Two and Six

I remember that nappies used to cost 2/6d a dozen. That is an odd thing for a small child to know and remember eighty years later. I also remember the slogan at G J Coles in the 1930s was 'nothing over 2/6d'. I know why I remember that. It was Christmas and, during a game of hide-and-seek, I inadvertently came across Mum's hiding place for presents she must have been hoarding throughout the year. There were cricket bats for my brothers, a waxed Japanese sunshade and a doll for me, a tea-set and dolls for my sisters, and all sorts of things for the little kids. And all of them came from G J Coles at 'nothing over 2/6d'. I had no idea about the value of money then; 2/6d could have been a hundred dollars for all I knew, but I was learning.

One day when I was quite small, but old enough to know how to go to the corner shop by myself, I found a farthing on the road. I was so excited because it meant I could buy a lolly from the lady in the shop. Four farthings made one penny and you could buy twenty aniseed balls for a penny. How many could I get for a farthing? The lady gave me five! But when I took them home to show Mum my good luck, Mum was shocked.

'That lady should not have taken your money,' she said to me. 'Farthings are no longer in circulation. Oh, dear, I hope the poor old thing isn't under too much pressure,' she muttered to herself.

Under what pressure? I remember now the dark shop, with bare shelves and no customers except a small girl with a farthing that was no good for anything. Perhaps I had been the only customer for the day, for two days or a week, and she took my money just to make a sale. Soon the shop closed and the women of the street were shaking their heads and speaking quietly about a 'nervous breakdown' and 'bankruptcy'. I still didn't know the value of money, but I was learning that it could make you happy or it could make you sick; it could give you comfort or it could break your heart.

When Dad was out of work, we lived on 'sustenance'. Once a week, Dad would have to stand in a queue to get issued with chits worth twenty shillings. That was the value of 'susso', twenty shillings. Then he – or Mum or one of us older kids – would have to stand in another queue at the greengrocer's with our chits in hand to be issued with a weekly bag of potatoes. For one chit, the equivalent of one shilling, the grocer would give us a fourteen-pound bag of spuds. He would also give us cheap onions and carrots or parsnips, if we had any chits left. When Dad was in work, and there was money coming in, we sometimes had fish to eat. In my memory there is nothing worse in the world than boiled salmon, which was the cheapest fish to buy and so we had it often. I also remember stewing chops were thruppence a pound. It was mostly bones and fat, but gave body to the veggies in the pot. Never green veggies, mind you, unless we were in a house with a yard big enough to plant a garden. Dad harvested radishes and cucumbers one year. I especially remember the cucumber because Dad happened to have one in his hand when he came across Evelyn and me fighting over who was going to do the dishes. He whacked us both with the hand holding the cucumber and seeds ran down our shocked faces. Dad would have been angry at the waste of a good cucumber! There was always rabbit to be had. I remember the unemployed, including my dad, used to go out into the country – not

very far – and bag rabbits for tea. For some that was the only meat they ever had, and that is why you'll find many people my age will refuse to eat rabbit at all now.

When the money ran out, we kids were sent around the shops to ask for 'specs'. I know now the look of pity on some of the shopkeeper's faces when they handed us fruit just past its prime – apples with brown spots or soft bananas – but when I was small I thought it was fun skipping from one shop to the next, for everyone we knew did it. You had to be very early to get the day-old cakes or bread from the cake shop, however. And anything we might manage to get from there never got home, for we gobbled it up on the spot. Sometimes we would see rich people stroll right into the shops past our pathetic little queues and buy fancy cakes or coffee scrolls and I, for one, was amazed to see people actually paying money for these things. Where did they get the money?

Although I was still too young to understand him, Jack felt the humiliation of the spec rounds. It was much more daring to try to lighten the load of the fruit trucks that were waiting at the AJC Jam Factory on Chapel Street. I can remember trucks laden with peaches lined up. The boys – Jack, Lessie and their friends, including sometimes Les Boyanton who I would one day marry – developed a technique for getting away with shirts-full of peaches. One boy would keep 'nit' while the others would climb up the blind side of the truck and drop peaches down into the caps of the waiting boys below. Sometimes they were shouted at, but they were never chased. The peaches were then divvied up and either eaten there and then or taken home where no one ever questioned where they came from. Jack also knew where there were some cherries for the taking. This time I went with my brothers to a house where the cherries were hanging on branches over the back fence just waiting to be picked. We got so excited with the abundance that we made too much noise so that the owner of the house heard us and gave chase. We ran for our lives, down the lane, through the

park, across Toorak Road, and escaped into our house just around the corner. I was frightened out of my wits, but while my heart was pounding with fear, the boys thought is was great fun. Once again, no one questioned where the cherries came from or how Jack knew there was a cherry tree across Toorak Road where the posh houses were.

