

CHAPTER 9

The High Street

ERRANDS! The bane of my childhood, that had to be endured. Nevertheless it had its compensations, when I was requested "To pop up the High Street". This raucous market held a fascination to me, being the scene and centre of unique attractions. Its versatility increased at weekends, and on occasions the mile of stalls were in business until midnight. St James Street adjoining, contributed to the trading although our light railways used this thoroughfare, and missed the shareholders by a hairs breadth. It was a miracle accidents did not occur daily, but by the grace of God, miracles were in evidence, aided by the alertness of the vendors. The number of naphtha flares hanging from the stalls gave a yellow to orange illumination, and not a little warmth. It was itself a warning not to get too close to the fearsome flame, which created dancing shadows and a cheerful atmosphere, while the leaking kerosene with its attendant smell was accepted - it had to be! These homely features ceased as soon as the first Zeppelin raid began and so the initial blackout was inaugurated. This characteristic flare was substituted by dim night lights, and flickering candles, placed in a box on the edge. The box front was covered by a transparent white paper showing enough light to give change. This barely illuminated the wares, so one had to buy almost on trust, so adding another of the many smaller miseries inflicted by the war.

However, war or peace, I haunted the High Street, listening open mouthed to the conglomeration of characters who were persuading and cajoling the shoppers to take advantage of the amazing bargains or cures on offer.

In spite of my mother's continued fault in forgetting some of her requirements, who would on my return casually remark "Oh just pop up the High Street agains", with monotonous repetition I was not deterred from wandering off on my own on Saturday afternoons. It was then the market was at its best, and I free of any responsibility.

On these occasions, I possessed a few coppers from father and sisters. My pleasure was to watch, and later to ape the various "barkers", among which was my favourite ex Dr. Brown. This King Edward-like person, stood aloof, adorned in a frock coat, morning trousers and spats half covering his highly polished shoes. A resplendent gold chain and hunter spread across his waistcoat, which was consulted from time to time, with a professional air.

Completing this spectacle was the adornment of a shiny silk topper, and a silver topped ebony walking stick. These played a significant part in enhancing his dignity. I revelled in re-enacting these characters, at various parties, until quite late in life. With due modesty we all inherited father's gift of mimicry.

He stood upright and very regal 5'6", supported by the said ebony walking stick and seriously listened to his son extolling the virtues of his astounding cures, while his pedantic expression was most impressive. By his side was a signwritten board referring to the authenticity of his previous status as a medical practitioner. Unfortunately, his son

sadly lacked his father's demeanour, his looks or his diction. In fact he appeared exactly what he was - a street vendor.

He usually wore a brown suit and boots and spluttered rather than spoke, and also had a slight impediment in his speech. However, try and imagine this person with glaring eyes, starting his repertoire with "My farder - Dr. Brown - Ex. Dr. Brown, late surgeon to vy division of der Metropolitan Police". You will note he had difficulty in pronouncing "the". It sounded like 'D's, Rs and Ys were also peculiar to him. However, he continued "Who was struck from der Medical Vregister, as a result of doing a kindness to a young woman - who talked" ! At this juncture, he would sweep his audience with a meaning look. Of his many cures, one was a cough candy. When recommending this, he held a slab in one hand, and with the other pointing to the medicant, would say "Diss ere contains de hoil of peppermint - der hoil of lavender - de hoil of hoar hound - de hoil of juniper, and several other "Hoils". His climatic remarks were "hif your little mite keeps you awake at night, and is racked with coughing - then put it in his little fist and let him suck it"! Each reference to the ingredients were accompanied by his eyes taking on a terrifying glare, and sweeping in a circle to the audience who stood in mute admiration.

Dr Brown appeared quite regularly, was a local resident and earned considerable respect. Occasionally we were visited by a Dr. Strong whose qualifications were suspect. He specialised in an aphrodisiac, Damianer! He attracted quite an audience by his outspoken and forthright approach to sex.

