

An Account of her Childhood Memories

Written by Florence Esther Malkin (nee Beezer)

Born: Greenwich, London, England, 3rd December 1891

Died: Raumatī Beach, New Zealand, 6th September 1966

We were a family of six when my mother died - the baby - a boy (Claude) - just 3 years old. I remember so well although I was but eleven years at the time he was taken to see mother who was in hospital, two days before she died - he was "britched" especially for the occasion in blue velveteen complete with lace collar and cuffs. We were just ordinary folks - my father was a crane driver at the time - his wages small - his hours very long. He worked - except for one break that I remember - for a cable laying factory. He had a wonderful fund of "yarns" which kept us well amused for many an hour as many ships unloaded at the wharf where he was employed. He was a very small man and how he managed to have such a wonderful reserve of energy is still a wonder to me even after so many years.

I loved my father and my greatest treat was being allowed to meet him on his way home from work in the evening. I always tried to beat the church clock when it chimed the hour of five - my little legs would work overtime running to get to the gate before the men came pouring out - I did so love seeing them hang their "medals," number tickets, on nails as they came out and say some mysterious words to the time keeper. Often I could not make the gate but would streak unnervingly for Dad as he came along in the middle of what looked to me like the biggest crowd possible. One day I remember my father asking me how I always found him among the many other men and he had a good laugh when I said, "Oh, you know your legs bend out when you walk". He used to be in a cavalry regiment in his younger days and horse back had made him "bandy" as we called it.

I was the second girl of the family. My sister (now dead) was the eldest and I followed exactly 1 year and 9 months later, as did my brothers and sister with surprising regularity. My mother adored my eldest sister. I was unfortunate - I should have been a boy and was a sad disappointment to my mother. I loved her and have always kept her memory deep in my heart. She had so little of real happiness and so much pain which no one even suspected until it was too late and after many operations she left us - just six weeks after she entered hospital. How well I recall the day she said she was leaving us to be made

well. How I firmly believed that God would make her well and send her home to us. The rules of the hospital were very rigid - children under 14 were not admitted except under very special conditions - as when my 3 year old brother visited her - but that was too harsh for we too older girls, so I went to the hospital quite determined to get in if I crawled all the way. On my first visit my legs felt like jellies when I was met at the door by a very imposing looking individual who asked my name and who I was visiting - he passed me on to another brass buttoned person who asked my age - clutching a few very bedraggled Marigolds in one hand and pushing my auburn curls back with the other to gain courage I falteringly said, " Please Sir, fourteen last birthday." I am sure he knew I could not be fourteen - I was not a big child but I believe I had very pleading brown eyes and I could smile when I liked. However I was passed on to a person whose very imposing starchiness made me wish to fall through the floor, but I did have a pass which I shakingly held out and lo! I was there - right by the side of my mother, or what I could see of her. I lost my tongue completely and could not say a word - however I managed to see her every time I went to the hospital but she never came home.

The next 2 years I would gladly draw a veil over. They do not reflect much credit on me. My sister, who was nearly 13 years old when Mother died became the little Mother. On her shoulders rested the responsibilities of a home and family of four - one brother died just before Mother and the newly "britched" brother was with my grandmother.

I am afraid I was very unfair. I hated housework or any domestic work and would run off and play Shuttlecock Buttons or Jack and Four Stones as soon as school was over. My sister had a very hard time trying to cope with rebellious children and the home. We lived in South East London and one has many opportunities to see the sordid side of life also how children were used to help augment the family income. We were very strictly brought up and my father had great ideas concerning our future - all had been placed according to his plans in his mind. I do not think we fitted in though it was quite a common sight to see children with bare feet and legs - clothes which refused to sit properly on any part of them and various parts of their anatomy showing through huge hole -. jerseys, or guernseys as we called them, six sizes too large and hanging on under nourished and undersized little bodies. But what they lacked in size they amply made up for in "cheek," or their raucous shouts of, "paaer, noos paaer," ("paper, news paper"), " 'orrible murder, Sir, at Camden

Town." This was sure to sell the papers. These tots, some as young as 5 years, would tear off after school - if they went to school. Often they "hopped the wag" or played truant, grab up their load of papers and do their best to beat the rest of the boys, meeting workmen's trams or anyone interested in the evening "noos." They played tricks on unsuspecting old ladies such as filling empty packets with dirt and leaving them on the footpath, hiding round corners watching for the poor old dear who would "fall" for the trick. They would tie string to knockers on doors, hide in doorways while they played a tattoo on the tied knocker. Many is the time we have been annoyed - at least, Father was - we thought it great fun seeing him throw down his paper, stamp to the door half a dozen times before he tumbled to the game.

