INTERNATIONAL *Service*

Kathleen Wilson

About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

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About this book

With its backdrop of Brighton in the Second World War, *International Service* tells the tale of Kathleen Wilson’s naive teenage years, leaving school at 14 on the outbreak of war to work in a factory, going on to work in a baker’s, as a domestic help and in the grocery trade.

Kathleen lived in the shadow of her domineering father who chose the jobs that she took and actively discouraged her passion for writing by destroying her manuscripts.

The book vividly describes wartime life in Brighton: Preston Park being turned into allotments, the introduction of rationing, and the bombing of the Preston Road viaduct. After the war Kathleen volunteered as an escort for disabled servicemen at St Dunstan’s, and she recalls the 1951 smallpox outbreak in Brighton.

It covers the time she spent working in family-run shops, through to her years at the International Stores at 82 Preston Road and brings to life the atmosphere of the local shop trade in the period up to the 1950s.

INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

INTRODUCTION

I have often thought back to 1939 when the Second World War started. It is a period in my life that my children have very little knowledge of. As my memories of this time are still so vivid, I have decided to write them down and so save them from disappearing into obscurity. I have only covered fourteen years of my life, but they portray my leaving school and cover my wartime and post-war working career in a retail food shop.

I was born in Stockwell, London, in 1925. During the period between my birth and attaining the age of thirteen, my family moved so many times that I lost track of all the different schools I went to.

My name originally was Kathleen Bertha Groves, but it changed to Wilson after I married. Albert Edward Stanley and Catherine Groves were my parents and Stanley David was my elder brother by eighteen months. I did have another brother, Jack Philip, but he died a few hours after he was born.

We came to Brighton in 1938, where I was forced to go to yet another school, Pelham Street Senior Girls. This never-ending changing of schools made it very hard for me to settle down and make firm friends with anyone. My brother was lucky because he was able to go out to work straight away. My story begins at the same time as war broke out.

My First Job

I left school at fourteen, which was advantageous for me. The outbreak of the Second World War made the existing government rethink their policy to raise the school leaving age to fifteen. This was good news for me because I hated school. For months I had miserably been acclimatizing myself to the fact that I still had another year to slog over the hated lessons. Then, with the advent of the Second World War, everything miraculously changed. In the three months up to Christmas, when I was due to leave, the whole school routine was inexplicably altered. The playground was being dug up to make air raid shelters. Classes were amalgamated to make way for the schools evacuated from London and gas masks had to be collected. The upheaval was so great and exciting that I suddenly didn't want to leave any more.

At fourteen I was small for my age and very immature in my outlook on life. It could have been the result of my upbringing, to be seen but not heard, a favourite saying of my father's. In some ways I think my father was Victorian in his outlook. He was also keen to get me out to work and bring in a wage, but not at the job my heart was set on. He would not listen to anything I said. He was of an opinion that at fourteen one did not know one's own mind. It makes me wonder if he knew his own at that age.

I wanted to be a hairdresser. I would spend hours arranging my mother's hair and giving

her the most outlandish styles. She would enjoy my efforts but to my disappointment, drew the line at my revealing the pure white streak in her hair. I thought it was so distinguished, but then, when you are only fourteen, you do not realize that the older woman finds grey hairs very demoralising. To be a hairdresser in the early days, you did not earn money at the beginning because you paid for your apprenticeship. This was out of the question as far as my father was concerned. He needed money from me at the outset, so my first job, just two weeks after leaving the schoolroom, was in a small factory making valves and switches.

It was like entering an alien world. Nothing in my life had prepared me for a job that was so boring and repetitive. I felt enclosed in a small area with lots of older women and working in one spot under the glaring light from unshielded electric light bulbs. My mind wandered from what I was supposed to be doing and my gaze drifted out of the window. It was soothing to watch the snowflakes fall gently down to earth. How could I have been so foolish as to want to leave school? I wondered how on earth I could possibly endure doing this sort of work for week after week.

I did not have to bother. The decision was taken out of my hands when, at the end of my first week, I was told not to bother to come back and I almost said thank you as I clutched my first wage packet. I may have felt elated until realization set in and I had the task of informing my father that I had got the sack. I walked home in the snow trying to work out what I would say to him. The scene that followed is indelibly printed on my mind. I walked into the small kitchen, glowing warmly in the firelight, and my father jumped up from his chair and said jovially. 'The worker's come home with her first wage packet.' He held out his hand expectantly. 'How does it feel to be one of the world's big earners?'

I meekly passed over the wage packet. To do anything else did not occur to me since I was not the rebellious kind. I just said rather embarrassedly, 'I don't have to go back any more.'

'Of course you don't,' he was still jovial, 'no one works over the weekend. You go back on Monday.'

I swallowed uncomfortably. 'I don't go back on Monday,' I muttered.

There was a deathly hush in the room. In the silence that followed I could feel my self-confidence sliding away and their reproachful eyes made me feel as though I had let them down. The telltale colour stained my cheeks as at last my father said incredulously, 'Are you telling me that you've got the sack?'

I burst into tears and rushed out of the room. Everything I wanted to say evaporated from my mind. This always happened when I was face to face with my father. I sought the refuge of my bedroom until he got over his shock.

Getting Stitched Up

My next venture into the business world was to a factory in Coombe Road, situated just above where Brighton Dental Supplies used to be based. It was a place where they made undergarments for a large Brighton store. Thoughts of working in a factory again really intimidated me and I saw myself standing under bright lights just like before. I had no say in the matter or for the taking of the job. If I had, I would have objected. It was discussed between my parents one evening and decided upon unanimously that needlework was the right thing for a girl to be doing. I may have liked needlework, but I was not sure I wanted to do it all day long. My mother accompanied me to the interview to make sure I procured the job and never said anything out of place.

So there was I, three days after my first fiasco, being initiated into the fascination of clocking on and clocking off. I began to feel as though I was a working girl at last. The factory was nothing like the other one. It was large, bright and airy. The women around me were very liberal with their conversation, and listening to them I thought they were worldly-wise. I wished I knew what they were on about when they spoke of things they did in the evenings. Their remarks left me baffled and I am sure they were aware of it. I must have appeared so naive to them. I had no conception of what they were on about and was really too shy and gauche to ask.

After three weeks of sewing on endless buttons to camiknickers, I was put onto the sewing machines. I felt as though I had been promoted but it was nothing like that. They wanted everyone on the machines. That was where the real work was done. They asked me if I had ever used a sewing machine before and I proudly said, 'Yes'. At home I was very proficient with the old treadle, but here the sewing machines were all electric and I felt overwhelmed at the speed they worked. There was row upon row of machines with a woman sitting in front of each one. They made such a noise as well. I sat down in trepidation and gazed at the iron monster before me. It was hard to take in all the instructions I was given, but the supervisor spent fifteen minutes going over every detail she thought I should know. Then I was on my own and I spent half a morning practising on odd pieces of material to become proficient.

Soon the great moment arrived and I was given my first garment to edge. My initial nervousness made me stitch rather crookedly. I was all fingers and thumbs, but after a while I got the hang of it. For a few days I was almost happy in my work - I was one of the girls at last! The crunch came when the supervisor eventually came up to me to say I must work faster. My output was below average. So I tried to please her and went faster.

The next moment the whole system ground to a halt as I lost part of my garment in the cogs of the machinery. Every machine on the floor stopped and although I might have felt a complete idiot, the rest of the women enjoyed the unexpected breather. I suddenly lost all my confidence again. The job in this factory only lasted three months, but when they stood me off, they explained to my irate father that I had only been taken on

temporarily to help through a rush order. I had my own ideas - I think they saw me as a liability.

So, much to my dismay, it was back once again to the juvenile employment office looking for yet another job. I sat before the big, shiny mahogany desk almost apathetically while my mother demanded to know what sort of jobs they had to offer, and not jobs that were only temporary like the last one. It amazed me where my mother found the courage to speak as she did.

The Bake-House

On this occasion, events seemed to be going very much in our favour because there just happened to be a job going in the very road where we lived. In 1940 there were actually six shops in Lowther Road itself. Three grocers, one bakers, one greengrocers and one sweet shop come library. I guessed it must be one of the grocers who needed an assistant. It turned out that the position was in the bake-house, and obviously one that was proving hard to fill. The woman in the employment office pursed her lips and fixed my mother with her compelling eyes, 'It's very near your home and there would be no travelling time for her to worry about. One would soon get used to the unsociable hours.' Her gaze automatically shifted to me and I tried to look attentive as she added pointedly, you like cooking, don't you?'

I wanted to say I would rather work in the shop but nothing came out except a small squeak that could have meant anything, and meanwhile my mother held out her hand for the card and said we would look at it. As we walked home and our footsteps took us past the baker’s shop, I gazed through the huge curved window at the trays of fancy cakes and baskets of bread. It all looked so cosy and inviting inside, maybe working here would be good.

I was very surprised that my father was not keen on my working in a bake-house when we told him, considering that is where he used to work himself when he was a young man. He was a qualified high-class confectioner and iced wedding cakes. His main objections were that it was not a healthy place for a young girl to be and also very hard work. We still went after the job though and I took to Mrs Stainer immediately. She was of generous proportions and very motherly. The impression she gave us was that my father's worries were unfounded. So before long I started on my third job at five thirty in the morning. Getting up early presented no problems for me.

I worked for an hour in the huge, floury bake-house and was then allowed home for half-an-hour for my breakfast. The bake-house was rather airless, but that was compensated by the lovely smell of freshly baked bread. When I returned I was given a variety of jobs to do by the two other men who worked there. One made the bread and the other was a confectioner. They at first took the mickey out of me because of my size, but I soon got on well with them and the routine ran smoothly. Best of all, I loved the fifteen minute break that I had at ten thirty because I went into the back of the shop

and spent it with Dorothy Hay, who was an assistant in the shop. We became good friends in the short time I knew her, even though she was at least four years my senior. Meanwhile Mrs Stainer took me under her wing and offered to teach me to play the piano after I finished work for the day, which was at one thirty. It was an offer I took her up on and I enjoyed the sessions. I felt as though this job could go on forever - that is, until the mishaps started to occur.

The first came when the men put me on to making meat pies. One of them had previously made up the filling, which stood beside me on the worktop in a huge black dixie. This I ladled out with a feeling of nausea into the pie cases and afterwards I covered the tops with pastry. Then I put each pie into a machine which neatly cut the edges and sealed it ready for cooking, A dash of egg mixture was brushed over them and they were put into the huge ovens. I hated this job from the start. It was not really the job, but the meat filling, just looking at it revolted me and made me wonder how on earth anyone could eat it. From this period onwards I have never been able to eat a shop-made meat pie without feeling sick.

This could have been the reason why I was a little inattentive to what I was doing, because one day I put my index finger into the machine with the pie. My yell brought the men to me instantly and they were concerned, trying to calm me down and looking at my hand at the same time. Whether it was for my benefit or not, I do not know, but they joked about me trying to put more meat in the pie than was really necessary, but Mrs Stainer rushed in and was livid. I had the rest of the day off, after first aid and going to the doctor's. I was told I would not be making any more meat pies. I had a very bad finger for a while and I lost my nail, which was not surprising, but the fact that my nail was there saved the tip of my finger.

The next calamity that happened was the incident with the jam tarts. I had been shown how to put the huge trays of cakes and pastries into the iron ovens with the aid of a long flat shovel, and how to retrieve them again without disturbing the cakes. I was very proficient at the task. The weather outside had become hot and the bake-house was getting hotter than ever. It was also filling up with wasps, which I was petrified of. They never came near the ovens because of the intense heat when the doors were opened, but they were a nuisance when one moved away from there. This happened to me as I removed a tray of freshly baked jam tarts from the oven and carried it to the worktop. The wasps zoomed in on me and I was paralysed with fear. As I balanced the tray on my shovel, they settled indiscriminately on my arms and hands and with a shriek I dropped the lot. I did not know which was worse, cleaning up the jammy mess, impregnated with sticky wasps or my mortification. Or, come to that, the men openly laughing at me.

Then, out of the blue, Dorothy gave me a misty jolt. On her half-day off at the shop, she invited me to her home and there she dropped her bombshell. She was leaving the following week to join the ATS - Auxiliary Territorial Service. I was really upset because she was my first friend, but she was happy to be going and was looking forward to it.

