well as the ASM, I frequently had a lot of lines to learn which meant that, as my afternoons were taken up with hunting down furniture and props, I often had to sit up half the night in order to be "DLP" (dead letter perfect) for the morning's rehearsal. The odd thing is that I don't remember ever being tired and I even managed to go to the cinema some afternoons.

I shared a dressing room with Ken Morey and one evening he said he had seen a film that afternoon and recommended it. I said I was saving up to buy a new jacket and could not afford it. "Oh", he said, "we don't pay!" and went on to explain that all I had to do was to go to the box-office and say, "Do you extend the courtesy of the house to the profession?" at which I would be given a complimentary ticket. I got him to repeat the phrase several times and the following afternoon, a Friday, when Doreen and I were free having already begged and borrowed everything required for the next play, I went with some trepidation to the box office of the local cinema wondering whether the woman behind the glass was as familiar with the magic phrase as Ken suggested. "Excuse me," I said, clearing my throat, "do you extend the courtesy of the house to the profession?" Without a word the woman reached for a stamp, stamped a ticket and handed it to me. I took it thankfully and made my way into the darkened cinema.

While we were rehearsing "George and Margaret", John Lewis was busy in the scene-dock painting the scenery and I would spend my free moments watching him as he sloshed the thick water paint on to the flats and grumbling endlessly in his strong Welsh accent about practically everything. "The bloody this... and the bloody that..." But he was a competent scenic artist and the sets were generally well done.

On Sunday morning when we put up the set, I learned the art of "throwing a line". Scenery is made up of a series of tall canvases known as "flats" stretched on wooden frames on the same principle as an artist's canvas. At the back on each side they have two cleats, one at the top and one at the bottom and a length of sash-cord known as a "line". The canvases are placed side by side and pulled tightly together by the line being thrown up over the top two cleats, pulled down round the lower two and tied off. The flats are then held upright by struts hooked on-to the back and attached to the floor of the stage by nails or the weight of sandbags. Doors and windows are made in the same manner and incorporated as and where they are needed. The theatre had two sets of flats so that one was in use while

the other was being painted. In weekly rep. in those days this was a luxury; many scenic artists had to repaint the same set each Sunday.

I was to learn later that “throwing a line” the “dock” and many other expressions that have a maritime flavour owe their origin to the fact that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the scene shifters in the London theatres were sailors earning extra money between voyages.

On the Monday morning Doreen and I dressed the set and prepared the props, and in the afternoon we dress-rehearsed almost until the curtain went up. On the first night of “George and Margaret” I was too busy to be nervous and the play went well with Rex, as the absent-minded father, getting most of the laughs. However, when I got back to the digs after the performance I found Miss Hinton and Mr Critchley waiting for me. They both congratulated me, but I got the distinct feeling that they were not impressed. They hinted, even that they were not too sure I had chosen the right profession.

The press, however, was enthusiastic. The Southport Guardian saying that;

“The ovation of the audience of 350 left no doubt that the company’s debut had been a great success. The acting and easy manner with which the players presented this hilarious domestic comedy by Gerald Savory won complete favour.”

It went to praise Rex Deering’s playing of the Father and Catherine Harding’s “charming portrayal” of the Mother, ending with;

“Other parts well played include those by Edwin Apps, Sylvia Kelly, Ken Morey, Michael de Barrass who also produced, Isabel Grist and Vera Williamson.”

in other words; everyone.

I got a more individual, if rather back-handed notice in “The Southport Visitor” which said that;

“Edwin Apps, as the younger brother, behaves as one expects a younger brother to behave”

The second play was J.B. Priestley’s “An Inspector Calls”. I had had the script of “George and Margaret” for longer than a week and

all my evenings free to learn the part. "An Inspector Calls" was different; I was given the script on the Saturday and we were playing every night. Suddenly it was weekly rep with a vengeance.

Looking back on the productions of those weekly rep companies, the surprising thing is how good some of them were, better often than the companies that had twice the time to rehearse. A play produced in a week is like a sketch for a painting and in the same way that sketches can be more alive and interesting than the final painting, so in a weekly rep production, as there is no time for extraneous detail, the company is forced to go for the essentials of the story and if the play is a good play with a good story and if the actors are reasonably well cast, their nervous energy will give the production a vibrant quality that is often missing when a more leisurely rehearsal schedule has given the actors time to go into their characters more deeply, but not quite deeply enough. The advantage is of course ephemeral. The moment the actors begin to relax, the lack of real preparation becomes evident and the production falls to pieces.

