

# **A Struggle for Existence**

**by Keith H Lloyd**

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*Ernest H Lloyd, my father, born on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 1911, wrote this account of his life between the years 1918 to 1939. It follows on from 'A Day at School'*

*KHL*

## **Chapter 1: Growing up Time**

**A**s time went on I found that Mr. Perry my teacher was a really decent man. I never had any more trouble and young Mac told me it was his sister who had suggested the use of chalk to stop him day dreaming. Anyway young Mac soon went up to Standard 6, leaping over 4 and 5, which was a good effort - so the chalk throwing seems to have succeeded.

Since I had been in the 'Boys' School' I found myself getting closer to my Mum. I began to help her by turning the mangle and hanging out the sheets and blankets on the line in the yard. I also began to get up earlier to light the fire, polish the grate with Zebra polish and whiten the surround with chalk gathered from the barge beds in the River. On Saturday mornings I would scrub the floors of two bedrooms. After sweeping I would get a bucket of boiling water from the cast iron copper in the washhouse, put in some black carbolic and scrub with a hard brush and Sunlight soap. A sweet refreshing smell would pervade the whole house and after three or four weeks the bare boards began to show beautifully white and I heard my Mum tell her sister,

"You could eat off his bedroom floor now, go and have a look Bella"

I saw them inspect both rooms and I was happy.

One Saturday my Mum said she didn't want me to scrub the bedroom floors anymore as Dad had got a piece of lino he was going to put down. She asked me if I would like to go to 'Swets' with Jimmy. Swets (Sweetinghams) was the local cinema or penny rush. I really wanted to go, as I had never been before. Mum gave me 2d (1/2p) - 1d to go in and a 1d (old penny) for a bowl of

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pea soup at 'Jack's'. Jimmy went every Saturday and he showed me the way. He was bubbling over with excitement. When we had both settled down to watch the film Jimmy would say, "He's up there, he's up there" pointing to a small square high up on the wall where a bright beam of light shot out into the screen where a bullet appeared and started to write 'The Brass Bullet' while all the kids screamed out. Then we saw 'Sting-Garee' Pearl White, William S Hart, Louis Wolheim, Slim Somerville and a comedy called *Let George do it*.

I went about three more times after that but what I liked most of all was the penny bowl of pea soup in 'Jacks' of Rathbone Street. He saw me take a small piece of bread from the counter and put it into my soup and then he said,

"Ok! Young-un you can have as much bread as you like"

I was amazed, but I had quite a lot more - in fact I ate so much bread I didn't want my dinner, then it was my mother's turn to be amazed. But I had a tablespoonful of Cod-liver-oil-and malt and was quite happy to tackle my dinner at teatime.

It was about this time I realised I was making things a lot easier for my Mum but I often thought when I looked at my Dad (without him knowing) that things seemed to be getting tougher for him. He had a tense look and lines were appearing on his face. Although he had a full time job his wage, like that of everyone else, was low. This was confirmed when he told my Mum that in his spare time he was going to help his step father in his decorating business.

Old Hughes, as my father referred to him, would charge people, one shilling and six pence (7.5p) to whitewash a ceiling, six shillings (30p) to paper a fair size room (about eight rolls of paper) and for wood graining he would charge 'so much per square foot.'

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I remember one day I had been taking my time getting home from school and was rather late arriving and my Mum was anxiously waiting,

“You are to go over to the Coffee Shop to help your father,” she said,

“He said to send you over at 4 o’clock and look at the time now it’s nearly 5 o’clock.”

There were several other things I had noted about Dad. Instead of getting his usual one-ounce of Nut Brown tobacco he had cut this down to a half and instead of two books of A G cigarette papers per week he was making do with one. And the two pounds of Russet apples for lunch each day were cut out completely. When I asked him for an explanation he would say,

“I’m past luxuries”

I dashed across the road into the Coffee Shop and found my Dad working on the ground floor putting the finishing coat of paint on the dining area walls. He said, “Hughes has a job for you upstairs”

Well I went upstairs and was greeted with, “Hello young Ernie, I’ve got some paint here I’d like you to put on the dado”(which is the bottom half of the wall). He waved his arm around the room and began to explain,

“Your Dad is now putting the finishing coat on downstairs and tomorrow it will be dry for me to put the graining under glaze on. Then on Sunday I will be doing the varnishing. So if you put the undercoat on this dado, it will be ready for your Dad to put the finishing coat on tomorrow, see!”

Then he proceeded to put high gloss on the top half of the wall and I started on the bottom half. Then he looked down at me and said,

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“You’ll have to put a lot more elbow grease in it than that”  
Well I didn’t know what elbow grease was so I went down stairs  
and said,  
“Where’s the elbow grease Dad?”  
“Where’s the what?” he asked.  
“The elbow grease I’ve got to put on the paint” I answered.  
Dad spluttered a bit and the said,  
“Old Hughes meant rub the paint hard in, so that it will soon dry”  
So I crept back upstairs, did as I was told and it was past 8  
o’clock. Old Hughes was very pleased with it and praised me a  
little - but I never did take any notice of praise.

It was some weeks later he visited No.1 Barnwood Road., where  
we lived and come upstairs with my Grandma. I was sitting  
drawing under the table as I often did because I was out of every-  
one’s way and not disturbed. He touched my toe and greeted me  
with a cheery,  
“Hello there young Ernie, I’ve got something for you”  
Then he produced a box of watercolour paints, with some tubes  
and brushes. When I saw them I thought I must be the luckiest  
boy in the world. It was soon afterwards I produced my first por-  
trait. It was of a relative on a horse, who had been sent to France  
in 1914 with the RHA (Royal Horse Artillery)\*. I copied it from a  
photograph taken after he had risen in the ranks and taken charge  
of a group of crack horsemen. I understand the horse was shot  
dead soon after the photograph was taken. My portrait ‘Horse and  
Rider’ was completed in 1920 when I was 9 years old.

