

CHAPTER ONE

PART ONE: WE CAME FROM THE SEA

Chapter One is the account of what happened before I was born according to my Great Grandmother Caroline Parker, Grandfather Arthur Weir, Grandmother Irene Weir, Grandfather William Maple, Nana Winnifred Maple, Aunt Olive Weir and my Mother Phyllis Maple. Events recounted from my own experiences in the following chapters tell a different version of a few important events but in Chapter One I have been careful to write EXACTLY what these people told me.

My Grandfather, Arthur Weir, was born on the 27th August (1900?) on St. Helena, a volcanic island in the South Atlantic Ocean. His Forefathers were scottish and had been sent to St. Helena by the British Government to guard Napoleon Bonaparte when he was a prisoner there after the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. After Napoleon Bonaparte's death my Great, Great, Great Grandfather stayed on the island and maintained an association with the British Navy that his descendants carried on for almost a hundred years. Together with his loyalty to the reigning English Monarch and his strict observance of naval duty and discipline, my Great, Great, Great Grandfather had another passion and that was his abhorrence of war. He hated the suffering that he had seen war cause to ordinary people, when strong and healthy bodies were hideously maimed beyond repair or when families were torn apart by death. He said that even so, such suffering was all so much worse in the winter as in the cold and wet pain stung more bitterly and the lack of basic necessities were felt so much more acutely. He told his children the horror of what he had seen in the Battle of Waterloo and for the rest of his life he was never afraid to do good to anyone who needed his help and he always saw that any prisoner was treated with human dignity.

When my Great, Great Grandfather was a child the last of the Slave Traders used to pass St. Helena and Ascension island on their way to America and some of the Slaves they carried were brought to the island and kept there. My Great, Great Grandfather used to hear the Slaves crying in misery at night and he used to creep down to the rough wooden huts where they were kept and pass tin mugs of water to them through a gap in the wood. He had to be very careful not to be seen by the men in charge of the Slaves because he would have been severely thrashed if they had caught him and his opportunity to help them would have been lost, but his heart used to ache because of the inhuman way in which they were treated and as he grew older he was never ashamed to speak of them to others with the greatest respect and to show people on the island who were descended from Slaves the utmost kindness at every available opportunity.

My Great, Great Grandfather taught his children and his Grandchildren the same compassion for human life that my Great, Great, Great Grandfather had taught him and when my Grandfather told me our family history when I was a child and about the Battle of Waterloo and the slaves on St. Helena, he used to speak with great conviction when he said that he would not like to meet one, not even one, of those Slaves in the next world because with all they had suffered in this world they would be so greatly rewarded

in Heaven that he would be afraid to gaze on such splendour. Then he would speak to me in his clear oxford english accent with the fire of scottish blood raging through his veins and say that those who had caused them to suffer like that would burn in the fires of hell!

My Great Grandfather married one of the islanders who was descended from black slaves, she was called Isabelle but there is some doubt as to whether that was her proper name or not. My Great Grandparents had seven children, six girls and then my Grandfather who was their youngest and only son. One morning when my Grandfather was a boy he was sitting alone on the beach quietly drawing on a patch of sand on the beach. He had been watching the fishing boats and the fishermen mending their nets and remembering the bible stories about fishermen that he had heard at the church and he was trying to draw them. Suddenly a vision of a hand appeared and the hand wrote the name 'Irene' across the sand where my Grandfather had been drawing. It was a very large man's hand and when it had gone my Grandfather sat looking at the printed letters in disbelief and stunned shock.

Not long after that and almost as if it had been a sign of the sudden change of events that were going to take place, my Great Grandfather died at a very young age and in circumstances so tragic, possibly on the Titanic, that it moved the Governor of St. Helena, a naval man himself, to help to make arrangements for the future of the bereaved family. When the arrangements were made it was decided that my Great Grandmother would stay on the island because she was an islander and she wanted to stay amongst her own people. Her daughters were older than my Grandfather and possibly married and they had no wish to leave the island either but it was decided that my Grandfather would come to England when he was older. There was little work and no future on the island for my Grandfather and so the Governor of St. Helena thought my Grandfather would have a better opportunity in life if he went back to England where his Father's people had originally come from and he offered to arrange a passage to England for my Grandfather when he was older.

My Grandfather welcomed the experience of going to England but our family have always felt sorry for my Great Grandmother because that was the last time she ever saw her son and she was heart-broken about it. My Grandfather and several other people from St. Helena arrived in England in (1921?) after working their passage to England on a merchant ship and my Grandfather chose to work with the others even though he could have had a free passenger trip if he had wanted to. When he arrived in England my Grandfather went to live in the country home of a senior English Naval Officer who had arranged to take him in when he got to England and my Grandfather became his batman and chauffeur. The Naval Officer was exceptionally kind to my Grandfather as he was to all his household and he taught my Grandfather everything about the ways of the great English houses as well as formal Naval etiquette. The Naval Officer entertained many people and he used to confide in my Grandfather that he hated the way some guests who were trying to make themselves look well bred showed themselves up by ordering the servants about. He said that a truly well bred person would treat every living being as a valued friend and since that was the same belief that my Grandfather had been brought

up to have by his own family they got on well together and my Grandfather was happy there because the thoughtful respectful atmosphere bred loyalty in all the servants of the house.

After some time my Grandfather came to London where he met and married my Grandmother. Her name was Irene Parker and 'Irene' was the same name that the vision of the hand had written in the sand at St. Helena. Although my Grandfather seldom went to church unless he had to, he had an unshakeable belief in God and he always said that he knew with no doubt whatsoever that God's plan in life for him was that he should come to England and marry my Grandmother. He said that when he saw her for the first time as a complete stranger in a crowd of people in Westminster Abbey at a society wedding, possibly the wedding of Lord Mountbatten, he recognized her as the person that God wanted him to marry. He said that it was not that he fell in love at first sight and 'heard' music by any means at all, but that at that moment he had a most strange and uncanny feeling, as strange as he had felt when he saw the vision of the hand write the name 'Irene' in the sand at St. Helena. He said he felt as if far away in heaven the holy musicians had been slowly playing the beginning of a beautiful and majestic symphony and at the moment when he first saw my Grandmother the first violin began to lead all the other musicians into something so beautiful and yet tragically unique that nothing would ever compare with it. When he got to know my Grandmother, Irene Parker, he discovered that she was a student at the Royal Academy of Music. She played the violin beautifully as well as several other instruments and one of her father's brothers, Richard Parker, was an alto in Westminster Abbey Choir. My Grandmother was my Great Grandparent's only living child and she had been very well brought up and well educated.

My Grandmother's parents were both physically unusual and they married because they understood each other's disabilities and felt that they could face the remarks that other people made about them as long as they had each other. The disabilities my Great Grandparents had were in their physical appearances and although neither of them were discontented with the way they had been born, they found the remarks that complete strangers made about them very hurtful. My Great Grandfather was tall and abnormally well built with very large hands. He had different coloured eyes, as one was red like an albino and the other was green, and he had jet black hair and a ginger moustache. He looked an odd character but he was a very popular man because he had a wonderful sense of humour and a kind and generous personality. My Great Grandmother was unusually small in stature, she did not have any of the illnesses usually associated with such drastic shortness because she was perfectly formed but she was so tiny and slender that she was just like a beautiful fairy. My Great Grandmother found her shortness a disadvantage but not a disability and both my Great Grandparents worked extremely hard during their lives.

My Great Grandparents were both well educated and they were certainly very happy together. They had a good collection of books and spent all their spare time reading which they both enjoyed. They were not very well off financially but they considered themselves to be quite comfortable because they had everything they needed and they

always had enough to eat themselves and to share with anyone poor who needed their help. My Great Grandfather worked as a carpet fitter and spent most of his time laying and restoring carpets in large London and country houses belonging to rich and famous people. At one time my Great Grandfather laid a carpet in the country home of Anna Pavlova, the ballet dancer, and to give him a break in the middle of his hard work she took him into her beautiful garden to see her Swans. Usually my Great Grandfather worked in London and when it was lunch time he used to go out and find a wall or coping to sit on to eat his lunch. Every day my Great Grandmother prepared a package of sandwiches and a tin flask of cold tea that my Great Grandfather took to work with him for his lunch and at the sight of someone eating food, there would very soon be a crowd of children around him. London was especially poor at that time and people lived in dreadful conditions. Children were often underfed and their parents were so poor that they had to put anything that resembled a garment on their children for clothing. My Great Grandfather used to see children in adult size clothing that had not been altered to fit them and wearing shoes that were several sizes too big for them and full of holes and my Great Grandfather used to look at those small feet and understand how uncomfortable they must have felt.

