

A SMALL BOY IN THE SIXTIES

CHAPTER I

AT 18 BOROUGH

“18 Borough” (now rebuilt in Mr H. K. Bentall’s shop) had six rooms, besides a wash-house at the back. The downstairs room on the street had a shop-window its full width—ten feet or so—at one side of the street door; and on the other side of this door was “The Shutter Hole.” This, a narrow cupboard opening on to the street—a cupboard some two feet wide perhaps and three or four feet deep (I think I never went into it)—this Shutter Hole had once been a watchman’s shelter, they said; but so far as I know it was never used for anything but to store the shop shutters—those artfully grained shutters—when they were taken down every morning and put away for the day.

The shop-window was probably partitioned off from the shop by sliding glass casements. I cannot remember this; but a memory of dull red woodwork—cheap Venetian red—runs into the lines of casement frames such as would suit there. Outside, the shop-window glass did not reach lower than some two feet or so above the street pavement. At this height the window ledge began, on the outside. My sister had, when a tiny girl, laid pennies from the shop till along the whole length of the ledge—very nice they must have looked to any passer-by in the street. Within, I fancy, the bottom of the casement gave the level for a boarded floor to the window; and in the two feet of

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darkness under these boards were not bundles of old unsold newspapers stored?

A counter ran the greater part of the length of the shop. It covered sundry drawers. One of these drawers was the shop till; in another were halfpenny pen-holders, steel pen boxes ("magnum bonums" had yellow pen-sticks); and there were penny cedar ("seedy") pencils, slate pencils (some of them covered with paper), wafers, sticks of sealing wax, india-rubber, ink-eraser, elastic bands, quill pens—all sorts of interesting things. Other items of stock that should not be forgotten were box-lining paper, printed with little spots or stars of blue, fire-screens—long tresses of curly coloured paper—and choice kinds of note-paper with "gophered edges" if you wished to be very chic, or if you were to write a love letter. For mourning, black-edged paper and envelopes might even show the extent of the bereavement—the black edge being so wide as to leave but scanty room for a few words of grief, if a very near relative had died. One very curious request would sometimes come from a villager; the man or woman asking for "a head." What was meant was a penny postage stamp, bearing a profile of Queen Victoria's head. In the shop, too, was kept for the convenience of customers a supply of the twopenny pale mauve Receipt Stamps more than twice the size of a postage stamp—which would do for a receipt in those days. There was also perforated cardboard, in which you might, with a sharp knife point, cut out highly refined patterns that would show well on blue silk, and so make a dainty book-marker or needle-case for a Christmas present.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-63302-5 - A Small Boy in the Sixties
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On the floor under the counter stood the gas meter, in a cavernous darkness. The place served me well for a cave; and as I spent a lot of time on the floor and in that cave, of course I knew that the gas meter had in front of it two jolly little clock faces as I thought, with hands that could be pushed round to please one's taste. Why there was no glass over these dials I do not know; nor yet do I know that my occasional adjustment of the hands was ever found out. The floor behind the counter had a knot-hole in it. Once I caught a blue-bottle fly and put it down into that knot-hole. Only once. My hands smelt so disagreeably of the fly that the sport was not worth repeating.

At the inner end of the shop was a number of books. The books had probably been chosen by my father, with nothing to guide him save his own unusual and far from ordinary or popular taste. Probably there were not a dozen other men in the town who cared for reading at all. I recall an argument between one of these and my father as to whether the *n* in "contemporary" should be pronounced; or elided, as my father held. But this must have been at a somewhat later stage than these other earliest recollections; probably of the period when I liked to look at *The Young Men of Great Britain*, for the sake of its pictures of Red Indians—a journal for some reason frowned upon by the seniors, but to my taste, far more attractive than *The Boys of England* substituted for it. These two journals could sometimes be found by rummaging in the piles stacked away in the dark under the shop window.

Perhaps the date of these interests of mine was round about 1870–71. I used then (lying on the floor in the inner

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room) to wonder why *The Illustrated London News* always referred to the Franco-Prussian War as the “Military” War. What other sort of war was there? The pictures struck me as dull and all alike. There was one, however, a large picture—of some “petroleuses” being shot. It seemed a shame. Then, I think, is when I first heard the name of Louise Michel. I had a sort of partisan contempt for the new French gun, the *Mitrailleuse*, a sort of partisan approval of the Prussian Needle-gun. It must have been during the Siege of Paris that I heard a lady in the shop (Miss Knight, then or soon afterwards Mrs Shalden Smith), exclaim to a friend, “Oh! *Poor Pari(s)*.” Several names became familiar to me—Bismarck, the Crown Prince, Bazaine.