As the years rolled by, more and more mouths to feed lined our table at home. We moved often, whenever the rent was in arrears, and each place, although it was similar to the last one, had different spaces which meant that we all had to realign ourselves, changing positions, changing relationships. With each new baby, the same thing took place. I would get the baby newly shifted from Mum's breast and the one that had been on my knee would be moved to Evelyn's care and on down the line. Each change, whether it was a new place with a different kitchen or a new baby, meant we had to move our places at the table. Jack was boss of the kids and he controlled all changes and alliances among us with the sweep of his rough hand. I felt his push and shove many times, but it never stopped me from sitting closest to Dad no matter where we were or how many of us there were.

Being next to Dad meant I was safe from Jack's authority since he was careful to sit away from Dad's swinging reach. It also meant that I might get a small secret favour once in a while: an extra bite of meat or a 'soldier' of toast with some egg yolk on it if I was very lucky. We never had eggs. Or if we did, they never came in dozens. They came one at a time, and were as treasured as if they had been laid by the golden goose. Dad was the only one ever served an egg. I imagine Jack smarted under the unfairness of such privilege for, even though (just like the rest of us) he couldn't keep his eyes off that egg while Dad ate it, he frowned and scowled and descended into a foul mood for the rest of the meal. The rest of us accepted our subordinate positions and merely looked on with longing. When Dad was given an egg, he would take the smallest

child from my knee and put it on his own. I loved to watch then as he dipped a 'soldier' into the soft egg yolk and very gently put it to the mouth of the babe to suck before he popped it into his own mouth and swallowed.

Soon there was not enough room at the table at mealtimes, but we still all ate together. Dad sat at the head of the table. I sat on his left and Mum sat across from me, closest to the stove and bench. Evelyn sat at the bottom end of the table where she claimed more space for herself, but Jack used to think it was manly to stand while he ate. I thought he was doing it in order to give all of us more room, but as I look back now, I know he was really being rebellious and trying our mother's patience as much as possible, by bolting his dinner down his throat in a rude manner. It also meant he could be cheeky and then leap out of the way of a swinging back-hander, which he deserved.

When the table filled up with the older children, the little ones spilled onto the floor. There was a line-up of the little kids, their backs against the wall, their legs straight out before them with a plate of food balanced upon them and cups of tea on the floor beside them. I remember particularly that the cups they were allowed to use had no handles. The handles had been broken off over the years by clumsy and reluctant children doing the washing up, but they were never thrown away, for we couldn't afford to replace them. So the littlies used them. Those cups with no handles lined up on the floor next to the dirty little legs of my brothers and sisters create a vivid picture in my mind, which opens my heart to all the warmth and love in the room at mealtimes, but also to all the hunger, longing, exhaustion and poverty that were there, too.

There never seemed to be enough to eat. Young Bill, who was the sixth child, seemed the hungriest of all. He would gobble up his dinner and then it was impossible to keep him in his seat, for he would creep around the room waiting to catch any crumbs that might be dropped or cleaning up any food that seemed to be left.

He had to be careful, though, because anyone caught reaching impolitely across the table got a fork on the back of the hand. Once we had finished our potato and parsnip we would wait in our places for Mum to bring out the bread and jam. She filled us up on bread and jam or, even better, if there had been any meat with our meal, she would offer us bread fried in the dripping. And then we were happy.

As I got older and we were still doing the spec rounds, I began to feel Jack's humiliation for I understood the only reason we did it was because we hadn't enough money to buy the food we needed for all of us children. I wasn't aware of how many other things we did without in those days such as toilet paper or toothbrushes or toothpaste since we never had them to miss them, but I was beginning to be aware that if you didn't have enough of it, money could make you feel bad and ashamed.

No matter how much food was missing from our plates, we never went without nappies at 2/6d a dozen, and we never went without our weekly dose of senna leaves to clean out our insides or our daily dose of Hypol, a fish emulsion of cod liver oil that all mothers around us gave to their children to keep away colds and chest infections. It's no wonder we had to be protected from colds, as we went without shoes and we slept without blankets. We used to sleep all together in the children's room, while Mum and Dad and the newest baby had the other room. In our room would be two double beds and we would sleep at least four to a bed, top-to-tail. I remember the hated mattresses covered in ticking and stuffed with lumpy kapok filling that stank with dampness. We had pillows, but we had no sheets. Only Mum and Dad had sheets, and worn ones at that, on their bed. We covered ourselves with old coats from the op-shops rather than with blankets. The coats were not our old cast-offs but were bought, specifically, to be used as blankets. If we were lucky, they would be old greatcoats from the war. I remember in one house we older girls had to sleep on a

bed with three legs. The corner without the leg was resting on a pile of bricks. We must have begun fighting over the coats, which never kept us warm enough, but the fight became a boisterous pillow fight, until the bricks gave way and the bed tumbled over spilling us onto the floor with a thunderous noise. Dad was severe with us that night. He made us put the bed back together and then scolded us until we were all crying. No silliness after that. At least we had a bed. We knew some of our friends had to sleep on thin mattresses on doors taken off their hinges and placed close to the floor on bricks.