At the time, this brought simulation and admiration from many and looks of disgust from the few. He was a tall immaculate person, dark and handsome, blessed with the deepest and richest of voices and was the epitome of sartorial elegance. Black coat, fawn vest, pin stripe trousers, crevette, black patent shoes, a monocle dangled from his immaculate collar. The single eye glass was occasionally used with a flourish, when reading out his testimonials.

These were displayed in a seemingly careless way on his stall. A doubtful large diamond ring flashed, as he described his wares. His enriched voice was his fortune as on approaching his subject he would disdainfully remark "From disease I am immune", (a startling announcement), then, "I have here Damianer, culled from the mountains of Spain, blessed by the life giving sun". Remember Spain to us all, in those days, was as mysterious as the source of the Amazon. As much as the general public knew of most of Europe were the songs of that era, such as "If I catch Afonso", or "Lady of Spain I adore you" etc.

Dr Strong raises his right arm and points skywards on each mention of Damiana, whilst fixing his eye on likely male customers eagerly drinking in his rhetoric' "Damiana the herb of life, it makes you what you should be to your young wife" . You could hear the gasps. "Damiana! It is energising and makes you immune from lassitude!" Men started feeling in their pockets.

"Damiana!" and so on until he disposed of his red pills to a calculating male audience.

The young were left with the grand imagination of an illusion of repeating the sexual act

for an indefinite period. The middle aged thought they would be able to repeat their honeymoon - and the elderly fervently hoped to make a comeback! Whilst Dr. Strong left, with increased wealth.

Whether the miraculous remedy worked or not, I was too young and innocent to find out, I can only say to me this spell left me with confused ideas. I was extremely naive, I would go so far as to say completely innocent, mainly by the complete and utter Victorian attitude of mother, and the extreme indifference of my father. Both had many good points, but sadly lacked in passing on the worldly education necessary.

Dr. Brown was a genuine ex MD. I cannot vouch for Dr. Strong's bona fides, but he was a well known "Market Practitioner" seen in Leather Lane, Holborn, and Tower Hill, later in life. There were however many fly by night quacks, who must have travelled extensively to market their useless remedies, as a repeat performance in the same market place would have been fatal.

One in particular, a black man, with heavy gold rings adorning his fingers, dressed extremely flashy. His English was broken but attractive. It was a rare sight to see a coloured person in those days.

This person sold tooth powder and displayed his excellent set of teeth as proof of his product. His opening remarks I remember quite well: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I are just arrived from de Gauld Coste of Sout-Aprica and I are brought wid me a toot powdah, made from de root ob da-" here an obscure name was used, "Say" "From de root ob de Oojah Tree - you notite mah teet am powah white" etc. I was fascinated by this rare spectacle who at the end of his convincing exhortation, offered one box for 6d and one free.

I was so desirous of obtaining this rare tooth cleanser, I waited until the sales were over then diffidently approached him and apologetically asked if he would sell me one box for 3d which was all I possessed. With a furtive glance he accepted the proffered amount for the same and I departed joyfully.

When informing mother of my bargain She immediately said "You have been caught silly boy, it's chalk" ! She was as often quite correct.

I still, on occasions, fall for the five card trick from convincing salesmen. We all have our weak moments. Even as late as 1937, I fell for a delightful con trick. While wandering in Leather Lane, Holborn, with brother Arch, we were convinced by a salesman selling "Unbreakable china". We both purchased a quantity, after seeing this wizard skim the plates along the pavement. I was married at the time, and on arriving home, convincingly informed the wife we were now free of breakages, and to prove it skimmed a plate along our tiled hall. It broke into several pieces! My wife thought I had taken leave of my senses.

Later I learned brother Arch had superceded my effort by throwing two plates, in reckless abandon. Moral: "There is one born every minute".

