

This Life of Grace

JOHN SYMONS



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We lived alongside her,
but all of us failed to grasp that she was
that one truly just person
without whom, as the saying goes,
no village is safe,
nor any town,
nor our whole world.

A.I. SOLZHENITSYN
Matryona's House
(Author's translation,
used by permission of
Mrs Natalia Solzhenitsyn)

Still are thy pleasant voices, thy nightingales,
awake;
For Death, he taketh all away, but them he
cannot take.

W.J. CORY
Heraclitus

Contents

Prologue	ix
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PART ONE

1 'When you and I were seventeen'	3
<i>Confirmation, November 1924</i>	19
2 'Dear Octopus'	20
3 'Tea at Gunters'	27
4 'The test of the heart is trouble'	36
5 'The best thing that ever happened to me'	49

PART TWO

6 '... down to Oxford's towers'	53
7 A New Life	55
8 Windwhistle	67
9 Neighbours and Friends	70
10 A Pattern of Life	85
11 Time Passes	92
12 'Gone are the days...'	101

PART THREE

13	A Last Gift	117
	<i>Ward 12, Mount Gould Hospital</i>	121
14	'What can't be cured ...'	122
	<i>Winged Chariot</i>	132
15	'... on my way, rejoicing'	133
16	'A Ring of Faithfulness'	138
	<i>Skin Deep</i>	146
17	'Such sweet sorrow'	147
	Epilogue ... <i>the means of grace and the hope of glory ...</i>	150

Prologue

ON AN IRON-FRAMED BED, in a side room off Ward 12, Grace lies on a Pegasus air mattress. The electric motor of an air-compressor hums very quietly and, every so often, it gently inflates or deflates one or another of the lungs of the mattress. The 'Friends of Ward 12' have raised the money for the hospital to buy more of these mattresses. Ward 12 is a special place. It has many grateful friends. The flow of air changes the contours of the bed and reduces the risk of bedsores. Grace was already suffering from one when she was moved to the specialist unit here from a ward in a general hospital.

Outside, about sixty feet from the window of her little room, stands an immense horse chestnut tree, covered in fresh green leaves. The first white and saffron flowers are opening. Grace watched the tree's leaves turn brown and fall, along with the conkers, last autumn. She saw the tree's branches bare against the blue winter sky. You can look at a tree for a long time.

Grace has lain on this bed for six months. Every two hours or so, she is turned from one side to the other by members of a group of skilled and dedicated nurses and assistants. She is paralysed on her left side, the effect of the stroke that she suffered in September. She cannot feed or clean herself.

Grace's speech is a little slow, soft but clear. Sometimes her mind is muddled, but often it is completely lucid. Sometimes she sleeps deeply, sometimes fitfully. After a deep sleep this morning, her mind is alert.

'I've been over nearly all of it now,' she tells me. 'I'm happy.'

Grace is my Mother.

This is the story of her long life, what she was turning over in her mind. It is what made her happy. It is what she told me during her thirty-two months in Ward 12, between her stroke and her death. She was amused, and perhaps pleased, that I noted down what she was saying in a shorthand book. We called it her 'log'. Many of the words of this story are hers.

1

‘When you and I were seventeen’

IT WAS THERE from the beginning.

No one could tell how the story would end and no one would have wanted it to end as it did, but what was there from the beginning made the end possible and gave it its meaning.



Mum was born in October 1909 into a large, united family. Descended from generations of farm labourers and game-keepers, her parents and many of her uncles and aunts had gone ‘into service’ as butlers and valets, cooks and maids during the sixty-three years of Queen Victoria’s reign.

Not long after King George V came to the throne in 1910, Mum’s family moved from Cornwall to Plymouth in south Devon. For a while, as an alternative to domestic service, her parents ran a sweet-shop, but they could not make it pay. Perhaps it was as a toddler, in the sweetshop, that Mum gained her life-long taste for liquorice and chocolate.

Two years later the family moved from the city to the village of Plympton St Mary, where Mum’s father once more earned his living as a butler.

'The first thing I remember was being in the back lane of our row of houses, a bit lonely as all the other children had gone in a horse-and-wagon on the chapel outing to the seaside at Wembury,' Mum told me.