We had one luxury in our house, and I can't imagine how life would have been without it: the wireless. It replaced the crystal set. Everyone had one of those because they were cheap and you could put them together yourself. I remember Dad made one when I was very small. He allowed us kids to listen to it, but we could only listen one at a time, for the sound came through headphones that we young ones had to hold to our ears. It was very exciting to hear voices of people who were nowhere near us but, of course, we never got to listen for long because the next child was always standing close by waiting, then tugging, then hitting if we didn't give over the headphones soon enough. With the first whinge or hit, Dad would bellow, 'That's enough!' And then no one got to listen. And there were tears.

We knew that there was such a thing as a wireless. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a wireless? A wireless would be an implement for listening that would accommodate our big family and stop fights. Although very few people around us had them, we longed for one of our own. Whenever we saw them in shop windows, we stopped to look and sometimes we even crept into the shop to listen if they actually had one tuned in and playing. Oh, we needed a wireless, we moaned to ourselves, to our father and our mother, but how could we ever afford one?

Well, Mum discovered there was a new scheme about that

would help people like us buy goods we coveted. It was called hire-purchase. We could hire a brand new wireless for 2/6d a week and after a while – after a long while – after we had paid 2/6d for many, many weeks and if we never ever missed a week – the wireless would become ours to keep forever. So, our Mum went out and bought a wireless for us on hire-purchase. Her own longing must have been powerful indeed, for Mum knew that a wireless was a real extravagance and that extravagances were not part of our life. But she must have told herself that she was buying it to please her husband and keep her children entertained. She must have had no problem convincing herself that 2/6d wasn't so much to pay to buy a bit of happiness and a bit of peace and quiet for herself. I am sure it did not occur to her that by signing up for hire-purchase, she would end up paying a lot more for the wireless than it was actually worth. I know now that in the thirties, the new concept of consumer credit called hire-purchase was the undoing of many people like us. It encouraged us to buy things we couldn't afford and plunged us into debts beyond our wildest dreams.

But oh, that wireless was wonderful! Every evening after dinner, after the dishes were done, we would sit back down at the kitchen table and Dad would turn it on so we could listen to 'Tarzan of the Apes' followed by 'Dad and Dave'. All the while the wireless was playing, you could have a heard a pin drop, we were so quiet. If one of the little ones so much as sneezed they got an elbow in the ribs to be quiet. If things got tense or terrifying on Tarzan, we would find ourselves snuggled together, our eyes big as saucers focused on the things we could see in our imaginations. Or if Dad said something especially narky to Dave, we would fall about laughing until our own father shushed us up. Listening to the wireless was our real family time when we were all together, just before bed, all tuned into the same story, all laughing at the same voices. Mum was right. It was an extravagance, but it was worth it.

We lived in so many different houses that it's hard to remember

exactly how things were, which kitchen belonged to which house, which table we sat at, which beds we slept in! Whenever the rent was in arrears, we would get an eviction notice. Quick as a flash Dad would get word to his mate in the Party, who would get onto his mate named Tom, and Tom would come with his horse and lorry to shift us to a new spot in a hurry. He wouldn't come unless there was a notice, but if there was one, sure as eggs he would come to save us from the humiliation of eviction. It must have been his way of taking a stand against the big boys who had got us poor battlers into the pickle we were in – the Great Depression, I mean, but more about that later.

Poor Mum! What a burden that frequent packing must have been for her with children running here and there, trying to help but probably only hindering. It must have been a sight as we moved, the furniture stacked high on the open lorry and children sticking out from wherever it was possible to poke one in. We never moved too far. I was about twelve when we moved to Hornby Street in Prahran, just over High Street, only two blocks from our abandoned house in Bangs Street.

I remember every bit of the house on Hornby Street because it stands out in my mind as the height of misery for me and my family. It was 1933, the worst part of the Depression. I was twelve years old. We were reduced enough in circumstances that we couldn't afford to rent a house of our own, and so we had to share. A tiny little Scottish woman, a very old and very cross Scottish woman all dressed in black, had control of the house, for it was she who had rented it in the first place and she was paying her own rent by renting out the rest of the house to strangers. She rented us two of the four rooms in her narrow little maisonette that was divided from the houses on either side by the thinnest of walls. All the rooms were narrow and dark, the first three in a row, off a dark narrow passageway, and the fourth off the cramped kitchen. The old lady was in the first room; Mum and Dad, a baby and a toddler

occupied the second room; another old lady was in the third room and in the fourth room five of us were made to sleep all together on one double bed and one single bed. At night in our room, we could hear the old ladies snoring, the babies crying and Mum and Dad talking, but we could also hear bumps, scrapes, coos, bellows and cries from the houses on either side of us. These houses were filled as well with too many people.