I painted portraits, scenery, flowers, bowls, basins, fruit and vege-  
tables and many other pictures but they soon disappeared. I didn’t

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\* *The relative was Ernie’s uncle, Frank Chalk, who married his  
mother’s sister, Polly*

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mind people taking them. I took it as a compliment - a feather in my cap. My Mum and Dad didn't mind so why should I. My Dad had taught me to stretch hot pressed cartridge paper in water and stick it over stiff board or plywood. One could then paint without the paper crinkling. He also told me how I could use the white of an egg to mix with my paint, which makes the water colour absolutely permanent - it is called 'Tempera' painting.

One day I was explaining to a youngster what watercolour was all about. I knew there wasn't much he knew anyway, so I became a little cocksure about what I could teach him. To emphasize my points I did some drawings on the pavement. The driver of a water cart was watching my drawings with great interest. He was a youngish man and congratulated me and said,

"Could you draw me like that?"

I didn't answer but proceeded to draw a very good likeness on the pavement. I looked at him and saw him put his hand roughly over his face and shout something unintelligible and his voice became a gurgle in his throat. I was a bit scared but he shook his head and dropped his hand to his side,

"Don't be afraid young un" he said.

I plucked up the courage to ask him why he did that,

"That's something you wont understand. It's just nerves, but your drawing reminded me of my Mum. I saw my mum killed by horses pulling a fire engine. She tried to run back to the kerb but the horse swung back the same way and my mum went under the hooves. Because of my nerves the only job they would offer me is on a water cart"

We became firm friends and I was soon sitting on top of the tank pulling the chains to allow the water to wash the roads and keep the dust down. All the kids would run behind the cart holding their knee breeches as high as they could. And when the girls lifted their frocks or aprons I would wait until they got close to the cart before pulling the chains. And when I did the shrieks and

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squeals told me that some of them had got their unmentionables wet and I said,

“I bet they go home and say to their Mums, ‘my drawers are all wet and Ernie Lloyd did it’, and their Mums would say, ‘you wait I’ll bash his brains in for that’. And then I added,

“Anyway, they couldn’t do that, I haven’t got any brains”

It caused the driver to laugh so much he nearly fell off the seat.

For three happy months both during the holidays and after school I was on the cart and I learnt quite well how to harness a horse, how to guide him and what to do when the horse took fright and there were no ‘Keep off the grass’ warnings from the driver. I rather liked his free and easy way and how he allowed me to do whatever I wanted. But suddenly an older man replaced him and when I asked where my friend was, the new man said,

“He’s got a better job now”

I never did find out what really happened to my friend.

It was back to school after the summer holidays and I had been back just over a week, when Mr. Perry said,

“Are you in any sort of trouble Lloyd?”

“Trouble? No, I’m not in any trouble” I answered,

“Well Mr. Dunlop of Standard 5, wants a word with you and you are to go to his classroom straight after playtime” said Mr. Perry,

“Go immediately after the morning whistle”

And that is exactly what I did. I stood in front of Mr. Dunlop’s desk, he looked at me and then looked all around his classroom and said,

“You are from Mr. Perry’s class?” he asked,

“Yes” I answered,

Then he added, “Go outside close the door quietly behind you, then turn and KNOCK.”

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I did as I was told and remained outside until he called “Come in” I went in and he said, “What’s your name?” When I told him he looked across at my older brother sitting well back in the classroom and nodded. I followed his gaze as I looked at my brother the cane was dragged across my left cheek so roughly that I thought it had cut my face. I demurred at that and Mr. Dunlop started to wave his cane across my bare legs. I had no idea why I was there so I asked him,

“Why?”

“You will soon find out if you tell me the truth” he said, “What were you doing on the school roof last night?”

“I wasn’t on the school roof last night or any other night,” I said, “Yes you were you were up on the school roof to ring the bell” he insisted,

“I wasn’t on the school roof last night, so I couldn’t have rung the bell”

While this was going on he kept the cane going across my calf muscles and it became harder and harder.

“Where were you last night then?” he voice was becoming louder, “I was under the table painting from 6 o’clock to 9 o’clock then I went to bed”

“Painting under the table,” he said incredulously, “but why under the table?”

I ignored the question and said,

“That’s where I was until 9 o/clock”

“Alright you can go back to your class now, but I will make further inquiries and maybe I’ll want you back here” he said and he gave the backs of my legs a swish with the cane. But I didn’t jump, as I knew he would have expected me to so I just strolled out of the room.

Three days later he sent for me again. Mr. Gibbins the Headmaster was in our classroom talking to Mr. Perry who said, “You are to see Mr. Dunlop again Lloyd, go in there now”

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I noticed that Mr. Gibbins asked Mr. Perry a question and Mr. Perry nodded towards me as I passed on my way to Standard 5. I had just got in front of Mr. Dunlop, who had come over with his cane in his hand and said,

“Where were you on Monday night?” and again the cane began swishing around my legs.

“Under the table painting” I said, “until 9 o’clock”

Suddenly the door flew open and in came Mr. Gibbins he looked at me and said,

“OK young-un, make your way back to your own classroom”

I notice that Mr. Dunlop had put his cane on his desk and was looking askance at the Headmaster. I gave him a perishing look and strolled past. All this happened on the Friday morning and had I thought that finished it. But I was wrong because he sent for me the third time at 3pm that day.

