

I

Cheese and pickle

IN THE London borough of Camden, in the middle of the last century, there lived three brothers; they were three young boys, with a year's difference of age between each of them. They were united, however, in one extraordinary way. They had been born at the same time on the same day of the same month – to be precise, midday on 8 May. The chance was remote and even implausible. Yet it was so. The local newspaper recorded the coincidence, after the birth of the third son, and the Hanway boys became the object of speculation. Were they in some sense marked out? Was there some invisible communion between them, apart from their natural affinity?

The interest soon subsided, of course, in a neighbourhood where the daily struggles of existence were still evident four or five years after the War. In any case, there were other differences between the boys – differences of temperament, differences of affection – that soon became manifest. These diversities, however, were still mild and pliable. They had not yet become the source of great disagreement or hostile division.

The three boys were young enough, and near enough in age, to enjoy the same pastimes. On the pavement

outside their small house in Crystal Street they chalked the squares of hop-sotch. They played marbles in the gutter with fierce concentration. They hardened the seeds of the horse chestnut with pickle juice and brine, so that they could compete with conkers. They raced each other on the common, at the edge of the council estate in which they lived. They explored the deserted tracts of land beside an old railway line, and trod cautiously among the debris of an abandoned bomb shelter.

On the common, too, they played the old game 'Run Run Away'. One of them, with a scarf wound about his eyes as a blindfold, repeated a few well-known words as the others ran as far as they could; when he stopped speaking, they had to remain quite still. He then had to find them, and the first one he touched became 'it' when the whole game began again.

On one particular afternoon the youngest of them, Sam, was standing, his eyes blindfolded, and he began to shout out the words.

'When I was standing on the stair
I met a man who wasn't there.
He wasn't there again today.
I wish, I wish he'd go away.
Here I come, ready or not!'

After a minute or two of threshing around he caught hold of his oldest brother, Harry. But there was no real excitement in the game. They had played it too often.

'Listen,' Sam said, 'what do you both want to be when you grow up?'

'I want to be a pilot.'

'I want to be a detective.'

'Do you know what?' Sam told them. 'I don't want to be anything.'

The sky was growing darker, and a cold breeze had started

up across the common with the promise of light rain. 'Come on,' Harry said, pointing to the abandoned bomb shelter, 'let's all go under the ground. I've got some matches. We can start a fire. Mum won't miss us till teatime. Let's start a fire that will go on *for ever!*'

'I dare you.'

'I double dare you.'

So one by one, in single file, following each other, they descended into the earth.

They had a small back garden, in which they investigated the lives of earwigs and other insects. At the bottom of this garden there was an old stone basin often filled with rain-water, and in this they raised tadpoles caught from the pond on the edge of the common. They put their heads together and peered down into the murky water, their sweet liquorice breath mingling with the dank odour of moss and slime. They tried to grow beans and peas in the garden, but the shoots withered and rotted away. It was, in short, a London childhood. They had never seen mountains or waterfalls, of course, but they lived securely in their world of brick and stone.

They recognised by instinct the frontiers to their territory; a street further north, or further south, was not visited. It was not welcoming. But within their own bounds they were entirely at home. They knew every dip in the pavement, every front door, every cat that prowled along the gutter or slumbered on the window sill. They knew, or at least recognised, most of the people they saw. There were few strangers in the neighbourhood. They lived among familiar faces.

Any stranger who happened to walk through the neighbourhood would not have come away with any distinct impression. It was a council estate, built in the 1920s, of two-storey

red-brick terraces. That was all. One row of houses was interrupted by some small shops – a newsagent, a hairdresser, a butcher among them – and on the corners of the narrow streets were general stores or public houses. There was a fish-and-chip shop, and a bakery, in the street where the Hanways lived. The district smelled at various times of dust and of rain, of bonfire smoke and of petrol. Its sounds were not of cars but of trams and milk-floats, with the distinct but distant roar of London somewhere around the corner. It had the forlorn calm of a poor neighbourhood, yet for the three brothers it repaid the closest possible attention. It was the source of curiosity, of surprise, and, sometimes, of delight. The centre of their lives was very small, but it was brightly lit. And all around stretched the endless streets, of which they were largely unaware.

Their first memories of childhood differed. Harry recalled how he had managed to walk unaided across the carpet of the small living room, praised and encouraged by his parents sitting on a yellow sofa. Daniel, between his brothers in age, remembered being taken out of a pram and held up to the sunlight, in which he seemed to soar. Sam's first memory was of falling and cutting his leg on a shard of broken glass; he had cried when he saw the blood. Had their respective memories ever come together, they might have had some understanding of their shared past. But they were content with these fragments.

They attended the same primary school, a red-brick building set beside a grey-brick church, where the signs for 'Boys' and 'Girls' were carved in Gothic script above two portals. The school smelled of soap and carbolic disinfectant, but the classrooms were always cluttered and dirty with a faint patina of dust upon the shelves and windows.

The Hanway boys were in separate classes, according to their age, and in the playground they did not care to

fraternise. Harry was the most gregarious and thus the most popular of the brothers; he laughed readily, and had a circle of acquaintances whom he easily amused. Daniel had two chosen friends, with whom he was always deep in consultation; they collected bus numbers and cigarette cards, which they would compare and contrast. Sam, the youngest, seemed content to remain on his own. He did not seek the company of the other children. And they in turn left him alone. But Sam had a temper. One morning, at the gate of the school, a boy remarked on the fact that Sam had torn his school jacket. Sam struck out at him with his fist and knocked him to the pavement. His two brothers witnessed the event, and adjusted to him accordingly.