Then Dorothy pointed to a photograph on the wall of the celebrated film star Will Hay. I loved watching his films, as well she knew, because he was a great favourite of mine. I asked her if he was also a favourite of hers since his picture was on the wall, and in such a prime position. She just smiled, 'It's not who you think it is. That is my father you are looking at. Will Hay is his brother, my uncle.'

We parted with promises that we would not lose touch but, sad to say, we were destined never to meet again. I never knew why. After a few more weeks I also left the bake-house. It was due to health reasons, and for the first time I was pleased at my father's intervention. The place was not the same without Dorothy.

Parental Choice

Our reception at the employment office was very cool. It seemed as though it was one thing for an employer to get rid of you, but a different kettle of fish if you had removed yourself. I did not envy my mother as she patiently asked again what was on offer. The young lady behind the desk looked bored, but she flicked through a file of cards in a way I thought was very professional.

As she withdrew one of the cards and held it between long red fingernails she said, in a very matter of fact voice, that there was a position for an assistant in a shop which dealt with laundry. She looked at us with raised eyebrows, and mother nodded her head.

So off we went to Middle Street, where the little shop was almost opposite the Hippodrome theatre - a place that was full of glamour and mystery to my youthful eyes. The Hippodrome is still there to this day, although sadly it is now a bingo hall, but the little shop has long since been demolished. The shop was very small and looked after by a patient, elderly lady. I am guessing at her age. I dare say she was only in her mid-thirties but to me she appeared old.

She explained carefully what the job entailed. As the soiled clothing came in, it would need to be sorted out and marked so that when the van driver called to take it off to the laundry it would all be catalogued. Then, when it was returned, it was sorted again and wrapped up ready for its rightful owners to collect.

While my mother went into the details of wages, I gazed wistfully at the Hippodrome and the lady, looking up and catching the direction of my gaze, said to my mother with the idea of impressing her, 'We have lots of garments come in from across the road. The actors performing at the theatre use us a lot. Your daughter will be lucky enough to meet them when she takes their clothes back.'

She may not have impressed my mother, but she certainly impressed me. I flushed with excitement, thinking of all the wonderful opportunities I would have. Meeting someone like George Formby or Max Miller in person! Then I went redder still with disbelief as I heard my mother saying, 'It's not the sort of job I want my daughter to be doing. Thank

you for your time. Come along Kathie.'

I followed her out into the street, choked up with disappointment and humiliation. 'Why? Why? Why?' That was the only word that went through my mind. What was wrong with the job? I tried to demand an explanation, but all my mother said was, 'One day you will understand. Like your father will tell you later, you would meet too many undesirable people working there. You're much too young and impressionable to come into contact with them.'

Very reluctantly for me, it was back to the juvenile employment office. Thankfully it was not the same girl sitting there. I hated being there at all. I was still smarting about the job by the Hippodrome. Maybe, without realizing it, I was getting bolshie.

When I look back now to my very early years, I wonder why I never exerted myself and stood up for my rights. Maybe something had rubbed off onto me from the women at the clothing factory because from this point onwards, I was not very co-operative and continually gave the wrong answers to questions asked of me. I sensed my mother bristling with disapproval at what she thought was my own stupidity at losing good jobs that were offered me. In my mind's eye I could visualize it all being repeated again at the meal table that evening.

It soon whittled down to the fact that maybe the only place I would get employment now was as a domestic help, but this avenue of thought soon ended up in failure as my mother carefully vetted every house we went to. She either did not like the people, and she definitely did not like them if they had a son a little older than myself, or going the other way, sometimes the would-be employers either wanted me to live in, or, on eying me up and down, they considered me too small to be able to do the work they had in mind. I thought it was time I stuck up for myself so I did venture once in a small voice that I would not mind sleeping in but my father took a very dim view of me and the idea. In fact, he asked me, wasn't I happy at home? In the end, it came down to the same question. Where was I going to work?

Learning A Trade

It seemed to be the end of the line as far as my parents were concerned, and the fact that I appeared to be very unconcerned about the situation must have really galled them. Before they washed their hands of me in utter despair, there was one more position of someone requiring a domestic help to be pursued. Mother set off with a grim 'do or die' expression on her usually placid face and I reluctantly followed. The address was in Harrington Villas where the houses were twice the size of ours and the gardens very large. It took us five minutes to reach there, as it was downhill, and ten minutes to get back home. The redbrick house was smart and looked well cared for and it was run by two elderly sisters, a Mrs O'Mara and a Miss McNally. We were invited into a very comfortable lounge and I geared myself for all the usual questions, but the sisters seemed to be committed to putting us at our ease. They explained that their current

maid was from a foreign country and wished to return home. At least, that was what she originally wanted but at the moment she was having second thoughts about it. Now I felt them eye me up and down and I could have surmised correctly if I had been asked, what their next words would be.

'She is rather small for her age, isn't she?'

Too small for the work that they evidently had in mind. The departing maid was obviously strong and buxom. Before my mother had a chance to defend my wiry strength the unmarried sister asked me if I liked needlework. The sudden change of conversation actually rendered my mother speechless and I was able to answer for myself. We stood in the lounge for quite a while and the outcome of the interview was that Miss McNally offered me a job in her workroom. She explained that it would not pay a lot because I was basically going to learn a trade. She worked at home and was a first-class tailor, making up gentlemen's suits and ladies' costumes.

It was a job of short duration, but in the few weeks that I was there, I loved every minute of it. The atmosphere was homely and friendly and feeling so at ease with them all, maybe I was gullible enough to say more about my home life than I intended. Miss McNally was kindness itself. I was taught the correct way to make buttonholes by hand and turn up trouser leg bottoms with invisible stitches. I was often sent down to the town to a high-class shop in East Street with a delivery of orders. They had no compunction about sending me. I may have left school, but I was still small enough to travel at half fare. Some days her sister would also be working in the room and on these occasions I was often sent into the garden to groom their rather large dog.

I was once asked how much of the seven shillings and sixpence I earned each week was given to me. When I replied, 'Sixpence,' Miss McNally's eyebrows rose a fraction. The next time she paid me, she pressed an extra shilling into my hand, 'This is for you, so mind you keep it. Remember, it's not for your father.'

That was the thing I missed most at first when the job ended. The shilling. With the gradual progression of the war and the shortage of good quality material, slowly the tailoring business ground to a halt. With no orders forthcoming there was no way I could be kept on. Sadly for me, the job of a lifetime came to an end. Whether or not my father understood I never knew, but the way he looked at me, I felt I was to blame in his eyes.

A Year In Exile

With a heavy heart I waited to be marched back to the youth employment office. It did not happen this time. Obviously my parents had discussed the situation between themselves and considered it rather pointless to pursue the domestic help idea. They decided to keep me at home for a year while I grew up, whatever that meant. The idea suited me down to the ground until I heard the rest of it. Instead of going out to do housework for all and sundry, I could do it at home for my mother. I think my father had

become acclimatized to the idea that for the moment I was not going to become a big earner, but at the same time, he made it painfully obvious that neither was I going to get much in the way of pocket money. I did not mind being reliant on my father for every penny I wanted. He did have his generous moments when his pockets were well-lined.

Disregarding the housework, which I genuinely hated, I had plenty of freedom and was able to pursue my love for reading books and drawing. I thought nothing of walking the mile and a half to the library and then back again. I also had another secret ambition and one that was much closer to my heart. I saw myself as a celebrated author of children's books. Most of my pocket money went on buying exercise books. Day after day I would scribble down my ideas, and day after day my father would become furious with me, telling me in no uncertain terms that I was wasting my time.

'You will stop doing this,' he shouted angrily. 'There are more things to life than your silly daydreaming and writing down all that rubbish that fills your head. Just help your mother a bit more in the house.'

When I did not act in accordance with his orders and still went on writing I suddenly started losing all my manuscripts and exercise books. I quickly realized he was picking them up and destroying them so I started to find ingenious places to hide them. It was to no avail. A rebellious streak rose up in me. I was not actively defiant but I grew much more deceitful. I now put my papers under my mattress. It was by far the best way, as I had learnt from experience. It saved lots of arguments and humiliation on my part. When I went to bed at night, I wrote by the light of my torch. You might wonder why I never switched on the light, but I knew a sliver of the light could be seen from beneath the bedroom door. On seeing that, my father would think nothing of storming in and confiscating all my work. I really thought I was being clever at the way I outwitted my parents until one day my mother drew me aside and said quietly, 'You will ruin your eyesight if you continue on as you are going now, and if that doesn't worry you, please try not to get any more ink on the sheets. I have to wash them.'

At that time there was no such thing as a biro. I used a fountain pen and a bottle of ink. I wrote my book for at least another six years, spurred on no doubt because I knew what I was doing was forbidden. My story was never finished, but it has over five hundred pages and now resides at the bottom of a cupboard. It is waiting for me to pluck up the courage and destroy it, but if I do, I feel as though I am destroying part of my life and my father would have finally won.

Life went on as usual. The war did not seem to touch us as much as I expected. There was a temporary lull before the Battle of Britain. At the very beginning we were all keyed up for the worst and faithfully carried our gas masks everywhere. When the air raid sirens wailed out we allowed ourselves to be shepherded into the nearest air raid shelters by vigilant ARP wardens, and sat there in the musty corridors until the all-clear sounded. But as the weeks passed by with nothing happening, when the sirens sounded they were mostly ignored by the people who continued on with their lives.

Sandbags could be seen everywhere, especially around important buildings like the town hall and police station, and pillboxes were erected in prime positions. Windows were criss-crossed with paper to protect against bomb blast.

The beaches had been mined and barricaded with barbed wire, which stretched for miles along the coast. Even the two beautiful piers had been blown up in the middle. I never saw the logic of that demolition. In the pre-war days I had loved to wander on the piers, even though you had to pay to get on. I loved it especially at night when they lit up the sky with a myriad of twinkling lights. Now, all that had gone, along with the gaiety and fun. All we were left with was the blackout.

As the year progressed, the situation altered and the war started to make itself felt. Conscription came to many people between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, and later the ages increased even further. Families lost husbands or sons to the armed forces. Even the women were drafted into the services or factories to make munitions. That sounded exciting to me. Much better than my humdrum existence at home.

Unexpected Visitors

Then things suddenly changed. My boring life took a turn for the better, just by receiving a letter. My aunt and two young cousins who lived in Battersea, London, asked to come and stay with us. They needed a new environment to visit so that they could recuperate in the relative safety of Brighton after some of the horrors of bombing where they lived. You could say it was sod's law. They had only been in our house for one day when the sirens started up. We took this in our stride like we normally did, but our visitors were instantly agitated and wary. Even when we heard the planes droning overhead and ignored them, they were all nervously asking should we not go to a shelter. Then suddenly they were on the floor and scrambling under the table. We were amazed. I never heard the bomb until it exploded, and I have to admit that it shook me up a bit. It was really near and they had heard it falling. It fell a couple of roads above us and demolished a house.

What a welcome to Brighton for them! Thank goodness it was the only big scare they got while living with us. During the period of their visit, I was pleased that I had time on my hands to be able to entertain them by taking them out. It left time for my mother to enjoy her sister's company. A few months later they returned to London, feeling less stressed than they did when they arrived.

Dad Does It Again

Suddenly, I was alone again. I was told my holiday was over and forced back to the housework. It was really hard graft this time. Before long I had a birthday and turned fifteen. My ideas had matured a lot and I liked to think I had grown up: not only in my outlook, but physically as well - there was no way I could travel on a bus at half fare any more. No longer was I the little girl that everyone always passed over as being insignificant. I knew what I wanted now and I was fed up with being at home. I wanted to go out into the world and have a job. To feel as though I was being useful. I did not want to do what everyone else thought I should do. I would not be dictated to. On that I was adamant. I wanted to work in a shop. I felt I would meet a lot of people if I did that.

I felt relieved at making my thoughts known and very thankful for the way my parents accepted my decision, yet I must say I was still surprised my father took it all so calmly. Maybe they had been getting fed up with me at home and did not like to say so. My father was still dogmatic and very much in control of my life. I always considered he was much harder on me than he ever was on my brother. Possibly my brother would have other ideas on that if asked.