'My next memory was of one breakfast-time, jumping up when Mother was making my cocoa, knocking a kettle of water over my shoulders. All the family rushed around frantically trying to help poor Mother. The district nurse came and did my wound. I lay in a cot in the kitchen, being spoiled once more. Mother slept on a mattress on the floor by my cot for a few nights.'

Mum always looked at her parents through rose-tinted spectacles. *'I can't help doing it,'* she told me. But her memories contain nuggets that run counter to the way she wished to see things. The stories that she passed on reveal that she had a formidable power of recall and was an honest witness. Her memories have always proved to be accurate when it has been possible to check them.



Mum started school on the thirty-first of August 1914, one day short of four weeks after the First World War broke out, and two months before her fifth birthday.

'Starting school was a shock to me, being the youngest of eight and a bit spoiled by the others. My sister Hilda was ten years older than me and had already left school. She took me to the baby school, called Bridge School in those days, at the foot of Station Hill. She told me to run home, and told Mother that she hadn't been able to catch me. The next day Mother took me, and, very tearfully clutching a packet of chocolate drops, I was left with Mrs Bettes and Miss Blight ...

'Our house in Moorland View was lovely. A few weeks later at Christmas, it was filled with holly and ivy, and we just had stockings filled with simple presents, and oranges, apples, and nuts. We had a lovely Christmas dinner and Christmas pudding (set alight with brandy), with ten of us around the table. Two doors away lived my friend, Edie Law, and we always had a good Christmas, with our dolls and toys ...

'We had baths on Saturdays in a tin bath in front of the kitchen fire; there was no bathroom there. After the bath we had sweets.'

Sixty years later, out of the blue, Edie Law visited Mum.

'Yesterday was a strange day. I answered the doorbell. A lady and a gentleman stood there, and the lady said, "Can you tell us where to find 14 Moorland View where I used to live?" I gave a shout, "Edie Law!" and she said, "Grace Jarrold!" We had not met for sixty years. She was my playmate. They came in and had cups of tea and coconut buns (I didn't have anything else). They stayed two and a half hours and we talked the hind leg off a donkey, about all the games that we played and of the people we knew. They live in Bristol. Edie's husband was tickled pink at our meeting. It was very funny after all those years.'

Another of Mum's friends in Moorland View was Edie Paul. At school Edie was a lively pupil. Like her brother Bill, Edie had the bluest eyes that Mum ever saw. Once, the teacher tried to get her to concentrate, saying 'Edith Paul, put on your thinking-cap.' Edie replied, 'I can't, Miss; I've only got my 'shanter'.



During Mum's first years at school her two eldest brothers were in the Army, serving in France.

'I remember Mother crying when Harry and Jack went to war. When they came back from the front on leave their uniforms were filthy from the mud of the trenches and full of fleas. Mother used matches to get the fleas to jump out of the serge; the cloth was so thick and that was the only way to get rid of them.'

After the United States entered the Great War two Americans were billeted with her family for several months in late 1917 and 1918. Mum was frightened of them because they used to play boisterously with her, throwing her up into the air and catching her. 'Yanks', as she often called them, rather fondly, always amused her by their 'exuberance', a favourite word of hers.

Food was short. According to the log-book kept by the headmaster of the senior school, called Geasons, his staff and pupils

used to grow an annual crop of potatoes during the War and for a good few years after it, partly for food and partly to teach the children how to work a vegetable garden. The area under cultivation at the school in 1917 was seven and three quarter roods, a plot that amounts to almost two acres. In the spring of that year Geasons' staff and pupils planted a hundredweight of seed potatoes.

A series of small events and treats marked the passing of each term. In the late spring and summer months the parish church of St Mary, and the Wesleyan and Congregationalist chapels in Ridgeway, as the high street was called, used to organise teas and outings for the children of the village. On those days the schools would be closed.

Not far from the school stood Hillside House where General and Mrs Birdwood lived for many years. They offered Geasons great support. In early summer each year they gave a tea party for the children in their large garden, with its forest of shrubs and rhododendrons. The wisteria would be in full bloom, covering the south front of the house.