A character of note and the most versatile, was a short chubby person with a moon face,

untidy to a degree who sputtered over whatever he was selling owing to his lower lip protruding to an unusual extent. It was owing to this lip he was dubbed as "Lip Bert" and was never lost for words. He was a freelance barker employed by any stallholder who required his services.

Whatever the wares it made not the slightest difference to "Lip Bert". His versatility was limitless. His best speciality was chocolates and sweets and when extolling the virtues of these would be astounding with his explosive expletives. Following his vivid description of the ingredients, his final verdict would be "Ere yar peepul choklits these are - not Sh** !" ! In his enthusiastic peroration, he would be spluttering all over his merchandise: at times uncovered! It was most surprising he was not aware that the public could quite see the distinction he made in describing the merchandise. Among the many traders was a superman. He did not make a public display of his strength knowingly, he merely sold rolls of lino and oilcloth in his shirt sleeves with a leather apron adorning him for obvious reasons. He had a magnificent lean frame and a leather wrist strap on both wrists. He lifted a whole roll of lino and held it across both arms in a horizontal position, whilst his partner supported the end of the roll and stood still while the strong man walked backwards. He would unroll the lino by bouncing it on his forearm, displaying its full pattern. While performing this prodigious act he continued his sales talk to the potential customers. The strain imposed was apparent, as he extolled the virtues of his merchandise. He would finally arrive at the price smacking the face of the lino with his right hand, whilst his left arm supported the full weight. Many times this feat was repeated, resulting in no sale, while sweat poured down his face even in winter. His lower jaw used to tremble which, I suspect now, was a nervous affliction, such a picture is hard to imagine. This Jewish gentleman's real name was Mr. Searl and correctly dubbed "The Lino King". The whole width of the road was used when displays were in progress and the large audience forming around took on the appearance of a circus ring. It was potentially a strong man act. He was a credit to his race.

Another lost sight today are the huge brass jockey scales highly polished with a comfortable armchair hanging from chains. The owner sat on a box at the opposite end, lifting tremendous iron iron weights and while watching the indicating needle in the centre would bawl out in stentorian tones 15 stone 10lbs 6ozs or whatever the customer weighed. It was of no use trying to keep a secret of ones weight as he bellowed it out to the whole world, and then presented one with confirmation on a slip of paper to prove it. All this for the price of one penny. I wonder what his daily takings amounted to? This beautiful brass structure stood outside "Cardos", the old established boot and shoe emporium. Mr. Cardo mainly catered for working mens heavy footwear with a variety of hob-nailed boots and even wooden soled clogs, reinforced by strips of iron on the soles and heels. This corn producing footwear was worn by many poor children who considered themselves fortunate, as indeed they were, as a few had no footwear at all. Opposite Cargos was Mr. Howards toy shop and the much publicised "Dolls Hospital" . Here was a treasure house of toys, where envious eyes of children were always directed.

A screamingly humorous episode happened one Saturday afternoon. A character sold a patent glue, which stuck almost everything - at least that is what we were informed. This tall dark cadaverous man sported a drooping black moustache under which was seen two very white sharp teeth, reminiscent of a rat's incisors. He also possessed wicked flashing eyes, and an extraordinary nasal voice. Attired in a greasy black frock tailed, coat and equally dirty baggy trousers, terminating with a pair of scruffy boots of enormous size. His success in holding the audience was his voice and eyes.

On this particular occasion he persuaded a small boy to hold the lighted candle with which he warmed the toffee like substance. When the glue was well melted he smeared it on to a piece of wood which he joined to another.

When it cooled he would dash it to the ground to prove the strength of his product. Whilst he made this repair he would hold the audience with a continuous spiel in his nasal tones, as follows: "It may be a corner of a table" - pause - "It may be the corner of a side-board" ! - Pause - "It may be the leg of a chair" ! - Pause - "It may be a piece of a peerno" ! - Pause - "I don't care! ! , "You can smash it into a thousand pieces and it will not, I say, will not, come apart!" etc. (Whereupon the repaired piece of wood was dashed to the ground at the appropriate moment, adding a climax before making the sale.)