For some obscure reason, my father kept tabs on everything I did, and after a visit to the town it was almost like an inquisition directly I walked into the house, 'Where have you been? What have you done? Who have you met? Why are you late?'

I would try unsuccessfully to swallow my irritation. 'You forget I'm grown up now dad - I'm -'

'Oh no you're not my girl,' he would cut in on me brusquely. 'You're just fifteen, so you remember that. Until you are twenty-one you are under my jurisdiction. When I was a lad I would never dare answer my father back like you speak to me...' and so it would go on.

Another lecture, heard so many times before, on how easy he was towards me compared to how hard his life had been as a boy. But I was a girl. Surely girls were treated differently? I retreated as soon as I could to my bedroom and started to daydream. I looked forward to finding myself a job. It was almost like an adventure, doing something by myself - finding employment that had not been first vetted by my father. Yet old habits die hard. A few days later I was roused from my reverie by him breezing into the kitchen with a self-satisfied smile on his face. Once he had my attention, he announced casually, 'I've found a nice little job for you in a family grocers. Get yourself ready because you've got an interview in half an hour.'

Middletons

I put my book down slowly. All my previous aplomb vanished and I realized I still lacked the nerve to disobey him. Too late I recalled that I had emphatically stated that I wanted to work in a shop. Now he had unexpectedly taken me at my word before I had said what type of shop I had in mind. It certainly was not a grocer's. I slipped on my coat and my mother gave me an encouraging smile.

As I walked down the road with him I willed myself not to say anything. He was in such a good mood that I was wary of upsetting him. Not that I could get a word in edgeways. He swamped my mind with a description of the place we were heading for and long before we arrived there, I felt there could not be a more perfect place in paradise itself.

The shop was not that far away. It was situated just off Preston Circus, a little way up Clyde Road. To be precise, it was on the corner of Clyde Road and Gerard Street - number thirty-one; Middletons, the family grocers. I knew a moment of panic as I gazed at the uninteresting facade of the building before me, boasting of two big windows, one in each road. Neither window showed a very elegant display of goods. It was all so quiet. There was not a person to be seen. It was so unlike the bustle and activity at Preston Circus, I felt really disappointed. To me it felt like being in suburbia. I nearly jumped when I felt the touch of my father's hand on my arm and we pushed open the door. An antiquated bell above our heads announced our arrival.

My first impression of Mr and Mrs Middleton was that they both appeared to be elderly. They reminded me of my own parents, except, as I later found out, their temperament was very different. I do not recall much about that interview. My father conducted most of it while I stood beside him. I felt it was more of an inspection since Mrs Middleton hardly took her eyes off me. I must have passed it A1 because I was told to report at the shop promptly at eight o'clock on the following morning and to bring an overall with me. That was very important because they could not supply one.

Monday morning found me hovering on their doorstep. I was feeling decidedly nervous. It was not a very auspicious beginning because if I had bothered to try the door, I would have found it open. Instead, I knocked persistently until someone came and a rather vexed lady in the form of Mrs Middleton told me that in future I would enter by the back gate into the yard. In that first week I was being fed so much information that I felt like a wet sponge. It was coming at me faster than I could take it in.

First and foremost I must remember that the customers are valued friends, to be treated courteously and politely and always referred to by name. I was to familiarize myself with the ration book and remember who was registered in the shop. There should be a smile on my face at all times, not like it was now, and on no account was I to be rude. The shop was to be kept scrupulously clean and always dusted and well stocked up and I should remember exactly where each commodity was kept. They did not want me searching around like some imbecile when they asked me to get something for them.

Lastly and more important to them, under no circumstances was I to take money from anyone unless I was being supervised by either one of them.

After two months I was wondering where I was going. I rarely served a customer so this made learning names rather difficult. The ration book was not such a problem because during the war every man, woman, child and baby had one. Food such as butter, bacon, cheese, eggs, sugar, tea, jam and meat were in short supply. This necessitated the ration book, enabling everyone to obtain a fair share of these goods. Each week as these items were purchased, the ration book was deleted accordingly, and all I basically had to learn was the correct way to do this.

The shop was not only a food store, it also dealt with hardware. It sold firewood and paraffin. Filling up the motley assortment of cans was always my job and I disliked it because I hated the smell of paraffin on my fingers. As I walked through the yard of a morning, I would see all the cans lined up and waiting for my attention. Most of them had a label attached so they did not go astray.

All the weighing up of merchandise was also my allotted job. Everything came in bulk so I had a choice of commodities to keep me busy. The scales were regularly checked over by Weights and Measures for complete accuracy. Mrs Middleton was always on my back. I had the feeling I fell very short of her expectations. For the life of me, I could not work out where I was going wrong. She would come up behind me on many occasions and check up on whatever it was I was weighing at that particular moment. It was unnerving the way she suddenly appeared. She would invariably find fault and I think it delighted her to do so. Mr Middleton was so different. He was even-tempered and placid, and never upset, even if I had done something wrong. The harder I tried to be efficient, the more sharp and volatile she became. I soon accepted that this was going to be the way things would be in the future.

The days she was unavoidably detained in the house adjacent to the shop were the days I came into contact with the customers and was able to speak to them. On other occasions, I loved to fill the shelves and dust around the windows and listen to what was being said. It felt almost a privilege to become involved in other people's lives: to commiserate with their misfortunes and to take pleasure in their anticipation of going off to the hop fields in Kent for their annual family holiday. I could not believe that one family of ten children could spend their week's holiday by just picking hops and getting paid for it. Yet so many families went year after year to the hop fields. It was like a reunion of old friends when they got there and they loved it. The brewery got their hops picked for next to nothing and in return, the pickers had a good time in the evenings. They came home at the end of the week, tired and happy but with stained hands. You knew without asking that they were going back again next year.

Not a lot of traffic passed by the shop, which was disappointing to me. It was so far off the beaten track of the main road that one never saw any of the numerous convoys that passed through the rest of Brighton on a regular basis. Yet one day a platoon of soldiers

miraculously marched by and halted just a few yards beyond the confines of the shop. I dare say they were lost as this was such an unusual occurrence. I managed to convince Mr Middleton that the pavement outside needed sweeping off, and the wolf whistles I received after starting my self-imposed task made Mrs Middleton storm out and order me back to the shop and weigh up a sack of sugar. I enjoyed the job in spite of hardly ever pleasing Mrs Middleton. I gained a lot of experience and was very proficient at cutting butter and cooking fat into neat little packages, and removing bones from a side of bacon without leaving too much bacon attached. They were so clean that even Mrs Middleton could not fault them, and believe me, she tried; but I never received any praise.

My sixteenth birthday came and went, and my father, who still relieved me of my pay packet every Saturday and administered to me my pocket money, could contain himself no longer. 'On your birthday you should have had a pay rise,' he stated ominously. 'Would you mind asking them where it is in case they have forgotten?'

I was dismayed. I hated looking for trouble. 'I can't do that,' I replied, utterly aghast, but I did.

When the opportunity arose and I found Mr Middleton alone, I mentioned it to him. He never said a word, but the rise was duly added in my next pay packet, tuppence. I was informed by the lady herself that when they employed me they paid above the rates. Now I was in line with any other shop girl of my age.

Dad Does It Yet Again

This explanation did not worry me, but my father was furious. So much so that two weeks later, he entered the shop where mercifully I was alone for a few moments. Looking very self-satisfied he told me to go for an interview at the International Stores along Preston Road directly I left the shop at six o'clock. The International would be closed but I was expected and the manageress would wait for me there. As he walked out of the shop, he added over his shoulder that he had told them all about me so I need not worry about a thing. That in itself made me wary. Knowing my father like I did, I felt extremely uneasy. He may have been strict and dictatorial with me, but when speaking of me to other people he could overdo the praise and exaggerate my achievements with a very plausible tongue. I waited for six o'clock in nervous anticipation. I began to feel fanciful. When Mr and Mrs Middleton spoke together very softly, just beyond the shop doorway, I felt sure they knew I was going after another job.

The International Stores

It was not far for me to walk to 82 Preston Road, as the road started at Preston Circus. You could say it was the continuation of London Road, leaving Brighton and heading past Preston Park to Preston Village. It was a distance of five hundred yards to the shop. As I approached the International Stores I took stock of the surrounding area. For

a start, it was on the main road. There would be lots of passing trade if I should be lucky enough to get this job my father had so obviously heard about from somewhere. The huge viaduct towered above me where the trains passed overhead, going to Lewes and towns further afield like Eastbourne and Hastings. On the opposite side of the road was the old Preston Road School, no longer in use as a school. During the war years I am sure it was something to do with the military.

The shop itself had a shuttered look, with all the blinds down, but a sliver of light escaped from round the edge of the door conveying that someone was still inside. Other than that it did not tell me anything, so drawing in a deep breath for courage, I pressed the bell and waited. I heard the murmur of voices from within and firm footsteps heading towards the door. So much for just seeing the manageress, she was obviously not alone. As the footsteps halted and the door swung open, the voices from within were suddenly silent.

Molly Mitchell stood framed in the entrance and she surveyed me with critical eyes. Molly Mitchell was the manageress. She was not all that tall and looked well-covered under her white overall. One could call her plump. She looked stern, but I was to find out later that it was her official face. I summoned up a smile and introduced myself. This was acknowledged with a slight nod. Her voice was neutral as she stood aside and invited me in.

In that instant I was aware of several things. First was the size of the store. Middletons shop could have been put in the space at least three times over. On my left, white tiles gleamed under the artificial lighting, and a marble counter, surmounted by clean shiny glass, ran the entire length of the wall. On my right, an equally long counter of highly-polished dark wood was backed by fixtures of the same colour which rose to the ceiling. It all looked very impressive to me after what I had been used to. At the back of the shop stood a group of silent people, all surveying me with avid curiosity. How many, I have no idea. I tried not to make any eye contact with them as I was led in their direction.

Molly Mitchell stopped in front of them all and took on a stance with her hands on her ample hips. Her authority was very much in evidence as she spoke to them. 'Right you lot. The show is over. Now get yourselves out of here pronto. Anyone I still see here in three minutes' time will find themselves working again.'

The reaction was almost instantaneous and there was a general rush to the shop door. In less than the given time the door only slammed once and I found myself alone with the manageress at last. She apologized about the other people but I could see a smile twitching at the corners of her mouth. At least she thought I was worthy of an explanation. It was then that the full impact of what my father had said and done on his earlier visit was made known. I coloured up with embarrassment, but Molly Mitchell evidently thought it was hilarious. She did not spare my feelings as she said, 'You should have seen the way he stood here as he sang your praises. Told us how

remarkable you were. Said you were absolutely brilliant in your job and could do anything you were asked. He also said,' here she paused for a moment to control her features, '...he also said that we would be really foolish not to employ you. Well Miss Groves,' now the smile really did broaden across her face, 'as you have seen for yourself, nearly all the staff wanted to wait and see wonder girl arrive.'

How I wished the floor would open up and swallow me, but I had no time to feel embarrassed. Molly Mitchell was suddenly efficient as she took down all my particulars for the second time. She put me at my ease with her brisk geniality. Needless to say, I was offered the job, but as a grocery assistant because at that moment there were no vacancies on the provisions counter.

Experienced staff were always hard to get hold of. I would like to think that I got the job on my own merit and that it had nothing to do with my father, but for months afterwards I was never allowed to forget it. The hard part was giving my notice in at Middletons the next day. I felt sure they were expecting it; maybe they were even hoping for it. Mrs Middleton just sniffed on being told. 'You mark my words miss, you will not last long in a big store. The work will be beyond your capability. You will never stand the pace. It will be no good you wishing you were back here.'

I added nothing further to the conversation. There was no way I wanted to be back there. I left without any emotional 'goodbyes' or 'sorry to see you go'. As I walked down Clyde Road for the last time, I felt this sense of freedom. I had no regrets whatsoever.

There were many benefits to my new job. It was definitely not so far for me to walk to as Middletons. Furthermore, I had many different ways of travelling to work. If I left home with plenty of time to spare, I much preferred to walk through Preston Park. During these years of 'Dig for Victory', a large part of the park had been turned into allotments and they were diligently cared for. People were becoming very self-sufficient. Round the outer edges of the park the huge beech trees grew together thickly and made a green tunnel, which during the summer months was a very pleasant place to walk. The canopy of leaves overhead also hid the armaments of the military convoys that continuously arrived in Brighton. The large uninhabited houses that flanked the road around the park were used as billets for a great number of soldiers. This happened not only around the park, but also in any road where there was empty property. The army commandeered it for their battalions. I saw many units come and go as the months of the war dragged by, and the last of these were the Welsh Guards, who stayed until D-Day and then vanished overnight.