If it had been possible there was a lot that my Great Grandfather would have liked to have done to help those people but he was not well off enough to buy them clothes or give them money and so he gave them his time and understanding and they flocked around him. My Great Grandfather told our family that the worst thing about the children was the hungry look in their eyes and that hungry look haunted him, even in his dreams. He could not eat his lunch with children standing around him with nothing to eat themselves and so he used to share out his lunch amongst them. Sometimes my Great Grandfather did not even arrive at work in the morning with his lunch because on his way to work he had already seen some poor young boy sent off to work at a dreadfully early hour looking as if he had not had any breakfast given to him at home or some poor old man huddled in a doorway who had obviously spent the night in the cold outdoors and my Great Grandfather had given his sandwiches and tea away there and then. My Great Grandfather used to say that the joy of being able to press his precious packet of sandwiches into the frozen hand of a complete stranger who needed them more than he did, gave him a greater feeling of warmth in his stomach than the food could ever have done if he had eaten it himself. My Great Grandfather just used to cheerfully say to some young lad "Here son, eat these as you go on your way to work and they will warm you up a bit in this bitter weather" or to some poor old man "Sir, would you give me the greatest pleasure in being my guest for dinner?" as he gave them the food and then he used to wait just a few seconds more to see the worried look of hunger on their faces fade into a smile as their cold fingers moved to unwrap the brown paper package and then to see the strangers eyes light up at the sight of good food before my Great Grandfather carried on his way to work, a little lighter and a lot happier.

Over the years my Great Grandfather befriended many adults and children but there was one little girl who used to come to him who he always remembered in particular. She had fair hair which was coarse where it was not washed properly and she always looked absolutely pinched with the cold. She stood back from the other children and the first

time my Great Grandfather saw her he thought that she was just watching the other children. Then when all the sandwiches had gone and the children had gone back to the game that they had been playing she came forward looking hopefully to see if there was anything left. My Great Grandfather felt awful because he did not have anything left to give her but he told her very gently and kindly that if she came back the next day he would save her something. The next day he saved a whole sandwich without the other children realizing that there was anything left and when they had gone the little girl came forward and my Great Grandfather gave her the brown paper bag with the last sandwich in it. She took the sandwich gratefully and stood beside my Great Grandfather eating it slowly but obviously quite hungrily. The little girl came back day after day and my Great Grandfather used to take an extra sandwich for her on Saturday for Sunday when he would not be there. After a long time she actually sat on the wall beside my Great Grandfather to eat the sandwich each day but in all the time he saw her she never ever spoke. My Great Grandfather used to talk to her as if nothing was wrong and without asking her questions that she could not reply to, which he said was the best thing to do in the circumstances. He always said that he thought something very terrible must have happened to her to stop her talking because she understood every word he said to her but she just stared at him and never replied with anything more than the look in her eyes. All the other children were very poor and their parents could not give them quite enough to eat at home but the children were happy enough and they played but the little girl was different because she did not have the energy that the other children had and she stood watching them play as if she was almost afraid to move her own body. My Great Grandfather always wished that he could take the little girl home to my Great Grandmother so that they could give her a home and take care of her but they knew that she had a home somewhere and they decided that it was not fair for them to ask to take someone's child away from them just because they could offer her more material things. After a long time my Great Grandfather realized that the child's quietness was due to pain and that she was seriously ill. One day she just did not come anymore and my Great Grandfather had the most terribly sad feeling that she must have died even before the other children confirmed his suspicions. My Great Grandfather was heartbroken when he heard about her death and he said to my Great Grandmother that the little girl had been such a very beautiful child with the face of an angel, and although there could be no doubt at all that her soul had gone straight to its home in heaven, there was just something about the child that he could never forget. He said it was as if he had a premonition about a child of the future, one of their descendants, but he dismissed it from his mind as at that time he had no children and even so they were too comfortably off and things would get even better with hard work, for one of their descendants to be so poor.

My Great Grandmother always loved my Great Grandfather's kindness and she was exactly the same herself. In the summer there was many a poor traveller who found themselves sitting on a chair in her tiny front garden with a cup of tea in one hand and a slice of her homemade cake in the other, or warming themselves from the warmth of her kitchen range on a cold winter day while she ladled out some hot stew that she told them was "just a little something to keep the cold out" but with the huge hunk of her homemade bread that my Great Grandmother gave them to eat with the stew it might

well have been the best meal that they ate that day. My Great Grandmother always knew exactly what my Great Grandfather was doing all day just as easily as if she was watching a film of him and he had the same remarkable insight. My Great Grandmother always 'knew' when my Great Grandfather had given his lunch away as well as knowing exactly who he had given it to and when he came home she would tease him about it. While she was busy serving his supper she would ask him if he had enjoyed his lunch and when he thanked her and said very humbly and truthfully that he had enjoyed it very much, she would smile at him sweetly and tell him that he meant that he had enjoyed having his lunch 'to give away' and she would tell him exactly who he had given it to. As my Great Grandmother placed a large plate of nourishing stew and dumplings in front of my Great Grandfather she would pretend to tell him off by saying that because he worked so hard all day he needed to eat something himself in the middle of the day. Sometimes my Great Grandfather had given away his flask with the tea in it and then my Great Grandmother would raise her hands in mock horror and say "Not another one!". Beggars usually carried their own cup around with them but if my Great Grandfather found someone who he thought needed it he used to give them the flask so that they could save the tea for later on or ask some kind woman to fill it up again for them. When my Great Grandmother reproached my Great Grandfather about it, he just used to smile at her and ask her if she had asked the person who she had been kind to that day to supply their own cup or soup bowl and then he used to tell her exactly who had sat beside her fire and the tale of woe they had told her. So they laughed about it together and thanked God not only for the food they had but for the wonderful people that God had sent their way for them to share it with. The next day my Great Grandfather would find that my Great Grandmother had put extra sandwiches in his lunchbox and the tin flask that he had given away so very graciously the day before had been replaced with another one from a small supply of spare ones that my Great Grandmother found she had to keep in her cupboard out of necessity.

My Great Grandparents were blissfully happy together and they would probably never have found anyone else in the world who had the same gifts that they had, with whom they could have shared their lives and been so ideally happy. Their marriage was one of those special marriages in which neither one of them ever held a secret from the other but it was also one in which they shared their secrets in such a very special and unusual way that they had a perfect understanding of each other, and of other people, that made them so perfectly suited to each other and so happy together.

My Great Grandparents loved children but probably due to their own deformities they lost two children before they managed to have my Grandmother. Their first baby was miscarried and their second son was stillborn. My Great Grandmother was in labour for four days before she gave birth to him and her whole body had turned absolutely grey. The baby was born blue, he weighed over 15lbs and he was hideously deformed with huge tumours all over his head and body. The midwife apologised to my Great Grandparents for the way in which she had handled the breech delivery and she took the dead baby away with her. My Great Grandparents would not blame the midwife for the outcome of the delivery, they said that she had been a tower of strength during those long and difficult hours and that she had saved my Great Grandmother's life, even if

nothing in the world could ease their grief at the loss of their son. They finally managed to have my Grandmother but my Great Grandmother always had a very special place in her heart for the two very precious children that she had lost, and especially for the boy who was stillborn.

The loss of two children was a particular blow to my Great Grandmother because she seemed fated never to have a family of her own. She had been brought up in an orphanage and all she had been told about her own family was that she had come from a very good family who had a blood tie with Queen Victoria and that was why life had always been made easy for her, and she had been put into a very good orphanage and not the workhouse. She was told that her own family had been unable to keep her because of her deformities and that her disappearance had been explained outside her family in that she had been a son who had died at birth. The orphanage found my Great Grandmother a position as a Cook and she worked for a lady who treated her so kindly that she could hardly have been called a servant. She was even allowed to go out whenever she wanted to and to have friends of her own. Despite life having been made easy for her my Great Grandmother would have loved to have known her own family who she was related to by blood but she bore her own sadness bravely and was loved by everyone for her kindness and gentleness.

On one occasion when my Great Grandmother was out with two of her friends they passed Westminster Cathedral while Cardinal Manning was lying in state. My Great Grandmother suddenly felt impelled to join the queues of people waiting to slowly file around the Cathedral and pay their respects. Her friends went with her but once inside the Cathedral my Great Grandmother suddenly felt quite detached from them as if a great weight of responsibility rested upon her that her friends would never know. She said that a feeling of acute embarrassment began to prick at the back of her neck and to spread all over her as if the whole church was looking at her. There was nobody looking at her at all, mostly because she was so small that no one could see her amongst so many people in the church, but the feeling grew stronger and stronger until as she passed the altar it was almost unbearable. It was not a feeling of nervous embarrassment but more a feeling of bashful embarrassment as if someone had given her a birthday cake full of lighted candles and even though she was delighted with it, she was bashfully embarrassed. She felt quite relieved when she got out of the Cathedral and into the fresh air. She told her friends that she had just had the most strange experience in the Cathedral. My Great Grandmother was not a Catholic and she did not become one but she came out of the Cathedral with a converted opinion of Roman Catholics and to the very end of her life whenever the Catholic church was mentioned she would look very thoughtful and say very sincerely that 'They must be very good people'.