“You were on the roof ringing the bell on Monday night” I was on the point of answering when he said, “Alright you can go back to your classroom” and as a passing shot he slashed his cane around my legs, then shouted, “AND DON’T LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT”

I hated the man so much that I decided that I *would* go up onto the school roof on Saturday and to see if I could find out what it was all about. I knew that Mr. Pope the Caretaker would be having his Saturday night drink in the Jubilee pub, so about 8pm I climbed on the roof and looked around but there didn’t seem to be anything that would lead me to the person who had been up there. I saw an iron bar up there and I picked it up, gripped it tightly and gave the bell a terrific whack. It was so hard that I felt an electric shock and pins and needles shoot up and down my arms. I dropped the bar and felt my ears ringing like the church bells. I bent down and picked up the bar again but couldn’t hold it. I thought if my arms stayed like this I wouldn’t be able to climb down. So I dropped the bar where I found it and hurriedly made my way safely across the

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roof and down into the playground. It was easy to climb the toilet wall and over into the building site in Hannameel Rd., where four houses were being built for Tate & Lyle executives. Tate & Lyle owned much of the land around there.

It was at 8.45 on Monday when the bell was rung but the noise it made was like a ‘clunk, clonk, donk’. I got a big laugh when one of my mates said

“Coo that bell sounded cracked”

“What do you expect when every thing is cracked round here” I answered.

We both had a laugh and the bell stopped croaking. But it was a talking point and a nine days wonder about how the bell became cracked.

Everybody at school were amazed a fortnight later when it was announced in the hall by Mr. Gibbins that a new teacher would be taking over standard 5 from Mr. Dunlop but in the meantime the class would be run by his son Mr. Vivian until the new teacher Mr. Leach had settled in. Mr. Vivian Gibbins was a part-time sports master and a well-known amateur footballer. At the time I was playing for the school’s ‘Barry Cup Team’ for the under elevens and he asked me to if I would like to play for West Ham’s Sun Shield Side. I immediately said, “No”. I thought going training for this and training for that - ugh! It didn’t appeal to me. I was a long way from my tenth birthday and my Mum said to me,

“You will be burnt out by the time you are thirty, you live your own life; go your own way about it, in your own time”. That was Mum’s philosophy.

It was some time later that Mr.Perry told me there were no black marks against my name because Mr.Dunlop had got the names mixed up.

“All the black marks were on my legs, back and front,” I told

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Mr.Perry and he remarked that Mr.Dunlop had no right at all to do that. Mr.Dunlop returned to the school some time later as a Play-Centre Warden, two hours each evening, but he didn't worry me any more, because I wouldn't attend.

About this time I became interested in a number of heavily drawn carts every one smelling sweet and apparently making for the same place somewhere in East Silvertown. I had no idea what they were carrying until one driver asked my mate and I if we would like a job as 'Back-boys' on his cart. We both said, "Yes"

"You are both rather young but you should be able to do the job together" he said, "All you have to do is to keep other boys away from the baskets of strawberries, with these whips"

So with my mate sitting high up on the baskets on one side of the cart and me on the other side we were ready to repel all boarders. We had no trouble and when we arrived at 'Keiller's Jam Factory' the driver helped us down and gave us each a big bag of strawberries.

"There's no need for you to wait" he said, "You can make your way home now"

When we walked out of the main gate we ran straight into trouble. We had gone about fifty yards when we heard a shout, "There's two townies, come on let's bash 'em"

Five boys came dashing out of Oriental Road screaming their heads off. They were all bigger than us ,so we started off at a brisk pace. We reached 'Itchy Park', so called because of the sand pits there, when my mate Jimmy shouted, "Down the line Ern"

But before I could follow two boys jumped on me and dragged me to the ground. I went down hard but still had hold of my strawberries. I pushed and kicked and managed to struggle up and as I did so I kneed one of them in the mouth. As soon as he saw

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the blood he let out a yell, covered his mouth with his hand and went back the way he had come. The other boy shouted, "Hey! Freddie don't leave me here on my own"

I could see this boy was not hurt but looked scared out of his wits. I said,

"Go and see what he's done"

He didn't need no more telling, he was off like a shot. I was glad to see the back of him. I wanted to see what had happened to my mate. I crossed over the railway line past Spencer Chapman Chemical works, Burt, Boulton and Hayward (Tar Makers), Gulf Oil and Silvertown Lubricants. I had just reached Venesta when I saw Jimmy standing there with his shirt in ribbons, his coat on the ground, blood on his nose and still in a fighting spirit. One boy was sitting with his back to Venesta's gate, his legs stretched out straight with a bag of squashed strawberries over his head; the other boy was leaning against Moreland Haynes wire fence crying his eyes out. I ran over to Jimmy and said,

"You all right Jim?"

"Yuh" he muttered, "But I aint got no bleeding strawberries now".

He looked at the boy trying to clean himself up and said to him, "Make sure you bring ten others with you when you meet the two of us again"

I said, "Come on Jim, let him have your strawberries I've got some 'good-uns' here"

He looked at me before diving his hand into my bag. Then we both burst out laughing and sat on the pavement in Barnwood Road and devoured our strawberries - they were delicious.