Another benefit about working at the International Stores was that the hours were so much better, for starting in the morning at least. Instead of starting at eight o'clock like I used to, the time was now twenty past eight. The shop opened at half past eight, but the staff were expected to be ready by then, dressed in the traditional International uniform waiting for the first customer. At one o'clock, the shop shut until two fifteen for dinner, and closed again at five thirty in the evening. What time we left after that was really very

variable. Wednesday was half day so it was early closing. After one o'clock the day was our own. The same as with Sunday, there was definitely no working on the Sabbath. The staff all went home for dinner with the exception of Molly Mitchell because she lived above the shop with her mother. There was no special entrance for them. They walked through the shop to reach their flat overhead. It was a known fact that all managers lived over the shop in which they worked.

The overalls were another benefit. No longer did I have to wear the crossover ones that my mother favoured. The International supplied and laundered their own every week and as an added bonus, they were stylish. The ladies wore smart, belted coats that buttoned all the way down the front and the men and apprentices had short white jackets with a tie-on white apron. The cashier did not fall under this jurisdiction and wore her own clothes. So long as she did not display any airs and graces, we ignored the fact that she was allowed to be different.

Just out of sight, at the rear of the shop, was a stairway going up to the flat above. At the top of this flight of stairs was a large landing. This space was allocated for the use of the female staff. Although it was not official, they were also allowed to use the toilet facilities in the flat. The male members descended to the cellar and made use of a few nails knocked into the wood beneath the stairs and hung their clothes there. Their toilet was out in the back yard. This was so disgusting that in this present day and age it would have been condemned as unhygienic. They never complained, but that's men for you.

From the very first moment of my employment at this store I was far happier and contented than I had ever been before. There was no under current amongst the seven-strong staff and we all pulled our weight together. The shop was busy. It had many more customers than Middletons ever had, and I was never controlled as to whom I was allowed to serve. I was also amazed at the amount of customers from my previous employment that came to the International as well. They were also amazed to see me. Obviously they had ration books registered at different shops. These customers were not liked so much as those completely committed to one shop. We knew them as scroungers. They were out for all they could get. Taking the best of everything in short supply from every shop they were registered at. It did not always work well for them because we had a system of our own on how to allocate these little extras to everyone fairly.

Once I got used to where everything was kept and how much it cost, I enjoyed serving and having the one-to-one contact with the customers. We totalled up their purchases by using our pencil on anything handy that one could write on. Often it was something they had just bought which had ample clear space for our needs. It was not really permitted for us to do this by Head Office, but we did. If the customer objected, we would brightly tell them that they could now check up on our arithmetic when they got home.

We would then write down the amount owing onto a numbered slip of paper, which the customer in her turn would take to the cash desk and pay. It was not compulsory to do it immediately. They often went across to the provisions counter and did some more shopping, thus receiving another slip of paper. Then they would pay both together. The numbered slips of paper were in two colours, one for the grocery counter and another for the provisions. The slips of paper were numbered so that the cashier could tell immediately if one was missing. Most of the time when the cashier called out for it, it was still in the shop, but sometimes it was not. Someone had really walked off without paying. This was fun for the person who had served them. It was an excuse to dash out into the street and find them. It depended on who went out as to how long they stayed out.

There was also great relaxation in taking a customer's order for delivery. This not only gave one ample opportunity for gossiping, but often got one out of the thankless jobs like weighing up soap flakes. With a little bit of luck, and conniving, the job could be finished before you returned to it. No one liked weighing up soap flakes. They flew up into the air, got up your nose and made you sneeze and your eyes run. They were also very difficult to seal tightly in a bag.

When the Weights and Measures inspector came to check on the many scales in the shop, for some reason I was chuffed to see that it was the same person who went to Middletons. It was almost like meeting up with an old friend. As he walked with such a pronounced limp, his disability had automatically discharged him from the armed forces. I think he checked the scales in all the shops over the Brighton area. Normally it was just a routine job, but on occasions, a scale or weight showed up a defect which meant the entire stock we had previously weighed up had to be done all over again. They were very hot on being accurate, especially if goods were weighed either net or gross. If you were weighing net, you took the wrapping into consideration, whereas if you were weighing gross, the wrapping was included in the general overall weight. That was one of the drawbacks with weighing up stock.

On the good side was when you were weighing up items like sultanas or other edible commodities. It was absolutely prohibited to consume the stock, but it was amazing how many times you bent down to adjust your shoe or straighten your stocking. It was at times like these that Molly Mitchell would suddenly fire a question at you, and the unfortunate victim would raise a very red face and splutter into their hand. We all knew that the veiled remark of 'I hope you're not coming down with a cold,' was a warning threat to stop us from consuming the sultanas.

Before long food became more and more difficult to obtain, so the points system came into being. Nearly all the canned items were on points: so many points for whatever it was you were buying. Some items were a lot more than others. The government allocated everyone with a number of points to spend each month, and when they ran out, you had to wait until the next month before you could buy any more. It was our job to cut out these points from the ration book as they were used. These same points had

to be counted every week and be made ready for the food office. Molly Mitchell usually did this job on a Saturday afternoon, but often one of us would help her. This was about one of the only times we could sit down.

Breaking The Rules

We had no time allotted to us for tea breaks, but that did not mean we never had one. It was just not official. In winter, we often started the day with a steaming cup of Oxo. Right at the back of the shop, where the steep wooden stairs descended to the cellar below, the shop fixtures were built up very high. They were stacked with tins and display materials, and effectively hid us from the eyes of the customers. We had a peephole and in this concealed spot we stood and drank our tea. It depended on who made it as to whether we enjoyed it. There was another reason why we liked it there. We could see who entered the shop. Rightly or wrongly, if we saw it was a person likely to be aggressive or a scrounger, and noticed that there was no one in authority around, we kept him or her waiting until we had drunk our tea. At one point though, we got a little too daring for our own good. One of us would dash out to Gigins bakery shop, which was only a few yards along the road from us, and buy a bag of cakes. We enjoyed pooling our money into this venture. This went on for quite a few times until suddenly Molly Mitchell came down on us like a ton of bricks. She reminded us that we were here to work and not have a tea party. 'Furthermore,' she added in the same breath, with an impassive expression on her face, 'where is my cake?'

Mrs Harding was the lady who ran the provisions counter. She was a war widow. Her husband had been killed while on active service in the Navy, but that was before she came to work at the International. She was softly spoken and would often reminisce about what she and her husband used to do before the war started. This would be during some of our slack periods and usually Molly Mitchell was with us. We legitimately had nothing else to do. All of us girls enjoyed these sessions because none of us were married.

I was very willing to help Mrs Harding and I was encouraged to do so by the manageress. At this point of time, I had no knowledge that she was thinking of leaving. I quickly learnt all the things that the Middletons refused to let me do. I had not realized how many until I came here. I used the bacon machine as though I had been working with it all my life. I acquired the knack of patting up the butter. It was so much easier to weigh it up that way, rather than using a knife like I had previously done. Then I was shown the correct way to clean off the butter slab after I had finished using it. A wash down with hot water first, followed by cold and rubbing in salt and leaving the butter pats in a bucket of clean water. Molly Mitchell was a little sceptical when I said that I could clean the bacon machine without cutting myself. She made sure I was aware of all the safety regulations before I even started, but need not have worried. Basically it was common sense, and I was very careful because I had no wish to lose my fingers.

Promotion

Two months later I was established in charge of the provisions counter, as Mrs Harding had departed. Molly Mitchell had no qualms in offering the position to me. She felt I was more than capable to run that counter. If there was any jealousy from the other women, it was soon squashed. It was obvious that such feelings were unfounded because none of them had the slightest inclination to skin cheeses or bone bacon. In fact, they thought the provisions counter was rather messy and entailed too much scrubbing down. For myself, I enjoyed the space and, other than Molly Mitchell, I was my own boss. The current apprentice was already trained and out of his apprenticeship. There were only the two of us and we worked together amicably, although technically speaking, I was in charge. This was a fact I did not push.

It was such a totally different way of working that I almost convinced myself that I had a new job. The provisions counter was airy and light and not so enclosed as the grocery one. The shop window was easy to see out of because it was not blocked off by the cash desk, and the counter itself was not cluttered up by stacks of canned meat or tins of fish. In due course, the position I had left vacant on the grocery counter was filled again, but very soon afterwards, the boy I worked with decided he wanted to do something different with his life. I believe he acquired a transfer to the main branch of the International Stores, which was along Western Road: a store much larger and more regimental than ours. We could get away with murder, but I doubt very much that they could. I have the feeling that our departed lad did not stay there.

This left another vacancy, one to be filled by a new apprentice, and before long, one arrived from the juvenile employment office. So my life took root. From then onwards, I took over a man's job. There were no men to do it because they had all been called up. This gave me a chance I would never have had in peacetime and at last I felt as though I was doing something worthwhile. I lost count eventually of how many apprentices I trained before leaving myself.

Making decisions for myself gave me a great feeling of authority that I had never experienced before in my whole life. It was now up to me to decide how many rashers I was going to lay out on the marble counter. I supervised what stock was needed in the shop and when a cheese was to be skinned. There was also the organizing and ordering of fresh, cooked meats, which included liver sausage and black pudding. The International Stores, or our branch at least, did not have any refrigeration, so each night these items were carefully wrapped and placed in a cardboard box and the apprentice would walk to the nearest butcher's shop where it would be put into their refrigerator. Each morning it was his first task to go and collect it. Molly Mitchell would only intervene if she thought something was amiss.

Wartime Brighton

If ever I had a spare moment, my eyes were glued to the window where the world went by. Lorry loads of soldiers drove past, shouting and waving to the pedestrians. I doubt very much that any of them had seen any enemy action. They looked to me like young conscripts, and at that moment, the war seemed to be nothing but fun.

Many soldiers also walked past on foot, especially those that were billeted just round the corner in Springfield Road. If they caught a glimpse of you looking out as they passed, they sometimes came into the shop with saucy requests, such as, 'Can we get any housewives in here?'

Molly Mitchell took it all in her stride. I had never known anyone to flummox her. She would march down to the door on purposeful feet and say calmly, 'OK boys, I'll be round tonight after we are shut. What number do you live at?'

The soldiers were not daunted. They pointed to me because I was more easily seen than anyone else, 'Can you bring her along as well, Grandma?'

I coloured up to a brilliant red as Molly Mitchell said wickedly, 'Sure thing. That's no bother at all, but you're in for a big surprise. She will have her dad in tow.'

That was the end of a promising acquaintance as they turned disgustedly and walked swiftly from the shop. Molly Mitchell turned to me with a grin, 'I bet your father would be proud of me if he knew the way I looked after you.'

My father had mellowed slightly towards me since I had been working at the International Stores. Not in everything, I was not that lucky. He was still filling my head with dire warnings about the opposite sex, but he did not mind my being out in the evening, providing I was always home on the last trolleybus, which left the Old Steine at nine o'clock. So far, I had always managed to catch it, even if it was full to capacity or standing room only. Usually I sat upstairs and there was so much cigarette smoke it was like peering through a fog. Sometimes it was hard to breathe if you were not a smoker yourself and such a relief to get off. As I walked up the road in the blackout, I could hear my father at the front gate. His excuse for being there was that he was putting out the milk bottles, but even I saw through that one. He was really hoping to catch me walking out with someone so that he could play the heavy father, but that he would never do because if anyone had walked me home, I would have made sure that I left them long before I turned into our road.

When the iron railings were requisitioned from outside our house at the beginning of the war, my father felt as though he had lost his privacy, so he planted a privet hedge. As the years went by, he allowed it to grow so tall before he trimmed it, that it became a landmark in Lowther Road. No one from the road could see our house windows, but neither could we see out. It must have been a great boost to our blackout but a sore

point for the ARP warden who had to peer around our hedge to make sure we had no chinks of light showing. The trees that lined our road were also unattended because there was no one employed to cut them back. For the whole duration of the war the branches grew freely. In the end they became so long you could lean out of the upstairs windows and grab a handful of leaves.