My Great Grandparents had brought my Grandmother up very carefully and had given her the best of everything they could afford, but while she had grown into a very careful, gracious and righteous person, there were times when she could be so self-righteous that she believed that only the best was good enough for her. While my Grandfather was courting her he still had the use of the huge car he chauffeured and my Grandmother loved being driven around in it. Once when he waited and chauffeured her away from a

Picture House in Lewisham where she had been playing the Piano, to the amazement of a large crowd of people who were leaving after the performance, her head swelled with pride. Another time, before they were married, my Grandfather told her that he was really a Russian Prince whose father had the Russian Navy smuggle him to St. Helena as a boy for his safety in the Revolution and he was now in exile in this country and that she must keep it a secret. She actually believed him and it was only the fact that she believed him to be a Prince that made her decide that she must have him for her husband and that no one else was good enough.

When my Grandparents married in 1924 my Great Grandparents were absolutely delighted because although he was penniless my Grandfather had the manners and courteous breeding of a gentleman and they all got on so well together. My Grandparents lived with my Great Grandparents until they could afford their own home and at least three of their children were born in their home. Their first child was a baby girl who was born on the 24th July 1924, who they called Olive Ellen Weir, followed by another girl Phyllis Mary Weir on the 29th March 1926, and a son Thomas Robert Weir who was born on the 3rd August 1927.

Tom was premature and Phyllis, who was my mother, was born with a congenital abnormality as she had no umbilical cord and her placenta was found to be growing directly onto her stomach. Dr. Rheuben the family doctor who handled the delivery had to operate on her straight away and he performed the operation on my Great Grandmother's kitchen table which was thoroughly scrubbed down by my Grandfather and Great Grandfather for the procedure. Dr. Rheuben removed the placenta with some difficulty but my Mother always had a tenderness in her abdomen and her legs were also deformed with rickets. My Mother was a very difficult child and my Grandmother was only too glad to let my Great Grandmother take over a large part of the responsibility of my Mother's upbringing as it gave her more time to look after her other children as they came along and to get her housework done. My Great Grandmother gave my Mother egg shells crushed in milk to strengthen her and she refused to let Doctors put my Mother's legs in irons to straighten them. She fed my Mother with hearty and nourishing meals and let her run around in the fresh air all day long and by the time my Mother was four years old her legs were as normal and as healthy as the other children's.

Some time in about 1929 my Grandparents and their children moved one street away from my Great Grandparent's house at 260 Sangley Road, Catford to a large four bedroomed house at 37 St. Fillans Road. The first time they went to see the house, all the adults were busy looking around the rooms to make estimates for paint, furniture and curtains and so they sent my Mother out into the garden to play by herself instead of getting in their way. In the garden she saw a huge dog that looked like an alsatian dog but that was very much larger and heavier built. The dog was very friendly to my Mother and she stroked his rough coat and talked to him. Later, my Mother heard my Grandparents and Great Grandparents calling her because it was time to go home and before she went to the kitchen door to find them she turned round to look at the dog again. She had thought that she could play with the dog everyday if she came to live in the new house and she had no idea that the dog did not belong there. As she looked at



Irene Weir nee Parker



37 St Fillans Road,
Catford, London



Olive Weir



Alfred Weir

the dog she saw him standing in the far corner of the fenced garden as if he was just going to go away and he gave her a strange look as if he was telling her that he would come back again to play a game with her and even though she would never actually see him again he would always protect her. She seemed to think that the dog then disappeared right through the garden fence but she did not realize that there was anything unusual about that at the time because she was so young and everything at the house was new to her.

When my Mother went into the house she told the adults about the dog and they became alarmed because they knew of no such dog in the neighbourhood. They searched the garden and spoke to the neighbours but they still found that there was no such dog known for miles around. From my Mother's account the dog was extremely large and she said that there was something strange about it. There were a lot of people about who had been in the street or in their gardens at the time and there was no possibility that such a dog could have got into or out of the garden without someone seeing it. Yet only my Mother had seen it and she had definitely been playing with a dog because her hands were dirty and greasy where she had been stroking its rough coat. Years later when my Mother was questioned about why the dog was 'strange' she was given some pictures to identify and it was established without any doubt whatsoever that the dog in the garden had been a Wolf. Despite enquiries to zoos and a travelling circus, absolutely no explanation was ever found for its appearance nor was it ever seen again.

After moving to 37 St. Fillans Road my Grandparents had three more children. A girl called Marion Irene Weir who was born on the 1st April 1929, a boy called John Peter Weir who was born on the 29th April 1931 and their third son and last child Alfred Lawrence Weir who was born the 23rd August 1935.

My Grandparents and their children were a very happy family, my Grandfather worked as a tram driver and then as a bus driver at Catford Bus Garage and he spent all his spare time working on his allotment to grow extra food for his family. My Grandmother was a very houseproud woman and although they were not very well off financially she took a great deal of pride in her children's appearance and spent hours making clothes for them on her treadle sewing machine. What spare money my Grandparents had was spent on carefully selected items of furniture for their home that would last for very many years, such as a very good quality carpet for their Parlour, their oak dining room table and my Grandmother was always very proud of the fact that they were the first people in their street to have their own telephone installed in their home.

The area around Catford was still mostly farmland and countryside in the 1920s and 1930s and on Sunday afternoons the whole family used to go for long country walks together in Bromley and Farnborough. Another favourite place for the family to walk to was Blackheath and Greenwich Park and during the school holidays my Grandmother used to send the children to play in Greenwich Park and to drink the water from a natural spring that used to flow from the lower part of the hill in the park.

The children were beautifully brought up and they were very respectful and responsible. They all went to local schools where the discipline was strict and the education was thorough and formal. The children enjoyed school but my Mother had two setbacks at school which affected her quite badly. In the classroom the children had to sit in alphabetical order and having the surname 'Weir' my Mother found herself sitting at the back of the classroom out of the teacher's view with only one boy behind her whose surname was 'Wellington'. All the girls had long hair in those days and they wore their hair in plaits to go to school. The boy who sat behind my Mother regularly pulled her plaits so hard that she had very bad headaches and severe nosebleeds and as she had always suffered from regular attacks of severe quinsy, having her head pulled did not help matters. The teacher was told about the matter several times but the children had to sit in alphabetical order and so there was no question of either my Mother or the boy being moved to different places. Eventually my Mother's hair grew long enough for her to sit on her plaits and pull her head forward so tightly that the boy could not get hold of her plaits to pull them, but the boy had already made my Mother's life such a misery that she could never bear anyone touching her head again for the rest of her life.

Another time my Mother accidentally knocked one of her friends over during a rough and careless game in the school playground that my Mother was not supposed to be playing. The girl fell rather awkwardly and damaged her back in such a way that she was seriously ill and in severe pain for a long time and then she was only able to walk with crutches. My Mother went to visit the girl and her Mother at their home and they were very kind to my Mother because they knew that it had been a genuine accident and they even gave my Mother a very nice tea with them in their garden. It was particularly unfortunate because my Mother's friend had recently lost her Father and the girl's Mother could have done without all the extra worry of her only child being so seriously ill as well but they completely forgave my Mother and made her most welcome in their home. At school however the teachers took it upon themselves to punish my Mother for knocking the girl over and for the damage that my Mother's 'boisterous depravity' had caused and the whole school sent my Mother to Coventry. Not one person in the whole school was allowed to speak to my Mother and it was a long time before she was allowed to forget the incident and play with the other children again. My Mother suffered dreadfully because no one would talk to her but everyone thought it was doing her good because she quietened down and became better behaved like her brothers and sisters. Eventually everything settled down and my Mother surprised all the teachers by becoming particularly good at her lessons when she moved into an older class where the children's places were determined by regular school tests. My Mother's marks steadily increased until she moved herself from the dunces at the back of the classroom to be amongst the more clever children at the front, in pure defiance of the teacher's attitude towards her.

Everyday the children came home from school for their lunch and my Mother used to hate the fact that the lunch was never ready on time. My Grandmother was very proud of her home and she did all her housework herself, meticulously, and in strict order. Each morning the children were got up and washed, they were each dressed in a completely clean set of clothes and had their hair done before they were taken down to the breakfast

room for a family breakfast. After breakfast they were sent off to school but not before my Grandmother had checked to see that each of the girls had the legs of her bloomers well down over her knees to keep the winter draughts out. As soon as my Mother had walked sedately down the front path and was out of my Grandmother's view behind the hedge she used to pull the legs up again but Olive and Marion were either more obedient or else they felt the cold! When the children had gone to school my Grandmother cleared away the breakfast things and washed up and then she went to make the beds. In every room of the house the windows were opened wide even in bitterly cold weather to air the rooms and each room was swept, tidied and dusted every day. When everything was done in that order my Grandmother had a cup of coffee at exactly eleven o'clock and then she began to do the daily washing. When the washing was done and the clothes had been hung out in the garden to dry, my Grandmother mopped the kitchen floor and then prepared the lunch. While the lunch was cooking my Grandmother laid the table beautifully and laid a clean towel, with the day of the week embroidered on it, in the bathroom ready for the children to use when they came home from school and went to the bathroom to wash themselves and get ready for lunch. On Mondays however, my Grandmother washed all the bedlinen as well as her normal amount of daily washing and her whole routine took longer especially when Alfred, the sixth child was born and he had to be bathed, fed and changed during the morning. My Mother grew to hate lunchtimes and especially Monday lunchtimes because when she got home tired and hungry after a long morning at school she found that the lunch was never ready on time. More often than not she had to wait outside in the garden for the kitchen floor to dry before she was allowed to walk across it to go and get herself ready for lunch. The other children did not mind waiting in the garden but my Mother just got more and more irritable about it. When the lunch was ready my Mother always said it was never worth waiting for because she could always have eaten a lot more. My Grandmother always cooked light easily digestible meals such as boiled fish and vegetables and my Mother missed the meaty stew and dumpling dinners that my Great Grandmother had given her in the days when she had looked after her before she went to school.

