

PRIVILEGED LITTLE SAVAGES



We occasionally dipped into village life, though Mummy and Daddy tended to shy away from too much involvement with parish matters. For reasons that grew to be obvious, they preferred to maintain their privacy; visits were for household requirements only. The butcher Mr Woodrow, a jolly man in a blue-striped apron, with a big tummy and a face the colour of well hung beef, always had a cheery welcome; I found the dissected carcasses horrific and the smell sickening. Down the hill Mr Notley had a tiny workshop festooned with baskets of every shape and size. He would sit outside on a small wooden seat, surrounded by dampened withies, his strong hands engrossed in creation. Over the years Mr Notley became a respected willow weaver with eager customers all around the world. Mummy loved the Chicken Baskets he made; they were oval with arced sides, apparently used to carry hens to market, the shape making it impossible for the bird to move or flap its wings. The little sweetie shop on the outskirts of Curry

Rivel was our favoured destination, my choice of treats would be tear-jerking acidic pear-drops and aniseed balls that turned your tongue black. Langport, a larger village a few miles away, had a historical and strategic past as a settlement on the River Parrett. There was a tale about an enormous pike which reputedly lived for many years in the muddy depths under the bridge. Rumour had it that if anyone caught the scaly monster they would find remains of small animals and lost keepsakes in the fish's stomach.

Taunton was our nearest town, where we would be taken to a terrifying dentist and occasionally to see a film. Mr Garrett clearly relished extracting teeth more than saving them; apparently he reached orthodontic celebrity status for the brutal way he behaved. The cinema appeared to be a pretty standard flea-pit with seats in the stalls and balcony. We much preferred the upper level, best of all the front row where we would drop Maltesers onto the heads of the people below. The films did not have much impact – it was the curtains that enthralled me. They resembled a tightly-packed washing line of huge, baggy, ruched-up women's knickers made from cheap, shimmery material; at the end of a performance the swags were lowered as an apricot upright glowed from somewhere below the screen. On one occasion when we were taken to the movies a judo presentation was going on in the ticket hall. Much to our delight and Daddy's chagrin, he got picked on by the white-robed sensei who took the opportunity to show the

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audience how easy it is to fling an exceptionally tall, fully grown man over his shoulder. The town, a staid conventional place, did not have much going for children; there was a cattle market where our poor beasts from the farm ended up and a department store, Hatchers, that had been in the same family since 1832. A visit to the shop felt like a sepia-tinted journey back in time; it was an excruciatingly dull experience and while Mummy spent money, Sarah and I entertained ourselves by trying on hideous hats in the millinery department.

Lunch at The Castle Hotel in Taunton could not have been considered an exciting treat for small children, nevertheless I do remember being taken there on a couple of occasions. Not long under new management, it was still a tired, shabby place where maraschino cherries were a badge of honour on a grapefruit and old colonels dozed in saggy armchairs with their flies undone. The hotel was a reconstruction of the twelfth-century Norman fortress Taunton Castle, where on September 18th and 19th 1685 in The Great Hall the infamous Judge Jeffreys presided over the Bloody Assizes. Five hundred rebellious prisoners were brought before the courts to hear their fate in the aftermath of the Battle of Sedgemoor. It is said that to this day local parents threaten their reprobate offspring with a visit from “The Judge”.

For us London was a fabled metropolis, far removed from day-to-day life in Somerset. Occasionally we would

be bundled into the car for a ghastly journey punctuated by many stops for fresh air and breaks between feeling sick. In the early 1960s investment in the regeneration of London, particularly the road systems, was happening at a furious pace – we had never seen such industrial sights. Our route took us directly past where the Hammersmith flyover was in construction; having not seen anything other than agricultural machinery, bleary-eyed Jonathan looked out the car window excitedly exclaiming “Look, look they are threshing”! We stayed at the Rembrandt Hotel in Knightsbridge where, despite every whim and wish being attended to, it still felt like a seductive correction facility with rooms you had to be locked into at night. Daddy metamorphosed into an elegant man-about-town, while we were encased in herringbone tweed coats with velvet collars. We were taken to feed the pigeons in Trafalgar Square; these city thugs with their scaly-pink, deformed feet horrified me – it was hard to believe they were the same species as the ones that crooned a lullaby from the treetops at home. Another outing was a trip to Bertram Mills Circus at Olympia where Daddy ogled the ladies in spangled swimsuits riding atop ponies with ostrich plumes mysteriously growing on their tossing heads. The arena smelt of anxious wee mixed with warm sawdust and I hated the bulbous red-nosed clowns stalking the audience, squirting the children with water from false flowers on their lapels. These forays to London were

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sold to us as an experience, where apparently the capital city offered delights not found west of Stonehenge; over the years my opinion has not shifted much and I would happily leave vast populations and urban offerings to the more confident.