Now comes the "Pièce de Resistance" - You will have to envisage a small boy, wheedled from the audience, who was asked to hold the lighted candle, while the operation of melting the glue was in progress. This same innocent child rather respectably dressed, wearing a white scarf with silken tassels, which were fashionable in those days. This same small boy stood gazing into the hypnotic eyes of the glue purveyor, as if under his spell, whilst the candle caused the tassels to smoulder and eventually catch light. All unbeknowing to the candle bearer. Rather than distract the audience, especially as the glue seller was on his climatic finish, he continued his oration without batting an eyelid, while making frantic efforts to pat out the flames with his free hand.

The boy remained entranced, totally unaware he was at the end of a fuse.

Looking back on this, it was extremely amusing, but to describe the actions, with the mimicry of the voice, makes what many have remarked "A music hall sketch". The voice contributed mainly to the scene. On each "It may be etc" his left hand would pat the shouldering hassle in unison. It was only when both hands of the glue vendor were free, he could successfully complete his fire fighting act. The innocent victim suddenly became aware of his incendiaries position by throwing down the candle and assisting in the operation. By this time the audience were engulfed, not by fire but by merriment.

Such fun, such entertainment, such excitement, was all to be found in the High Street and all free! The previously mentioned lino kings' pitch was in front of the old fire station which was operational in my youth. I gazed in awe at the glinting brass work and the steam boiler of the horse drawn fire engine, with the harness hanging over the shafts, ready for use. This vague recollection became more vivid when the inevitable change to motor occurred in the early part of the century when two new "commer motors" appeared followed by varied public comments. The brass helmets with the attendant

gear were placed in full view of the public as were the firemen, who were always wearing their high leather boots, and glamorous uniform. Their presence at the doors, with the engines in the background, was an added attraction to the High Street - and also the opposite sex. The majority of the Brigade were ex sailors and who was to doubt the assumption that "all the nice girls love a sailor" according to Marie Lloyd or was it Florrie Ford?

Nearby was "Raphaels" the gown shop. Mrs. Raphael was invariably outside her premises making an imposing figure and clad in a creation, designed to attract attention. Any female who chanced to view the window display would immediately be cajoled and persuaded to enter "Under no obligation dear". A sale would be made, before the proverbial exclamation of Jack Robinson! Mrs Raphael was a commanding and extremely smart lady who possessed plenty of flesh to command. Her upright carriage with her right hand decorously placed on the upper part of her chest, disclosed by the square neck dress with the rings on view, would have put Mae West in the second division with regard to female attraction. Many alleged that she kept her money in her bosom, hence the position of her hand.

The past glories of the costermongers' barrows were the salad stalls. These piled high with water cress, tomatoes being inserted between the bunches - lettuce, cucumbers, radishes and the delectable bunches of spring onions.

Heads of sweet smelling celery and above all the steaming hot beetroots cooked in the vendor's copper, no doubt after the weekly wash had previously been boiled, thus adding special flavour. Then, various fruits and vegetables only appeared when in season. Modern farming now can produce out of season and although this may please many, the pleasure of anticipation has gone, as also specialised shops. Supermarkets have transformed the art of shopping. We have to assume it as progress - I wonder! Unless you had money to spare, you were not welcome to wander in "The Arcade" next door to the "Chequers". This dingy open-fronted hovel, held automatic machines "For amusement only" including "Waht the Butler Saw", "A Day at the Seaside" and the most daring of all - "A Night in Paris". If one caught a glimpse of two plump female legs, encased in horrible striped stockings coupled with a prodigiously proportioned bust, showing the tiniest bit of cleavage, that was the ultimate! The gambling consisted of a ha'penny in the slot machine, which produced one ball-bearing, which was hit by a spring trigger operated by ones thumb.