Mealtimes were a family gathering in the Weir household and were taken very seriously. My Grandfather often laid the table for meals when he was at home on shift work and he taught the children what he had learnt as a naval batman. The table was laid formally for every meal and the children sat in their correct places. My Mother always resented the way her place at the table was moved down a place to its correct position everytime another boy was born and she resented the times when she was looked after by my Great Grandmother because then she lost her place at her Parent's table entirely, which was something no one else even stopped to think about. Meal times were a happy occasion but although the children were allowed to quietly laugh and tell jokes, their table manners were kept under strict review. After their meal my Grandfather would amuse the children by imitating various people and as he was very good at it they found it very funny indeed. The children had a very happy, well organised childhood and although they were too poor to have more than one or two good toys each, they shared what they had with each other and played many exciting games.



When my Mother was eleven years old she was playing in the garden one morning when she saw a huge grotesque 'thing' run down the garden path and touch all the nappies on the washing line. My Mother could never give a better description of it than to say that it was 'very tall' and 'awful'. My Mother was terrified of it and because she had the most awful premonition she let out an unearthly scream. My Grandmother came rushing out of the kitchen where she had been cooking to see what the matter was but when my Mother told her what she had seen my Grandmother was furious and gave my Mother a good telling off because she was talking nonsense and had frightened my Grandmother for nothing.

Exactly a week later and early in the morning, my Grandmother was upstairs in the house making the beds. It was one of the first few days in January and all the children were home from school on their Christmas holidays. Olive was washing up the breakfast things and the other children were getting ready to go out to play, when Alfred the youngest child who was sitting in his high chair started crying. My Mother went into the hall and called upstairs to my Grandmother to ask her what she should do for Alfred. My Grandmother looked over the bannisters and called down to my Mother, telling her to "Give Alfred a drink of milk." My Mother filled Alfred's bottle with milk and fed it to him and all the time he kept drinking the milk he stopped crying but as soon as the bottle was empty he started to cry again. My Mother called upstairs again to tell my Grandmother and ask her what to do and my Grandmother called back telling my Mother to give Alfred as much milk as he wanted to have. My Mother took what my Grandmother said literally and she filled Alfred's bottle again and again until he had drunk his way through most of what milk there was at the time in the two quart milk container that normally stood in the cool larder until it was taken out to the road to be refilled by the milkman when he came round with the milk churns on his horse and cart.

Eventually Alfred must have gone off to sleep and my Mother's older sister Olive put Alfred back into his pram to sleep and wheeled him out into the garden. Later on that morning my Grandmother went to the larder to get some milk to make a Yorkshire Pudding and when she found the milk container was virtually empty, she asked my Mother where all the milk had gone. My Mother was a very helpful child who did a lot to help her Mother in the house and she told my Grandmother that Alfred had drunk all the milk. My Grandmother was horrified and cried "What!, All that!" and rushed out into the garden to where Alfred was supposed to be asleep in his pram but when she got there she found that the baby was not asleep, he was dead. My Grandmother called the doctor urgently and he came straight away but there was nothing he could do. My Grandfather was telephoned to come home from work urgently and he was absolutely distraught as it was hardly four hours since he had last seen his son alive and healthy. As the whole family stood in the breakfast room with the Doctor and the dead baby, my distraught Grandfather and my Mother's bewildered brothers and sisters, my Grandmother turned to my Mother and screamed at her in her grief "You killed my baby!, You killed my baby!"

Alfred was taken away for a Post Mortem and the whole family were told that he had been born with a congenital abnormality. His gut was twisted and he was alright as long as he was fed on milk but as soon as my Grandmother began to wean him, which she had

just begun to do, the solid food blocked in his stomach and he died. Alfred had been crying after my Grandmother had given him cereal at breakfast time and all the time he was drinking the milk he stopped crying because sucking the bottle was a comfort to him. He probably fell asleep from exhaustion and the cause of his death was put as Pneumonia because he had inhaled the excess milk and died.

After the Post Mortem Alfred was brought back into the house and laid out on the settee in the sitting room. My Mother was terrified of the dead body and to help her get over the shock of what had happened to Alfred, my Grandfather forced her to go into the sitting room to see Alfred. At first my Mother put up a physical fight against going into the room but my Grandfather dragged her in there because he wanted her to see that Alfred's dead body was nothing to be afraid of and that he was 'just asleep'. He made her touch Alfred's body to see that it was cold and although she put up quite a fight against doing it, once she had touched the dead body she became quite fascinated with it and spent hours alone with him in the sitting room before he was buried, touching his dead body, talking to him and playing pretend games of Mothers and Fathers with him, while her parents were too distraught over Alfred's death to think about what any of the other children were doing or that they might be doing anything other than praying beside the dead body.

After the funeral service at St. Andrew's Church in Sandhurst Rd and the burial at Hither Green Cemetery, the family went back to their home and things began to get back to normal but my Grandmother was distraught. One morning as she sat alone in the darkened breakfast room crying as if her heart was broken with grieving for her dead baby she heard a voice telling her not to cry and looked up to see a vision of two Cardinals, Cardinal Manning and Cardinal Newman, surrounded by light. They told her not to cry but to look after two little girls who would be born into our family, because one would be brilliant and the other prove amazing. Despite my Grandmother's grief everyone in the family believed what she had seen and on a number of further occasions Cardinal Newman appeared to her and told her about the two little girls. He said that she must look after them as a girl would be born into our family who was written of in the bible and she would be the Bride of Christ. He said that a comet would appear in the sky and a phoenix rise from the ashes and the girls would be Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, because the beginning of one would be the end of the other. They would both be given the grace to be crowned, one temporally, one spiritually, because one would be crowned on earth and the other in Heaven and the one that would be crowned in Heaven would lay down her life for the other. She would suffer beyond the depths of human endurance but through her suffering she would ease the suffering of many because in time to come many would call upon the name of St. Anne of London and be answered, because it was her name that was important. The other little girl would have her way into the world lit by a comet, she would spend her first night out in the world under the same roof as a Prince and would leave the world crowned in laurels when she went forward dressed as the Bride of Christ and carrying a lighted candle in her hands. He said that the two girls would be complete opposites of each other, one fair and one dark, one rich and one poor, and one would live while the other died but through them the breach between the Catholic and Protestant Churches would be healed and a

link found between science and religion that would prove God's existence to disbelievers.

After the visions, strange things began to happen in the house and eventually things got so bad that a Society for Psychic Research was called in. A team of investigators arrived led by a man called Dr.Chibet and after their arrival things became a lot worse in the house. Objects disappeared and reappeared in strange places, pools of water appeared for no reason and footsteps and voices were heard. The voices said things like "Pave the way for Judgeman", "There is something in this to the Mother's advantage" and they gave a peculiar set of puzzles that one of the Psychic Mediums went into a trance and drew, which they said one of the girls would be able to solve. The family thought they were Egyptian Hieroglyphics but it turned out that they seemed to be more like pictures in the Catacombs of Rome. Messages were heard saying that the two little girls would resemble Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth I, in at least three ways each, possibly because of our Scottish past and the fact that our ancestors blamed the death of Mary Queen of Scots for the long standing breach between the Catholic and Protestant Churches. They held the belief that the differences between the two faiths and the trouble it had caused might have started with Henry VIII making himself the figure head of the Church in England but that it was Mary Queen of Scots son James, who had sealed it by not renouncing that position to Rome on becoming King as his Mother would have done had she not been executed. They claimed that if he had done so then his unique work, of a Bible accurately translated from original manuscripts by eminent scholars at his Majesty's request, would have been accepted by the Pope in recognition of his acknowledgement of Rome, as the true word of God and have brought universal religious unity. As Dr.Chibet and his team progressed with their investigations everything that happened to the Weir Family for many years was recorded in separate statements and thought to be some unique prediction of the future but many years later the written accounts were burnt immediately after Dr.Chibet died by his son who disapproved of his Father's psychic interests.