The Customer Is Always Right

Life fell into a routine and of a morning I always walked the quickest way to work through the roads. Of an afternoon it was usually through the park as this was more relaxing to me. The staff usually congregated on the shop doorstep, waiting for Molly Mitchell to open the door and let them in. Work also fell into a familiar pattern. The orders that had been taken over the counter now had to be made up ready for delivery the following morning. We did not own a delivery van ourselves, but borrowed the van and driver from the main shop twice a week.

Other than that, the orders were delivered on the tradesman's bicycle by one of the apprentices. It was doing simple jobs like this that determined when we got away at night. Every order had to be completed before we left the shop. My part of the order was always finished first, but that did not mean I could go home. Only when the shop blinds were lowered could I start clearing up the provision counter and getting it washed down.

In the meantime, there was always the infuriating possibility of someone coming in at the last moment. We had several customers likely to do that, and they did it time after time. Just as the blinds were being lowered, one would walk in through the door, for all the world as though she had timed it. We would not mind so much if she looked apologetic but no, she would breeze in with an insincere smile and say, 'Oh good, I've just made it. I am so lucky to find you open. Now, who is going to take my order? Look at you all waiting for me.'

While Molly Mitchell looked on, no one dared to glower at the customer. The shop remained open until she left, and believe me she took her time. In that interval, several other people often walked in as well. Normally, none of us minded what time we got away. It was only when you had something planned for the evening that it became irritating, especially if you were going to the pictures.

Entertainment

The cinemas and dance-halls were the main form of entertainment during the war, but for me the cinema won hands-down. On my half day and on a Sunday, I would always be queuing up outside one of the numerous cinemas in Brighton. Unlike the present day, performances were continuous, and it was not unheard of for a person to sit inside and see the programme round twice. I was very guilty of that. Furthermore, the programme generally consisted of two films: the main one usually classed as an 'A' and the supporting film a 'B'. Along with these were the Gaumont or Pathe News and a

cartoon. The queues outside were often endless, but they were also adequately entertained by one-man bands and numerous other buskers.

I have to admit though, I would have loved to dance, but I always felt like a fish out of water in a dance-hall. The virtual wallflower. I suppose my main reason for feeling this way was because I considered myself as being too tall. I had a dislike for men shorter than me. All the other girls were not only vivacious, but petite and heavily made-up. According to my father they were asking for trouble, but he never elucidated as to what sort of trouble. He went berserk if I experimented with lipstick and powder, followed by scathing remarks such as 'making myself look like a tart' to 'ruining my complexion'. In the end I just did not bother to use it. Even on the occasions when I did, I felt as though I was over-painted and everyone I passed was staring at me, so I suppose some of his words had rubbed off on me. I did wonder how long he wanted me to retain that unsophisticated girlish look.

What's in A Name?

When clothing coupons came into use, the government offered workers in trade and industry supplementary coupons for their overalls, or any such covering that was needed to protect their own clothing. This was so in the International Stores and a detailed form was made out and signed by the applicant. Molly Mitchell handed me out one of these forms to sign.

'Just fill it in and sign it please,' she said carelessly as she passed by to do something else. Without really stopping to think, I answered, 'You don't want my full name for this, do you?'

She was arrested at once by my words and I now had her attention fully focused on me. She may have been passing by originally but now she halted and changed her mind, her face avid with curiosity. 'Of course I do. It is official you know. What's the matter? Are you ashamed of it?'

I glanced down at the form held in my hand, to the blank spot where it said "Name in full" and I wondered very briefly what would happen to me if I falsified my name. My thoughts must have been expressed on my face, because her brown eyes crinkled up with devilment as she added, 'You're not a Fanny or a Matilda are you? Come on Kathie, just sign it. No one else is going to see it except me and the bigwigs up in Head Office, and they won't care what you're called.'

I was really incapable of giving a coherent answer. Already one or two members of staff were beginning to linger nearby. I thought of the name I disliked more than anything else in the world and hated my parents for giving it to me. I picked the pen up and filled in the form. So it was I signed the name that was given to me for no other reason than that an aunt of mine emigrated to Australia and they wanted to keep it in the family.

Molly Mitchell whisked the form away from me before it was barely dry. My mouth went dry. Why had I believed her? I knew in my bones I was about to be humiliated because as she glanced at it she laughed uproariously.

'Oh gather round everyone,' she chuckled, 'I want you all to meet our new assistant as from today. Allow me to present to you, not only our wonder girl, but big Bertha. From now on she will be known as Bertha.' Some male voice in the background said helpfully, 'Big Bertha was a gun, wasn't it?'

Molly Mitchell walked off, shaking with mirth and flourishing the offending form in her hand. That was all she said, but it was enough. From that day onwards I was known to all and sundry as Bertha. A lot of staff and a lot of customers passed through that shop in the fourteen years I worked there. Even to this day I still meet people who shout out, 'Is that you Bertha?' and I just cringe.

Apricot Brandy

My first Christmas at the shop was unforgettable. I was introduced to Apricot Brandy. Up until then I had never even heard of it. My father did not go in for drinks. After the store was shut on Christmas Eve and all the cleaning accomplished, Molly Mitchell brought out all the little goodies she had saved during the year. Some cream biscuits, which the general public had not seen for a very long time, and a half bottle of Apricot Brandy. We all gathered together at the rear of the shop where Molly Mitchell had her desk, and we celebrated Christmas in style. It was all done with finesse because she brought down the glasses from her flat above and we toasted one another with them. Her mother did not come down because she was very old. Molly Mitchell was very cautious about how much I drank, explaining that it was a liqueur and it was only meant to be sipped, but I am sure, deep down, she was more wary of my father's reaction to his daughter drinking. I loved the drink and it must have shown. I even had two glasses. Molly Mitchell was now really concerned about how I was going to get home since no one else lived my way of the world. I just laughed it off and said I was fine, I could still walk a straight line if she wanted to know, but she was serious, or rather, I thought she was until she added, 'It's not you I'm worried about. It's those poor soldiers round the corner that you're going to be passing by tonight. I think I had better come with you to make sure they are safe.'

We all laughed. It was easy to laugh when you knew you had two free days ahead. We all wished each other a 'Merry Christmas' and as we passed out through the door into the blackness beyond, we added, 'See you in two days' time.'

After that, we celebrated Christmas Eve in the same way over the following years. Usually an old member of the staff had left and a new one had taken their place, but the procedure was the same. No matter how miserable the war made people feel, I loved this time of the year. Christmas time was rewarding in the shop. The one-to-one contact we had with the customers made many of them our friends and at this time of the year,

a lot of them showed their appreciation to us for all our concern and help to them through the year. Often they gave us a small gift when we served them. Sometimes it was money. Whatever it was, during this period I often earned my wages all over again.

Are You Open, Dear?

In 1943 the most memorable thing in my whole life occurred. It was the nearest to death I had ever come. It started off as a normal day and the routine in the shop was unchanged. It was quite a pleasant day really and I was feeling on top of the world as I re-arranged the uncovered bacon rashers before me. The sirens had sounded minutes earlier and as usual we took no notice of them. The shop was empty of customers. We heard the planes droning overhead and disregarded them also, until we heard the scream of the bomb falling. Just as though we were all tethered to the same strand of elastic, and a hidden hand gave it a yank, as one person, we all made a mad dash to the rear of the shop. For what purpose, I have no idea, except that we all thought there was safety at the top of the cellar stairs. The only real safety would have been from flying glass. Anyway, the back of the shop was as far as we got.

The explosion that followed was tremendous, and to this day I can still feel the impact of the blast on my chest. A roar and shattering of glass followed instantaneously. We huddled together and it seemed like an eternity before anyone dared to move. The air was full of choking dust, and as everything subsided back to normality, we very shakily ventured back to the main part of the shop. Our legs felt as though they consisted of nothing but jelly. A lot of the female staff were near to hysteria and tears ran down their faces.

We viewed the destruction with horrified eyes. The shop windows had imploded leaving us open to the elements. The bacon rashers, under their covering of dust, were speared with splinters of glass and nearly everything had blown free from the shelves. As I made my way to the shop door, I noticed cans of food rolling across the pavement into the gutter. Across the road, there was a gaping hole in the viaduct, and a few soldiers were emerging from the old school building. The air was still thick with dust as the rubble subsided into an ungainly heap.

Our branch of the International was licensed to sell wines and spirits, and Molly Mitchell made her way to the fixtures that held these expensive items. Amidst the carnage and destruction, it was unbelievable to find that these bottles remained intact. She sent the apprentice to the cellar to bring up some clean cups. She emphasized the word 'clean' and she removed a bottle of brandy from the shelf. The apprentice was a little reluctant to go. I am sure he thought the shop was going to collapse on top of him, but he decided to go rather than let anyone think he was scared. With the cups now assembled before her on a hastily-wiped counter, she opened the bottle and gave us all a drink, which she insisted that we all consume.

Then she went to the entrance and called to the soldiers to come across. They were a

lot more shaken up than us because they had been a lot nearer to the explosion. They shambled slowly across, supporting one of their comrades who had blood pouring down his face. They were really grateful for the brandy. Then Molly Mitchell took the Canadian soldier up to her flat and gave him simple first-aid by placing a plaster over the nasty gash above his eye. The Canadian soldiers had been doing a course in the school building when the bomb came down.

One very important question remained to be asked. How was the empty bottle of brandy going to be explained away to head office? Molly Mitchell had the answer to that as, without hesitation, she promptly smashed the bottle and threw it down amongst the debris waiting to be cleared up.

I moved back out to the pavement and decided that someone must collect up the cans of food. As I bent down to retrieve the first tin, a little old lady picked her way diligently over the rubble and broken glass and said to me, 'Are you open, dear?'

I nearly laughed, but controlled myself in time. She was so serious. By now the police and Civil Defence were on the spot. They cordoned off the area to keep the usual sightseers at bay. This included a very indignant old lady who protested loudly she needed some shopping. She was not one of our customers anyway.

Now that only authorized people could come near us, Molly Mitchell sent us all home for an early dinner break. There was nothing to be done at the moment, and it would relieve our relatives to see us all in one piece. My mother's reaction was very disappointing. All she said was, 'Why are you home so early? I haven't got your dinner ready yet.'

As a matter of interest, many years after the war was over, the Canadian soldier who had been cut over the eye, made a pilgrimage back to the shop. He looked such a different person in civilian clothes. He was very sad at not being able to see Molly Mitchell, because for years he had always remembered her kindness to him on the day of the bomb. He had now lost the sight in his eye. I could not fix up a date for him to meet her because he was leaving England later that evening.

Part-Time Conscript

Eventually I reached the age of eighteen, which was not the age of majority then, and I can assure you I was nothing like an eighteen-year-old of today. I did not celebrate with a party. It was no different to any other day.

I shall never forget the day I went out with one of my working colleagues into a pub in West Street. She was sixteen and I was the only one who was old enough to go in, not that I could prove it. Jackie was the epitome of a Hollywood film star and attracted the men like bees round a honeypot. The landlord served her without a bat of his eyelid, but me he unceremoniously threw out of the bar as being under age. I was so indignant and mortified, mainly because she stayed inside and had her drink, while I waited

impatiently outside. We were not a couple that were suited to become friends, but because my father had forbidden me to go around with her, it only added fuel to the fire and I continued to see her behind his back. She was not really suitable at the International and Molly Mitchell was not the only one who could hardly tolerate her. Eventually she left the shop and slowly the friendship between us fizzled out.

Unlike the men, there was no danger of me being called up - although secretly I would have loved that to have happened. The only way I could have got into the forces was to volunteer and I could not do that because I knew I was unable to face my mother's reproachful looks for even contemplating such an action. Even the censure from my father was bad enough. He had a very poor opinion of girls in the armed forces. Anyway, I was perfectly happy in my job, and although working in a food store during the war years exempted me from call up, I was still eligible to become a part-time conscript in the Fire Service, Civil Defence or Red Cross. After my birthday I was forced to choose, so I plumped for the Red Cross.