Mr Baple, the energetic new headmaster, recorded in his log-book on the morning of Empire Day, the 24th of May 1917, that 'Suitable lessons were given and General Birdwood gave a brief address to the children on "The Empire and the Flag".' In the words of the writer of a recent textbook,* 'The British Empire... stretches over the whole globe... The sun never sets or rises over the British dominions... It would be perfectly possible to put round the earth a girdle of telegraphic wire, the ends of which should rest only upon land that belongs to the British Empire.' Another recent popular history for children told 'Our Empire Story'.†

The pride felt in our country's history and achievements was combined with humour and a sense of proportion. On the same day that General Birdwood gave the pupils his talk on

* J.M.D. Meiklejohn, *A New History of England and Great Britain*, 1902.

† By Miss H.E. Marshall.

the Empire, Mr Baple noted in his log that there was 'a small attendance of children in the afternoon, a circus being in Plympton'.

The following year on St George's Day, the twenty-third of April, there were lessons 'suitable to the day'. A collection in the school raised £1 0s 3d, for the RSPCA's fund for horses wounded in the War.

Plympton St Mary was a loyal, quiet village. It was home to three or four thousand people, including those living in the neighbouring smaller villages of Plympton St Maurice and Colebrook and in the outlying hamlets. There was a spirit of patriotism in the village and school, and of long-suffering, stoical humanity and realism, with modest pleasures and no luxuries.

The village was typical of thousands across the country. That the people of our country were once so gentle and patient, so hardy and decent, so reasonable and free, facing together so many hardships, can hardly be believed by anyone born after 1950, but so it was.

Even those on the fringes of society in Mum's childhood seemed to share in this powerful ideal as much as anyone else.

Tramps were sometimes seen passing through Plympton on the main road between Exeter and Plymouth. Without irony, they were known as 'gentlemen of the road'. One of them regularly called on Mum's family. Her mother would give him tea, some food to take on his way and a pair of boots saved up for his visit. Sitting at the kitchen table, he used to tell Mum and her mother of his adventures on his long walk between John o'Groats and Land's End. Even when she was elderly, perhaps partly as a result of this friendship, which lasted for many years, Mum used to carry some loose change with her in her mackintosh pocket in case she met a tramp '*in need of a cup of tea*'.

Old-fashioned gipsy caravans sometimes visited the village. Once in a while they made an encampment in the field beside the Tory Brook, between St Mary's church and the livestock

market. Fascinated by the sight, the village children watched them cooking on their camp-fires and putting their children to bed under the stars. When one of the gypsies died, he was sent on his way by a large congregation at a funeral service in St Mary's.

In the autumn of 1918 as the Great War was coming to its end, an influenza epidemic (known as 'Spanish 'flu') began to rage in the country. In Plympton only sixty per cent of the children were able to attend school on some days. At the end of October and in early November Mr Baple closed the school completely for a fortnight. One boy, Robert Parsons, died. The pupils brought in their pennies for a wreath; £1 6s 11d was collected. Later they made a contribution to the costs of his funeral.

The following summer, in mid-July, the school held a special celebration to mark the return of peace. Mum won a prize in the sports which took place in Geasons field. The next day, according to Mr Baple's notes, 'the cake remaining from the festivities was distributed among the children'. Mum's family had a photograph taken of them all gathered together in their back-garden.

'At the King's express desire', the midsummer holiday was extended from four to five weeks that year. The country, including the children, could begin to breathe more easily for a while.

That summer Mum's brother, Walter, three years her senior, won a scholarship to Corporation Grammar School at North Road in Plymouth.* He was a clever boy, and the first in the

* Plympton Grammar School had been closed in the early nineteenth century. Sir Joshua Reynolds, the portrait painter and first President of the Royal Academy, and Plympton's most distinguished son, had been educated there. It was re-opened in Plympton St Maurice in 1921, too late for Wally, so his family had the additional expense of his train fares to Plymouth every day. The school was moved to a new building in Plympton St Mary, still in use but much extended, in September 1937. It is now known as Hele's School, in commemoration of one of the original benefactors.

family to go to a grammar school. The family had just enough money to pay for the uniform and books that he needed. Mum's father was working as the butler at Newnham House, a mile outside the village. He earned 23 shillings a week (£1 15p). Apart from Wally, Mum's brothers and sisters were by now in work.