Harry Hanway was ten, Daniel Hanway was nine, and Sam Hanway was eight, when their mother disappeared. They returned late one afternoon from school, and found an empty house. Harry made sandwiches of cheese and pickle. They sat around the kitchen table, and waited. No one came.

Their father, Philip, was employed as a nightwatchman in the City. He always left the house in the afternoon, stopped at a pub on Camden High Street, and then took the bus to the financial headquarters where he worked. He would put on his dark blue uniform, kept in a small locker off the main hall, and then sit behind an imposing central desk. He always had with him pencils and paper. After a few minutes of concentration he would begin writing, slowly and hesitantly; then he would stop altogether. For the rest of the night he would smoke and stare into space.

He had been called up for the army, in the third year of the War, but in fact travelled no farther than Middlesbrough where he was assigned to the barracks as a clerk of munitions. He remained in that post until the end of the War when, with

army pay in his pocket, he returned to London. He had been brought up in Ruislip, but he had no intention of returning. Ruislip was the place where he had waited impatiently for his real life to begin. Instead he set off for Soho. He believed that he was destined to be a writer. When he was a schoolboy, he had read an English translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* over several weeks; he had devoured it, page by page, elated and terrified by the turns of the plot. The day after he finished the novel, he began his own story. He never completed it. He put the pages in a biscuit tin, where at the time of this narrative they still lay. Yet he was not discouraged. He began writing other stories, to which he could never find a satisfactory conclusion. The more disappointment he suffered, the more intense his ambition became. He recalled the last words of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, 'wait and hope'.

So he migrated to Soho in search of publishers, of magazines, of fellow writers, of critics, of any stimulus – he was not sure of his way forward. He rented a small room in Poland Street, and indulged in what seemed to him to be the bliss of bohemian life. He woke late; he drank coffee in dirty cafés; he lounged and sipped Guinness in shadowy pubs. Yet he could not write. He sat down at the folding table in his room, pencil in hand. He could find no subject.

When his army funds were low, he sought work in the neighbourhood. He became a barman in the Horn of Plenty, a pub in Greek Street that was the chosen spot for a group of hard-drinking and sometimes bellicose Soho residents. Philip Hanway was happy here. He called himself a writer, and enjoyed the anecdotes of the journalists and advertising copy-writers who frequented the bar. And then he met Sally Palliser. She worked in a cake shop, or 'pâtisserie', in Meard Street. He had passed its window, with a display of almond tarts and buns and pastries, and had seen her delicately picking out an angel cake for a customer. His first impression was

of the graceful way she moved behind the counter, her skirt slightly creasing as she bent forward. On the following morning he paused, opened the gaily painted door, and ordered a macaroon. He purchased a macaroon every morning for the next few weeks.

Sally had been impressed when he told her that he was a writer. He was young, and looked very smart in a grey suit, grey overcoat and grey trilby.

‘I like grey,’ he told her. ‘I can disappear.’

‘Now that’s interesting.’

‘I promise you, I will *always* say interesting things to you. I can’t help myself.’

‘But what will *I* say?’

‘You just have to smile.’

When he first took her out she ordered a pink gin and smoked Woodbines. This delighted him. They went dancing at the Rainbow Room in Holborn to the music of Harry Chapman and his orchestra. After three months, much to her parents’ disapproval, she moved into Philip’s small room.

‘Living in sin is not right,’ her mother said. ‘It will come to no good. Mark my words.’ She was always enjoining her daughter to mark her words. ‘And what are you going to live on? Spam and baked beans?’

In fact there was a fish-and-chip shop in Dean Street. And the pastries were free. She brought back the stale ones at the end of the day.

After a violent argument with the staff of the Horn of Plenty, Philip Hanway lost his job.

‘Where are you going?’ the landlord asked him.

‘I’m going *outside*. For good.’ He wanted to slam the door but it swung limply to and fro.

‘Well,’ he said to Sally when he returned home, ‘at least I can concentrate on my writing.’ She surmised that he would be happy to survive on her small income.

When she first realised that she was pregnant, she panicked. She enquired about abortionists, of whom there were several in Soho, but the stories of injury and even fatality dissuaded her. 'Sometimes,' a friend told her, 'they stick a knitting needle up your you-know-what.'

'Ouch.'

'Have you ever seen a dead baby? Looks like a mole.'

So Harry was saved.

She informed her parents of the pregnancy before she told Philip. She wanted to present him with a family ultimatum. And so, five weeks later, Sally and Philip were married in the registry office on St Martin's Lane. Philip then exerted himself to find work, and applied for the job of night-watchman. The two of them formally requested a council house, as a newly married couple, and to their relief they succeeded. So they moved to Camden, where Harry was born four months later.

The three brothers had been sitting in silence around the kitchen table. Sam was fiddling with two elastic bands he had tied together. 'I'm going to have a drink of fizz,' Harry said. 'Anyone else want some?'

'Where is she?' Daniel asked him.

'I think,' he replied, 'she's been delayed.' An old alarm clock was ticking by the sink. 'Dad will know what to do.'