There was an awful atmosphere in the house and the children went about in dread and fear. It was such a short time since Alfred's death and funeral and suddenly the house was full of strange people and strange recording equipment and the children hated it. None of them were allowed to speak and the house was kept in darkness for what seemed like weeks on end because the curtains were kept permanently drawn. Dr.Chibet tried to hypnotize my Mother because she had been the first to see anything unusual in the garden, including what was thought to have been a wolf, but Dr.Chibet found that he could not put my Mother under hypnosis because she was determined not to be hypnotized and made a mental block in her mind against giving in to him. Dr.Chibet said that he had never met anyone, even an adult, with such strong determination and he said that my Mother had unusually strong powers of mental resistance. Dr.Rheuben who had attended my Grandmother at the birth of each of her children and who had been present at Alfred's Post Mortem, was called to the house to give the investigation team details of my Mother's birth and her congenital abnormality. Dr.Rheuben said that there were only two recorded cases in medical history of my Mother's unusual abnormality and that the other case had been when one of Queen Alexandra's children, possibly the Princess Royal, had been born the same & my Mother was told never to have any children because the abnormalities were in her blood.

My Grandmother certainly hoped for more children because she wanted a large family after having been an only child for so long and at that time children were considered not only to be a blessing but also an insurance against old age when my Grandparents hoped to have a large family around them to provide for their needs in their old age. The older girls were also at an age when it was considered good for them to gain experience in caring for children by helping to bring up younger brothers and sisters as babies. For the first time in years the pram, the cot and the highchair were empty of babies and my Grandmother wanted to have several more babies as quickly as she could to get the noise of children back into the house.

After a while my Grandmother realized that probably due to the shock of Alfred's death she did not seem to be able to have any more children and although she was bitterly disappointed she began to look around in the existing family for the two little girls. When a letter arrived from St. Helena saying that one of my Grandfather's sisters had given birth to twin girls and one of them had been named Anne (after her Mother ???) there was great excitement in the family but neither of the little girls fulfilled the prophecy in any way at all and so my Grandmother came to the conclusion that the two girls must be two of her own girls and most probably Olive and Marion. My Mother firmly believed that she was one of the prophesied children and she became thoroughly embittered when my Grandmother refused to even consider her having any part in fulfilling the prophecy even though it was my Mother who the team of investigators had been most interested in. My Mother had always been sent to my Great Grandmother's house so that she was out of my Grandmother's way because my Mother was slightly handicapped with her bent legs and even when my Mother was better she had never properly regained her place in the family but after Alfred's death my Grandmother could not bear the sight of my Mother near her and she hardly even considered my Mother as part of her family let alone being one of the children to fulfil the family prophecy.

Once the Society for Psychic Research accepted the vision as being authentic Dr. Chibet persuaded my Grandmother to become a spiritualist medium and he became her spiritualist guide to the exclusion of all other people, particularly since the voices in the house had said that the Mother 'Would receive a great reward' which Dr. Chibet assured my Grandparents would be financial. My Grandmother was invited to all kinds of spiritualist meetings and she became very psychic and had the gift of healing in her hands. She had letters from all over the world from people asking her to pray for them or their sick relatives and her prayers had a very high success rate. My Grandmother had healing in her hands for about twenty years and then just before I was born she lost the gift. A man had written to her from America asking her to pray for his only daughter who had cancer. Normally the distance would have been no object because my Grandmother would have prayed and the person would have been healed however far away they were but this time my Grandmother was very busy and tired. She was travelling to London to work everyday in the rush hour which she found exhausting and she had a lot of worries on her mind, particularly over my Mother expecting me, and because my Grandmother could not rouse the feeling of compassion in herself towards the people who needed her prayers, she lost the gift.

Sometime after Alfred's death my Mother had to go into Hospital. My Grandmother told my Mother that she had got Scarlet Fever and had to go into Hither Green Hospital because she was infectious, and the other children were told to tell that to the neighbours if anyone asked where my Mother was. My Mother recalls that she felt perfectly well and that my Grandmother took her on a long journey to get to the hospital in the country, past Bromley, which was strange because Hither Green Hospital is only a few minutes walk from my Grandmother's house. My Grandmother told my Mother that she had to take her to the Hospital and that the authorities had told my Grandmother that there was no question about it and that it would be better for her to take my Mother quietly along to the hospital herself rather than to have her taken away from her by force in a scene outside the house with all the neighbours looking.

When my Grandmother and my Mother arrived at the hospital my Mother was quietly taken off by a very official looking woman. My Grandmother was told that she was not allowed to visit her at any time and she was told that she would be notified in writing as to when she could collect my Mother. My Mother was taken straight into a room and put on a table. Her clothes were lifted up and an injection was put straight into her stomach and because it was extremely painful she screamed. The woman Doctor who gave it to her was wearing a white coat, she was extremely hard faced and showed no emotion whatsoever at my Mother's distress. The woman did not speak to my Mother at all and when other people in the room came and stood around my Mother as she was lying on the table none of them spoke to her either. Everyone was just staring at her in silence and my Mother realized to her horror that no one was speaking to her deliberately. Within a minute before the injection needle was taken out of her stomach everything went black.

My Mother never knew what they did to her or why and forty years later she was still trying to work out whether they had given her an anaesthetic for an operation and if they had, then why she could not find the scar, but the memory of that incident lived with her day and night for the rest of her life and ruined it. When my Mother woke up she found herself locked in a room with another girl who was spastic and mentally handicapped. There were only two beds and two lockers in the room which had a hard cold floor and no other furniture; Both girls were dressed in hospital nightdresses and my Mother completely accepted the situation. The other girl was called Sheila and she was very nice but she could not help herself very much or speak very clearly. My Mother soon made friends with Sheila and she used to make Sheila's bed for her and help her feed herself. At meal times a hatch in the bottom of the door was unlocked and two enamel bowls of thick porridge or rice were flung across the floor to the two girls together with a spoon for each of them to use and my Mother often had to get down under the beds to get the food from where it had landed. Whatever the girls needed in the way of absolute essentials such as bowls of washing water and toilet facilities were passed through the hatch in the door in the same manner and collected through the hatch later. Once a week the door was unlocked when a woman came into the room to sluice the floor over with a huge mop and a large iron bucket of strong disinfectant. The woman was obviously terrified of the two girls and she made them stand facing the the wall with their hands and feet extended and poor Sheila trying to do the best she could because she could hardly stand up let alone extend her hands and feet along the wall. The woman talked to

them all the time sternly telling them to keep away from her and not to move or try to come near her as she stood in the doorway and sluiced the room with an extremely long handled mop and with people standing outside the door waiting to come to her aid if she was attacked. From then onwards my Mother always loathed the smell of disinfectant, even if it was one with a light fresh clean smell, and she would never have net curtains up at any of her windows because the first thing she had seen of the hospital were the half net curtains at the windows at the front of the building and she said that no one could see what went on behind them. My Mother spent months locked in that room and only on the day that she left the hospital was she allowed out of the room with a woman in a white coat to go along many corridors to a bathroom and have a bath before she went home, and even then the woman did not leave her alone but stayed in the bathroom with my Mother and allowed her no privacy.

Eventually my Grandmother came to collect my Mother. By that time my Mother had grown so much that her clothes did not fit her any more, although she had to squeeze into them to go home, and only her shoes still fitted her. My Grandmother told my Mother that it did not matter about the clothes because she would soon buy her some new ones, but my Grandmother said it to my Mother in front of the nurses and when my Mother left the hospital my Grandmother did not buy her anything, she made her something that was too big and found her some old cast offs. When my Mother got home her brothers and sisters did not recognize her, her hair had not been taken care of, she was painfully thin and ravenously hungry, and she had become like an animal because she had lost her refined manners and her behaviour was strange. My Grandmother had invited various relatives to the house to see my Mother's homecoming, it was not a party but the house was full of noise and people who had come to look at my Mother and everyone seemed to be talking about her but no one really stopped their talking to talk to her. My Grandmother's cousin Beate had brought a small toy sweet shop filled with real sweets as a present for my Mother but as soon as she opened it she put all the sweets in her mouth at once because she was so ravenously hungry and all the children whispered to each other about it and ran to tell the adults what my Mother had done. My Grandmother told everyone to leave my Mother alone and said that she would soon settle down and get back to normal.

My Mother never became the person that she had been before she went away and her behaviour was always strange. My Mother always said that what my Grandmother should have done when she got her home was to put her in an empty room on her own and to leave the door unlocked so that my Mother could come out for short periods of her own accord when she wanted to, until she got used to her family again. After being locked up for so long with only one other person who could not talk properly, my Mother said that it felt just as harmful to take her out of that barren room at the hospital and throw her straight back into a noisy family life without allowing her any period of adjustment or understanding as it had been to lock her up in the first place. My Mother had become used to long hours of silence broken only by the screams of other women patients and when anyone in the family talked to my Mother she said it sounded as if they were shouting at her. Above all, my Mother could not stand the noise the family

made as they went about their normal daily lives in the house and she complained that they seemed to do everything so noisily.