In September Wally took up his scholarship. Mum moved up the hill from Bridge School to Geasons. There were about three hundred children at the school, 135 of them boys and 154 girls.

Mum's family bought her new clothes for the move to the senior school: a warm winter coat, a hat and gloves, and leather lace-up boots. Winters were usually severe and long, and Mum always suffered from chilblains.

'I remember going up to the Big School. I really loved it when I got used to it, especially when I got older, although I went up the hill from the baby school shaking in my shoes on the first day.'

At the end of October the pupils subscribed £1 2s 10d for a portrait of Nurse Edith Cavell. The matron of a hospital in Brussels at the start of the War, Nurse Cavell had become a popular heroine. She had risked her life by helping two hundred British and Allied soldiers to escape to The Netherlands after the German army occupied Belgium in 1914. She was executed by the Germans in 1915. Her picture was placed in the school's main assembly room.

On the eleventh of November 1919, the first national commemoration of the anniversary of the Armistice, Mr Baple wrote in his diary: 'An Assembly was held in the Schoolroom, in accordance with the King's desire. Silence at 11am for a few minutes; then an address on the subject of the day – the Armistice, its results, the League of Nations, etc. School closed in the afternoon'.

At the end of the winter, in early 1920, Bridge and Geasons Schools were inspected by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. The Inspector, Mr A.M. Morley, reported:

'The discipline, which during the war years at times showed unsteadiness, is now much improved and the staff more settled than it was. The majority of the children are bright and intelligent, though there are a few very dull ones who seem to need special attention. The subjects of instruction as seen at the time of the visit appear on the whole to be up to the average, and the methods of teaching are generally suitable, although this is more characteristic of the upper than the lower part of the school.

'It is clear that the organisation might be improved in certain details which were discussed with the Head Master at the time of the inspection, and the timetable which has been in use a long time needs revision. The scheme of work, which was drawn up some years ago, is too vague and general in character to be of much help to the assistant teachers, and the terminal examinations might well cover a wider range of subjects.

'In a school of this size, the children in Standard VII (thirteen year olds) should attempt more advanced work by means of private study instead of, as at present, working with Standard VI and occasionally Standard V.'

Althia Birdwood countersigned the report of the inspection on behalf of the governors.

By now Mum had just passed her tenth birthday. She had a little less than four years' schooling ahead of her. There were about forty-five children in her class. Mum loved school and worked hard at her lessons.

Perhaps as a result of the inspector's report the school began to arrange for more of its pupils to sit the scholarship examination for the grammar school.

Mum did well in her studies. *'When I was thirteen, I was made head girl, and every morning at eleven o'clock I used to fetch Mr Baple his coffee on a tray from the cottage in Station Road where he and Mrs Baple lived.'*

Mr Baple encouraged Mum's parents to put her in for a scholarship to the grammar school. Nothing came of his idea. There was not enough money for the family to buy Mum the

uniform and anything else that she would have needed for the extra two years at the grammar school to take her school certificate.

'I didn't have the nerve to go in for the scholarship although Mr Baple told me that I could easily pass. I wasn't brave enough – too babyish, I expect. My family were too nice to me; I can't get away from that – they spoil me.'

Mum always looked back to her days at school with Mr Baple with affection. In 1976, when she was reading *Devon Life*, she told me, *'I saw a letter by my old schoolmaster, Mr W.H. Baple. He asked pupils of 1919 to 1923 to write to him. I have done so and eagerly await a reply. He says that he has been in India. I told him all the news and hope that he will enjoy reading about my time in India with Dad. You cannot believe the thrill I got from seeing his name.'*

Mum would have done well at the grammar school. She never gave the slightest hint of resenting her loss. Even with most of her brothers and sisters already at work, she could see that her family's funds were short.

So it was that Wally was the first and last of that generation to enjoy a grammar school education. Mum was proud of his success. She cried when, near the end of her life, she told me that on one occasion some pupils in Plymouth had jeered at him because of the patches and darns in his school uniform, lovingly and carefully mended by their mother.