For the first four weeks I was given training at the school building in Circus Street. I have the feeling the Civil Defence made this building their headquarters. These training sessions were to ensure that I could give first-aid to any casualty I came across, and I attended them directly I finished work. In the shop I was suddenly promoted to 'Sister Bertha'. At these lectures I met Betty Walls and we soon became very firm friends, especially as we shared the same sense of humour and we were often reduced to uncontrollable giggles. She worked in the fuel office. She was not only the same age as me, but she lived nearby and we ended up on the same first-aid post.

Once these lectures were over, we sat for a compulsory examination, both verbal and practical, to make sure the initial training had given us enough knowledge to cope in an emergency. Sitting for this exam was really daunting and I would hazard a guess that there were about fifteen of us. For a while, Betty and I were parted while the questions were asked individually, but we came together again for the practical part. All of us were herded into a large hall, which looked for all the world as though it had been hit by a massive disaster. Obviously the casualties were volunteers and they were scattered around the room laying perfectly still, moaning quietly or thrashing about with hysteria. Two very official people directed each of us to a specific casualty and we were told to determine what was wrong with them and to treat them. My victim, I have to call him that because he was, was half-supported by the wall and showed no visible signs of injury. Once he saw me standing by him, he closed his eyes and every so often gave a realistic groan. I bent down and asked rather tentatively if he was in great pain, and he replied, 'No, but it sounds rather good, don't you think?'

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Betty bending over the inert form of a woman and was suddenly thankful that my patient could speak. He was actually feeling a little fed up. All he wanted was for the session to be over so that he could go to the pub for a drink before closing time. I ignored the cryptic remark of 'You can come with me if I'm still alive by then.' So he was very helpful to me and I had the feeling he had medical

knowledge of his own. Only a complete fool would not have been able to diagnose him after that. He was also useful when I started to apply the bandage. He muttered under his breath, 'That needs to be a little tighter,' and, 'I should put that a little higher if I were you.'

At last the evening was over. I passed the examination and so did Betty. I should think that everyone else there passed as well. Two months later we were issued with a certificate from the St John Ambulance Association, to acknowledge our ability to cope in any disaster. We were now issued with a uniform and a tin hat and directed to our nearest first-aid post. This was at the junction of Ditchling Road and Upper Hollingdean Road. The long, dark, wooden hut was a fully equipped first-aid depot with beds, medical supplies and a kitchen. It was situated on the site of Brighton's abattoir, the entrance being in Florence Place. Here we were expected to spend one night each week, from eight o'clock in the evening to six o'clock the next morning. We had to be alert in case there was an invasion or bombing raid. Both Betty and I fervently hoped we would never have to put our knowledge into practice.

The crunch came when I gave this news to my father, and I had been really looking forward to doing that! His daughter out all night? Not if he could help it! Sleeping in a hut with goodness knows who? There was something wrong - this could not be happening! He admitted he could understand the logic of my having to go if the sirens sounded, but to stay out all night for no reason at all? I tried to point out rationally that he and my brother stayed out all night with the Home Guard, but all I got was, 'That's different, it's expected of us. We're men.'

My night out would have been fun had Betty been with me, but our duties fell on different evenings. There were not many people on duty at night; I can only recall seeing about five, and they were much more my seniors.

At nine o'clock someone made tea, or rather, that is what they called it, and often we stood just outside the hut before it was completely dark, and looked towards the abattoir. It was a good job I was not squeamish because the whole area was alive with rats. We could stand and watch them as their eyes glowed red in the fading light and they scavenged around the wilderness between us and the abattoir. They never came any nearer. At ten o'clock I was told I could go to bed and they would wake me if I was needed. They need not have bothered to wake me. The camp bed was so uncomfortable I did not sleep. I realized now why most of them sat up all night playing cards. At five o'clock I was given another cup of tea with milk powder and no sugar, which I did not appreciate, and at six o'clock I started to walk home and get ready for work. It only took me ten minutes to walk home, but even so, my father was at the gate. No, he did not say he was putting the milk bottles out. This time he was looking for the milkman.

Acquiring A Soldier

At the end of the year there was a party being held at the first-aid post, and by the way they were organizing things, it was going to be a big affair. Workers from other posts were going to be there, and Betty and I were waylaid by one of the senior officers. She told us both that we were expected to bring a donation of food for the festivities and also to be accompanied by a male escort. We stared at one another in dismay.

In wartime, to bring food along anywhere when it was in such short supply, and rationed at that, was a major obstacle, but to bring a man along as well! She might just as well have told us to go to the moon. This was like performing a miracle. Neither of us had the type of parents that encouraged us to have boyfriends. .

I did have an advantage over Betty. Working in a shop gave me the opportunity of picking my customers' brains, and after a while and a lot of deliberation, I came up with the idea of making a couple of jellies. Packets of jelly were unobtainable in the shops, but once I learnt how to make up my own, nothing was going to stand in my way. Just a bottle of cordial, boiling water and some gelatine, and even my mother was impressed with the results. The jellies set extremely well, even though they were a bit on the rubbery side and just a teeny bit chewy. After all, there was a war on and they were the only jellies at the party.

The male escort was another matter. I refused to take my father even though I knew he was waiting to be asked. Betty and I mused over it for a long time, getting rather desperate. Then I came up with a brilliant idea right at the last moment.

'Just leave it to me and meet me tonight. Even if what I have in mind fails, I'm sure they will still let us in for the party.'

We asked at the first-aid post if we might leave our jellies there and return a little later. They were grateful that we were sensible enough to realize they needed to get the food prepared. Then we both headed towards the International. Betty was rather apprehensive with my idea, but I did not mind so long as I knew I had her support. The way I saw it, what was the use of having soldiers billeted all around you if you could not ask a couple of them along to a party. Nothing went as I planned. As we walked down the dark road it was deserted. There was no sign of life at all. Not even one solitary soldier. Usually the place was alive with them and I was a little put off by its emptiness.

There was nothing for it, I had to ask at one of the billets. I paused outside one of the houses and motioned to Betty to ascend the steps, but she preferred to remain in the dark. I took a deep breath and went alone. With fingers crossed for good luck I knocked at the door. Rather belatedly, I suddenly thought that the emptiness might be caused by everyone being on leave for Christmas. I forgot that there was a war on and this was most unlikely. The door swung open but it was so dark I could not see a thing. Then a very cultured voice bid me to enter. 'Because of the infernal blackout,' it added. Once I was inside and the front door shut, I could see the officer and he could see me. He was so taken aback by my presence it immediately drove my nervousness away.

'By Jove, what have we here?' his eyes appraised me questioningly, 'Are you looking for someone. Can I help you?'

I took a firm hold of myself and tried to look dignified. At least he appeared friendly enough, so I hardly gave him time to collect his thoughts before I launched off into the problem we were having in trying to find a couple of fellows to come to a Christmas party and wondered if two soldiers might like the chance to come instead. As I paused for breath, he smiled very disarmingly. Then it occurred to me that he might think I was asking him and I went bright red. His smile grew broader. He was really enjoying the situation now. 'How jolly sporting of you both. That's really a damned nice idea. We can't have two young ladies without escorts now, can we?'

He turned his back on me and called down the passage to where someone was furtively lurking; and listening, no doubt. 'Con old fellow, I've got an unexpected job for you. I'm sure you will like it. Just grab hold of Des will you and you can both have the evening off to escort two charming young ladies to their Christmas party, and by the way, that's an order.' Then he turned back to me, still smiling. 'I'm giving you my batman for the evening. You will find him very accommodating. He will not keep you waiting long.' Then he sauntered away and vanished into an adjoining room as though he had completed something very satisfactory. The next moment I was being ushered out into the night air by two bemused soldiers who Betty and I took to the first-aid party.

It was one thing taking two strange soldiers to a party, but quite another one to get rid of them afterwards. Betty was much more prepared in this field than I was because she fabricated up a story about her fictitious boyfriend who was serving in the Navy. I had not thought about anything beyond getting a couple of escorts for the night which was rather foolish of me. So I was stuck with Con and, against my better judgement, I let him walk me home to within a hundred yards of my house. Then I explained it was best he went before my father saw him. He could not understand why, but I shook my head and walked away.

The following morning in the shop they all wanted to know the details of my evening out. That is the one drawback to working in a smallish shop. Nothing you do is private. They were relentless in their questioning and before long they found out about the batman and got quite the wrong idea of how things were. They were all agog to see what he looked like and I was not very helpful. I did my best not to be around when he walked past the shop which was not all that easy since he was only billeted just round the corner. But this method did not always work because one day he came right into the shop, dragging behind him a cute fluffy little puppy. The other women were over the moon with him, fondling the puppy's ears and asking what it was called.

After that, Con felt he was very welcome and it was harder than ever for me to avoid seeing him. Molly Mitchell did more than her fair share of the teasing, but in the end, she was the one who turned out to be my saviour. She was very astute and knew how I

felt. The next time he walked in, she went up to him, took hold of his arm and said in a conspiratorial way, 'You have not met her father yet, have you?'

The poor bewildered fellow shook his head, but Molly Mitchell went on as though she had not noticed, 'Never get entangled up with him son. He's a jujitsu fanatic.' She paused as though deliberating. 'Black belt I believe. If he thought anyone was trying to date his daughter I hate to think what would happen.'

'Oh, I'm not doing that,' he quickly protested, 'I've only come in for some matches.'

'Right then, I had better serve you. Best you get away before he comes by doing his daily checkup. You never know son, he might get suspicious if he keeps seeing you hanging around.'

The poor soldier could not get out of the shop fast enough and no one saw him again. He never came anywhere near the premises.

Meeting A Celebrity

We had celebrities call in though. Periodically Max Miller descended upon us. The first time I saw him face-to-face I was overcome with awe. Brighton's Cheeky Chappie, the top-billing comedian, so well-known in the music halls and at the Hippodrome, was actually sitting in our shop. He acknowledged us all with an airy wave of his hand as he made himself comfortable on one of the wooden chairs placed out for the customers' convenience. There he waited patiently for the manageress.

Sometimes he had his secretary in tow. He was a large man with a florid face, which was usually set in a benign expression. He drew much attention to himself because he was dressed flamboyantly. His suit, covered in a large check design, made him easy to recognise. The average person would not have been seen dead in it. I felt completely tongue-tied in his presence and he was only four yards away from me. If any person spoke to him they got a cheery response, but I was mute.

Only Molly Mitchell served him, by choice or accident, I do not know. Usually it was only her who dealt with the wines and spirits. He came in every so often for whisky, which was in very short supply, and although he was not a registered customer, he never went away empty-handed. We all speculated on what she got out of it. I thought it was free tickets to his shows, but the others disagreed and said it was nylons.

Nylons were just coming into fashion after wearing lisle stockings for years and years. They were much sought after and very hard to come by. The coming of the GIs -American servicemen - made them much more accessible, because they seemed to have an unending supply of them, and maybe that is why they always had a string of girls around them.

'Be a good girl. Lead a good life.

Get a good husband. Be a good wife.'

More Shortages

Come the 6th June 1944, there was suddenly an absence of soldiers around Brighton. Two weeks earlier the town had been bursting at its seams with an overflow of military convoys and armaments parked in every conceivable place. Instinct told us it was a build-up to something important. Then over the radio we all heard it was D-Day and overnight everything vanished. The allied forces had landed in France. It was uncanny, and although there were still some soldiers billeted around, Brighton was suddenly a ghost town.

Now a more sinister threat loomed on the horizon. The doodlebugs started coming over. Their destination was London, but at the beginning a great many of them fell short of their target. They had an awful sound to their engines, and as they passed overhead, one almost felt compelled to stand and watch their progress across the sky. You would pray that the engine did not cut out while it was passing. If it did, you had but seconds to find cover before it fell and exploded. I cannot recollect any doodlebugs falling on Brighton, but many times I had seen our planes try to intercept them and turn them back or else the anti-aircraft guns would attempt to explode them before they crossed the coastline.

Food shortages worsened and more things came under rationing. You now needed coupons or points to acquire bread and potatoes. This is where the allotment holders were better off. 'Dig for Victory' the posters said. Most of us dug for victory in our own back gardens. Then sweets and chocolate fell to rationing and everyone was allowed 4 ozs. a week, or if you wanted, the coupons could be saved up so that it was possible to buy the whole month's supply in one go. That way you could buy a box of chocolates. This was a great blow if you were a sweet-toothed person like myself. Yet I was lucky because I had several customers in the shop that did not want their sweet coupons and passed them on to me to use. Sweets were something I was very well off for. You did not need to be registered to acquire them. You could buy them anywhere. That was why it was so easy for me to use the coupons they gave.