My Grandmother had left my Mother and collected her in a corridor at the entrance of the hospital and it was a long time before it even dawned on my Grandparents that my Mother had been locked up in a room all that time. My Mother had seemed so strange when she came home that everyone thought she was sulking as the hospital had warned my Grandmother to expect her to do and when my Mother did not talk to anyone very willingly, they just let her be. One day when my Grandfather was trying to get my Mother to talk about her time in hospital because months had gone past and she had still not started talking to them, he asked her what games she had played with the other children at the hospital, what lovely toys there had been in the ward or if the nurses had taken the children for long country walks, or given them sweets and read stories to them?. My Grandfather was under the impression that my Mother had been to a wonderful place for children but my Mother answered him sullenly and said that there had been no toys or games at the hospital and that the nurses had not given her any sweets or treats like reading her a story. She said that there had been no other children at the hospital except one spastic girl who could not walk or talk properly and she told my Grandfather that she had never once been out of the room that they had been kept locked up in. When my Mother told my Grandfather that their food had been thrown across the floor to them from a hatch in the door, my Grandfather was horrified. Although my Grandfather was such a gentleman that he never raised his voice to anyone, he shouted to my Grandmother who was cooking in the kitchen and told her to come here at once into the breakfast room and listen to what Phil (my Mother) had just said.

As my Mother's story came tumbling out my Grandparents were deeply shocked. They realized that the Welfare Authorities had lied to my Grandparents about what was going to happen to my Mother, and in his fury my Grandfather swore that my Mother had been locked up because the Authorities believed that she was responsible for Alfred's death. My Grandparents made furious enquiries to the Welfare Authorities but they received no answers to their questions, partly because over three months had elapsed since the incident about which they were complaining. My Grandparents were simply told that the sentence had been served and the case was closed. My Grandparents were powerless to even get their voices heard on my Mother's behalf and as far as the Authorities were concerned they were satisfied that the best course of action had been taken in the circumstances. The Authorities were actually pleased that everything had been done for the best and they would not let anyone undo the good they had done in the name of justice. My Grandparents said that it was quite obvious that the Authorities had based their decision to put my Mother away on the unofficial enquiries they had made about Alfred's death, including listening to what people had to say about it who were not members of the family or who had not even been to their home at the time of Alfred's death. He said that my Grandmother had told too many people their business and that the whole affair should have been kept private. Everyone knew that Alfred's death had been one of those awful things that sometimes just happen so tragically and anyone, including my Grandmother, could have been the person who gave Alfred the bottle of milk that killed him, but my Grandmother, in her grief, had been too eager to talk to anyone who

would listen to her and she had answered questions that had been put to her without realizing that in her bitterness she was laying the blame for Alfred's death on my Mother.

My Grandfather also blamed my Grandmother for having left my Mother at the hospital without insisting that she should see exactly where my Mother was taken to. All my Grandmother had been so pleased about was that the hospital was spotlessly clean, whereas my Grandfather would have noticed that there were no other children there, nor any toys. My Grandparents made wonderful parents together and their children were devotedly cared for, but it was as if my Grandmother's love for my Mother was as clinical as the way the men of the family had clinically scrubbed the kitchen table ready for my Mother's operation moments after her birth. All my Grandmother noticed about the hospital was that it was spotlessly clean and she had left my Mother there thinking that because it was spotlessly clean my Mother would be perfectly alright in a way that she would never have done about any of her other children.

The whole family had adored Alfred because he was such a happy baby. He was attractive to look at with masses of jet black hair that my Grandmother had never had cut. He also had an unusually perceptive character for a baby and would have grown up to be quite a remarkable child. My Mother also felt Alfred's loss very acutely because he had been 'her' baby. In large families it was quite usual to allocate a baby into the care of an older child because it eased the Mother's burden in bringing up a large family. It helped to give the older children a sense of responsibility ready for bringing up children of their own and it meant that the younger children had an older child who they could turn to when their Mother was busy. Olive was the eldest and she had always looked after Marion, but when John was born my Mother was in trouble at school through not being careful enough and so Tom had been allowed to take care of John. My Grandmother had told my Mother that it was for the best because Tom and John would grow up as two boys together, like Olive and Marion who were close, and that my Mother would be older and more sensible when the next baby was born. My Mother had waited a long time before my Grandmother had another baby and even then she had only just been considered responsible enough to help take care of a baby when Alfred was born and she was allowed to help her Mother to take care of him. My Grandfather had been heartbroken at Alfred's death but when he listened to my Mother and found out what had happened to her, he realized that two of his children had been lost in the tragedy. My Mother was never the same person again and despite my Grandfather spending hours and hours talking to my Mother and trying to help her there was always something strange about her behaviour because of the way in which she had suffered.

My Mother had times when she was purposely difficult and one of the things she did was to purposely fail an entrance examination for the Roan school that everyone wanted her to go to. She could have got into the school easily and she said that she did it because my Grandmother could not afford to buy her the new school uniform that she would have needed, but she said it mimicking my Grandmother's voice as if she was trying to punish my Grandmother for not having bought her some new clothes when she had come out of hospital and because she did not want to be put back into a childish school uniform.

When my Mother was fourteen years old the Second World War broke out and she had to leave the secondary modern school she was at when it closed down due to the bombing. My Mother went to work in a Jewish Dress shop in a row of shops at the back of the Town hall in Catford which was five minutes walk away from her home and my Mother used to walk home from work in the darkness while the air-raids were on without taking cover because she just 'knew' that nothing was going to happen to kill her during the war. My Grandmother would not let the children be evacuated because she said that if any of them were going to die, they would all die together as a family, and the Authorities did not argue with her wishes. The family used the cellar of their house as an air raid shelter because there was a church that backed onto the end of their garden fence and so it was safer to have their air raid shelter in the cellar of the house rather than under the shadow of the church that might fall on them if a bomb hit it. Everyone slept in the cellar in case there was an air raid during the night and my Mother and Grandmother used to spend the long nights of the blitz chatting and knitting together to keep their spirits up. Although the house was badly damaged from nearby bomb blasts the family survived the war remarkably unscathed without any loss of life or limb. They even gained a large homeless dog who just walked into the garden when the side gate was blown off in an air raid and adopted the family. His owners were never found and so he became 'Kim Weir' and my Mother used to feed him with her meat ration when her Mother was not looking.

Marion had a very lucky escape from a bomb blast in 1943. She woke up one morning and was so ill that she could not go to school. There was no reason for it but she had such a horrible feeling about going to school that when my Grandmother mentioned the word 'school' Marion was violently sick all over the kitchen floor. My Grandmother had to let her stay home from school which was strange for Marion who was the teacher's pet and usually could not get to school fast enough, but that day her school in Sandhurst Road, Catford received a direct hit from a bomb and the casualties and loss of lives were so horrific that it was one of the worst tragedies of the war. My Grandparents ran up to the school and helped to dig children out of the wreckage but the horror of what they saw haunted them for years afterwards. The screams from trapped children was horrific and despite all the Parents, Policemen, Ambulancemen, Civil Defence Men and volunteer neighbours who turned up with all the shovels and crowbars that they could collect to help free the trapped children, many of the children had died before they reached them and others came out of it without their arms or legs. My Mother said that after that my Grandmother let Marion be ill and stay away from school whenever she wanted to.

My Grandfather changed to driving an ambulance instead of a bus for the war effort and as the war progressed and the children grew older the eldest three joined the war force. Olive became a nurse. She was clever enough to have been a Doctor but with a war on hand there was not enough time for her to do the long training she would have needed and so she became a nurse instead. She took up nursing in a private hospital where she worked alongside an order of Nuns who she was referred to by the Nuns of St. Ursulas R.C. School at Blackheath where she went to school and where she had been given a place despite not being a Catholic because she was very clever. Olive worked long hours and she worked very hard. She loved the strict discipline of nursing with the Nuns as it



Olive Weir (top far left) Phyllis Weir (bottom far left)



Tom Weir (top) Marion Weir (bottom)

suited her highly reliable nature and she found she was independent enough to be able to work on her own on night duty if she was told to while the Nuns went off to say their Night Office. However, the life was severe and the discipline rigid with exceptions made for no one. One night Olive helped a patient when she was very tired and as a result finished her night duty without remembering to open a sterilizing machine before the steam in it cooled rendering the machine door locked in such a way that it required a mechanic to remove the door to free it. Other people had been dismissed from their posts for having done that as it was dangerous and caused so much inconvenience in the operating theatre that it endangered lives. Olive was dragged from her bed by the Matron and Mother Superior and marched to the machine to be shown the damage she had done before being told she was sacked. Olive asked to be allowed to try to open it and despite appearing impudent when she saw that no one else could open it she was allowed to try the impossible task. Olive loved nursing with her whole heart and loosing the privilege of caring for the sick through the mistake that she readily admitted to was more than she could bear. She silently prayed "Mary, Mother of God, help me!" as fervently as she could with her whole soul and as she reached out and took the handle of the door it opened easily for her to the horror of her superiors who had tried it themselves seconds before. She was later privately accused of having 'the dark powers' very suspiciously by the reverend Mother but she continued her nursing and showed remarkable compassion and understanding. Olive loved nursing people and she was attracted to the Religious life. She had ideas about becoming a Nun herself and she stayed on at the hospital after the war ended but one day just before lunchtime and during a long and tedious operation she collapsed in the operating theatre and was later brought home by the Hospital Surgeon in his own car. He spoke to my Grandmother and told her that Olive needed a good long rest after the strain of the war years and that they would look forward to seeing her back at the hospital when she was better. At home the whole family treated the matter as if it was a huge joke and they swore that Olive had seen two drops of blood and fainted. They would not listen to her or give her the rest she needed and through their continual ridicule she lost her confidence and never went back to the hospital or to become a Nun. She spent years at home doing the family's housework or helping elderly neighbours do theirs. From time to time she took local part-time office work on a temporary basis or did 'home typing', but she never managed to achieve her true potential and any attempt to use any of her unusually gifted artistic talents was soon ridiculed by the rest of the family.