Mum made the most of the schooling that she received. Mrs Bettes had given her a few piano lessons when she was at Bridge School, and now she started to take regular lessons with Mr Leonard Ash at Geasons.

'Mr Ash made me blush when he called me out to the front to play a piece to the class.'

A little later, Mum began to take piano lessons with Miss Chubb in the dark drawing-room of her house, hidden behind a dense laurel hedge, in the terrace where Mr and Mrs Baple lived. Miss Chubb used to smack her hand with a ruler if she made a mistake. It did not often happen. She encouraged Mum

to go on to 'take theory', saying that she would become an excellent musician if she did so. Although there was no money for the extra lessons for that, Mum always played well, with feeling and accuracy. She won a music prize.

There was a good teacher of English at Geasons, Mrs Markham, and she encouraged her pupils to read some of the great works of English literature. Mum relished learning poetry. For all her shyness, she enjoyed reciting or performing it: Wordsworth's *Idle Shepherd Boys*, Tennyson's *The Brook* and *The Revenge*, and passages from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, including Portia's speech in praise of mercy (her lifelong favourite). All the books that Mum read at school and in later years lived on in her heart and mind, stored there by her powerful memory, imprinting their lessons on her soul. Each term there were examinations in arithmetic, in reading and in the writing of compositions or essays.



Every week Mum used to go with Sam, her family's spaniel, to take the rent to Mrs Damerell, the farmer's wife who owned the house. Mrs Damerell told Mum how much she admired Mrs Jarrold for keeping the house so clean and looking so neat and tidy, with the ten of them living there. But now Mum's family had to move. In the economic confusion that followed the Great War Mrs Damerell had to sell the house to raise money to enable her husband, who was much older than herself, to save the farm.

So in 1922, twelve months before Mum left school, the Jarrolds went to live on a small council estate of red-brick houses, newly built for soldiers returning from the Great War – 'homes fit for heroes' as they were known – a little to the northwest, on the far side of the valley and the railway line. Their house, Number 7 Stone Barton, would stay in the family for more than sixty years.

Despite the new houses, Plympton remained peaceful and little changed. The population rose to about five thousand by

the mid-1920s. *'They were days when you could walk in the fields and roll in the daisies and buttercups without being molested,'* she told me in 1990, when the papers reported that a murder had been committed in Plympton.

'We had simple treats. I remember Mother and her sister, Aunt Emily, taking us in a donkey cart to Wembury to see the sea. Sometimes Jakey the donkey would not move, and Mother stood in front encouraging him with carrots.'

When I went to Bulgaria in 1993 and visited the depths of the countryside on local trains, I wrote to Mum to tell her about life there. She replied that it sounded like Plympton in her childhood, *'with donkeys and carts and hayricks and people living very simply'*.

At home, Mum was still treated as the baby of the family. *'I was still playing with dolls when I was thirteen years old,'* she told me. She was amused and a little ashamed that she had been so slow to grow up.

Mum left school with a good report, as well as with her prizes. *'I left school a few months before I was fourteen. I had won a prize for my work. Mrs Birdwood presented me with it, a book called The Flower of the Family. She said to me, "I hope that you will be the flower of your family."'*

Mr Baple wrote in Mum's report, *'I cannot praise her too highly as a gifted and dutiful pupil.'*

Some of the girls at school were jealous of Mum's success and teased her. They said that Mr Baple was *'not praising her'*. Mum knew that Mr Baple had given her a good report from what he had said to her, but she was upset when she told her parents what the girls had said. Her mother and father assured her that Mr Baple had, indeed, given her a wonderful report.



In the autumn of 1923 Mum started work. There was little choice of jobs. Years later she told me, *'If I had my time again, knowing what I know now, I would have gone on with botany.'* She

loved to search for flowers and plants in the fields, woods and hedges and identify rare finds in the well-thumbed books handed on by her parents.