After a while Jimmy started to make a note of the names of all the carriers who were delivering fruit from Covent Garden to Keiller's. He got to know the times when they crossed the swing bridge.. He said,

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“We will follow them down to Mill Road and they will be in ‘striking distance’ and that will be far enough for us”

Jimmy even knew where and when they would stop for coffee along North Woolwich Road. We never did take on the job of ‘Back Boys’ again. We got more fruit taking it for ourselves. Some of the boys said it wasn’t stealing, just the spoils of war. I guess nobody missed the amount we took anyway. We had grapefruits, oranges, apples, blackberries, strawberries, plums, gooseberries and lemons. Some of the boys liked Seville oranges which were used for marmalade. But they were much too sour for me. We really did have a bonanza; we took plenty home to share with our younger brothers and sisters. I loved to see the family enjoying themselves food was in short supply in those days.

## Chapter 2 : In the Swim

**I**t was during the next few weeks I started swimming in the Thames. I had no money to swim in the local baths so it had to be the filthy waters of the River.

There were steps down to the river which had been built for access by 'Lightermen' and 'Bargees' But the steps were seldom used by them - they gained access via the factory wharfs such as that at Tate & Lyle's sugar factory and the John Knights soap works. We called the area 'The Bank'. I well remember collecting firewood from there which had floated in with the tide. My brother George and I were discussing ways of getting a big plank up the steps when suddenly our younger brother Johnny was gone. I looked down and just caught sight of his hair floating on the water, I jumped in, swam out and grabbed him and George helped me pull him to the side. We got Johnny to the top of the stairs and laid him on his stomach and pressed his back. He seemed to be bloated. Then he let out a deep gurgle, "uh, uh, ug", and water poured from him. We took him to the nearby boiler house of the Anglo American Oil Company and was allowed to stay there until he dried out, provided we were quiet. We didn't make a sound.

It was up 'The Bank' I first saw the effects of the birch, on the back of a crippled boy. His back was covered in long wide slash marks which had salt rubbed into the wounds. It was a terrible sight which shocked me. It was easy to see the marks because we all swam naked - no one had money for swimming costumes. We all sympathised with him but he was having none of that and mouthed at us a string of superlatives that stopped us in our tracks. Some of the words were impossible to understand, but I admired his courage and thought of him as a hero. Apparently he

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was a thorn in the side of authority. It was shortly after receiving the birch again he died from blood poisoning, or so we were told.

Every family in Silvertown with a certain number of young members between the ages of seven and fourteen received tickets from the schools which entitled them to meals from the 'Soup Kitchens'.

"These are for two meals a day on school days only, more than sufficient" said Mr Bumbledon who was in charge. "Saturday and Sunday are for fasting"

He would only take a few at a time to the kitchens and some kids would be left out and never received a meal.

"You won't starve" he'd say "I'll take you next time".

One of our boys who was a bit older seemed to have more sense than the rest of us so we called him our leader. Well he said to me,

"Ern, don't you know what happens?" I said, "I don't know"

"It's easy, all the kitchen workers and that git Bumbledon gets most of the grub and we get the left overs"

"We will raid the place tonight" he said.

So the plan was for me to make a drawing of the layout, the dining room, the kitchen, the post room and the roof fanlight which had three boards below the window. These were to be removed and put back loose to allow six of us to crawl through later that night. I was to go in first to get the dog out of the way. It took some while but I finally got the dog into the oven. The rest of the boys were anxiously waiting on the roof.

"You can come down" I whispered "He won't bother us now"

I didn't know what to expect but I was surprised by what I saw. There was every food you could imagine - ham, pork, sausages, cheese and pickles of every description, rice, custard, loads of bread, bread pudding stuffed full of currents, pots of jam and

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drinks we had never heard of. Well, we stuffed ourselves better than a taxidermist.

Two of the boys got out on the roof and were spotted by the local fireman opposite. They got their hoses out, so we had to make a quick get away. We had just got clear when the police arrived. Old Bumbledon was upset because the food he had parcelled up to take home had been broken open.

There was one tragedy, when the workers arrived the next morning they started the oven and the dog was badly burned and died later.

On another occasion we collected a load of timber from the river and built a raft. The idea was to get to the barges moored about 100 yards from the bank which we understood had all kinds of tinned fruit, corned beef and tins of cocoa powder. It was hard work building the raft but when finished it looked very strong and when I jumped onto it I felt like one of them Vikings - but I don't suppose they shouted 'Tally Ho!' as I did. Four of us had to swim at each corner to get to deep water. Then two of us got onto the barge and started loading the boxes on to the raft.

We had just about finished loading up and were ready to swim ashore when one of the boys saw the river police. We swam ashore as quick as we could. The police launch headed towards us but we got away. They tried desperately to stop the raft but it slowly submerged leaving the boxes drifting with the tide down the river. We watched the disappearing raft with a feeling of sadness, all that work for nothing.

There was another fine mess we got ourselves into. Our camp, which was just a hole in the ground in the high um-

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ples field, had a corrugated tin roof and this was rusting badly and needed a coat of paint.

Todd said, "I know where we can get some tar, that ought to do it"

Well Todd showed us where the 'Tar Tanker' was parked just outside Prince Regent Tar Factory. We all stood back as Todd climbed up and sat astride the big wheel on top of the tanker.

"Stand back" he said, as Todd attempted to turn the wheel.

"Is any coming out yet?"

"No" we all yelled back.

Then Todd started to pull and tug on the big wheel and suddenly a huge jet of tar shot ten feet up into the air and dropped back to where Todd was sitting. We all jumped out of the way but poor old Todd couldn't and he was completely covered.

He managed to climb down from the tanker, which was still spewing out tar, but he was crying his eyes out and trying to run. I know it sounds cruel but we were all laughing our heads off to see him in such a state trying to run. The following morning the roadway became busy with traffic and most of the roads in Silvertown were turned black with tar.