Clothing coupons were handled differently. If I remember correctly, we were allowed twenty of these a year. That was not so many when you come to think about it because I believe a man's suit or lady's costume took twenty coupons in one go to buy. So if you did that, it meant you passed a whole year unable to buy any more garments. It was a matter of make do and mend. Blankets did not fall under this restriction, neither did curtain material. I once bought an ex-military blanket, dyed it and made up a coat, and for the lining I used a curtain. From the outside it looked very presentable and I wore it for several years.

One unforgettable day, a customer came into the shop and imparted some exciting news. A friend (un-named) had given her a parachute. She had used some of it, but the rest she would bring in to us to share out. It did not cross our minds to inquire where it came from. It was best not to delve too deeply. We were just thrilled to get our hands on it. Parachute silk made lovely undergarments, and the amount of material in one parachute was colossal.

Victory

Then the day everyone had been looking forward to for so many years suddenly arrived. It was May 8th 1945 - VE Day; Victory in Europe. How jubilant we all were. There was so much celebrating. All one could think of was no more bombs, and a little prematurely I'm afraid, a lot more freedom. We were still at war in the Far East with Japan, but for this moment, we pushed that thought to the back of our minds. Uppermost was victory over Germany. There was so much happiness and relief - people suddenly seemed to be laughing at nothing. A weight had been lifted from everyone's shoulders. I begged Molly Mitchell's permission to decorate our provisions window out with red, white and blue crepe paper and it was graciously given. Street parties sprang up everywhere. Food was willingly given for these special celebrations. It was a miracle where it all came from - people must have had food stored up for this very occasion. However, if anyone was misguided enough to think food rationing was going to cease now, they were sadly disappointed. It went on for years after hostilities ended.

Following the liberation of Europe the next few months was a busy time with the repatriation of many prisoners of war. Brighton held a fair number of them as they passed in transit.

Then came August 15th 1945 - VJ Day. The Americans had dropped their atomic bombs on Japan at Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few days earlier and Japan surrendered unconditionally. Now the war was well and truly over and the celebrations started all over again, but this time they were intensified. We opened our arms to receive the good things we all felt sure would follow. There were more street parties and dancing and bonfires, since there were no blackout restrictions now. There were the sad and bereaved families of course, and we all commiserated with them, but we could not bring people back. The way ahead was forward, and we hoped, it was to a brighter future.

Going back to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it was not until years afterwards that anyone realized what awful consequences followed the dropping of the bombs. Those that survived it were a lot worse off than those who were killed. The ones left behind suffered horrific diseases caused by the intense radiation they received.

With the ending of the war, you could say there was an anti-climax because no matter what anyone expected to happen, nothing major changed. Life went on as usual. There were one or two subtle changes, but nothing that made any real difference. I continued to train the apprentices, although now we often had two lads at the same time. One

would be working out his first year on the grocery counter and the other one would be with me. The idea of keeping a happy balance in the shop was to keep them apart as much as possible. This was not easy in a small shop. They enjoyed learning to master the skills of skinning a cheese and cutting up a side of bacon, mainly because these jobs were executed in the cellar where they were not under scrutiny all the time. None of the apprentices ever took kindly to scrubbing down the woodwork until it dried up nearly white, but this job was done once a week because it was essential for hygienic reasons.

We would often find cracked eggs which you could not give out as a customer's allocated ration. People were only allowed one egg a week so there was obviously a great demand for the cracked ones, no matter how badly they were damaged. Some customers came in with a basin, in the hopes of salvaging an egg that had departed its shell and was residing in the egg tray. Even when there was a little bit of dirt in it they did not mind. Only expectant mothers and young children were allowed three eggs a week, and you knew these by their different coloured ration books.

Some of the ration books were in an absolutely disgusting condition. You would look at them with repugnance and not want to handle them. We had one such customer, Mrs Bone, who came into the shop every week with a fox fur round her shoulders and a cat draped cosily round her neck on top of it. Looking back, I think it was a tabby. She presented her book without the bat of an eyelid. It looked for all the world as though it had fallen into the frying pan, and besides making you shudder when you touched it, it was almost impossible to delete with a marker. If any of the lads were forced to serve her they would make a song and dance about it, treating the book as if it were contaminated with the plague. One even audaciously asked did anyone have any gloves he could use. He can thank his lucky stars that Molly Mitchell never heard him. The woman just stared stolidly ahead and ignored him completely.

St Dunstan's

It was at about this time when Betty and I had nothing to occupy ourselves with, that we applied to be escorts to the blind servicemen at St Dunstan's. We went through a very rigorous interview with an official lady who determined our suitability to do this job. We must have appeared sensible enough because we were told to come back in two days' time, then we would be taken to St Dunstan's to meet the men. From our interview, we gleaned that it was mostly at weekends that we would be needed to escort the blind to the cinema or dance hall. Maybe they would like to be taken shopping or they may have other ideas of what they wanted. We were to be their eyes and their help.

So on the Friday evening, we joined a crowd of other young ladies gathered in the foyer of a hotel on the sea front, ready to be taken out to St Dunstan's in their own coach. We were accompanied by the official lady, who introduced herself to us as Miss Heap. It did not strike us as strange that no one seemed to be over thirty years of age. We just assumed they needed active single escorts, and we qualified.

The coach swept up the open drive to the red brick building standing proudly alone on the clifftop at Ovingdean Gap. As we alighted, we noticed how many windows St Dunstan's had. Inside it was very spacious, bright and airy, with guide rails going off in every conceivable direction. Even outside the building they ran across the grounds to disappear under the busy coast road, and continued on down the stone steps to the undercliff walk. A blind person could get that far on his own in complete safety.

We were ushered up the stairs to the winter garden at the top of the building, which had fantastic views of the sea and surrounding countryside. It was an extremely large room and a party was in progress. The men were sitting about in easy chairs and obviously waiting for us. We were told to mingle and get to know them. This was the first time Betty and I were aware that not all the servicemen were just blind. Some were limbless and others very disfigured. It caught at one's emotions to see what war had done to these once-virile young men. Through no fault of their own, some now lived in a world of utter darkness.

We were a little awkward and tongue-tied to begin with, but the men soon put us at ease. Except for their disability, they were no different to any other man, and joked and laughed uproariously. In fact, when they remarked how pretty we looked in our blue dress, we thought they could see, but we found out later they got their information from an orderly. When the coach returned us to Brighton, we were all told to meet it again on Saturday evening in a car park behind the town hall. If we had not made our own arrangements as to whom we were escorting, we would be assigned to someone.

For quite a long time Betty and I took numerous men to the cinema, always going together as a foursome, and wherever we went, we showed a pass and never paid. St Dunstan's paid on our behalf. If the film had plenty of dialogue in it, we had nothing to worry about as they could follow it, but when it was an action film we needed to explain what was occurring on the screen. This often irritated the people sitting nearby who kept telling us to shut up, and after a while, we just turned to them and said with as much dignity as we could muster, 'Do you mind? They are from St Dunstan's and they are blind.'

Normally we chose seats that were far away from other people, but it did not always work out. People often drifted up and sat beside you.

We soon discovered that St Dunstan's were a hundred percent behind the men's activities, no matter what it was they wanted. When it came to their notice that Betty and I could ride a bicycle, they encouraged us to experiment with a tandem. This idea really appealed to us. If we became familiar with the machine and felt confident enough, we could then take our blind companions out for a country ride. So without any trouble, we were issued with a brand new tandem to practice on. We decided that the roads in Brighton were much too dangerous for a couple of greenhorns like ourselves to be let loose on. Neither of us had ever ridden a tandem before and we were not exactly

oozing with confidence. So we caught a train to Hassocks and then walked with the tandem to where the lanes were empty of pedestrians. Then, after we had decided who was going in front first, we mounted the tandem. I can only say we found the experience hilarious.

It took many attempts on our part to get underway and stay upright, then we found we had another difficulty. We could not stop unless we fell off. For ages we persevered with the technique of stopping and starting, going backwards and forwards on the same stretch of lane, trying to make ourselves proficient. We had not even tried turning a corner yet, when suddenly a policeman stepped out in front of us and held up his hand. To our mortification we could not stop and went flying by. He stepped back hastily and watched with incredulous eyes as we fell into a heap on the bank with the tandem on top of us. As we foolishly extricated ourselves, he walked up to us and said sternly, 'Did you not see that halt sign back there?'

It was almost as though we had rehearsed it as we both answered instantaneously, 'What halt sign?'

If I had not been so self-conscious, I would have hazarded a guess that he almost smiled. As it was, he produced a notebook from his pocket and looked all-official. He cleared his throat and said ponderously, 'If you cannot see the road signs then you have no business to be on the road. I've had my eye on you two for quite a long time.' He looked us over thoughtfully as we brushed the grass and bracken from our skirts, feeling more and more stupid under his gaze. Then he added severely, 'Besides the fact you are not in control of your vehicle, are you?'

He was not a very old policeman and I can only say he was jolly decent to us. He advised us to walk, a great emphasis on 'walk', and take the tandem back to where we got it. He did not think we were roadworthy on it, let alone carry blind people on the back.

He was dead right. Long before we got back to St Dunstan's we had decided to give up the idea. We continued as escorts for a long time, then, as these things do happen, I drifted away from it, following new pursuits, but Betty met and married one of the blind servicemen and our paths separated as she went to live in Wimbledon.

Post-War Changes

As time went on the men and women were gradually being demobbed. The return to their old jobs did not run smoothly. The women seemed to cope with it much better than the men. Yet there was a difference. Women came out of military service with changed ideas. No longer were they going to be slaves to the kitchen stove. They were much more independent now and openly desired a status of their own in the community.

Some of the men were content to rejoin the family life and all its responsibilities, but the

greater percentage of them found no joy in this. Life in Civvy Street was suddenly undesirable after the excitement of fighting for one's country. They had no wish to settle down to a humdrum life in the office, working regular hours from nine to five. They were indecisive and restless and wanted better things for themselves. There was great unrest in the country in the post-war years.

Because of this attitude, a lot of women who held men's jobs during the war found that their jobs were still secure. I was one such person. None of the men who did my job in pre-war days wanted to return to it, and since it appeared that I was very efficient, I was allowed to continue in my position. Molly Mitchell was not so lucky. About eighteen months after hostilities ceased, she dropped her bombshell. One Monday morning as we congregated behind the counter, she suddenly said out of the blue, 'You had all better pull up your socks and smarten up your ideas now. Next week there will be a new manager here in my place.'

In the silence that followed you could hear a pin drop. We stared at her in utter dismay. What a way to start a week. Her face showed that she was being serious. We had not expected such a thing to happen. Molly Mitchell was strict and no one refuted it, but she was also fair. She was also understanding, and could take a joke as well as give one. We all felt she was one of us. The idea of losing her was appalling. We all felt we could not tolerate a man in her place. The only good thing we salvaged from the whole affair was that, for the moment, she would still stay on as undermanager. She knew the man who was coming, but beyond telling us his name, she said nothing else. During the week that followed, we watched her moving out of the flat above the shop as she moved all her belongings to her sister's house in Patcham. We felt it was the end of an era.

Enter The Manager

The following week we all assembled outside the shop with a feeling of trepidation, but this was overridden by a stronger sense of natural curiosity. What was more, we all arrived five minutes earlier than usual, and we did not have to do that. Molly Mitchell came along and stood with us. Her face was impassive and she herself was very non-committal. We assumed the new manager, a Mr Cooper, had moved in over the weekend. Now at last the moment had arrived when we would see him, and the climax came as the shop door was opened with a decisive swing.

We all wanted to take stock of the new manager, whose white outline we could just make out in the dimness behind the door, but not one of us had the courage to openly stare at him. We all filed past silently, which was very unusual for us, and went to our allotted places to change ready for work. Only Molly Mitchell paused for a few words of greeting to him before joining us. Then, five minutes before opening time, we took up our positions and Mr Cooper called attention to himself as he stood in the middle of the now illuminated shop.