I don't remember much about "An Inspector Calls", or "Lover's Leap", a comedy by Philip Johnson, in which I played Poynter, the butler (I got the part because I had tails) nor "Suspect", a thriller by Edmund Percy and Reginald Denham in which I played Robert Smith, but the next play, J.B. Priestley's "Eden End" was a turning point for me. In the first four plays of the season I had been cast as a young man of more or less my own age, but in J.B. Priestley's "Eden End", I was cast as the elderly Dr Kirby, whose favourite daughter has run off to go on the stage, married an actor and comes home pretending to be successful but is discovered to be anything but.

To play someone resembling your self is difficult and calls for an objectivity and self-assurance that few young actors have and I certainly did not when I was seventeen. An old theatrical adage claimed that no one could be a convincing juvenile while he still had his own hair and teeth. In my case, although not quite so drastic, it was almost another ten years before I could play a young man and feel comfortable in the part. But I could play old men. I had lived

among them, been surrounded by them, studied them and, in an odd way, longed to be one myself. Dr Kirby was right up my street.

This of course was my opinion and, as I soon realised, not one shared by the other members of the company who grumbled at the idea of an important character part being given to an inexperienced boy. Catherine Harding was especially vexed at having to play her major scene with a seventeen-year-old-father. Rehearsals went well and my playing of the part seemed to meet with approval even from Catherine Harding, but mutterings continued about the fact I looked so young.

My costume, a grey worsted suit with a wing collar and stock, together with a wig, had been ordered from Samuels in London. When it arrived, Michael handed it to me saying "You'll have to try and make-up as well as you can, do you need help? I said I thought I could manage.

Before the dress rehearsal, I got into my dressing room early and once there, all the experimenting I had done with make-up in the attic at Gloucester began to pay off.

Originally, the need for actors to use make-up had been due to the use of candlelight when candles had floated in a trough at the actors' feet and cast unnatural shadows on their faces. When gaslight replaced candles, the same footlight system was used and the problem had not been rethought in the change to electricity. Today, of course, stage lighting is highly sophisticated and comes at you from every point of the compass except the feet so there is practically no need for make-up, but in the theatre of the 1940s, the art of make-up was a matter of tradition, a tradition handed on from generation to generation like the art of painting icons in Russia.

Leichner grease paint came in sticks that were numbered. For a straight make-up, numbers 5, a yellow, and number 9, a brick red, were rubbed over the whole face and neck with the red concentrated on the cheekbones. The eyes were outlined with a dark blue liner and, as a finishing touch, bright red dots of carmine were placed on the inside corner of each eye and on the outside corner of each nostril

so that, close to, the actor resembled nothing so much as a freshly painted rocking-horse.

For character parts, the face was covered with No 5, the yellow grease paint, only. The forehead was heavily lined and lines were drawn down each side from the nose. Crow's feet were drawn in on the sides of the eyes. All these lines were done with a lake liner, a deep violet red. The effect of this on young faces was to suggest some serious skin disease rather than age.

My interest in painting had led me to look at the problem afresh, to see the face in terms of highlights and shadows, with the object of showing, in T.S. Eliot's words "The skull beneath the skin". The wig that Samuels provided had the usual cotton forehead piece to cover the actor's hair with the thinning grey hair starting further back. The idea was to put the wig on first and cover the cotton with the same colour as the rest of the face. At that point it was usual to paint horizontal lines over the wig-join to disguise it, but this only accentuated the join. My approach was to treat the forehead vertically by sharpening with highlights the bones of the skull leading up from above the eyebrows, shading the sides of the forehead, and in that way disguising the wig-join by going up and down rather than along. For the rest of the face I threw the eyes into shadow and put highlights on the lids, highlighted the cheekbones and sunk the cheeks a little with shadows, sharpened the nose with a highlight on the ridge and shadowed the sides, with more shadow under the chin. A white moustache made from crêpe hair covered the mouth.

When I looked in the glass I saw Dr Kirby looking back at me. Satisfied, I finished dressing with the upright wing-collar and stock covering my neck, put number 5 on the backs of my hands and went out on to the stage to join the other actors. The effect was most gratifying, people looked, looked away and looked back quickly, not having at first realised who I was. Michael muttered that it was amazing and Catherine Harding began to look more cheerful.

Acting is essentially a matter of imagination. When Ellen Terry was asked what she considered to be the most important requisite for an actor, she replied, "Imagination, imagination, I put it first years

ago!" The problem is, of course, how an actor sparks his imagination to the point that he believes himself to be the character so strongly that the other actors and the audience come to share his belief. It happens in different ways and at different times, sometimes early on in rehearsal and at others much later, sometimes not until the first night. What sparks it depends on the individual; it can be finding the right shoes, the right coat or simply getting the walk right. With Dr Kirby it was the make-up, from that moment I was Dr Kirby and I gave the first proper performance of my career. Actors are generous and they like nothing better than to see someone succeed and the Crown Players were very generous to me. Suddenly I felt I was accepted as a pro, an impression reinforced a few weeks later when I was made a member of Equity, the actor's trade union.