The ball then went round and round a groove. When the momentum finished, it dropped in one of the six holes, showing "4 wins" and "2 losers".

These holes were protected by pins, suffice to say the odds were cunningly arranged. To obtain a win was almost impossible, but should you be so successful, the reward was your ha'penny back and the ball returned.

Eventually one always lost. I have never known a profit to be made on this momentous gamble. The younger generation were not welcome, if they were not spending money. In no short time I was often told to "Clear out" by the sleazy looking proprietor, who

always reminded me of a character from Dickens. A slightly built weasel faced, under nourished, evil looking individual. He had a permanent cigarette end attached to his lower lip,

appearing to be a built-in appendage. He slouched rather than walked and his permanent expression was that of an unemployed undertaker. Later in life I was tolerated, but by then the curious attraction had faded, I could never reconcile or forget the unpleasantness of weasel face, or the bare boarded dingy premises. .

The toffee maker with a boiling pan of ingredients, the large flaring spirit stove, being pumped at intervals, producing a frightening jet of flame, and the manipulation of the huge "sausage of toffee" being pulled and twisted from a large hook was extremely interesting to observe. Nearby was the sarsaparilla distiller offering the health giving drink with its enriching qualities to the blood, at least so his testimonials claimed by being boldly displayed in wooden frames. These imposing certificates were headed by some obscure society of herbalists. All added spice and glamour to this street of never ending interest.

Prior to Lloyd George introducing sickness benefits in 1909, clubs for this contingency were popular among the poorer communities. They therefore continued to supplement the modest sickness payment, made under the new Government Act. Thus it was one of my many and never ending errands to pay father's "Sick Club" dues on Saturday evenings at "Conway Hall" attached to the church, then situated at the top of the High Street. The title of the club was ⁽¹⁾"Marsh Street Sick Mens Benefit Society" which always puzzled me until I learned of the reason. This trip occurred every three weeks, being the permitted period to be in arrears, before being fined 1d per share. Mother's gasps of surprise and remarks "time flies" always alerted me to the fact my evening trek was in the offing.

The only redeeming feature was to again view the bustle and glamour of the market which continued until late in the evening. Otherwise, the prospect of sitting in the dimly lit gaslight of the musty church hall, waiting interminably for the name of "Walker" to be called, was most boring indeed. To a young boy, who at times fell asleep and sometimes missed his turn, it was almost a nightmare. As one entered this typical church hall, which was the venue for all religious activities from Sunday School to Bible class studies its gloomy atmosphere was apparent. There were rows of hard wooden forms, and individual chairs, with the inevitable harmonium on which was a residue of well worn hymn books. Beyond this was a diminutive stage flanked by brown drab curtains reminiscent of old army blankets.

⁽¹⁾ There were three churches built on this site, the last being erected in 1871. Marsh St became the High Street in 1882.

In front of the stage sat two elderly grey haired gentlemen, one being Mr. Gore of 62, Greenleaf Road, (Secretary), a name imprinted in my memory.

So many times did I read it when on these irksome visits. The next initiation was to place the contribution book face down on an enormous pack of the same, being careful to avoid the inkpots on the green baize cloth.

The pale glow of the light supplied by the "Lea Bridge Gas Company" shed its full share on the shiny bald pate of the treasurer, whilst the rest of the hall was in semi darkness. Mr. Gore then proceeded to select the books in strict order and in a sonorous voice would call out "Mr. Walker", causing me to jump up with alacrity, unless otherwise asleep. In some cases, a member would leave the hall for a smoke and miss his turn, in which case the book was returned to the bottom of the pack. Arriving at the table, Mr. Gore would look up with an enquiring manner whilst I volunteered "Three weeks please", in the most subservient voice. The flat monotone would then spell out the message to the silent partner in charge of a massive ledger. "Mr. Walker No. 6484" eightpence", or whatever: having signed the book which was then handed to his partner, who in turn checked the entry with raised eyebrows. On some occasions a secret low toned conversation was held with Mr. Gore, which left me isolated with cap in hand feeling like that famous boy in history, being asked "When did you last see your father". Although I may have felt like him, I was not so sartorially as elegant as he. As beneficial as these clubs were the rules applying when on sick benefit were stringent. To enter a public house meant being struck off. To be caught outside home after permitted hours meant a fine, or worse. This was left to the discretion of the committee. ⁽¹⁾