Little children pushed barrows and hawked wood for firing - swept doorways of snow - shovelled coal into cellars - cleaned boots and shoes, standing in gutters shouting, "shine yer shoes sir for a penny." Those were the good old days, or were they?

Then the barrel organs or "hurdy gurdys". Many is the time I have stood entranced at the antics of the monkey, usually carried by the organ grinder as an added attraction, delousing itself or begging "monkey nuts" from the crowd. The factory girls and boys would dance the "Cake Walk" or any dance that happened to be the craze until the usual "Copper" would move them on and I would race home often to find my sister in tears because she could not get all the work done in time. I was a mean creature but still I could not like house work. I was very observant and many things I saw remain clear in my memory today. Although school was supposed to be obligatory a great percentage of children either played truant or were too tired for school after gong on milk rounds - delivering bread - meat or other jobs little children were forced to perform winter and summer and how cold English winters can be - poor little bits of unwanted humanity - the flotsam and jetsam of a cruel and indifferent world shivering in their rags, huddling under archways or shop doorways. No wonder our gaols and reformatories were full - little children - babies almost - sent to bring the beer home in a jug from the nearest "pub" for their parents - some so small one wondered how they managed to carry the jug and contents - but they had many a sip on the way home and children have been quite as drunk as many adults. Little girls were forced to all kinds of menial tasks for a few pence a week, exploited because of their poverty or laziness of parents. Wages were of the lowest, 18/- (*shillings*)

weekly being considered a good wage for a family man and so there was the Monday morning visits to the Pawnbroker. I believe it was usual for a woman to act as a go-between - as children were sent with father's suit but were not allowed to pawn them. The money thus gained was used for food and the suit redeemed again on Friday and so it went on until perhaps the bread winner lost his job or was ill.

There were the "Tally Men" who called when the husband was at work using flowery phrases and making still more flowery promises about his goods and their respective value. How many women have been driven to desperation by this particular ramp and slick salesmanship will never be known but clothes and footwear have been sold to these unsuspecting women who find they have to pay three or more times their value. Failure to pay - hubby will be told or the police court, poverty and want everywhere.

It seemed to my growing mind that the baker (*who*) gave short weight (*as*) was clever (*as*) the butcher and fishmonger. I well remember my mother buying a rabbit and being doubtful she lifted it up and a weight - I am not sure how much - fell out of where its internal organs were meant to be. Then there were the drapers. Every thing was sold with three farthings tacked on, such as socks, 1/11³/₄ (*one shilling and eleven pence plus three farthings*) pair and so on. When making a purchase if the total came to an odd farthing one was given a few pins or hairpins but never the farthing. I well remember the day when I was much older being in a well known Drapers and a woman making a purchase (and she) paid in packets of pins and hairpins. The assistant was in a dilemma and called the manager who threatened and expostulated in turns but the woman stood her ground, saying if it was right to give her pins for change then pins were legal tender for her goods, and she won, much to my delight.

Often now when I see the neat underwear and frocks of girls today I think of the hours my mother spent washing and ironing and goffering our clothes. Petticoats were all befrilled and each of us girls wore two or three. The boys wore frocks, petticoats and drawers until they were three years or more. Our "pinnies" (*pinnafores or aprons*) were a work of art - when laundered - school "pinnies" were - or at least ours were - made of holland, which was a very light fawn and had a lovely gloss when starched and ironed. These had frills around the yoke and armholes which Mother used to goffer, i.e. making small pleat like frills with irons that closely resembled the old fashioned hair curling tongs. On Sundays