One pleasing result was that Catherine Harding suddenly seemed to take me seriously. She warned me that if I stayed in weekly rep I would pick up bad habits and insisted that I must go to a theatre school. I listened to her advice as I had come to respect her as an actress. In difficult circumstances she gave some excellent performances. After that season our paths never crossed again and I have often wondered what became of her.

During these weeks I had of course been returning to Miss Hinton's for my meals with Mr Critchley. Rex would often ask me about him with a slightly worried air. In fact we got on rather well at first. I think he enjoyed being vicariously part of a repertory company, and I gradually pieced together his history. He told me how he had lived on the south coast – Weymouth, if I remember correctly – and how he had a young friend of whom he was very fond, but whom he was no longer able to see. He showed me, with an air of sadness, a photo of a boy of about 14 in bathing shorts, and I got the impression that there had been some sort of scandal and that he had come to Southport under duress. He hinted from time to time that he was from a very grand family, but the figure that infused all his reminiscences and appeared in his conversation like Mr Dick's King Charles's head was "My old bishop, the Bishop of London, Dr Winnington-Ingram", repeated like an incantation. It was "My

old bishop, The Bishop of London, Dr. Winnington-Ingram used to say” or “As I said to my old bishop, The Bishop of London, Dr. Winnington-Ingram” or “One day when I was walking with my old bishop, The Bishop of London, Dr. Winnington-Ingram” for breakfast, lunch and tea. Nevertheless, we got on quite well and he even made me a present of a nicely bound set of 19th-century poets, which I still have. However, the incompatibility between his retired life and my intense activity meant that I became restive under the endless accounts of the doings and sayings of Dr. Winnington-Ingram and he got tired of my obsession with my work. The situation became strained and one day Miss Hinton informed me that he found that my coming in late and making a noise disturbed him and that either I must go or he would. As he was paying more than I was, I must leave at the end of the week.

It was a blow as my room was comfortable and I enjoyed Miss Hinton’s cooking. Then, too, at the bottom of Portland Street there was a rank of horse-drawn cabs and on wet nights I had enjoyed the luxury of being driven to the theatre amid the homely smell of straw and stable, leaning back on the seat feeling like Henry Irving on his way to the Lyceum.

When I broke the news at the theatre, Rex seemed relieved and suggested I go to Mrs Rimmer at 43 West Street, where several of the others were staying and he thought there might be room. Mrs Rimmer did have a room; what was more, it was five shillings cheaper than Miss Hinton’s so, returning to collect my things, I moved in immediately. The contrast between Miss Hinton’s and Mrs Rimmer’s was, from my point of view, totally in favour of Mrs Rimmer’s. Whereas Miss Hinton’s had been a respectable boarding house, Mrs Rimmer’s was a real theatrical digs. Miss Hinton had left me a cold supper after the show, which I ate alone, but at Mrs Rimmer’s we all sat down to a relaxed and warming supper and a great deal of theatre chat and gossip. It was heady stuff and in leaving Mr Critchley behind, I felt I had at last left school and was living *la vie bohème* and I couldn’t get enough of it.

It was about this time that someone got hold of a copy of

Stanislavsky's "An Actor Prepares" and it was passed round the company with everyone eagerly reading it. Stanislavsky, the founder of the Moscow Art theatre and first producer of the plays of Anton Chekhov, caused a revolution in the theatre at the end of the nineteenth century with his theories about the art of acting. His basic premise was that acting should not be superficial, but that it called for a profound study of the character to be portrayed, to enable the actor to present it from the inside and not comment upon it from the outside. To achieve this end, the Moscow Art Theatre rehearsed for many months and explored all sorts of different approaches before finally presenting the production before an audience. Stanislavsky encapsulated his ideas in two books, "My Life in Art" and "An Actor Prepares".

Although he had worked with Ellen Terry's son, the theatre designer, Edward Gordon Craig, Stanislavsky's ideas did not reach our shores in any significant way until the 1930s when John Gielgud and a few brave spirits began to try to put them into practice. The war brought theatrical experiment, like much else, to an end and it was only in the late forties that these ideas trickled down to the ordinary actor. "An Actor Prepares" is a book that every actor should read, but the best moment for doing so is not when one is playing a part in, say, "The Girl Who Couldn't Quite" in a weekly rep season in a seaside resort.