At another time she pondered a different possibility. It was when she was travelling to Moorhaven Hospital three times a week to visit Dad. She got to know the Matron of one of the Plymouth hospitals who said that she would be pleased to offer Mum a job. *'The nurses are so kind and thoughtful to all the patients, and, if I had my time again, I would try to be a nurse. They are so wonderful.'*

Mum's two sisters were by now well into their twenties. Like their parents before them they had gone 'into service'. There were twenty or so substantial country houses in the rich farming country around Plympton offering such work, and Edie and Hilda 'lived in' as maids. Things were beginning to change even then in the early 1920s. Because of the slump in farming, the landed families were cutting back on servants. Perhaps Mum's mother felt that her youngest was too young for her years and too home-loving to move out and live with other servants in a country house and work for a strange family.

Whatever the reason, Mum took a different route. In August 1923 she began to work at Northcott's, a small drapery shop in Ridgeway. She received 3s 9d (19p) a week. She gave her mother three shillings; the nine pence that she kept, she spent on a bun or a slice of Russian cake and a glass of milk at Mr Heathman's dairy, or liquorice at Mrs Gent's sweetshop.

Mum enjoyed her work at Northcott's. She became fond of the elderly spinster who ran the shop. She observed her fussy manners and took in her droll words about her customers. She stored it all away.

Mum always loved Ridgeway, and that love went back to her childhood. *'I was happy with life as it was. If we wanted a treat, we just went to Ridgeway. You wouldn't believe that would you? And it was so nice when the Christmas tree was set up there and covered with lights.'*

She was disappointed when the earliest known painting of Plympton, by William Tomkins in the mid-eighteenth century, was sold to an American and exported in 1990.

The confirmation service at St Mary's church was a big event each year, especially for the school-leavers.

In November 1924, when she was fifteen, Mum was one of the thirty-nine parishioners confirmed at St Mary's. The Bishop who conducted the service preached on a text from the Book of Revelation, *'Be faithful unto death,'* words inscribed on the flyleaf of the small prayer book presented to each of the candidates.

Until about 1960 around half of the local school-leavers were confirmed each year in Plympton, between forty and sixty of them. Several adults would also be confirmed. In those fifteen years after the Second World War the ways and manner of life in the village were more like those of the 1920s and 1930s than what followed.



After working at Northcott's for a few months Mum moved to a more promising job at Yeo's department store in Plymouth. Her mother had taken her to Plymouth to buy an apprenticeship at one of the stores in the city. The first shop that they visited was Dingles, *'But I wasn't smart enough for Dingles,'* Mum said, *'so we settled on Yeo's.'*

In the old city of Plymouth, destroyed by German bombs twenty years later, Yeo's ranked below Pophams and Dingles, but on a level with Spooner's and above Coster's among the big department stores, all of which stood in, or near, Bedford Street.

The choice of Yeo's turned out well for Mum and she made the most of her opportunity. She made some friendships which lasted a lifetime. Lily Coombes, two years older than Mum, was already working there. The apprenticeship gave her training in each department in turn. She loved the shop and the daily routine. Each morning she travelled from Plympton station on the 8.40 train to North Road station. *'There were a lot of smart*

girls on the train. One worked at Pophams. Normally she took the short walk from there to Yeo's, although from time to time she caught a tram.

At midday, when the weather was fine, she used to buy a sandwich or pasty at the Three Towns Dairy or the Windsor Dairy in George Street. With her friends, she would walk up to The Hoe and they would eat their lunch looking out over the waters of Plymouth Sound.

Mum still felt very young for her years: *'I was a thin little girl standing behind the counter – very skinny. Some days I wore a long-sleeved white jumper that was almost too tight at the neck to pull over my head; it shrank each time it was washed. I felt like two yards of pump-water.*

'At first I used to earn ten shillings (50p) a week. I used to give the brown envelope to Mother: she had a lovely way of receiving and giving. Then, at the end of the apprenticeship, my wages went up to £1 a week. To celebrate this increase Mother bought me a grey flannel suit with a waistcoat, and a Scottish 'shanter with a tassel, at a shop in Old Town Street. I felt lovely in that outfit.'

Mum became popular at Yeo's. The owner, Major Frank Yeo, 6' 4" tall and distinguished in bearing, used to tease her. 'You have grown a lot since I last saw you', he said when he told her of her increase to £1 a week. Mum's height of 5' 10" made her noticeable in those days when most young women were so much shorter than they are now. The manager, John Beckley, also used to pull her leg. 'You are fit only for the carpet department', he said and she pretended to be furious.