Philip Hanway did not seem particularly surprised by his wife's disappearance. 'She has gone away for a while,' he told his sons. That was all he said. He offered no other explanation. In fact he never afterwards spoke of her. He continued his work as a nightwatchman, and the boys saw little of him. They grew accustomed to looking after themselves. Philip provided them with pocket money that they pooled. After a few months they forgot that their life had ever been different.

In the days immediately following her disappearance, however, Sam was very quiet. On going to school in those mornings the boys encountered a thick smog, and under its cover Sam wept softly without the others knowing. They explained nothing to their school companions or to their teachers. On the matter of their mother, they were wholly silent. Something – something vast, something overwhelming – had happened. But they could not speak of it. The neighbours, curiously, did not seem to notice Sally's absence. The three brothers were left to themselves.

A year after the disappearance Harry progressed, as he had expected, to the secondary modern school on the other side of the borough. He had sat the 11-plus examination, but he had not excelled in any of the papers. He changed from one school uniform to another, and caught a bus in the morning. Then, a year later, Daniel passed the same examination with much higher marks.

Daniel seemed to have a natural propensity for study, and a love of reading. Often, when Harry and Sam would busy themselves with sports or games on the common, he would stay behind with a book. In this he could be said to take after his father. But Philip knew very little of his son's secluded life. Daniel visited the public library on the boundary of the estate, and brought home each week a selection of adventure novels and popular histories. He took out on an extended loan each volume of *Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopaedia*, and vowed to memorise the contents.

His work was rewarded when it was announced, after passing the 11-plus, that he had won a place at Camden Grammar School. If his mother had been there, she would have danced with him around the kitchen; she would have lifted him up, and pressed her nose against his. Philip simply shook his hand, and gave him half-a-crown. Harry joked

with him about a school for swots. Sam never mentioned the subject.

But there was now a change in the Hanway family. Daniel had to strive with his contemporaries. He had to compete. He was given homework every night, and would sit at the kitchen table while Harry and Sam were free to roam. He became more deliberate and circumspect; he saw his life as a series of hurdles over which he was obliged to jump.

Then Harry started playing football for his school team. He enjoyed the exhilaration of the dribble with the ball, the clever pass, and the sudden shot at the goal. He enjoyed the exercise of his own body – the exercise of his power in the world. He called out to his teammates, he shouted at the linesmen, he whooped with triumph at every goal his team scored. It was a world of expressive noise. The physical sensation of movement delighted him. He revelled in the wind and rain and sunlight as he ran across the pitch.

In this, he was different from his brothers. Gradually the intimacy between them began to fade. Sam was left to himself. He spent many hours making elaborate contraptions out of wood and cardboard. Even though he did not know the word melancholy, he began to experience it. He would turn, head over heels, on his narrow bed in order to make himself dizzy and disoriented. He did not prosper at school. As a matter of course he was sent to the same secondary modern school as his older brother. He made no friends there, and Harry seemed to avoid him.

II

The path is clear

HARRY HANWAY left school at the age of sixteen, and was already eager to join the world. He was active, determined, and energetic. At school he had won popularity for his cheerfulness and bravado. He had become captain of the football team. He had retaliated against one notorious school bully by knocking him to the floor. He had his own recognisable phrases, which were instantly imitated. ‘How the heck are you?’ was his standard greeting. He also said, in mock irritation, ‘What the heck?’ So he became known as Harry Heck.

‘I don’t want to go to college,’ he told his father as his leaving day approached. ‘I want to get a job.’

‘Say that again.’

‘I want to get a job.’

‘Just so you’re certain.’ He looked away for a moment. ‘There’s nothing worse than a dead-end job.’

It was a Sunday afternoon. Philip Hanway was about to leave for the City. He now worked seven nights a week in order to support his family. ‘I’ll come back with money, Dad.’

‘It’s not about the money. It’s about you.’

‘But what do you think, Dad, of the newspapers? That’s a good life, isn’t it?’ Harry loved newspapers. He enjoyed the

appearance, and even the texture, of them. He liked their smell. He relished the size of the headlines and the neat rows of type. He was excited by the thought of thousands of copies despatched from the printing plant into waiting vans. In the evenings, after school, he flattened the *Daily Sketch* on the kitchen table and slowly turned its pages. Sometimes he read out paragraphs aloud, just like the news broadcasters on the wireless.

‘Newspaper boy?’ Daniel was writing in an exercise book, but now looked up at him.

‘Dry up.’

‘I was only asking.’

‘Sod off.’

‘There’s no need for a fight,’ Philip said. ‘We have to think about this seriously.’

‘I have thought about it seriously.’

So Harry arrived at the offices of the local newspaper, the *Camden Bugle*, and asked if they needed a messenger boy.

He was astonished to discover that the offices of the *Bugle* comprised two small rooms, one marked ‘Editorial’ and the other marked ‘Advertising’, above a row of shops along the high street. Its premises were on the second floor above a barber, and the candy-striped pole could be seen from the desks of ‘Editorial’. The floor was covered with scuffed linoleum, and the interior needed repainting.

The *Bugle*, quite by chance, did need a messenger boy, the previous occupant of that post having just handed in his notice in order to become a gentleman’s outfitter in Bond Street. The editor, George Bradwell, prided himself on making his decisions in an instant. And he reckoned Harry to be a lively young man. ‘Do you run or do you walk fast?’ he asked him. He had a gruff voice that seemed to come from his chest rather than his throat.