At first glance he looked a lot younger than we had imagined him to be. He was tall,

very thin, with dark rimmed glasses and slightly wavy dark hair. He would have been considered good looking by us if he only relaxed his features into the resemblance of a smile. He introduced himself first and then waited expectantly for each one of us in turn to introduce ourselves to him. Then he went on to say that he hoped we would all get on well together and work willingly as a team to become proficient. He expected from us, efficiency, punctuality, obedience and prompt service for all the customers. Then he cleared his throat and added that now we understood each other, would we please stand by our places as he was going to open the shop.

We soon got over our initial shock. We made allowances for him. It was well known that a new broom sweeps clean. He would be better and more relaxed in a few weeks' time. Two weeks passed and we trod very carefully. Then we decided that he was acceptable as a manager. He had a lovely wife who was very quiet and unassuming so he could not be all that bad. After a month he had well and truly found his niche and our first opinions about him began to alter. In our opinion now, he was showing signs of abnormal strictness, which was very easy to do after Molly Mitchell's regime. We felt as though he was still the sergeant in the army and that we were now his subordinates.

Every Monday morning RPDs arrived from head office. These were Revised Price Directives. At first they were pinned to the wall in a convenient position for us all to read and commit to memory. This was the way it had always been done but it was not efficient enough for him. He soon found fault in the way they were thumbed through when someone wanted to check up on the revised price of the article they were selling to a customer. In his opinion they should have learnt it by heart on the first day of seeing it. So the next morning he had us all lined up in the centre of the shop before it opened, grocery staff on one side, provisions staff on the other. In the words of the apprentices afterwards, this was the beginning of the reign of terror. Mr Cooper strode up and down between the lines with his hands behind his back just as though he were at an inquisition. Suddenly, out of the blue he would stop and point his finger at someone and bark out, 'Price of Bisto, Miss?'

Fear alone must have prompted the correct answer, but he was not satisfied with one answer. Just when you thought he had passed you by and you were safe, he would swing round and point to someone else, ‘Price of Lifebuoy soap, lad?'

This went on for at least five minutes. He did not often catch anyone out, but when he did, it was humiliating for the person who gave the wrong answer. Mr Cooper's attitude did not encourage loyalty or any deep feelings of respect. He was obeyed because he was the manager and that was what one did if they wished to keep their job. The apprentices had no choice because they were bound by a two-year contract. So come what may, they had to stick it out, and this weekly line up continued. We may have hated it, but it had the desired effect.

Surprisingly, Mr Cooper did have another side to his character. When his wife was expecting a baby, he was very caring over her and it sometimes rubbed off on us. Often

when he was laying down the law, a chance remark of 'How is Mrs Cooper today?' would sidetrack him and switch the conversation in another direction.

When the baby was born, a beautiful looking boy with his father's hair and dark eyes, he became almost human, but it did not last. The whip was soon out as he drove the apprentices to do his bidding.

I recall the day very clearly when the apprentice I was training came rushing up the cellar stairs and he grabbed hold of my arm in obvious agitation.

'Mr Cooper's fallen down the stairs, Miss,' he blurted out.

I spun round, thinking it was a sick joke on his part. 'Did you find out if he is badly hurt?' I asked automatically.

The boy was shaking as he answered, 'No. He's at the bottom of the stairs in a heap.'

'And you've left him there?' This time I was incredulous.

'I was scared. I just ran over him and came up here.' He gulped painfully, 'I think he's dead.'

I froze for a split second and was joined by Molly Mitchell. 'You stay here and look after the counter.' We were down those cellar stairs in a flash.

Mr Cooper was not dead, far from it. That was wishful thinking on someone's part, but he had certainly hurt himself. Between many groans and protests, we got him to his feet and managed to haul him up the stairs to where a very worried Mrs Cooper was waiting. She had been informed of the accident by another member of the staff. While waiting for the doctor to arrive, it came out that Mr Cooper was trying to lift a cheese for the apprentice to cut. A whole cheese is extremely heavy and weighs about 401bs. Then he got this sudden terrific pain in his chest and dropped everything as he fell. He could not ask for help because he realized he was suddenly alone.

The doctor's verdict was a badly pulled muscle and it was essential that he have complete rest for at least a week. A silent cheer came from certain members of the staff, but that was before they realized they had underestimated Mr Cooper's constitution. After two days of absence, he was seen hanging over the banister rails leading up to his flat, to see what was going on in the shop. After four days he was sitting at his desk again and keeping a check on what everyone was doing. So much for a week of freedom!

Smallpox

Towards the end of 1950 there was one of the biggest scares ever to hit Brighton, which

in some ways was even worse than the bombs we had during the war. It all came about when a serviceman, I believe he was an airman, smuggled a fur coat into the country for his girlfriend. If that was not bad enough, the fur coat also harboured the deadly disease of smallpox. At least this was the story that we heard in the shop, and the people who gave us this information got their privileged knowledge from "friends of friends". As the people started to be diagnosed as having this contagious disease, so the panic swept across the town.

By the 10th January 1951 there were already twenty-six cases of smallpox, of which quite a few had died. Vaccination was widespread, but not compulsory and over a hundred thousand people in Brighton and Hove were vaccinated in a fortnight. People were asked not to leave the town in the hopes of confining the disease. There were so many close contacts to the original source of the outbreak, that it was unbelievable. Some of these contacts were customers in our shop. Although we had all been told to get vaccinated because of our vulnerability in being in touch with the general public, we were still very skittish at serving certain people - especially touching their ration books. On February 6th the smallpox all-clear was given, but by that time there had been twenty-nine confirmed cases and ten people had died. It was the biggest outbreak in the area for decades.

The Competition

Life under Mr Cooper had to be experienced to be believed. Employees of today would never have tolerated the conditions under which we worked, but then, we never knew anything different. We had no union to fight our cause and we had no pay for overtime. It was taken as a matter of course that we worked until the job we were doing was finished. Often we would work until seven o'clock at night, and when it was stocktaking, that did not start until after the shop was shut. So it could be ten o'clock before we went home.

I think that Mr Cooper's rushing around was the result of nervous energy. He may have been domineering and a stickler for detail, but if one worked on it, you could begin to understand the way his mind worked and so keep out of trouble. None of us realized how very much aware of us he was. He seemed to know whatever we said when we talked amongst ourselves. To prove my point, he came up to me one day with a form in his hand. It was an entry form for a window display competition, promoting a certain brand of flour. He must have heard from somewhere that I loved to draw and paint, because he suggested that I might like to think up an idea for our grocery window. Then we would enter the inter-store competition run by Head Office. I was really chuffed to have been asked and I spent hours at home in the evenings, creating and painting a huge windmill with sails that went round.

I took my work into the shop one morning and Mr Cooper was so delighted with my efforts that he took the windmill upstairs to show his wife. Then he told me afterwards that his son, Colin, wanted it as well - it was all he could do to keep his chubby little

hands off it. He wondered if, after the competition was over, I minded that his son had the windmill. It was a question I did not like to say 'no' to, so it was taken for granted that Colin was going to get it.

The window was dressed out on the Saturday afternoon by Mr Cooper. He scorned anyone's help except the boy who cleaned the window. The competition was judged sometime the following week by a team of people from Head Office. We were never aware of when they looked at it. We saw no one outside. It was another two weeks before the result was known, and then Mr Cooper approached me and shook his head. I had not expected anything else.

'We didn't win it Miss Groves, but I am pleased to tell you that it was highly admired and we were a close runner up.'

Then I was dumbfounded because he did a most unexpected thing. He put his hand in his pocket as he went on, 'I really think it is a shame after all your hard work. Your windmill was so excellent Kitty, and I want you to take this for all your effort,' and he pressed a ten-shilling note into my hand and walked away.

I seemed to be on better footing with Mr Cooper after that, and life at home was decidedly improving. I thought my father had given up on me as I had considerably more freedom these days than I had ever experienced in the past. Did he think I was safer now that there were hardly any military personnel in Brighton? I only know he talked to me a lot about the fine young men he worked with. For a while my senses were lulled, until I realized that all of his introducing me to his workmates was nothing more than trying his hand at matchmaking. I soon put a stop to that by acting ungraciously when I met anyone. After a while he gave it up as a bad job, quite convinced I was going to be an old maid. Not that it was a bad status to end up as, he was quick to point out. In his days, lots of decent women never married. I think he was still smarting over my attitude as he went on to say that if this happened to me it would be my own fault.

A New Apprentice

In the shop, a new apprentice came from the employment exchange, and the old routine started all over again as I began his training programme. I was cleaning out the provisions window when he walked in, and I watched his progress as he made his way to Mr Cooper at the other end of the shop. John Wilson was much more mature than any of the other lads I had taught. He was as tall as me, and I certainly was not lacking in height. Actually, his name was really Michael, but since we already had a Michael working in the shop, he was going to be known by his second name, John.

Molly Mitchell seemed to be getting very restless. She was not happy in her present situation. Circumstances had thrown her into the position she now held. It was very difficult to be second-in-command after you had been in charge for so many years.

Even the customers were confused. The last thing I wanted to see happen was her leaving. She had always been there for me, but somehow, I suspected it was on the cards that she would go.

For a while, life went on in its own monotonous way. A lot of my spare time was taken up going to the cinema. I was happy and content to lose myself in the films I watched. I would often talk about them the following day, especially if they had been good. Before long, John asked if he might come with me the next time I went. Momentarily I was taken by surprise. I did not want to be rude, but it was not what I wanted. I rather enjoyed my own company. Yet, on the other hand, I felt very awkward at refusing him.

We got on well with one another, but never before had I developed a personal attachment with any of my trainees. However, I gave in and said yes, and tried to look as though I was happy about it. That word 'yes' changed my whole future. Before long, it became a regular thing for us to go to the cinema together and after several months, a close friendship developed between the pair of us. It was noted by both the staff and the customers who saw us out together. We got a lot of friendly ribbing from them all. John was the only member of the staff who came to work on his bicycle every day. I think he lived the furthest away in Moulsecoomb. Nearly every day he would meet me of an afternoon as I walked back to work through Preston Park, and we would continue on to the shop together. One could almost call those days idyllic, but like all idyllic things, it did not last.

It was a great shock, but a very pleasant one in some quarters, when it was announced that Mr Cooper was leaving us and taking up the management of the Hove branch of the International Stores. It was a much larger shop than ours, and busier. One could not help but feel sorry for the unsuspecting staff that were about to have him. Some of us were genuinely sorry to see him go, but the rest, when they spoke, were very hypocritical. I looked towards Molly Mitchell and she read the question in my eyes.

'No. I'm not taking over again,' she stated as a matter of fact. 'I shall stay a few weeks with the new manager, then I am leaving. I have many things I wish to do with my life, and the time to do them is now.'

So Mr Older arrived and the staff had mixed feelings with his coming. They were quite unnecessary because Mr Older was really nice. He was a family man with three children - two girls and a boy. He had a twinkle in his eyes, a dry sense of humour and a great understanding. Within a month, there was not one person who did not like him and show him respect. It softened the blow of Molly Mitchell departing, but I missed her for many weeks. She had been a part of my life for so long.

I spent more and more time with John, until the inevitable happened and he was called up for National Service. The day he left the shop was the day I gave in my notice, but a week later I started a new job. I was still doing exactly the same thing, but at Teetgens grocery store in Preston Village. It had three things in its favour; more money, Saturday

half day and, above all other things, I could be called Kathleen again. This was also the end of an era because rationing was now at an end.

POSTSCRIPT

John served two years in the Royal Army Medical Corps, and any hopes I had of spending weekend leaves with him were doomed from the start. After three months of training he was sent to Germany for the remainder of his service. When he was demobbed back into Civvy Street his ideas had changed and he no longer wished to pursue a career in grocery and provisions. He became a butcher and eventually worked in a shop only two doors away from Teetgens. At this point we got married.

Life at Teetgens was very happy, although I missed all my old customers. The shop was totally different from the International Stores because it was run as a family concern; no more orders from a head office. It had no need for apprentices to be trained, and every so often the owner came on a state visit. I stayed there until the birth of my first child.

Sadly, Molly Mitchell died about fifteen years after she left the International Stores; at least she managed to get in a little travelling before illness overtook her. Equally distressing for me was the death of my friend Betty two years ago.