"An Actor Prepares" hit the Crown Players like a tsunami and with a similarly devastating effect. We always knew where it had got to and who was in the middle of reading it because of its repercussion on their current performance. Suddenly, without warning, in the middle of a slick comedy scene which depended on pace for its success, the actor or actress would unaccountably slow down. An intense and dreamlike expression would come into their eyes as they entered the spiritual life of the character, while their movements, subjected to a deep inner scrutiny as to their authenticity, would make them suddenly appear to be moving under water. The scene would go down the drain but the actor, once in the wings, would say in an awed voice, "It's incredible, I really felt the character tonight".

Time heals everything and eventually everyone had read the book and things got back to normal. Easter weekend was the occasion of my first getting drunk.

Rex, whose matrimonial life had been eventful (I once met him sloping into the post office (“got to wire some blood-money” he said in a low voice) had recently married Vera Williamson, a singer from Manchester. Vera was in her early thirties and they had just had a son, Howard. As it was Easter, they had arranged for Howard to be christened on the Sunday and they kindly invited me to the evening party. It was a very jolly affair. Vera’s mother and sister were there and Michael de Barrass and his wife, Sylvia Kelly. It was my first experience of a theatrical party and I found it a great contrast to the parties I had been to with my parents. When they asked me what I would like to drink, I remembered that at home I had been allowed to drink a glass of dry sherry on occasions, so I plumped for that. The party got going and glasses were refilled, mine included, and by the end I had drunk a bottle of sherry and was in no state to walk back to my digs, so, with much giggling, Vera and her sister put me to bed on the sofa. I woke up the next morning feeling that my head would burst. As it was a Monday, there was a dress rehearsal and first night. How I got through it I shall never know, but it gave me a healthy respect for alcohol.

After “Eden End” the rhythm continued with “Meet the Wife”, “The Girl who Couldn’t Quite”, “Acacia Avenue”, “The Shining Hour” (I am battling with an enormous part in the “Shining Hour”) “Fly Away Peter” and “Peace Comes to Peckham”. At that point, it being the Easter school holidays, Holly came to join us. It had been agreed, the rules about employing amateurs being less strict in those days, that he should play the part of the solicitor in Terrence Rattigan’s “The Winslow Boy.” I was of course overjoyed to see him and reassured when he told me he thought I had greatly improved and that Rex thought I was doing well. He acquitted himself well as Desmond Curry, though he admitted to finding the pace of weekly rep. a bit of a shock. Then it was “Spring-time for Henry” which gave me my first rest, there being no part for me, but I was still A.S.M. and the prop

list that week presented a special problem as it included a pregnant cat. The next play was "The Poltergeist" by Frank Harvey in which I played an old farmer. I based the character on Old Bill Sheaff, the Wenderton bailiff, which gave me another chance to do an interesting make-up.

"My part as the old farmer was well received and I got a round on my exit which, on a Monday night, is good going. I will get a photo taken – it is a good make-up, I have blacked out two teeth for the occasion and a red jolly face."

There follows a sketch.

Getting a round on your exit was something everyone hoped for and many were the devices used by the old actors to encourage the audience to do its duty in this regard. They would say part of their last line in the middle of the stage, move rapidly to the door, open it, turn, say the last part of the line to the audience, and exit quickly, shutting the door after them and at the same time stamping a foot hard on the stage. The idea was that the audience would hear the noise, think it was someone beginning to clap and join in. The practice was frowned upon, being considered unsporting, rather like shooting a sitting bird, but I often saw it done, sometimes with success.

The same letter begins with the news,

"I have heard from Holly this morning saying that Christopher Hassall can use me as Assistant stage manager and small part in the Canterbury Festival and I have just written to Mr Hassall myself."

On the 22nd of May, my parents arrived for a long weekend for my eighteenth birthday. I had booked them into the Scarisbrick Hotel

"the garage of which backs on to my digs"

and the plan was that they were to see the last performance of "Fools Rush in" and the first night of "The Two Mrs Carrolls". They enjoyed Kenneth Horne's "Fools Rush In," in which I played the bridegroom, the bride being played by a newcomer to the company. Jean was twenty-five, attractive with a sense of humour, and we hit it off at once. What's more we were in the same digs, which made

for greater intimacy, especially when everyone else had gone to bed. Briefly, I was having a very enjoyable initiation into adult life and it was absorbing my thoughts.

In the plays of those days the characters did a great deal of smoking which meant cigarette boxes and match boxes were distributed on tables all over the sets, a match being carefully wedged half out of each box so that the actor could pull it out easily and not have to open the box, thus averting the danger of scattering matches due to first-night nerves. It was my job to check cigarettes and matches before each performance and again in the intervals. On the first night of "The Two Mrs Carrolls" the second act opened with a scene between me as Pennington and an elderly character actress who had joined the company for that production, Zaza Mottram, as my Aunt, Mrs Latham. As the curtain went up, I noticed that her hands were shaking.

Early in the scene she had the line,

"I think I'll have a cigarette, Pennington".