During the same period Farnham Streets still echoed sometimes with reminders of the American Civil War—whenever wretched Street-singers wandered along wailing “Just Before the Battle Mother.” In the same way I learnt the tune (but I have forgotten it now) of

Oh the King of Abyssinia,
 Oh the very wicked King!

(Can I have been taken to London at this stage? I have a recollection of seeing a “Transformation Scene,” in which a huge face—“King Theodore’s”—emerged out of chaos on a curtain at a theatre. It was at the Regent Street Polytechnic, where also was a wonderful diving bell, and a man blowing glass in a side room all by himself. Then too, at intervals all round the walls of the main building, were fascinating peepholes into tiny galleries where little toy coal-trucks went running by on toy rails.)

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It must have been at about this same stage of my growth that my attention was seized by a very crude drawing in red chalk, on the stuccoed wall of "The Surrey Arms" in East Street. Why did it fix itself in my memory? I seem to see it now—colour, position and all. The face was but a profile about as big as half-a-crown. Near it was written the word "Fenian," which I was able to read. And as this is absolutely all that I can remember about the circumstance, I can only surmise that there must have been some strong public feeling connected with it, to stamp so trivial a matter so indelibly on my memory.

One other public matter of about this period has not been quite forgotten—a parliamentary election. A disquiet of excitement in the staid old street clings to my dim thought of it—a boy I probably knew was singing an election song:

I wish I had a penny.
 What for? What for?
 To buy a rope to hang the pope,
 And Pennington for ever.

The tune recurs with the words. But what it was all about I don't know. Was Pennington to be hanged for ever? He was one of the candidates. There were two others—Cubitt, and Briscow.

A Mr George Peacock, probably coming for his morning newspaper in those far-away days, used to call me "Copper-toes," because the toes of my little boots were covered with narrow strips of copper to keep them from wearing out too fast. A curious man was Mr Peacock. My father and mother dubbed his manner "theatrical," perhaps because

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of his strutting walk, and his swinging his cane up to his shoulder, in gay swishing movement. He lived at the house in front of what is now Barling's "Castle Brewery," of which he was, I fancy, the owner at that time.

It may have been a little later, but I was certainly very young when I had a bitter disappointment over some knickerbockers. I do not remember caring much about such matters at any other time, before or since. True, in after years the acquisition of my first trousers satisfied me—they would allow me to walk through stinging-nettles without getting my legs stung. But that, though so desirable a thing, was only a utility; whereas, at the time referred to, I seem to have been affected for once by an interest in the appearance of my clothes. The occasion was the conversion to my use of a pair of my brother's discarded knickerbockers. Now had they been passed over to me as they were, they would have hung down, I judged, to my ankles just like trousers. But my benighted Aunt Ann could not be persuaded to leave well alone. She insisted on cutting off the legs so as to reduce the garment again to knickerbockers for me. I was bitterly disappointed.

Behind the shop, and separated from it only by a narrow staircase, was the "sitting-room"; and behind that again (outside a latched ledge door) was the wash-house and yard. In fact, this sitting-room (like the little shop also) was no more than a widening of the passage to the back premises from the street.

A frequent nuisance, to me, was the weekly washing. It should be understood that my mother, though there was

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a small servant-girl, had more than enough to do at minding the shop, house-maiding, cooking, mending and making clothes for the family, and generally keeping the house going. She carried on a biggish correspondence with her own mother and sisters; she helped (and was helped by) my father in all the household accounts and economies; she kept her eye on us children and our upbringing.

So it was natural enough that for the family washing a washer-woman was hired—a Mrs Weymouth's name recurs to me. To be sure, my mother helped with the wringing and drying, to say nothing of the subsequent ironing; but she got Mrs Weymouth or another to do the work at the wash-tub. And to myself the unpleasing thing was as follows:

At dinner-time the washer-woman was called in to sit down to dinner with the rest of us. Now, I had no class prejudices then (my father and mother would have laughed it out of me, if I had thought of such a thing), but I did object to Mrs Weymouth's damp apron (blue print) and to her fingers all flabby and wrinkled from the soapsuds. My brother, I believe, fairly yelled once at sitting to dinner with such a being. I was not so bad as that. But my disgust must have been very keen. As if by some association with discomfort, for years afterwards a certain sort of unpalatable food (underdone cold mutton) always seemed to me to taste "like washer-women's aprons," I was wont to say.