On Wednesdays, when the shops closed for a half-day, Mum sometimes went to the pictures with a friend. Saturday was a full working day.

The other girls working at Yeo's were interested in Mum's big family. 'How many brothers have you got, Jarrold?' they asked her. (The girls used each others' surnames at work.) When she replied, 'Five,' they asked, 'Can we come out to Plympton and see you next Wednesday afternoon?'

Once a week, after work, her mother used to go into Plymouth on the 5.09 train. Mum would treat her to tea at Goodbody Matthews' café in George Street, near St Andrew's Cross. Mum would feel so proud of her when one of the girls called out, 'Your mother has arrived, Jarrold.'

They would drink a pot of tea or small cups of strong coffee with cream, and eat tiny, delicate sandwiches and delicious cakes which they used to share, half each, so that each of them tasted everything. A string trio, made up of tall, thin ladies with reading-glasses and long noses would play light classical and salon music: Kreisler's *Caprice Viennoise*, Paderewski's *Minuet in G* and *Chanson du Voyageur*, Elgar's *Chanson de Matin*. There was a certain homeliness, but with a hint of romance, even elegance, in the busy, thriving city.

The two of them would then go to the pictures at the Gaumont Cinema or Andrews Picture House in Union Street. They often saw dramatisations of classic novels, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *Anna Karenina*. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was a favourite. They used to catch the 9.20 train back to Plympton station.

Mum's father worried about her. One day, when she was seventeen and was dressed up 'to go out flirting, Dad took me aside. I was wearing a black coat with an astrakhan collar and a French cloche hat. Dad told me that I looked like a "Piccadilly Pat". Dad was stern in my flirting days.'

'I was a perfect nuisance when I was seventeen,' Mum told me. 'I used to keep Mum and Dad up late, till eleven o'clock, when I was out flirting. I fell for the curate at St Mary's, but I didn't dare to speak to him. I was seventeen and he was forty...'

'Mr Brooks used to cut my hair with a fringe, or a shingle, or an Eton crop, at his shop in Ridgeway...'

'My brothers paid for me to have my first filling at the dentist's – Mr Arthur James – in Plymouth. They wanted me to have good teeth.'



One day nearly seventy years later, Joan Vincent, one of Mum's oldest friends from Stone Barton, visited her in Ward 12. They talked about the old days. Together they sang one of the songs from a pantomime that they had seen at the Palace Theatre so long ago:

*'When you and I were seventeen,
And love and life were new,
The world was just a field of green,
With smiling skies of blue,
That lovely spring when you were King
And I was then your Queen;
Can you recall when love was all,
And we were seventeen?'**



Mum enjoyed her time at Yeo's. She loved dealing with customers and selling them hats and flowers, shirts and hosiery. She was unhappy for a while in the despatch department. One of the staff there was dishonest and tried to lead her astray. Mum had had to stand up to her.

Apart from that short time, the atmosphere was cheerful and kind and full of jokes. When it was time for the customers to leave and for the doors to be locked at the end of the day, one of the managers used to go quickly from floor to floor, calling out, 'Have you cleared your drawers, girls?'

Mum worked at Yeo's for seven happy years until 1931.

* I have kept Mum's words even when they differ slightly from the correct text of songs or poems, an indication of how her memory stood up to the passing of many years.

Confirmation at Plympton St Mary's Church November 1924

'Be faithful unto death':
such easy words
When death is far away.
White frocks for girls
With shoes to match;
dark suits for boys,
With darns, and patched;
the Bishop garbed
In purple robes.
His text runs on –
'And I will give
you then a crown
Of life.' And life's
so troublesome
But fresh and green.
How can it end?

Like this: a bed,
a catheter,
A rattling breath,
a gasp for air.

The words bore fruit –
piled high, pressed down,
It overflows.

How could he know,
That man – grey hair,
a shepherd's crook
Blue eyes, shy smile?
Yet in his voice
The ring of truth
that stood the test
Of time, run out:
the crown is hers.