At school I had been moved to a higher class but my mate Jimmy was left in the old class.

"Tell them you don't want to go" he said.

Well I did tell them but old Leachy our teacher said,

"It's not what you want Lloyd, it's what you have got - so you've got to put up with it."

After a few weeks Ma said I was to have a day off from school to go with her to Whitechapel Hospital to collect an iron frame which was to be fitted to my Dad's leg to

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enable him to walk straight. It had two iron rods fitted round the hip and down through the heel of a specially made boot. Dad was disabled in the Silvertown explosion during the First World War. He couldn't collect it himself, so Ma and I got the job. She had to arrange for someone to take care of the children when they came out of school - there was seven of them to consider, Wally, George, Johnny, Jessie, Alf, Gladys and Jean.

When we arrived home there was a note from the new head teacher asking why I wasn't at school that day. Ma read it and handed it to me

“Here Ern, you answer it, your writing is better than mine”

Well answer it, I did, I wrote ‘Mind your own business’ and signed it Ernest Lloyd,

I made sure Ma never saw it though.

In the assembly hall next day I was approached by the Head Master. He looked at me and said,

“Well?” so I handed him the note, he read it and his eyes bulged,

“Who wrote this?” he said

“I did I answered”

Then he made me write my name on it and then he studied for a few seconds. Then he turned and swung the pointer cane, fetching it down so hard across my shoulder blades that the pointer broke into four pieces - one piece shot across the hall and hit the classroom door on the opposite side, two pieces flew the other way leaving a piece about a two foot long in his hand. He raised this to strike me again, but I struck him first. I swung my left hand and caught him full on the chin. He went down as if he was poll axed. I was amazed and looked down at him lying there quite still. Then I saw Mr Leach and Mr Willingale

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emerge from their classrooms. I thought it's time I wasn't here. As I turned to make my exit I bumped into George and he ran out with me. When we got home George was telling me, excitedly that he had seen me lash out.

“I was standing on my seat and old Willingale was on his tip toes looking through the glass in the door- I bet he don't know I'm missing” grinned George.

### Chapter 3 : Job Seeking

I was in my last term at school and was sent for by the Head Master. Mr Houghton my teacher said he didn't know what it was about, but to be careful what I said because there were two other people in the there. I was prepared for the worst - I hadn't done anything but someone else had and I would surely get the blame. So I buttoned up my coat and was prepared for a fight. Well it didn't turn out that way.

The two men with the Head Master were introduced to me as Mr. Spendley of Venesta Ltd, plywood manufacturers and Mr. Nichols of Pinchin Johnson, paint manufacturers. Apparently this was a job interview.

“I have given you a good report” said the Head Master, “Read it” and he passed the paper to me. He waited for me to read it and then he said,

“Well what do you think?”

“It's passable” I said, “but a prospective employer might read between the lines and say this is implying that the boy is good with his hands but has no brains”

The Head Master looked at the other two and then turned to me and said,

“You have a choice, think it over; you have a month to decide”

Neither of the jobs was what I wanted. I believed I could make a living as an artist. I was offered a job as a newspaper artist helper at the ‘Star’ Office in Bouverie Street, in London, but my mother thought it was too dangerous trav-

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elling there in view of the heavy traffic. I thought ‘Mother knows best’.

Well I chose Venesta and it was one of the worse decisions I had ever made, but that is a closed chapter and I wouldn’t want to open it again\*.

I got a job at Moreland & Haynes, a steel works, as a rivet fixer’s mate. I was reasonably happy there but after eight months the work dried up. So I was told to leave. Four of my mates also got the sack for similar reasons.

So we conceived a plan to start a window cleaners business. We made a thousand hand bills and distributed them in the Kent area of Bexleyheath and Erith. But there was a snag. We were told we needed to be a limited company and we were too young to obtain a licence. We decided to give it a try anyway but ran into another problem when we were stopped transporting ladders on a push cart.

My mate Todd was sacked from Tate & Lyle and his mother said she couldn’t keep him if he didn’t have a job - so he left home. We were all standing on the street corner looking down hearted when Todd said,  
“I’m fed up with this, I’m going on a tramp, it wasn’t my

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*\* In fact Ernie had a serious accident in Venesta, he fell down a stoke hole into the boiler room, he was carrying two sacks of coal weighing 2cwt, doing the work of two men to cover for his mate who was late for work, someone had removed the safety barrier rails which had they been in place would have prevented his fall of about 15ft. Ernie cracked his ear drum and the Doctors could not repair the damage as a result his hearing was permanently impaired for the rest of his life.*

*He was unceremoniously sacked due to his absents in hospital. In today’s world sixty years later, he would have received considerable compensation.*

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fault I got sacked.”

Three of the boys, including me looked at each other and chorused,

“We’ll come with you, just to be sure you don’t starve”

Todd laughed.

So we started off, hitch hiking at first well into the country side and then walking until we reach a place called Horsmonden where we meet some good honest farming folk who pitched us a tent inlaid with straw for us to sleep on. They wanted us to stop, probably to work on the farm. But that wasn’t part of our plans - we wanted to go on.