"Of course, Aunt" I replied "Let me get you one."

I went to the cigarette box only to discover that it was empty. I had not checked the props as I should have done before the play and, as the scene was played in evening dress and I had been busy in the Interval struggling into my dress shirt and white tie, I had not done the second obligatory check either.

"Oh dear, Aunt, I'm afraid there don't seem to be any. Perhaps in this box over here," as I crossed the stage to another box only to find that it, too, was empty. I looked across at my "aunt" and saw that she was in a bad way. I heard stirrings as panic spread behind the scenes. "I'll just look in the dining room" I hurried off leaving her on the stage alone with nothing to do, something I felt instinctively she would not enjoy. In the dark of the wings, someone thrust a cigarette into my hand and I re-entered; "Here you are, Aunt, let me light it for you. Oh, the matches don't seem to be..." and so I struggled on. Finally we got the cigarette alight and began to try to save the rest of the scene. When the curtain came down I had to face the fury of Michael de Barrass threatening to sack me, the reproaches

of Doreen and worst of all having to beg forgiveness from Zaza. She was kind and forgiving, but treated me with obvious suspicion for the rest of the week. All this with my parents out front who had come many miles to see how well their son was succeeding in his chosen profession.

Not checking the props was by no means the only mistake I made that season. On another occasion, as the curtain came down after the curtain call, it was my job to rush into the prompt corner and put the National Anthem on the panatrope. I did so, there was the roll of drums, the audience stood up and the band played "Land of Hope and Glory" to laughter and cheers from the audience. I had put the record on the wrong side. Having no ear for music I didn't realise anything was wrong until I felt Michael de Barrass bearing down on me in a fury. I was again threatened with the sack.

After "The Two Mrs Carrolls", the last play of the season was "The Sacred Flame". While we were playing it, as there were no more rehearsals, we took a day off and went to Liverpool and saw a matinee of Pinero's "The Magistrate" at the four-weekly Liverpool Playhouse, considered to be one of the best repertory company in the country Cyril Luckham played the magistrate and I was bowled over by his grace and skill.

On the Saturday night the curtain fell for the last time and we made our tearful farewells, exchanged addresses and promised undying friendship. We did the strike and I returned to the digs where Jean and I had a delicious last moment, the company left for Portrush in Ireland where they were to do a summer season and I took the train back to Gloucester.

As the train pulled out of Southport station on that Sunday morning the 6th June, I thought of all that had happened since my arrival on the 15th January, barely five months before; I had become a professional actor, played eighteen parts without getting the sack and the company had even wanted me to go with them to Portrush. What was more, I had not only become a paid-up member of Equity, but I had ceased to be a virgin. Not a bad start, I thought, not bad at all.

When I got back to Gloucester, a letter was waiting for me from Christopher Hassall telling me that the company was rehearsing in London, but he wanted me to go straight to Canterbury and help Dorothy Sayers, who was overseeing the Canterbury end of the project, so I quickly unpacked, repacked and set off.

The Canterbury Festival owed its origins to Bishop Bell of Chichester who, in the 1920s, while he was Dean of Canterbury, wishing to bring Drama back into the Church, started a scheme whereby leading writers were commissioned to write plays to be performed in the Chapter House under the auspices of the Friends of the Cathedral. Authors had included Lawrence Binyon, Christopher Hassall and T.S. Eliot, whose "Murder in the Cathedral", about the death of Beckett, had become a classic. These plays were all in verse and they had begun a vogue for verse plays that continued.

When I got to Canterbury, I went straight to Gilton where it was arranged I should stay and commute daily. I found my grandmother shooting rats. The stockyard below the breakfast-room window was empty, the cattle being out to grass for the summer, and a quantity of rats could be seen drinking at the water tank. Armed with a 4.10, my grandmother was busy picking them off and shouting to Wellard to go and pick them up. She seemed very pleased to see me, but when I began to tell of my experiences and use some of the freer theatrical expressions I had become accustomed to, I felt a wave of disapproval and had to quickly readjust.

The following morning I went to meet "D. Sayers" or "the Sayers", as she was known.

Dorothy L. Sayers was, not only, a distinguished scholar, feminist and author of ground-breaking detective fiction, but she had written a popular radio series about the life of Jesus of Nazareth called "The Man Born to Be King" which had had a huge impact in those pre-television days. I had listened to it with my parents a few years previously during the Easter holidays and we had been moved and impressed by the force and modernity of the work. She was currently working on what was to be her major opus, a translation of Dante's Divine Comedy. The play we were now to do, "The Zeal of Thy House" was

the story of William of Sens who, after the disastrous fire of 1174, designed and built much of the Cathedral including the great choir, but who, when he was hauled up to see the placing of the keystone, fell to the ground and was paralysed for life. The contemporary chronicler, Gervase the monk, describes the accident and attributes it to “either the Vengeance of God or the Envy of the Devil”. Dorothy Sayers pounced on these words to tell the story of a great artist who, in his excessive pride, seeks to rival God, which leads to his downfall. The play was in verse and had been written just before the war for the 1937 festival. Now it was to be revived. Apprehensive at the thought of meeting someone so very famous, I made my way to the Cathedral and asked where I could find her; “You’ll find her in the shed”, I was told, “she has just reduced a journalist to tears.” The shed was a temporary building erected on a bombed site of which there were a great many in Canterbury at that time.