Tom joined the Royal Air Force and was sent out to Egypt as a mechanic. My Mother joined the Wrens as a pay clerk and was stationed at Leeds, Newcastle in Staffordshire, Newcastle in Tyne and Wear, Chelsea Barracks and the Royal Naval College at Greenwich. While my Mother was in the Naval College it was very definitely haunted by a ghost who spent much of his time near my Mother. She said she knew he was a naval man and from the way he frightened her but felt quite friendly towards her she said it was as if he loved her enough to have been one of our ancestors. On one occasion he saved her life by frightening her enough to make her leave a room when she had not heard an air raid siren from where she was. My Mother had been to sign up to join the Wrens with one of her friends called Audrey Miles but Audrey changed her mind about signing the form and became a nurse instead and so my Mother found herself joining the

Wrens on her own. There were plenty of other Wrens in the same situation of being away from home for the first time on their own and so my Mother soon made friends with them and found that she got on well with the people she was put to work with. The people in higher ranks of the Wrens than my Mother were well bred and well educated people who had mostly come into the Navy just for the war period and my Mother found that the better educated they were then the more likely they were to understand how other people felt, although it did not necessarily follow that someone with no education did not have the same qualities of understanding. It was just that it was easier on everyone concerned if the people in authority were well mannered and well educated and some of those people seemed to come straight from the upper classes who saw to it that their children were strictly brought up in that way and in exactly the same way that my Grandparents had brought my Mother and her brothers and sisters up in.

One of the first things my Mother had to do in the Navy was to have an anti-tetanus injection. My Mother argued with the Nurse at the medical that she was allergic to it but the Nurse thought that my Mother was just afraid of pain and stuck it in her arm. My Mother told the Nurse to wait and see what would happen and three weeks later when my Mother was taken to the sick bay so desperately ill that she nearly died, the Nurse was most apologetic. She would have done anything for my Mother rather than get into trouble for having given her an injection that she was allergic to and so my Mother had a wonderful time in the sick bay asking for anything she wanted and getting it until she became good friends with the Nurse even after she was better.

At Staffordshire the Wrens slept in converted nissen huts and on the first morning that my Mother was there she got up at the crack of dawn, put on her ballet clothes that she had taken with her from her ballet lessons at home and began to do her ballet exercises in the middle of the nissen hut floor. My Mother's ballet exercises were a long series of silent and repetitive movements that consisted of flinging her arms and legs about in a way that was not quite what ballet exercises should have been. When the other girls began to wake up and saw my scantily clad Mother wearing her leg warmers and ballet shoes and doing her 'ballet exercises' in the middle of the nissen hut floor, there were titters and giggles about it. Some of the girls who had been very well brought up were highly embarrassed about it but my Mother carried on as if there was nobody else there and when she did the same thing day after day everyone got used to it and began to accept her as being quite harmless.

My Mother did not mind being in the Wrens although she did feel homesick and she worried about her family. My Mother knew of people who had gone home on weekend leave and found their home destroyed or their family dead in the bombing and so my Mother went home as often as she could to see that her family were alright and she sat up for hours into the night with my Grandmother in their cellar while they did their knitting and listened to the bombs dropping. My Mother said that the war shed light on bonds of love and attachment between people that they had never realized existed until they were faced with being separated and possibly never seeing each other again. She said that when people saw their whole homes destroyed it made them realize that it was the people who lived in them that were important and that material things were worthless

except for the basic necessities. She said it made people realize all the things they had previously taken for granted and also remember all the times that they had wasted 'time' so wantonly in Peace time and think of what they would do with it if they had their time all over again. Above all, war brought people together in a common cause and old grudges and differences between people suddenly became so unimportant when people lived in the fear that it could be them who were killed in the next bombing raid.

In the Wrens the only things that bothered my Mother were the cold weather and the food. My Mother hated the food and she hated the Belgium Nuns who cooked it. My Mother said that they cooked the porridge so thick that they cut it into portions with a knife. The food was so badly served and the cooks always put out six bowls short of the full number of Wrens so that the last six people had no breakfast. My Mother had to scrub a flight of stone steps each morning before breakfast with a bucket of strong disinfectant and on the first day she took too long to do it and found herself in the last six people for breakfast who got nothing. My Mother said that she hurried her work each morning after that and never missed her breakfast again because although she hated the food she was too hungry to miss it. My Mother hated the cooks and because they were Belgium she hated the whole race of Belgium people after that.

On the 9th of March 1946 while my Mother was stationed at Chelsea Barracks she became a Roman Catholic. My mother had always been attracted to the Roman Catholic Church ever since she was a child and had been sent to the local Catholic Church to buy a Catholic newspaper for an elderly housebound man who was being looked after by all the neighbours while his daughter went on holiday for a well earned rest. My Mother had walked right into the church to ask for the newspaper in the middle of a sung Latin Mass and she had been attracted to the Church by the beautiful music, the singing and the flickering candle light. While my Mother was stationed at Staffordshire she received instruction in the Catholic Faith from a dear old Priest and a very sweet and gentle Nun whose name was Sister Stanislas. The nun was very elderly and on the day of my Mother's confirmation Sr.Stanislas promised my Mother she would always look after her even after she had died. It was a very wrong thing to do but Sr.Stanislas told my Mother to pray to her after she had died and she asked my Mother to promise her that if she answered my Mother's prayers then my Mother would go straight to the Bishop and tell him that she had prayed to Sr.Stanislas and her prayers had been answered, presumably because she wanted to be canonized. My Mother was confirmed, wearing her naval uniform, by Cardinal Archbishop Griffin who was the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England at the time and he confirmed my Mother and five other people in a Mass in Westminster Cathedral. My Mother chose the name Theresa of Lisieux for her confirmation name and although Sr.Stanislas was the only person with my Mother at the ceremony, my Mother and Grandmother spent some time either before or after that in Yorkshire and they went into All Saint's Church where they saw the stained glass window of St.Anne teaching the Virgin. My Grandmother and my Mother had gone into the church to spend some time quietly and for some reason from then onwards my Grandmother believed that the window in All Saint's Church had something to do with the family prophecy.

Olive also became a Roman Catholic in the local Catholic Church of the Holy Cross in Catford. After becoming a Catholic, Olive tried to urge her family to pass records of the vision of Cardinal Manning and Cardinal Newman to the Catholic Church because the two Cardinals had been Roman Catholics but my Grandmother would not hear of it. My Grandparents said that the Catholic Church would keep the records in secret for hundreds of years and would not have let my Grandparents gain any financial profit or glory for themselves from the affair. My Grandparents thought that the Catholic Church would also have asked them to become Catholics which they were unwilling to do since under the 'spiritual' guidance of Dr.Chibet they had both become too deeply involved in spiritualism and they preferred it.

My Grandparents also received small sums of money for speaking at Spiritualist Meetings and although the amount was not excessive, my Grandmother found the fame she attracted was a reward in itself. My Grandmother loved the way everyone gave her a standing ovation when she walked onto the stage at a Spiritualist Church Meeting and going over and over the story of what had happened when Alfred died seemed to help her. The one thing that really held my Grandmother to the Spiritualist Meetings was the fact that Dr.Chibet kept promising my Grandparents that there was always the possibility that they might contact Alfred in the 'Spirit World' and that was more than my Grandmother could tear herself away from to join the Catholic Church.

In answer to Olive asking my Grandparents to give the records of the vision and family prophecy to the Roman Catholic Church my Grandmother insisted that since the two Cardinals had said that the prophecy would be fulfilled during my Grandparents life time, it could not be right to pass records of the vision to the Catholic Church to be kept for a time that they would never see. Olive argued that they were misinterpreting the vision for their own advantage but my Grandparents were adamant and although Olive was allowed to do as she pleased and become a Catholic, my Grandparents would not have anything to do with the Catholic Church.

At the very end of the war my Great Grandfather died. He had suffered from severe Dermatitis since he was twenty one years old and had cut his hand badly. Since he could not afford time off work he had carried on working with his injured hand and he said that a germ from the dirty carpets got into the cut and as it healed Dermatitis had broken out and spread all over his body. It was an awful affliction as it irritated my Great Grandfather night and day and forced him to wear white gloves even in summer. My Great Grandmother rubbed lard into his skin which was the recommended remedy at the time but the skin dried, cracked, wept, bled and irritated with relentless determination for years on end. Finally one week before he died the whole irritation mysteriously disappeared while he was suffering from a kidney complaint and for the last week of his life he was left in peace.