We arrived at Sittingbourne in a roundabout sort of way. We were tired and hungry. Todd pointed to a shop ‘Home & Colonial’

“I’m going in there for some bread and cheese”

We had no money but he walked boldly into the store and asked for a loaf and cheese. Then he spotted some drink priced at three pence each. The man said if we drank it on the premises the price would be two pence each, the extra penny was for the bottle. Todd took four bottles and handed us one each and called for an opener, then he whispered to us,

“When you’ve drunk them don’t hang about just make yourself scarce”

Well I walked out of the shop calmly with the other two lads and ran as fast as we could up the road leaving Todd in the shop. We hadn’t got a 100 yards before Todd overtook us running like a cheetah with a loaf of bread under his arm. We made our escape to the cliff edge where we found shelters and spent the night.

Next morning we made our way to Folkestone where we spent the day scrounging for food in the Fish Market and

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watching the Ferries, Todd said,  
“Wouldn’t it be great if we could get on one of them ferries. We’d be in France in a couple of hours”

So we made a plan to stowaway that night. All went well at first. No one was around and we made our way to the life boats, lifted the covers and crawled inside.

We weren’t in there long before the covers were pulled back and a man said,

“Come on out of it”

“Blimey!” said Todd, “Who gave us away?”

“You are not very good stowaways” said the man.

Then he said to follow him into the cabin for a talk. He could tell by our accent we were from London. He asked where we were from and when we told him Silvertown. He was not surprised as he came from Canning Town. He was the First Mate and his Captain was due aboard shortly. He told us to forget going to France – it wasn’t very good over there.

“Your best bet is to make your way back to Silvertown, so I’m giving you a dollar each (five shillings) to get your breakfast in the morning, I can hardly afford it but it will help you get back home”

In fact his dollar each lasted us almost a week.

We left him about midnight and as agreed we waved him goodbye from the cliff top at 2.30 am when the ship sailed and he in turn flashed a torch light in farewell. It left us with a feeling of sadness but then we went to our comfortable shelter and were soon fast asleep.

When we awoke in the morning we decided to go to the big house on the cliff top called St. Andrews, where we were told we could get a bath with soap and clean towels

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for sixpence. It was some form of rest home and it was great. The Matron showed us in and the handy-man set up the showers. It was great - we spent two hours scrubbing ourselves and we revelled in it.

But soon it was time to move on and it was goodbye Folkestone, hello Canterbury. We hitched a ride on an old traction engine to the edge of the town and the driver directed us to farm house,

“Go there and asked for Mr. Mount. Tell him that George Yeoman sent you and he will fix you up with a job”

Mr. Mount owned the biggest farm in the district called Denstead Farm. He couldn't give us a job because the hop and fruit picking season hadn't started but he provided us with a tent, a stove for cooking and gave us some food. We made friends with a very nice gypsy family who took us to the local pub where the wife played the piano whilst smoking a long clay pipe and Todd sang a few songs to the delight of the patrons. Afterwards we went round with the hat and made a lot of money. The gypsy family said it was all ours. We got a few jobs chopping and sawing wood but mostly we survived on raiding orchards for plums and apples, we also did a bit of poaching, the gypsies taught us that.

With the arrival of the hop pickers we were busier than ever but Todd wanted to move on to Southampton. But someone had written to my mother and one Saturday after hop picking we made our way back to our tent and was surprised to see my elder brother Wally waiting there. Mum had booked herself into the local inn and Wally was going to sleep in the tent with us.

That night we had an argument with four drunks from the next farm. They had been turned out of their place and

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they were told all they had to do was kick us four kids out and they could have our tent. We also had a big seaman from Silvertown staying in our tent, who was known to us as a Banjo.

That night the drunks arrived shouting and hollering and one of them cut down the tent rope holding the flaps down and poked his head into the tent shouting,

“Come on you kids out of here or else”

Well that was a mistake. He was smashed in the face with a heel of a hob-nail boot, blood spurted everywhere. Then another drunk shouted out,

“You’ve smashed my mate face in, now come out, I’ll fight the best among you”

That was another mistake, six foot tall Banjo stood up and said,

“I guess that means me”

All I saw was a few flaying punches and the drunks were on the floor not moving. One of them recognized Banjo and tried to appease him.

“You thought there were just a bunch of kids in ‘ere. It serves you right. Now hop it out of here before I get mad”

They scarpered. Banjo repaired the rope and we turned in for the night.

In the morning we could see Wally’s shirt covered in spots of blood it looked like a tramps handkerchief. Ma wanted us to return home with her and Wally. He had no luggage so he would have to travel home in his bloody shirt. I stressed to Ma that I had no quarrel with the family and the worry lines disappeared from her face when she saw how happy I had become. I promised Ma that I would be home on Thursday and when she left on Sunday she looked radiant, a different woman to the one who arrived

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the day before.

Well we left Canterbury and arrived home safe and sound. The family were pleased to see me and there was a lot of kissing and cuddling. Finally I wished my Mum and Dad goodnight and I went to bed. As usual Mum said,

*“God bless, don’t forget to say your prayers”  
Although Mum was not a devout religious person she  
would always recite the same prayer:  
Jesus tender shepherd hear me, bless thy little lambs  
tonight.  
Through the darkness be thou near me; keep me safe  
‘till morning light.  
We are happy we are well and we thank you for thy  
care.  
Take me when I die to heaven happy there with me to  
dwell”.*

Everything seemed to be back to normal. I was unemployed but then I had a bit of luck. As I was strolling past Tate & Lyle’s Plaistow Wharf factory a man called out and offered me a job. When I told him my name he said he knew the family and I must be the artist one. He said he wanted twenty six lads under eighteen to make a gang but unfortunately it was all night work. I said that was no trouble and I soon rounded up my mates who all wanted a job.