Wondering if I, too, was about to be reduced to tears, I approached the shed and went in. At the other end I saw a stout figure bending over a table, busily involved with paper and glue. I announced myself. Dorothy looked up; she wore thick glasses, her hair was brushed over to one side and cut short in a masculine style and she wore a double-breasted coat and skirt with a very distinctive gold pendant, which I never saw her without. She greeted me warmly and explained that she was making angels’ wings and please would I help.

In “The Zeal of Thy House” the four Archangels, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, and the recording angel, Cassiel, formed the chorus and commented on the action. Their costumes included a pair of huge folded wings that rose, high above their heads in one direction and almost touched the ground in the other. These wings, made on wooden frames, Dorothy Sayers and I spent the week covering with feathers made of folded paper torn from old copies of *The Christian Science Monitor*, of which there seemed to be an endless supply. Once they had been glued on and the glue had dried, we painted them with gold paint and all the time she chatted and I listened. She talked on many subjects. One, I remember, which resonated with me then and has done since was that she drew a contrast between work

and employment, saying that work was something you did in which you could take pride, but employment was something you did only to earn a living. It was important, she insisted, that we got back to a world where people worked.

At lunchtime each day we went to a restaurant and I noticed that when the bill came, she regularly took out a pencil and did the calculation so as to give a tip of exactly ten per cent. She was a wonderful companion, forthright, down to earth, and very funny. At one point she said we must go and see how the ladies of Canterbury were getting on with sewing the costumes. I followed her into another shed where the ladies were sitting in a semi-circle with their heads bent over their needlework. Dorothy looked at what they were doing in silence until one lady, holding up her work, asked what she thought of it. Dorothy peered at it, looked up and said, "Well, if you don't mind my saying so, you've properly bugged it up." A frisson went round the circle and heads bent lower. Such language had never been heard in the shadow of the Cathedral.

One morning she arrived in great distress "I've lost the keys of the Detection Club!" The Detection Club was the club for crime writers of which she was President (she was succeeded after her death by Agatha Christie.) "I must ring my husband", so we went to find a telephone. "You've got to find them," she told him "they can't get in. Tell them I can't come, I'm making angels' wings". I wondered what the members of the Detection Club would make of her alibi.

The "Friends of Canterbury Cathedral" had been founded some years earlier by Miss Margaret Babington who, always to be seen on her bicycle, was a familiar figure in Canterbury. Miss Babington considered the "Friends of Canterbury Cathedral" to be hers and, by extension, the Festival to be hers as well, an attitude that had led to several sharp exchanges with Dorothy, the details of which Dorothy had told me while we folded and glued.

To save my having to go back and forth to Guilton every day, I had been invited to stay with Mrs Vera Findlay who lived in Burgate Street, which backs on to the Cathedral Close. Mrs Findlay had been on the stage in her youth and was considered to be the official

representative of the profession in Canterbury. No theatrical event was complete without her presence and any theatrical figure coming to the city, was officially welcomed by her. I knew her because she had helped us with the school plays, doing make-up for the boys who played the girls' parts and generally bringing a professional air to the proceedings. I had always liked Mrs Findlay and now I was a professional, we got on better than ever. On the Friday she suggested that I invite Dorothy for a drink when we had finished our angels' wings. I passed on the invitation and at about six o'clock we went to the house.

It was still difficult to get hold of any form of alcohol, but Mrs Findlay had managed to procure a bottle of sherry, which she proudly produced. Seeing it, I was reminded of the Deering's christening party and decided to be careful, but Dorothy brightened visibly and settled down comfortably in a big armchair. Whether it was because the angels' wings were at last finished, or the prospect of a welcome glass of sherry, Dorothy was in a relaxed mood and there was a great deal of gossip and laughter with Miss Babington and her bicycle as the main target. Mrs Findlay wondered whether when 'Babs' went to heaven she would take the bicycle with her, and Dorothy supposed that when she got to the gate and St Peter asked her who she was, she would reply; "I am Miss Margaret Babington of the Friends of Canterbury Cathedral."