To enforce the latter, sick visitors were appointed to visit or snoop, however one interpreted the call, without prior notice. There were several more bye-laws which now escape me.

A terrifying evening occurred when a visitor called one dark and dismal night, while father was claiming benefit for bronchitis while he was wicked enough to be out.

On this occasion mother had sensed who was at the door, it could only be the dreaded visitor. No one was expected. All the family were in! Father had the only other key - apart from the one that was attached to a string just inside the letter box. Frozen silence by all! A second knock - slightly louder, and a third - beads of perspiration on mother's brow - a dryness in all our throats. Had we all been on a charge for murder, the atmosphere could not be more stifling. Finally, steps fading away could be heard, even then no one dared to stir in case the inquisitor returned, or was hovering by the gate.

Such was the fear of authority and the subsequent penalty that could result.

⁽¹⁾ Should any kind person still have an old membership book, the author would appreciate a sight of same for historical purposes. Communication to the publishers would receive appropriate attention.

The visitor returned the following night, father malting quite sure he would be home and ready with his perfect alibi, "The family had gone to visit relations leaving him tucked up in bed with a hot water bottle and lemon water. Yes, I did hear the knock - it woke me up - I felt it foolish to leave a warm bed, etc." The experienced histrionics saved the situation, also the dire results of his crime in breaking the rules. Nevertheless, a much needed service was efficiently conducted by these worthwhile institutions. They served a need, and if any excess profit was made, a share out at Christmas was a welcome event. It may be interesting to note these many sick clubs were used to administer the new state benefit introduced by law and were "approved" by legislation as were insurance companies, who also had a section known as "Approved Societies" thus reducing the cost of administration. Obviously no special departments were necessary as "Sick Clubs" and "The State Panel Benefits" were interwoven, and the administration was already in being.

As soon as approved societies were disbanded in 1948 and the present day administration took over, so higher costs were inevitable.

About 10 p.m. the traders are hurriedly disposing of the perishable residue of their wares at knock out prices. The butchers are auctioning bloody joints of meat and the fried fish shops are preparing for a rush when the second house of the "Palace" and "Carlton" discharge their bleary eyed patrons.

Some with higher sense of values will visit the jovial Mr. Watcham (Mr. Watcham was the initial President of the first Walthamstow Motor Club, founded by myself and several keen motorcyclists). He was proprietor of "The Palace Tea rooms". A jovial cherubic faced man with a mop of wavy black hair, matched by a decorous moustache of the same colour. His generous portions of egg and chips with roll and butter and a real cup of tea would set you back 9d. A few of the night owls may wander round to Hoe Street Station or further down the High Street where at either venue the popular sight of a coffee stall appears as if by magic. At each stall one would see a damp tea stained cloth covering an enormous brown enamel teapot, from which a liquid looking like an oak stain is poured. To accompany this, you could purchase a "sav and a slice". A string of the former are retrieved from the boiling steamer and one of these tasty smokers are severed from the necklace, a thickish slice of bread spread with Sainsbury's famous Crelos (Sainsburys Crelos, was their original substitute for butter, and popular in the period). If required this also could be smothered with sauce satisfying the evening pangs of hunger. Should we return to the High Street, we will see the piles of litter left as a result of an industrious day, being cleared by the council cleaners, complete with dustcarts. Thanks to these men, the High Street will present a complete change of appearance as a clean and quiet thoroughfare for the following Sunday morning.