We started and I was given a note each night with instructions where the men were to be deployed. Our job was to move all the sugar from the seventh floor and stack it neatly and tightly on to the lower floors. It had to be done in one night and it wasn’t easy. There was tons of the stuff. But the extension of the seventh floor was almost complete and a new lift was being installed to carry 45 cwt. This made the job a little easier. But after a while I

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noticed some of the men were being sent to other jobs and eventually we were down to just three of us. We all agreed we were being exploited.

One night we found there was over three hundred and eighty tons to shift and we had seven and a half hours to do it. It was an impossible task and we complained. However we decided to give it a go. We worked flat out all night and managed to move two hundred and seventy eight tons. We were dead beat and in the morning practically crawled across the road to Skingley's Coffee Shop for tea and toasted tea cakes. We complained to the management again and a short time after they started a three shift system which made things easier.

But this wasn't to last very long. We told it was back to the old system and the sugar was now being stacked in one ton loads. I complained again, I said, "We will need two lifts to clear this lot or we will have to put four tons in" I was told, "Nobody cares how you get the sugar down as long as the seventh floor is cleared by 6.00 am." So I took that as read.

It was my job to drive the lift but Jimmy wanted to have a go. We loaded four boards, which was four tons at a time - a 45 cwts overload - but Jimmy didn't lock the drive handle like I told him and the lift started to slide down, slowly at first, then there was a whirring sound and a woosh as it gathered speed and crashed like a concertina into the buffers in the well of the pit. The gates were screwed up but I thought quickly and managed to get the gates open to take out the overload which we did at break neck speed. Then we went back into the lift and I relocked the gates and got someone to send an emergency call to the electrician.

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We were inside the lift when the Chief Electrical Engineer came dashing round and said,

“Good lord man you have overloaded the lift”

“How can that be?” I replied, “We are stuck here waiting for you to get us out”

“So I see” he said and opened the gate sufficiently for us to squeeze out.

“You had better go and get yourselves a cup of tea while I sort this mess out”

As soon as we sipped our tea all three of us were violently sick.

I was called in at 8.30 am the next morning to explain what happened but no more was said of the incident.

I had been there two years and was told my job had been downgraded and was to be handed over to a sixteen year old. I said,

“I’d like to see a sixteen year old do my job”

As I expected I was pushed out. It had happened to me many times before. I hadn’t then been worried but now I was angry. I chased around and spoke to several men in executive positions. I even spoke to Alex Lyle - it made no difference but he did write me out a ‘White Card’ which is used by casual workers.

“This will get you plenty of work” he said.

I was given a job which meant I had to carry 2 cwt sacks on my back. It was not difficult for me. I found the work easy but the problem was that for six months I only got one day’s work each week. So I complained. The next week they sent for me on a Thursday and said it would last until the following Tuesday which was over the Easter holidays and that meant double time. Jimmy said,

“Looks like we’re in the money Ern”

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“Yeah” I said, but I should have known better.

We started work at 2.30 pm on the Thursday and at 9.30 pm that night the foreman came running down the yard, “Stop! Stop!” he shouted, “The job is finished”

I dropped the bag I was carrying into the mud on the road. “Pick that up” yelled the foreman”

My reply was unprintable prompting Jimmy to say “Cor Ern I never heard so many swear words, they’re not in my vocabulary”. But when I told him,

“You can’t sign on at the Labour Exchange now until Tuesday because of the bank holidays and we will be unable to claim the four days since we last worked”, Jimmy soon found some swearwords of his own.

Tate & Lyle senior man Mr. Runnicles, said it was nothing to do with the firm. I had worked hard for seven hours and was paid 8 shillings and 9 pence (49 pence today) but I had lost 12 shillings and 10 pence labour money due to not being able to ‘sign on’ until Tuesday.

They sent for me again but this time I went straight to the wharf to see the Captain of the Dutch Ship ‘Etal’. He couldn’t give me a job but was a good friend and he slipped some money into my pocket.

I wasn’t the only one who didn’t go to work that day - in fact all the boys stayed away in protest at the way we were being treated.

We were all on the street corner and I was explaining what happened to Jimmy and me when the foreman Willis came running across to us,

“Look here Lloyd” he said, “I’ve had nothing but trouble since you arrived on the scene. You are a trouble maker

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and I won't be sending for you again.”

Then all the boys chorused,

“Don't send for us either, we are fed up, we've had enough of you lot”.

And this was the beginning of the end of the Tate & Lyle casual labour system.

A few days later I received a letter from Mr. Alec Lyle asking me to report to his office at 9.30am any morning. I thought this must mean a regular job, so with that in mind I smartened up and went along and waited just inside the Plaistow Warf when his car arrived I said,

“Good morning Mr. Alec you wanted to see me?”

“Uh! Did I?” he answered, “What's your name?”

I told him and he looked at me in a disdainful sort of way before inviting me into his office. He pushed open the swing door stepped inside and let the door swing back into my face, I stuck my foot out and kicked it hard back the other way, as the door swung inwards it caught the tip of Mr. Alec's homburg hat and sent it up about four inches, settling back on his head at a funny angle. It looked extremely funny and I burst out laughing. He wasn't pleased and shouted,

“Be more bloody careful you fool, you could have caused me a serious injury.”

He shouted names to the inner office and six men came running in,

“Runnicles get the file, Carmichael get this, Graves get that” and so on

Seeing these men dashing about I got the impression if they were told to lick his boots they would have done so. Then Mr. Alec turned his attention to me, still shouting

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and I answered his questions shouting back. The six slaves stood around dumbstruck and gaping at me goggle-eyed.

Mr. Alec then said,

“I have given out two thousand white cards and try to give every holder a shift’s work every week, which counts as a weeks work to us.