One day news came that Mrs Weymouth was dead. She had broken a blood-vessel in her leg, they said. It was the first time I had ever heard of such a thing.

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But, beyond the discomforts already told of, I do not remember any others in this poky little home. On the contrary it was almost all happiness for me there. I feel as if I was one of those blissfully-placed children Oscar Pletsch used to draw, in his domestic scenes. Things went cheerfully; everything was interesting—my sister's dolls, the clothes drying over the fire-guard, my mother's starching and ironing; or the preparations for dinner.

As I recall it, it seems as if summer always lay over that little shaded back room behind the shuttered shop—summer quiet in the outlook along the shadowed backyard towards the distant tree-tops of Farnham Park. Yet, through this memory as of perpetual June, I seem to see my father, in his Sunday clothes back from church, stripping off his black gloves and bending down to warm his hands by the winter fire. For some of his fingers were “dead,” he said: and indeed they looked bloodless, corpse-like.

More interesting however than the real cookery was my own play cookery. In front of the sitting-room fire, across a narrow hearth-rug, stood the dinner table. My mother could hear thence if anyone came into the shop; and while she worked there amongst the pots and pans (I still seem to see the pan of flour, the highly-glazed red earthenware) I at her side was busy too. I was at work on a little scrap of pastry making it thin, cutting-out little disks of it with my mother's thimble (in which a disk often stuck, until it was howked out perhaps on to the floor), and then stamping a pattern on each disk with the thimble-top. After the pastry had been cut out into a limp network it

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could be rolled together between my hands, and then flattened out to make three or four more cuttings. Finally the disks, arranged on a plate, were put into the oven to be baked. If then I did not wholly forget them they would eventually be taken out—cold, dry, flinty, and usually grey from their frequent visits to the hearth-rug. Yet I ate them.

What would one not eat in those days? With my brother I went into a little grimy tent at Farnham fair. A conjuror there, borrowing a hat (probably some villager's old beaver) mixed and cooked in it a currant pudding to everybody's great astonishment. But, my brother says, he for his part ate some of that pudding!

I do not remember that treat, myself. But I did often enjoy cabbage-stumps, which my mother cut from the cabbages she was preparing for dinner, and put (for me) in a glass of water on the window-sill of the wash-house. I also had a liking for a slither of uncooked ham "in my fingers," and for a certain curranty pudding before it was cooked. Sometimes, on a Sunday, half a table-spoonful of gravy from roast mutton or beef was given me, before the joint was taken away, but the "liquor" from salt pork was poured over one's slice of plum pudding and made it very palatable.

I liked to watch my mother making fritters for Shrove Tuesday. She put a little beer into them! An experiment of salt fish—perhaps for one Ash Wednesday—was not repeated. As we had breakfasted by half past seven, when the morning papers came, and dinner was not till after my father could get back from his wheelwright's shop at one

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o'clock, we perhaps stood more in need than most people of the eleven o'clock "lunch" which everybody we knew took as a regular thing. Hot elderberry-wine, in the winter, was an accompaniment to our bread and cheese then. The wine was in tallish glasses—about twice the height of an ordinary wine-glass; and a finger of toast sopped in it was pleasant eating. At dinner I almost welcomed cold meat if there chanced to be mashed potatoes. For an "oven" could be chopped into the mash, where a mouthful of meat, buried for a few minutes, might with luck become almost tepid again. And if that was not in itself superlatively nice, it was all the same very nice indeed to be playing at "ovens" with one's food. Similarly nice—not for itself, but because it was odd—was an Osborne biscuit sopped in one's tea.

One queer thing comes back to my thoughts. In the shop, besides the double gas pendant over the counter, a gas bracket stood out over a little desk near the inner door. To this bracket, which, having no globe (there were none in the shop) offered the most accessible flame, I would run out from my supper o' winter nights, to toast a mouthful of cheese. I probably burnt it, holding it on a fork right in the flame; but even so it was nicer than any toasted cheese I have tasted since.

From my mother's farm-house home came now and then a home-made loaf; a "Lardy" cake—all flaky; a quarter of a large currant cake too full of lemon-peel for my taste; a supply of "scraps" for mince-meat; a hog's pudding or two; souse; a corking of hocks, and once (ah how succulent!) a dish of chitterlings ("chidlins"). A