‘I run, sir, when I see the path clear.’

‘That’s good. That’s what you must do.’ He had an emphatic manner of speaking, reminding Harry of the fairground barkers who came to Camden once a year. George Bradwell was not used to being interrupted or contradicted. He explained that Harry was supposed to take the ‘copy’ from the office to the printer, and then bring the ‘proof’ back to the *Bugle*. Copy of what? Proof of what? It was very mysterious. Bradwell then showed Harry some pages of typing, with various scrawls and symbols in the margins. ‘These,’ he said, ‘have been marked up.’ Harry nodded, as if he understood perfectly what he was being told. The air was heavy with the stale odour of tobacco. ‘Cadogan Street.’ Pinned to the wall was a large map of the borough. Bradwell pointed with tobacco-stained finger to the street in question. ‘On the right is Lubin the printer. Just tell him you’re from the *Bugle*. This is Tony, by the way.’

Tony was a middle-aged man of florid complexion, with the indefinable air of having been disappointed in life. He boasted a thin pencil-like moustache, and a clump of hair perched precariously on his head. ‘You can’t miss Lubin,’ he said. ‘He is the Jew boy.’ Harry knew at once that Tony wore a wig, and he suspected that the moustache was dyed. Tony looked like a man perpetually in disguise.

Tony, in turn, took an instinctive dislike to the new recruit; any young person threatened him.

Harry soon became accustomed to his duties. He was so exhilarated by his new job that he mastered its details easily enough. He dashed from the *Bugle* to the printers. He ran between ‘Editorial’ and ‘Advertising’, picking up the copy from both departments. In ‘Editorial’ Tony was news. George was interviews and reviews. An elderly man, Aldous, was sports. Aldous hardly ever spoke, and seemed to Harry to exist in a state of self-pitying gloom. Stress and tension were

always in the air. Bradwell would answer the telephone and announce himself as 'editor in chief'. Tony would then give a sarcastic smile. Bradwell would often snatch his hat and coat, and stride purposefully out of the office. Sometimes he would not come back for an hour or more. Then he returned with an air of mystery, and with the odour of alcohol.

In the background there was always the stutter of a typewriter, as Tony or Aldous put together a paragraph. Aldous described the triumphs, or the miseries, of the Camden Rovers. He praised the exploits of a Camden schoolgirl who had won a North London javelin competition. He denounced the closing of the bar of the Camden Cricketers' Association. He typed down all this with the same air of gloom. Tony celebrated a lucky win on the football pools by a Camden pensioner. He described the closure of a cottage hospital in East Camden. He reported the theft of a jukebox from a Camden public house. He sat over his typewriter like a bird of prey.

On the whole, Harry preferred 'Advertising'. It was run by a small woman with a strong Scots accent. To Harry, Maureen seemed marvellously exotic. She wore a skein of artificial pearls over her hair and, according to Tony, dressed like something out of a shop window. He referred to her as Queen of Scots or Bloody Maureen. She supervised the work of two young men who were, again according to Tony, 'slaves at her feet'. Maureen had overheard the remark; she had arched her eyebrows and sniffed. She considered Tony to be, as she put it, 'a drastic little creature'. 'Excuse me,' she said, 'but I think he's a very common type of person. And that wig looks like a dead cat.' Harry could not disagree.

Harry enjoyed his time in Lubin's printworks. He savoured the pervasive smell of ink, and the steady metallic beat of the electrotyping machines. He saw the curved plates of metal type being inserted into the presses, and watched as the paper

flowed between them. It was a cheerful and good-humoured place, filled with shouts and the noise of the machinery. This was the newspaper world that Harry had envisaged – a strident, exciting, declamatory world.

Harry was walking back from the printer one evening, after delivering the last of that day's copy, when he noticed a man in a dark raincoat walking ahead of him. He was in his thirties, or so it seemed, but he was much smaller and slighter than Harry. He was carrying a shopping bag in each hand, containing something bulky or heavy. He had difficulty in maintaining an even pace, but he looked calmly from side to side. On a whim, or instinct, Harry decided to follow him. The man crossed the road, and then began walking down a street of semi-detached dark red-brick houses. The area was gloomy enough in the day, but on a winter evening it was a place in mourning. It was one of those parts of London that sunlight never seems to enter, an almost subterranean world of domestic privacy and seclusion. Net curtains were hanging at every window, and the gates of the small front gardens were all closed.

Harry knew that the brick church of Our Lady of Sorrows stood at the end of this dark red avenue, opposite a small park. He suspected that the man was about to enter the park, but then he saw him vanish into the deep shadow of the church itself. He followed him through the porch, and then sat quietly in a pew at the back. The church was deserted. The man had walked slowly up the aisle and had halted at the wooden rail before the altar. It seemed to Harry that he had knelt down and, with his head bowed forward, begun to pray. But that was not what he was doing. Harry heard rustling, and noticed that he was taking something out of the bags. He walked towards him silently and cautiously; then, to his alarm, he saw two large cans of petrol. He did not

hesitate. He shouted out 'Heck!' and rushed at the man, knocking him to the floor before pinning him against the rail. The man looked at him, mildly, and did not try to resist.