“It doesn’t count as a weeks work to me or to the Labour Exchange” I said.

“I’m not concerned about that” he said, “All I do is, keep two thousand men in insurance stamps” he said.

“It shouldn’t be like that” I said.

“Are you trying to tell me how to run this job” he replied.

He still hadn’t calmed down when Runicles handed him a white card with red printing on it, he threw it at me and said,

“Perhaps this will get you some work”

I looked at it, read it and then tore it up in to as many little pieces as I could and threw it back at him. No one spoke, not even Mr. Alec, when this was happening.

“That’s what its worth” I said.

They seemed to wake up when I pushed open the swing door and walked out, noting that Mr. Alec was standing there wide-eyed staring at me. I never went to T & L Plaistow Warf again and nor did any of my mates. Then I recalled that the captain of the ‘Etal’ had put an envelope in my jacket pocket. I had forgotten about it and when I opened it there was five pounds in it which was a god send and I silently thanked the old Dutch Skipper.

After that I was unemployed for some time before I started earning a few bob mending boots. The trouble was if one of my mates was worse off than me I’d give him some of the money. My Mum often used to say,

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“You will need that cash yourself later on and when it’s gone you won’t find anyone to help you”

Dad would say,

“It’s no use talking to him”

I eventually landed a job with Babcock & Wilcox which only lasted a few months. Then I moved to Kirkcaldy & Co. as a ship’s plumber, but I didn’t know it at the time, I was introduced to an elderly man who showed me what to do. He said, “If anyone asks you what you are doing on this ship just say between decks”

My first job was to clean out the portable water purifiers which meant taking out all the granite chippings, cleaning out the inside with soda then putting the chippings back.

We took down pipes cleaned them and put them back. I was quite happy there. After the first week I lined up behind the old chap to get paid and when I saw his wages I thought ‘Good lord’ if that’s what they pay plumbers, the mates must get about £1 eight shillings (28/-) but when I opened my pay packet I was astounded to see £7 twelve shillings. It was the same for the next two weeks. On the third week a chap was standing in the gangway he said, “Just a minute mate, what’s your name” when I told him he went on,

“Lloyd? Oh! Yes, you’re the plumber, where’s your ticket? Your union card”

“I haven’t got one” I replied.

“I have got five hundred men working here who would go on strike immediately if they knew that” and then he said in a more subdued tone, “You had better have a word with Jim”

Well I had a word with Jim and he suggested I give this chap a fiver. But I told Jim I had to pay back some money I borrowed and if I hand over a fiver I will be left with

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38/-, not enough to live on.

Well as you might expect I was asked to attend the head office at the West India Dock. The clerk said, "I've got 24 shillings holiday pay for you and an excellent report on your work and honesty. It's a pity you didn't buy you way into the job"

So that was the end of that job. Such was the state of bribery and corruption in those days. It seems nothing changes in today's world.

Work on a short term basis was becoming easier to find. I got jobs with Dorman Long steel benders and fixers, James Howden (Edinburgh), the Stirling Boiler Co, George Kent and Richard & Prentice (Ipswich). During this time I travelled all over England including Retford, Peacehaven, Doncaster and Carlisle to mention but a few. I was finding it difficult to keep two homes going. At the end of the week I never had more than a few shilling in my pocket. I tried to get permanent work with different firms but before long I got fed up trying to make ends meet and I came back to Silvertown.

I was unemployed again when I met an old friend who was home on ten days leave from the Royal Navy. He had married a local girl and came to see me to borrow some hinges for a bathroom cabinet, "I'm making it for Kitty" he said and he laughed in his old giggling way.

"We got the cabinet but no bloody bathroom" he said, "But seriously, I'm going on a special assignment which I don't fancy, I have a good mind to report sick"

I said "If you feel that way about it, report sick. Remember you have a wife to take care of now". Well he didn't

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report sick, “It’s not like me to chicken out” he said.

When his leave was over he came to say “Goodbye Ern” I wished him good luck and good health and promised to see him when the job was finished. But it wasn’t to be. His premonition was well founded - he lost his life in a submarine called the *Thetis* in 1939. He was 27 years of age. He was Tommy (Toddles) Kenny, the boy we all laughed at when he was covered in tar.

The whole community attended a memorial service for Tommy, held in the local church.

Just a few weeks after, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov. 1939 Neville Chamberlain the Prime Minister told the nation that Britain was at war with Germany and everything seemed to wake up. Suddenly there was no unemployment - all the people were wanted by the country, men under thirty years of age were soon in the forces and those that weren’t joined the Home Guard, the Fire Service or became Air Raid Wardens.

It took a war to take us out of the doldrums, but it turned a ‘Struggle for Existence’ to a fight for our lives.

*For and on behalf of Ernest Howard Lloyd.*

### *FOOTNOTE:-*

*The H.M.S. Thetis was the pride of the Royal Navy, a submarine which failed to surface on its maiden voyage test run. Conditions on board were extremely cramped with 69 crew and 34 shipyard engineers. First the sub failed to dive, a decision was made to open the torpedo tubes to allow sea water into the tubes to increase the weight but they were not aware that the outer doors were already*

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*open due to a ship yard painter allowing enamel paint to drop on the doors and solidify. Tons of water poured in and the sub nose dived. The sub still wouldn't surface even after fuel and drinking water was jettisoned. Men were suffocating, three men escaped through the hatch but others died in the attempt to escape the same route. Rescue attempts failed and the sub was not raised until four months later. Ninety-nine men lost their lives.*

*KHL*