I think, now, that the tiny old Scottish woman dressed in black must have been desperate to rent to a man with such a large family. How can an old lady cope with so many boisterous children scampering about, being naughty and cheeky, full of energy with nowhere to spend it? I know it was war between us and her, from the word go. She screeched at us as we skipped and tumbled down the passageway from the small backyard, where there was no room to play, to the narrow treeless street out front that was equally no place to play.

'Stop that noise! Stop that running! Elsie, can't you control these brats? They'll be the death of me! The death of us all.'

We would laugh and stick our tongues out at her, much to Mum's dismay. I'll say, we were buggers of kids in that house.

The other old lady had it much worse, but we never teased or taunted her, for we thought she could cast an evil spell on us if she wanted to. She was a very tall, gaunt-looking woman with long grey hair which she wore in a tightly knotted bun at the back of her neck. She always wore a long dark dress with an apron over it. The thing that made her scary was that she had only one leg. She got around very slowly and, I now imagine, very painfully on one crutch. If we came across her while she was moving down the passage on her way out to the toilet at the back of the yard, we came to a screeching halt and crept around her, quiet as mice, hoping she wouldn't turn us into frogs or stones. We never spoke to her and she never spoke to us. She spent all of her time in her little room, which was actually a bed-sitter that came with a stove and

a sink in it. At five o'clock each evening the smell of her meagre dinner cooking on her tiny gas stove permeated the house. It was the same stench of onions and potatoes every day! I know that is all she ate, once a day – onions and potatoes. Such poverty! What a sad and lonely woman she must have been.

My own mother wasn't much better off than these two women, except that she was surrounded by people who loved her although, as we were all fending for ourselves at that miserable time in our lives, we neglected to show her how we felt. I imagine the only thing Mum got from us was demands, which she couldn't meet. Our family was given exclusive use of the kitchen, which was just as well since otherwise it would have been bedlam. Mum had to try to cook meals for her large family on an old gas stove that stood in a narrow passage running parallel to the kitchen. The stove would only work if she put a shilling in the gas meter. Imagine trying to get all the cooking done before the meter ran out. Whenever that happened, Mum would send us scurrying around to look for another shilling, or instruct us to run up to the shop to get change or, horror of horrors, she would make one of us – usually me – ask the old lady in black if she would lend us a shilling. You can imagine the complaining we did whenever the gas ran out, while Mum stood patiently in front of the cold stove waiting for us to get a move on.

'There'll be no dinner if I can't get it cooked!'

While Mum seemed to be patient with her situation, I know now that she was utterly defeated by it. I remember her crying in front of that miserable stove as she struggled to stretch the stew into enough for all of us. She would also cry as she carried the hot water for the washing up to an old tin dish next to the stove in the passage. How could we manage to help with the washing up, when there was hardly any room to stand? And she would cry with her arms thrust in the dingy wash trough out in the crowded wash-house in the cramped backyard. What was the point of wearing

herself ragged when the clothes she was trying to keep clean were so worn out and stained and patched that it was an embarrassment even hanging them out on the line? What must the old ladies think of her? The washhouse was also our bathroom, but it was almost impossible to maintain our Saturday bath ritual without getting in the way of each other. Poor Mum. How could she ever sustain her self-respect if she could not even find a way to keep her children clean? And there was no space for her at all. She was forever making way for the old ladies and scolding us for upsetting them with our barging-in and trampling-on and knocking-over bad manners. Sometimes she would retreat to the dunny back in the furthest corner of the yard and lock herself in. Her splendid isolation could never have lasted more than ten minutes before someone would be knocking on the door.

When I think back on the Hornby Street house, I realise that none of the three women in that house was able to support the other. It was surely a mark of the misery of the times, for in my experience, friendships between women can get them through most situations. I know Mum spoke very little to the other women. She hadn't the time. They never made any attempt to get to know Mum, nor did they ever offer any help for her or for each other. The shame of such terrible poverty as they were all suffering in that house must have kept them isolated from one another. It is only now that it occurs to me to wonder from what heights did those two old ladies fall to find themselves sharing a house with us? How did the lady lose her leg? Why were they alone? I avoided all curiosity about those two old ladies since, at twelve years old I, too, felt their shame and isolation, even though I should have been too young to know such things. I was frightened of their misery and wanted to take flight from it. An enduring image from that time is of myself sitting on the curb opposite the house looking across the narrow grimy street and feeling the pain of our poverty. That pain has never left me. How could I make something of myself when I

was such a victim of circumstance? How could I, or any of us, ever climb out of this abyss? That climb would become my life's work and it would be my father who taught me the way to go.