The cry had roused the curate of the church, who had been dozing in the sacristy amidst the mild perfume of lilies and beeswax polish. He came running out, and was astonished at the spectacle of Harry straddling the man and pressing him against the floor of the church. Harry suggested to him that he might go in search of a policeman. A glance at the cans of petrol convinced the curate. 'I'm in no possible hurry,' the man said as Harry continued to sit upon him. 'Don't you think this church is rather wonderful?' It was ornate and comfortable, with candles and flowers and images; statues of the saints stood between the Stations of the Cross, and a wooden confessional box was against the south aisle. 'My mother used to frequent this place a great deal. She used to sit here with me. I was only a boy, naturally. That was in '44. When the bombing got a trifle on the heavy side.' He had a plaintive or earnest expression, as if he were trying to solve a curiously subtle problem. 'I can remember the bombs very well. I was never scared, you see. It was the excitement. Glorious feeling.' His voice, echoing in the empty church, was very gentle. 'I was one of the Blitz boys. Have you heard of us by any chance?' Harry shook his head. The War was, for him, very distant. 'We were the ones who put out the fires. We had buckets of sand and a hand-truck. We had iron bars to force our way in. We were absolutely fierce. We were ready to *eat* fires, even if I say so myself.'

The curate came back with three policemen. Harry rose to his feet and two officers took the man away. The third remained to take down Harry's statement.

Harry told George Bradwell the following morning. He became so excited by his own narrative that he knelt on the

floor to demonstrate the manner in which he had pinned down the arsonist.

‘I think,’ Bradwell said, ‘that we can make a story out of this.’

‘But it’s true.’

‘A news story. *Bugle* reporter foils arson attack upon church. Commended by the police for his heroism.’

‘But I’m not a reporter.’

‘You are now.’ He glanced at the unoccupied desks of Aldous and of Tony. Harry sensed, then, that he did not altogether relish their company. ‘You know how to hold a pen, don’t you?’ Harry nodded. ‘That’s a good start.’

Within a very short time Bradwell taught him how to construct a news story; he explained to him that he should begin with the simple fact, in a short sentence, and then gradually elaborate. He pointed out the places where Harry might acquire news – the magistrates’ court, the town hall, the police stations, the office of the coroner. He gave him lessons in typewriting, and even sent him on a course of shorthand. Bradwell seemed to be reliving the earliest stages of his own career; he saw in Harry a version of his younger self. He wished him to succeed. And Harry did. He had a natural gift for vivid description, and a keen eye for a likely story. Another messenger boy was hired.

Tony was furious at Harry’s appointment. He believed himself to have been supplanted and, in effect, humiliated. But he did not show his fury to those who had instigated it. He concealed it from Bradwell and Harry, but he vented it to Aldous. ‘He can’t write,’ he said as they sat in a local public house. ‘He can’t spell. He is an ignorant little bleeder. I think he may be a pansy. What do you think?’ Aldous was deeply uncomfortable about any such allusion. He merely shook his head. Tony’s anger emerged as genial malice in Harry’s presence. He was careful not to criticise him directly, but tried to

unsettle him with jokes and insinuations. Harry feigned not to notice his resentment and bitterness.

He spent most of his time, in any case, out of 'Editorial'. He rushed after stories of burglaries and assaults. He attended weddings and funerals. He waited outside the local police station for the arrival of the Black Maria van. He spent hours talking to the elderly clerk of the magistrates' court, Mr Peabody, who was a source of local information. Mr Peabody was a grave and dignified gentleman, with a taste for whisky. He would speak eloquently of the foibles of a certain magistrate, or the surprising conclusion of a certain case; but as he drank he grew more thoughtful, until his conversation came to a lingering end. Harry knew that, at this stage, it was time to withdraw. He would leave Mr Peabody at the bar, glass in hand, staring solemnly at the row of bottles above the cash register.

'Hanway? Hanway?' he asked Harry one evening.

'Yes, Mr Peabody?'

'The name is known to me. I can recall it. It is an unusual name. Most unusual.' He reflected. 'There was a young woman, by the name of Hanway, connected with the court in some way. Some years ago. I seem to remember her crying.'

Who was the young woman, crying? Could Mr Peabody have some vague recollection of his mother? But, then, what had she to do with the magistrates' court? Harry sensed, at that moment, that all this had something to do with her disappearance.

He decided to consult the court's files. He knew the approximate date of his mother's disappearance. It had been in the early winter. He recalled the smog. He had been ten years old. So he turned back to the records of October 1957. It was weary work, going through the reports of cases and incidents long forgotten. But he read on through evidences and judgements – until one name arrested his wandering

attention. Mrs Sally Hanway was brought before the court on 22 October 1957. He started to sweat, and looked away at a printed notice fixed to the wall. With an effort of concentration he turned back to the page, from which he had been momentarily distracted by a pang of anxiety so great that he caught his breath. At that instant, too, Daniel Hanway and Sam Hanway were seized with a sensation close to panic. Harry carried on reading and learned that Mrs Sally Hanway had been found guilty of soliciting and of offending public morals. The magistrate had sentenced her to a term of three months' imprisonment.

Harry got up from his chair and walked down the long corridor of the building. He came out of the entrance, descended the stone steps, and was then sick on the pavement. He steadied himself against a pillar, and breathed in deeply. He had a sudden image of her, standing on the steps of the magistrates' court, with her finger to her lips. He went back to the library, and replaced the heavy volume on the shelves.