Towards the end of his illness my Great Grandfather had begun to feel better and he wanted to go out to get a breath of fresh air. It was autumn and the air was damp but he promised my Great Grandmother that he would only walk around the block and come back. My Great Grandfather was gone for hours and hours and suddenly my Great

Grandmother realized with an awful sinking feeling that for the first time in their married life she did not 'know' where my Great Grandfather was because the picture of him in her head had faded to a hazy fog. She wanted to go out and look for him but she hesitated to go because she had grown elderly and her sight was so poor that she could hardly see. Eventually, she put her hat and coat on and ventured out of the house to look for him with her blind person's stick. My Great Grandmother groped her way along and found my Great Grandfather in the next street sitting on a coping. He had only got that far when he had felt ill and sat down, the coping was cold and damp and my Great Grandfather had sat there getting colder and colder and feeling too ill to move. He did not recognize my Great Grandmother when she found him and even though people in the street came to help her get him home to bed, it was obvious that he was dying.

People had actually seen my Great Grandfather sitting on the coping hours before but because his features had changed so much during his illness nobody had recognized who he was. They had thought he was an old tramp sitting on the wall huddled against the cold and no one had bothered to go up to him and help him. The next day he died because he had cysts on his Kidney and one of them had burst. My Great Grandfather did not die alone in the street but the family felt bitter because so many neighbours who knew my Great Grandfather had passed him by as he was sitting on that coping and if only someone had stopped to ask him if he was alright they might have recognized who he was and helped him home. If my Grandfather had got home before he got so cold he might have stood a better chance of recovery and he could have lived for another ten years or more. In their sorrow for my Great Grandfather the family also thought of all the poor old men who had nowhere to go and of how poor old tramps must feel sitting on walls and park benches getting colder and colder in bitter weather. They thought of how much worse it must be for those poor dears with no one to care about them and to go out and look for them and with no hope of a warm bed to die in or someone to lovingly hold their hand.

Tom was particularly upset by my Great Grandfather's death because he was out in Egypt when it happened and if he had been at home he would have kept a better eye on my Great Grandparents and either have told my Great Grandfather to stay indoors or else have gone out with him for a walk and seen that he got home safely. It was strange too, because Tom had gone round to see my Great Grandparents to say goodbye to them before he went off to the R.A.F. and as my Great Grandfather shook hands with Tom at the front door and wished him 'Good Luck' he had a strange feeling that he would never see Tom again that he had not had when Olive and my Mother had gone off to war. He told my Great Grandmother and although she did not have the same feeling about Tom, she knew my Great Grandfather well enough to believe him. My Great Grandparents were worried and incase it might be because Tom was going to be killed in the war they firmly resolved to keep what they knew to themselves incase they worried my Grandparents about their son. As it turned out my Great Grandfather did not see Tom again because he had died himself at the end of the war and Tom was the only one of his Grandchildren who had not got home on leave at the end of the war.

My Great Grandmother bore her loss bravely but felt very alone in the world without the only other person who she had ever shared such an unusual understanding with. In her usual wisdom she learnt from the experience. My Greatgrandfather's death taught her a lot about her 'psychic' abilities, which had been kept secret from Dr.Chibet and his investigators who had not interviewed my Great Grandparents during their investigations at my Great Grandparents request. My Great Grandmother said it was my Great Grandfather's brain that must have sent out the information about where he was and what he could see and hear, and her brain that had been sensitive enough to pick up the information like a radio transmission. When he had slipped into semi-unconsciousness while sitting on the wall in the next road his brain had stopped sending out that information even though he was not dead and she had lost the picture she was so used to having of him. Then suddenly about five months after he died the picture in my Great Grandmother's head suddenly flickered into life, Great Grandfather had arrived in Paradise. She could never understand why it had taken him so long to get there as he was such a good person but he was human as well and my Great Grandmother was given to understand that he had some things to see and put right before he had entered Paradise. If my Great Grnadmother had any human faults then she corrected them in the years that were left to her to be as saintly and perfect as a human being could be. I always felt a sense of Peace, Perfection and Serenity all around her when I stood close to her that very few people outside religious orders ever have here on earth. She said that she did not want to wait five months before she joined Great Grandfather in Paradise, she was going straight there. She longed for Heaven and said she knew exactly what it was like from what Great Grandfather was enjoying.

After the war everyone set about clearing up the war damage in the midst of an absolutely bitter winter. My Mother went around wearing her thick Naval Great Coat but many people who had lost their complete homes in the bombing, including their wardrobes of clothes, were not so warmly dressed because they had so many new things to afford for their homes and children before they could buy clothes for themselves. My Mother felt sorry for them when she saw them suffering even more in the bitter cold and somehow the aftermath of the war seemed worse than the Blitz itself. It was almost as if there was no end to the war and its suffering and when my Mother saw soldiers returning armless and legless from the war or with other permanent injuries, particularly blindness that had been caused by explosions, it struck my Mother so terribly that she felt almost as if she climbed inside the other person and felt their pain herself.

My Mother and her family did not take a proper part in the street parties at the end of the war either, which were an important and symbolic end to the war for most people, especially when they built bonfires and burnt their gas masks and other relics of the war and watched their own feelings of hatred burn down to ashes at the same time as the things they had grown to hate. My Mother's family kept their gas masks and their old ration books as well as their memories and their fears and it did not do any of them any good not to let go and forgive. The street parties were also rowdy affairs where nobody sat in their correct places or bothered about the proper way of doing things. My Grandparents had always been very careful about eating food and the war had made the whole family more grateful for the food they had than ever before so that for them to

celebrate it would have meant that they would have been even more careful that they did everything properly at their meal than ever before. At the street parties the family soon saw that other people had their own way of doing things and although they were too polite to let other people see that they felt uncomfortable there, no one had their heart in what they were doing. They were not made to feel particularly welcome by other people either and that was partly because my Grandparents were ashamed to face other parents who had lost their children in the school bombing tragedy that Marion had been so lucky to escape. My Mothers family was known to be 'psychic' and everyone thought it was strange that Marion had been kept away from school on the one and only day that a bomb had hit the school. Some families had lost two or three children in the tragedy and several Mothers who were embittered by grief at the loss of all their children had openly accused my Grandmother in the street of having known that a bomb was going to hit the school and of having kept Marion away from school on purpose. They said that my Grandmother could have warned other people so that every child in the school could have been kept away from school that day and they would not believe my Grandmother when she said that it had just not happened that way. She said that if Marion had not been so violently sick then she would have gone to school with all the other children but even my Grandparents had to admit privately that the whole family had come through the war remarkably unscathed, particularly with the way my Mother had walked home through the blitz with bombs falling to the left and right of her without getting so much as her finger scratched. My Grandfather said that the whole family had walked through the war as safe from harm as if the hand of God himself had brought the whole family through the war intact. They had suffered the same hardships and discomforts as everyone else during the war and the house was badly damaged but apart from my Great Grandfather, whose death was not due to the war, not one member of the family had been lost in the war and everyone in the family said that they had the most awful feeling that they had all been brought safely through the war in order to face another unseen war that was only just beginning.

Without the family celebrating properly at the street parties it seemed as if there was no proper ending to the war and when each of the children came home after the war they fell like flies. Olive came home suffering from sheer exhaustion that she never recovered from and Tom came home so hideously thin that every bone in his body could be counted. He had been living on the same war rations that everyone else had been allowed but because Tom normally required more food than other people needed to eat to retain his normal weight, he had found that he had not had enough to eat. Tom had eaten the same amount as everyone else without ever complaining but when he returned home so painfully thin at the end of the war only to find that food was still going to be rationed for some time to come it seemed to be the last straw for him and he had a complete mental and physical breakdown. My Mother carried on as normal when she came home from the war but then she had never been completely 'normal' anyway and after the war she was worse than ever. Having been away from home had given my Mother more confidence to behave exactly as she wanted to and since it was her abnormal behaviour that exhibited itself when she was allowed to 'be herself', her family found her impossible to live with. My Mother had also learnt to smoke and speak roughly to such an extent that my Grandparents said that she sounded as if she had been in the 'Naafi'

and not carrying on the family tradition by serving her country in the Royal Navy. No one had corrected what my Mother did in her own time while she had been away from home and when she came home she would not be corrected and my Grandparents found that my Mother disrupted their orderly lives and ruined the homely family life in their home.

Olive never managed to work properly outside the home again and it was six months before Tom was fit enough to work but my Mother soon found herself a job as a clerk at the Bellingham Gas Corporation works near Catford. After some time my Mother left that job and went to work in the offices of Selfridges Departmental Store in the Strand at Charing Cross in London. My Mother travelled to Charing Cross each day by train and it was on London Bridge Station one morning while changing trains that my Mother met my Father. Just as my Grandfather had done when he had met my Grandmother, so my Mother recognized my Father as a complete stranger in a crowd of people as the person she would one day marry. She had the most awful feeling that she would hate being married to him and she wanted to run miles in the opposite direction to get away from him while there was still time but one thing after another happened and my Mother did marry my Father even though she had not originally wanted to.