we wore more elaborate 'pinnies" made of fine lawn or cambric. We also wore long lace up boots for school and on Sunday we thought ourselves the acme of fashion in boots nearly to our knees which buttoned up at the side with small black buttons and how dreaded one popping off when using the button hook. It was such a boring business screwing them on until the cobbler or "snob" had a small instrument like pincers which would put them on in a trice. Our boots had patent leather toes which were cleaned sometimes with milk, vaseline and even egg white, depending on what Mother's latest "caller" cleaned her children's boots with of course. We wore hats of all shapes and sizes - I had a lovely Tam O' Shanter with a quill feather which was the envy of all the other girls. I remember once there was a school excursion to Southend by the Koh'i noor steamer and my sister and I were allowed to go. At that time we attended a church school and paid 1d (*one penny*) per week - I do not know what this was for. We used to begin our lessons with a hymn and prayers. At dinner time we all sang, "Be present at our table, Lord" then when we returned after dinner we sang a "thanks" for our dinner and again in the afternoon we sang "Now the day is over." Of course some had to stay behind and write, "I must not talk or eat in school hours" a hundred times. But I am rushing on and will get back to our excursion to Southend. It was a lovely morning and we met our teacher at Greenwich Pier, quite close to the Old Ship Hotel, Seamen's Hospital, Owen Alnabeth's Stairs and the museum where Nelson's relics are kept, all very historical places. We arrived at Southend in time for lunch and enjoyed the beach with of course paddling. In the afternoon black clouds began to gather and a very bad storm came up. My sister and I had new summer frocks and lovely white leghorn hats complete with ribbons and white Ostrich plume which was the last word in fashion then. We had to wait on the pier for a considerable time as the boat had great difficulty pulling alongside owing to rough seas and the wind was by now howling and screaming. My sister's hat went sailing off on its own with its feather looking sad and forlorn. We only knew it had blown away but could not see it for rain. We were a shivering, bedraggled crowd by the time we got on board and what a voyage home we had. We were scared stiff - the old tub bucked like a bronco and when we came to the Nore Lighthouse we were sure we would be drowned and I thought of the "Wreck of the Hesperus" and hoped I would be found lashed to a mast and everyone would feel sorry for me. We finally arrived at the Pier five hours late and there was my

father, almost beside himself with worry. I must have presented a funny spectacle. We were soaked to the skin and I still kept my hat which was flapping dejectedly around my ears minus its lovely feather but it was so nice and safe to be home with Mother waiting, tears running down her cheek because she was so pleased, she said, to have us safe. A hot bath, some hot broth and we were none the worse but what yarns I spun about my special shipwreck.

In those days bathrooms were unknown in working class houses and so a tub before the kitchen fire (*and*) hot water from the copper which had to be carried made bathing a family of children hard work. There were no switches other than the variety used on tender parts of the anatomy. Everything was hard labour and women of today would shudder could the clock be turned back 50 years.

I must not forget the Sunday School excursions. We nearly always went to the same place - Chalk Farm - and we went by train which was a wonderful adventure, as it seem miles to us there. When we reached our destination we would have tea and buns, then races and games. I usually had sixpence to spend, which was wealth untold then, with a few coppers (*pennies or half pennies*) won at races, and I usually did win, I would buy a bottle of scent for 1d, a cheap moustache cup for my father and a bunch of flowers for my mother. We were a sorry crowd when we arrived home dirty, bedraggled , tired but oh so happy with our faded bouquets clutched tightly in our hot little hands and our "present from Chalk Farm" just aching to be given to father. He always beamed at us when we gave our present. I remember we had a collection of china with a "Present from Suthend" or "Clacton" printed on them which was later to be thrown into the dustbin, but that is anticipating.

I must not forget the Pantomimes. They were something to look forward to. A little girl could go straight to fairy land for three hours. I really think Pantomimes were my "chiefest" delight. It created a wonderland for me which lived with me always and even now I think wistfully of those glorious visits to the London theatres to see "Dick Whittington," "Puss in Boots, " "Cinderella" and the rest of them.

The dresses of the cast sparkling, as I thought then, with real diamonds, the fairies with their silver wings and wands almost flying across the stage - they were so real. To see huge shells open and heavenly creatures trip out of them waving their wands over the

Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella was sheer ecstasy but the Principal Boy was my greatest joy. I always fell in love with him. He always wore tights, beautiful satin jacket lace ruffles with "diamonds" - sequins really - everywhere and he

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be there, his nose often a beacon in the cold night air, laden with parcels and mail until he looked like Santa himself but he always had a "Merry Christmas" ready when the door opened. Indeed London and districts always have a great way of shouting greetings across the road. It is grand to feel one's heart swell with joy on such a glad time. Xmas was such a wonderful experience for me every time it came round. I never thought it would change, but it did and the time was to come when Xmas passed almost like all the other days and I no longer lay in my bed to listen to all the bells ring out the old and ring in the new year, or listen to the people shouting, "A happy New Year." There were no happy days, or very few, and they were stolen days.

The above was copied from the original hand written manuscript by Harold Richard Green from the 9th to the 13th August 2012. Words or phrases shown in italics above are not in the original manuscript - they have been added as an explanation for words or phrases that, at the time of typing, have all but disappeared from common use.

Some other memories that were recorded by Florence Esther Beezer are: Park bands, river, Isle of Dogs, tunnels, Toffee Maker, Napthalene flares and stalls, Church and school, Bostall Woods, Queen Victoria and Boer War.