It was only when he had walked out again into the street that he realised something else. His father had known of this. That is why he had evinced no surprise. That is why he had never spoken of her disappearance. And the neighbours must also have known of his mother's arrest. Out of pity or embarrassment, they had not remarked upon her absence to the three young brothers. He realised, too, that with this knowledge he could no longer remain in the house with his brothers.

The life of the Hanway household was not, in any case, as it once had been. The brothers had steadily grown apart. Daniel spent his evenings in study, while Harry pursued his new work. Without the company of his older brothers, Sam had become aimless. He had no friends and spent his time, outside of school, roaming through the streets – in search of what? Their father had changed his job. He gave up his post

as nightwatchman, and had become a long-distance lorry driver with a regular run from London to Carlisle; as a result he spent less time than ever at home.

Harry took advantage of his father's absence to leave quietly and quickly. He found a small room in a street close to the offices of the *Bugle*. He had few possessions; what he owned could be carried in a suitcase.

Daniel saw him packing. He asked him where he was going.

'Now that's an excellent question. I'm going away. I'm taking off.'

'For good?'

'Nothing is for good, clever boy.'

'Dad won't like it.'

'Dad will like it. You will have more space. Sam can have my room.' He closed the lid of the suitcase. 'Dad doesn't even know I'm here. When is he ever at home?'

'Where are you going then?'

'Carver Street.'

It was a street of small houses and of small shops. They were some of the first buildings ever erected in the fields of Camden, in the early nineteenth century, but they did not wear their age gracefully. Their yellow brick had faded with grime and decay; the doors were peeling, and the windows were dusty. A sudden gap in the row of houses marked the spot where a stray doodlebug had flattened two houses; they had not yet been rebuilt, and the open site was covered in weeds and refuse. The windows of Harry's room overlooked this waste-ground. He rented the room from an elderly Irish couple, the Stantons, whose son had recently died of poliomyelitis. It was the son's room that Harry now occupied. A crucifix hung on the wall above the bed.

Harry had never been alone before. He had never thought of himself as solitary. He had lost contact with

his erstwhile school friends, but he would have denied ever being lonely. He never once used the word. But now he sat by himself in any number of cheap cafés, where the principal resource was egg and chips and brown sauce. It was the sauce, in fact, that effected his introduction to Hilda. She was sitting at the table next to his in the Zodiac Café for Working Men. He was shaking the bottle of sauce so vigorously that it splattered over her plate of spotted dick and custard.

He offered to buy her an untainted pudding, an offer that she gracefully accepted. It was the least he could do. Then they began to talk.

‘I expect,’ she said, ‘that you will be laughing at me soon.’
‘Why would I do that?’

‘Everything I do seems to be funny. Not funny peculiar. Funny ha ha. People laugh at me for no apparent reason. I’m *serious*.’ She had a direct manner, but it was accompanied by a shy smile that Harry found charming; she had a round face, but it was a pretty one. ‘My name is Hilda. That makes you laugh, doesn’t it?’

‘No.’

‘It should do. Hilda is a stupid name. *Everyone* in Southend is called Hilda.’

‘But they can’t all be as pretty as you.’

‘Now that *does* make me laugh. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been there.’

‘Where?’

‘Southend.’

‘I have, actually. I felt the need for fresh air.’

‘Did you find any?’

‘No. It just smelled of seafood and candy-floss.’

‘That’s it. That’s *it*.’

‘Yet I enjoyed it. I liked the gloom.’

‘That’s where I *come* from.’ Then she did laugh. Harry

thought that it was a delightful laugh, an innocent laugh.
'What's your name and rank?'

'Harry Hanway. First-class.'

'Where are you from, Harry Hanway?'

'If you seek my monument, look around you.'

'A local yokel?'

'That's me.'

So Harry and Hilda became friends long before they were ever lovers. Hilda worked in the 'typing pool' of a City bank, from which she emerged every evening with stories about her colleagues. She seemed to be in a continual state of amusement at the absurdities of the world, and often began her sentences with 'You'll never guess' or 'Don't laugh, but . . .'. Harry did laugh. He began to write a short weekly column in the *Bugle*, entitled 'Don't Laugh, But . . .', in which he retold some of Hilda's anecdotes.

'I'm a bit of an orphan, actually,' she had told him. 'I was found. On a doctor's doorstep in Tilbury. Where the docks are.'

'Was your father a sailor?'

'I don't know. That's the *point*. Anyway I was called after a nurse in the hospital. That was before I was taken on.'

'Who by?'

'Mum and Dad. Well, *honorary* Mum and Dad. That's why I ended up in Southend, you see. They had an ice-cream van on the front by the pier.'

'One of those ones with a chime? A tinkle?'

'"Singing in the Rain." Mum used to serve ices like Chocolate Melody and Vanilla Creamsicle.' She laughed. 'The van was the colour of strawberries.' She suddenly had a memory of the strawberry van against the blue sea, its melody sometimes drowned by the sound of the waves. 'My favourite was Raspberry Wriggle.'