The conversation then turned to what it was like living beside the Cathedral and Mrs Findlay told us that it could be eerie at night. She said she had often felt presences there and instanced one night when she and her daughter were going through the Dark Entry and her daughter felt something take her by the shoulder and pull her back; she screamed and they both ran. Dorothy listened and talked about well-known sightings of ghosts, while helping herself liberally from the bottle, which was eventually discovered to be empty. She was staying with Gerald Knight, the Cathedral organist, who had composed the music for the play. His house was in the Close and she was about to leave by the front door, when Mrs Findlay suggested she take the short cut through her garden and across Canon Crumb's

garden, adding that his house had been destroyed in the bombing and the site was empty.

Canon Crumb was an authority on stained glass and it was said that, during the Canterbury blitz, he spent the night on his knees in front of the altar praying, "O Lord, please spare our stained glass, but Lord, if some must be broken, let it be the nineteenth-century glass and not the twelfth-century". The Lord had answered his request and the stained glass remained intact, but clearly the Canon had omitted to ask the same privilege for his house.

I offered to accompany Dorothy, which she accepted. Night had fallen and it was dark as we made our way out of Mrs Findlay's garden and into what had been Canon Crumb's. Dorothy was ahead of me and watching her walk, I got the impression that in the cold air the sherry was taking its toll. Suddenly there was a loud shriek and she disappeared from view. I had a moment of panic thinking the Cathedral ghost had made off with her, before I realised she had fallen into a bomb crater.

I rushed to pull her out, but the crater was deep and Dorothy was no light weight; I heaved and tugged, Dorothy struggled and pushed until suddenly, like Pooh being pulled out of Rabbit's hole when he had lost weight, she came out quicker than expected and I fell on my back with Dorothy Sayers on top of me. We picked ourselves up and she thanked me, adding that she would be all right from there on and, giving herself a shake and throwing her shoulders back, she marched off into the dark. Hoping there were no more craters in her path, I returned to the house.

The next day being Saturday, the cast were due to arrive. The stage manager, John Brebner, whom I was assisting, had arrived the day before and it was arranged that we should both go to the station to meet them and organize transport to their hotels. I had met and worked with rep actors; now, for the first time I was to meet real West End actors.

The first person I met on the platform was Christopher Hassall. The stage manager introduced me and Christopher, smiling, asked how I was getting on with Miss Sayers. I told him we had finished the

angels' wings and he said Dorothy must be relieved as she set great store by them. Himself a poet and actor, Christopher Hassall was best known as Ivor Novello's lyricist. Ivor Novello was the actor-composer who had composed the popular song of the First World War, "Keep The Home Fires Burning" and all through the thirties and forties, his romantic musicals (usually concerned with Royal life and loves in Ruritania) with titles like "Careless Rapture" and "The Dancing Years" were a huge success, with their songs, ("We'll Gather Lilacs in the Spring Again") on everyone's lips.

Christopher, who had come to notice while he was an undergraduate, as Romeo in an OUDS production of "Romeo and Juliet" produced by John Gielgud with Peggy Ashcroft as Juliet, had been extremely good-looking as a young man. Now, in his forties, he was putting on weight, but had a lively and intelligent air and a beautiful voice and was much in demand as a reader of poetry, both his own and other people's. I had often heard him on the Third Programme, the cultural channel of the BBC. With him was Jill Balcon, daughter of Sir Michael Balcon, the film producer and herself a poetry reader who often read with Christopher. The other members of the company collected round us and we moved out to where the taxis were waiting. In the taxi I noticed a small, rather serious-looking man. He sat quietly saying little, but everyone seemed to respect him. His name, I learned, was George Benson.

Michael Goodliffe who was to play William of Sens and Joseph O'Connor, the Archangel Michael, had come down separately and we did not see them until the first rehearsal.

That first rehearsal was an eye-opener. From the moment Joseph O'Connor, with his huge voice and splendid presence began effortlessly;

"I am God's servant, Michael the Archangel
I walk in the world of men invisible,
Bearing the sword that Christ bequeathed His Church
To sunder and to save."

I realised at once that these actors were in another league from the Crown Players and I would need to work hard to get to their level.

I was to play the small part of Geoffrey, a workman, and I had short comedy scene with George Benson. By the way Christopher treated him, it was clear that he was considered to be a specialist in comedy. We had lunch together at Lefevres in the same tearoom where I had so often had tea with my Mother and Gladys in what seemed now a distant world.

During lunch several people congratulated George Benson on a radio comedy series he was currently doing with Joyce Grenfell. As we talked, I gathered that he had just returned from Broadway where he had been playing Desmond Curry in the American production of "The Winslow Boy".

Final rehearsals went well and the play opened to enthusiastic audiences. The only problem was that on the First Night there was an undignified scramble for seats. This was due to Miss Babington's telling everyone to "Hurry along!" Dorothy was furious and insisted on taking charge of the seating. She ordered that the queue of people should be halted at the entrance to the cloisters and that she, in the Chapter House, would send a runner when she was ready for more. She was very keen on this idea of the runner, and we were all expecting to see someone young and active, so it was a surprise when a very old gentleman made his appearance and told us he was "Miss Sayers' runner".

In the part of Geoffrey I again drew on the Wenderton characters and their broad Kentish accents and did a make-up based again on Old Bill Sheaff. Christopher Hassall seemed pleased. When I was having lunch one day with him and George Benson, the two of them asked me what I intended to do.

I told them I had to do National Service. They had both been in the war and commiserated with me. Then, remembering Catherine Harding's advice, I said I was thinking of going to a theatre school. They both seemed to approve and Christopher said, "It won't make you a better actor but it will make you better theatrically educated"

As we talked, it became clear that they were old friends. They told me that they had met on a tour of Australia at about the time I was born. The tour had been led by Athene Seyler and her husband

Nicholas Hannen; Athene Seyler was a major figure in the theatre of the twenties, thirties and forties and famous for her comedy technique. She had written a book, "The Craft of Comedy," in the form of a dialogue with the promising young actor, Stephen Haggard, who had died in the war. She had taught at RADA where George Benson had been her star pupil and had subsequently married her daughter. The marriage had failed and it was to recover from this that he had gone to the States. Now, he was about to begin rehearsals for the 1949 Old Vic season at the New Theatre.

I asked them which school I should try for, and it turned out that Christopher was the Master of the Voice at the Old Vic School. Started just after the war, it had a reputation for being the most innovative of the schools and students from it formed The Young Vic Company, a new and exciting classical company. The school's head was Glen Byam Shaw and the staff included Michel St Denis the famous French director. Christopher suggested I audition and George added that if I wanted a bed when I was in London he could put me up. It all seemed too good to be true.

Playing the small part of "The Fair Lady" was a professional actress, Pamela White. It turned out that she had agreed to do it as she was staying with her mother who lived near Canterbury. I noticed that she and George Benson seemed to spend a lot of time together.

At the end of the week, there was a party in a hotel, which ended with us all round Dorothy who talked about her translation of Dante. It was fascinating and I was mortified when I had to leave to catch the last bus out to Ash.

While I had been staying with my grandmother, I had found her far from contented. Living alone in the house, she was virtually a prisoner because, although she still had the Hillman, she could not drive and when she asked Uncle John if someone could drive her to do her shopping, his answer always seemed to be that everyone was busy. If she asked him to get her things he forgot, and altogether she had the sense of being neglected.

In my grandfather's Will, it was stipulated that my grandmother should have the contents of the house during her life on condition

she kept it “in good repair and condition and insured against loss or damage by fire to the full value thereof.”

In other words she was condemned to stay for the rest of her life at Guilton polishing furniture. I had noticed that in the rebuilding of Canterbury a block of neo-Georgian flats had just been built in Burgate Street, and I now suggested to her that she had no reason to stay at Guilton and comply with the conditions of the Will and that she would be more comfortable in one of the flats. The notion appealed to her and in the following months she moved. The move was a success, she enjoyed living in the town and it enabled her to see her friends more easily. On one occasion when I was staying with her, she announced that she had some schoolgirls coming to tea. Surprised, I waited for an invasion of gym-slips, only to see her greet several old ladies with whom she herself had been at school, including her great friend, Dossie Nootte. The Noottes had been the Goodsons' neighbours at Upton St Peters, and Dossie, now Lady Somebody and a widow, was living in Canterbury. I noted her surname, which I was to make use of some years later.

But my grandmother's move to Canterbury did not please Uncle John, as it left him with the empty house on his hands and no one to look after it. Besides, my grandmother had been useful to him as she had answered the telephone at weekends and greeted clients in his absence. This led to a breach between them and as a result she became closer to my aunt and my mother.

It was about that time that a curious chance event occurred: my father had to go to Worcester one day to negotiate with the head of a family firm of auctioneers and land agents. After the negotiations they lunched together and the man remarked on my father not having a west-country accent. When he explained that he came from Kent, the man said that they had had a chap who had moved to Kent. “My father caught him fiddling the books and gave him twenty-four hours to get out of Worcester,” he said. “We heard that he joined a firm near Canterbury,” adding “His name was Bernard Hincks”.

My mother did not hesitate to inform grandmother of this and the result was that she renewed relations with my father and began

to visit them in Gloucester and my parents would stay with her in Canterbury. On these occasions I was surprised to see how well she and my father got on, she would ask his advice on everything and seemed to depend on him from then on. Seeing them together, I got the impression that they were very old friends