She lived now in a hostel for single young women, with a strict rule against male visitors. Harry could hardly have

brought her to his little room in the Stanton household, with the crucifix above the bed. So they existed on the fringes of lovemaking. They met in the park. They retreated to the back rows of the local cinemas. They were passionate but furtive. What others might have found embarrassing, they considered to be amusing. It was part of the comedy of life.

Whenever she saw love stories on the screen, Hilda wept. 'I can't *help* myself,' she said. 'It's daft, I grant you that, but there it is. But let's face it. I'm a *girl*. And Robert Mitchum is so handsome. He looks like you.' Harry remained dry-eyed, and slightly bored, through the films that Hilda enjoyed.

One late afternoon he had spread the pages of the *Morning Chronicle* over the grass in the neighbourhood park, so that they might be protected from the damp ground. At the beginning of spring they both enjoyed this part of Camden. Harry was just about to roll on his back when he glimpsed an item in the newspaper. It announced a competition, sponsored by the *Morning Chronicle* itself, for young writers. The challenge was to complete a profile of a neighbourhood personality. 'Now this is interesting,' he remarked to Hilda. 'This is just the ticket.'

And then he thought of the Blitz boy, the arsonist whom he had forestalled in the church of Our Lady of Sorrows. He was a fine subject for a pen portrait, connecting the carnage and mayhem of 1944 with his own obsession. The arsonist wanted to live in flame. And, in London, there would always be a time when fire broke out.

Mr Peabody recalled the case very well. Harry himself had wanted to attend the trial, but the man had pleaded guilty to all charges and had thus dispensed with jury and witnesses. He had also confessed to two other offences of arson, connected with a garage and a gentlemen's lavatory. He had been sentenced to three years and despatched to Wormwood Scrubs, where he would be subject to regular medical reports.

Mr Peabody consulted the registers and uncovered the name of Simon Sim.

Harry applied for permission to interview Sim, and the prison authorities obliged. He then wrote to Sim, introducing himself once again, and to his surprise received a friendly response. So, on an early summer morning, he arrived at Wormwood Scrubs. The name itself was sinister. What could be worse than a wood full of worms? It had been designed to resemble a fortress, with a wooden gateway between two great towers. Harry's pace slowed, and he approached the entrance with some hesitation. He had the curious sensation that, once he entered, he would never get out again. He went up to the prison officer on duty, and explained his presence. Doors were opened, and gates were unlocked. He was led into 'C' wing, and taken to a small room containing nothing more than a table and three chairs. One chair was at each end of the table, and the third was by the door. The air of the prison smelled of wet paint and stale potatoes mingled.

Simon Sim was accompanied by a warder, who sat by the door. 'Wonderful to see you again,' Sim said. 'I haven't been well. But I wanted to talk to you. I know that I know you. Isn't that peculiar?' Harry did not understand what he meant. 'This is a fine place to have a fever, actually.' He looked appreciatively at the grey walls and the barred window. 'It calms you down. Helps you to think.'

'Are you feeling better?'

'Over the worst. Just the occasional shake or two.' He fixed his stare upon Harry with the same plaintive force as before, when they had struggled in the church. 'May I enquire, I mean, why do you want to see me?'

'I wanted to ask you about the Blitz.'

'Oh that's an enormous subject. Vast.'

'What was it like?'

‘What was it *like*? Golly, that’s a hard question.’ His laughter turned into a cough. ‘This is what it was like. The glass was raining down. It was raining glass. If you looked up, you would have been blinded. But that was not the worst thing.’ His voice was curiously melodious. ‘I’m glad that you caught me. It would just have gone on.’

‘How old were you when you began?’

‘Eleven. Twelve. A ripe old age. Terrific noise sometimes. We were out one night, after the sirens had sounded, when the bombs came down on the high street. I saw one girl. Her face was smashed where pebbles had lodged in her cheeks. One man was running down the slope of Hannaford Street, making for the shelter, when a falling bomb got him. I saw his head rolling along like a football.’ He paused for a moment. ‘We were as keen as mustard.’ Sim then told him of the bombing of a jam factory, where the dead were found covered in marmalade. He told him of a girl whose back was blown off, so that her kidneys were exposed; she had continued talking as she was taken away. There were other stories that he related with a peaceful and sometimes even blissful expression. Harry wrote down all of them. ‘I told you,’ Sim said, ‘that I knew you. As soon as you wrote to me, I remembered. Your name is Hanway.’ Harry nodded. ‘I knew your parents. I knew your mother. Lovely lady.’ Harry looked at him in alarm. ‘After the War I worked in the grocer’s on Sutcliffe Street. Do you remember it?’

‘It’s still there,’ Harry said.

‘She used to buy bacon for you. Sometimes one of you boys came with her. She was always cheerful. And now you’re here. Isn’t it curious how things come about? But then, dear me, you found me. I never found you. Isn’t it astonishing?’

‘I wanted to ask you,’ Harry said, hesitantly, ‘about the fires.’ He glanced at the warder who was clenching and unclenching his hands.

‘About my fires? Goodness me, I don’t know. I don’t enquire into my reasons. I don’t like to pry, you see.’

‘Do you think there is some connection with the Blitz?’

‘I wouldn’t speculate on that. It might just be an amazing coincidence. Coincidences do happen. Your mother bought bacon from me. There’s one. And a fine one. Where is she now, by the way? Your mother?’

‘She’s dead,’ Harry replied.

‘Is she? We used to talk about the terrible shortage of matches. And of flypaper, actually. There wasn’t much of it around. And, goodness me, there were plenty of flies.’

So Harry wrote his profile of Simon Sim. He described his fever; he described his calm and melodious voice. He read it out to Hilda on one Sunday afternoon. They had decided to walk along the river at Chelsea. They liked to look into the windows of the houses there, and imagine occupying those large and opulent rooms. ‘Do you think we ever shall?’ she asked him.

‘Oh yes. I should hope so.’ And then he added, after a pause, ‘I intend it. And I will do it.’

They sat down on a bench overlooking the Thames, and Harry took the article out of the pocket of his jacket. Hilda listened intently. When he had finished she put her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. Someone was walking past them. When they had finished their embrace, Harry looked up. He seemed to recognise the figure. He was taking long strides, and his head was bowed. It was Sam. Harry was sure of it. He called out to him. But Sam – if indeed it was Sam – quickened his pace. Then he began to run. He did not look back.

Harry was unsettled by the unexpected sighting of his younger brother. He had not visited his father. He had not heard from his father. Now he believed that Sam had avoided

him out of anger, or disappointment, at his sudden departure. Still, Harry was of sanguine temperament. He rarely thought of his family. He put the matter out of his mind.

After he had sent the profile of Simon Sim to the *Morning Chronicle*, he endured some weeks of suspense. He had told no one, at the *Bugle*, of his intentions. Tony, however, sensed something in the air. 'You're nervous, Harry,' he said, barely restraining a smile. 'Anything up?'

'Nothing at all.'

'Just thought I'd ask.' Then Tony noticed that he read the *Morning Chronicle* every morning with unusual attention. 'Are you thinking of leaving us, Harry?' he asked as soon as he saw that George had entered the room.

'Of course not.'

'As long as you're sure.'

'Well. I am sure. Thank you for asking, Tony.'

Then on a Saturday morning, three weeks later, the *Morning Chronicle* printed his profile of Simon Sim. Harry had won the competition. He looked at his name in ten-point type. He could not bear to stand in the street, but walked into a café and ordered a cup of tea. He was nervous, and his hand shook as he held the cup. He thought that he had seen his future. He had tasted ambition. He received a letter the following week, asking him to collect the £25 cheque in person at the offices of the *Chronicle*. This was his opportunity.

He decided that he would not take Hilda with him. She would laugh, or out of nervousness say something absurd. Harry knew that, to attain his goal of acquiring a job as a reporter on the *Chronicle*, he would need to remain calm and attentive. He would need to convey an air of seriousness and professionalism. Of course they all knew at the *Bugle*. George Bradwell had shaken his hand, and expressed the wish that he would remain with them. Aldous had looked grave, and nodded. Tony had never mentioned the subject, and avoided Harry's

eye. Maureen had embraced him, and congratulated him, while her two young men stood up and clapped. The new messenger boy, Percy, had pretended to blow a trumpet. 'That's the bugle,' he said, 'of the *Bugle*.' Percy was a cheerful boy.

In the following week Harry took the 48 bus to Fleet Street. He had passed through it before, but he had never stopped here. He had never been here in earnest. Now he was struck by the pace, and the intensity, of this narrow valley between tall buildings. He found the offices of the *Morning Chronicle* easily enough; they were based in what seemed to be a new building of plate glass and Portland stone. In the lobby there was a constant stream of people coming in or going out. Harry announced himself to a woman standing behind a large desk and was directed to the office of the deputy editor on the fifth floor. Harry could sense the beating of his heart as he entered the lift. He felt faint. He made his way along a corridor. He glimpsed a large room where several middle-aged men were sitting hunched over their typewriters. Telephones were ringing. A small man in a brown suit was standing by the open door, his hands on his hips. 'Where,' Harry asked him, 'can I find the deputy editor?'

'You have found him.' His glance was very sharp. 'And who are you?'

'Hanway, sir. Harry Hanway. I won the competition.'

'Oh did you?' He was very carefully dressed, with a white handkerchief discreetly visible in the upper pocket of his jacket. His tie was tightly knotted, his cuffs crisp. He was short but he seemed to Harry to be plumped up and perky; he looked like a pigeon about to mate. 'Well, young man, I have a cheque somewhere about me.' He was scrutinising him very carefully. 'Where do you work?'

'At the *Camden Bugle*.'

'No! And how's George?'

'Sir?'

‘I started on the *Bugle!* With George.’

So the connection was made. The deputy editor, John Askew, was immediately impressed by this coincidence. What a tight little world, and a tight little city, this was! He asked Harry if he carried a union card. Harry did. George Bradwell had arranged the matter as soon as Harry had joined the staff of the *Bugle*. ‘What a chance this is,’ Askew said, almost to himself. ‘It is too good.’ He went into his office and telephoned Bradwell. Bradwell was of course reluctant to part with Harry, but he gladly acknowledged his skills as a reporter. He wanted Harry to succeed where he had failed.

‘Arranged, arranged,’ Askew said as he joined Harry in the corridor. ‘Just a word with the editor.’ He came back, twenty minutes later, singing ‘Oh I do like to be beside the seaside’. ‘You are in,’ he said, almost casually. ‘Now where’s that cheque?’

So in the spring of 1965, at the age of eighteen, Harry Hanway became a reporter for the *Morning Chronicle*.