

My life when young

I was born in Number 73, Mersey Road, Colchester, on the eighth of February, 1908, which now makes me at the time of writing this, as any one with, or without a maths degree will know at once that I am now over eighty years old.

I was the second daughter of my parents. They already had one little girl, of nearly three years old who was known as "Venie" throughout her life. She was a fair, haired child with black eyebrows, like our father. I think my parents were just a little bit disappointed at first that I was not a boy, as they had lost their precious first-born, a little boy named Bobby, about six years earlier. But our parents loved all their children dearly, making as our father used to say, "Neither fish nor foul"

I was christened Amy Gertrude, after one of mother's sisters who had died at the age of 38. Had I been a boy, Mother was going to call me Eric, after a little boy in the old Victorian book called "Eric, or Little by Little". Soon after I was born, I contracted scarlet fever, so my first few days were spent in an isolation hospital, and within a few days was joined by my sister, Venie, who was quickly followed by our father. I was, I believe, a plump little baby, but slimmed down as I started to walk, which was not until I was nearly two years old.

One year and eight months later, on October 26th, I was joined by another sister, Nelly Rosalie. But ever after, she was just "Nelly", until my own two boys called her "Betty", and her grandsons called her "Morry". I will explain this later. Another girl! Poor Dad!

It was not until nearly five years later, after we had left Colchester for Manor Park, that a son was born to Nelly Lavinia, (my mother) and Edwin Grimston, (my father). Their joy knew no bounds at the birth of this little boy, mother going so far as to say that he was her "supreme moment". So from that day, usually in our rare moments of irritation towards him, we three girls called him "SM".

From Colchester we were to move to Ilford, to Manor Park, to Sidcup, and then finally to Canvey Island.

My father, Edwin Grimston Nunn, was born and brought up in Colchester. He earned his living with a fairly prosperous cycling business next to our house. He had most of the trade from the public in those days of the cycling boom, as well as the trade from the various military camps in the town.

He was born in 1872 on March 8th. He was about thirty-six when I was born, a tall, well built, quiet young man with mid-brown hair, and blue eyes set under thick, black bushy eye brows. He was a quiet, dreamy man with blue eyes, a sensitive mouth and large thin ears. He spoke with the slow, sing-song accent and dialect of the Essex man.

When addressing us he would call us "Together". " Come on, Together !" he would say, if he wanted us for some reason or other.

He took an interest in astronomy and even when we were quite small he would tell us about the stars, their names, their distance from the earth and their colours. This one was blue, this one was red, and Mars was the nearest to the earth. He very often said to us,

"One day, Together, they will put a man on the moon".

Although he lived to be ninety two, he did not live long enough to see his words come true.

He also showed his scientific leanings by making homemade fireworks with iron filings and magnesium.

One Christmas when we were visiting our Aunt Ophelia in Colchester, he made himself up as a ghost, complete with sheet and phosphorus paint on his face and hands. Somehow we knew it was Daddy, and so we were not afraid.

My mother also loved having fun and was a great tease. However, when mother dressed up we did not like it. I remember one Christmas time, when I was about 3 years old, missing my mother from the room, and when we were asked to go into the next room we saw a little old lady about 3 feet high dancing on a table. She had a painted face with one tooth missing and hair all over the place and was wearing a dark cloak.

I was horrified! It seemed to me that my mother had turned into this dreadful being. I was so upset that I stopped the performance there and then.

When I was young I very often had nightmares about my mother being someone other than her usual merry, loving self

My father was very proud of the way he could double up like a jack-knife. He could bend from the thighs and with knees straight he could place his large, bony hands flat on the floor, challenging us to do the same if we could manage it.

He rode his old upright bicycle everywhere, weaving in and out of what traffic there was. Later, at Canvey Island, motorists became aware off him peddling slowly along the road, making allowances for his not putting a hand out to the right or left until he was on the point of turning.

He was an intellectual man, quietly spoken until his temper was roused; and then he roared like an angry bull. Neither he nor my mother, Nelly, ever smacked us although we must have deserved at times. He was a kind father, loving his own children dearly but never welcoming other children around him or in the home. When our friends called for us, and there were more than two, he would say,

"You harbour the children ! They make too much 'ni-oz'"which in his Essexism was meant to be "noise".

Nelly, our mother, also born and raised in Colchester, had the merriest of laughing blue eyes and real, golden hair down to her waist. She was very rarely angry or cross with us. Mother told us of a day when we three little girls were all under four years old and when "enough had been enough" for one day. Our father just sank back into a chair with a sigh of relief, saying as he did so,

"It is like Heaven!. One in the lavatory, one on the pot and one asleep !"

Our brother George, or, to give him his full names, George William Watson, was loved very dearly by all of us, petted, but not spoiled. He was, and still is a gentle and most lovable person. At the time of writing, he is now in his mid-seventies, has four strapping sons, one daughter, six grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. One day Dad called him " Master of the house". So from that day on, he was always known as "Master". This had a disastrous effect; one day when he was about four years old, he took a walking stick and smashed several fragile gas mantles, saying as he did so, "I am Master ! I can break gas mantles !"

When Dad heard this, he very gently explained to little Georgie that being "Master" did not mean that he could break up the home ! He was a timid little boy and went to a private school run by two spinster sisters until he was nearly ten years old, Then he went to the local council school. Here he had his first fight which, to his surprise, he won. He came home from this school complaining that one boy, Tom Mellor, was bullying him and in general pushing him around, so during the official mid-morning break, he, George, could take it no longer and lunged out with his seemingly puny little fist and punched the other boy on the nose. This resulted into a battle royal which lasted until both boys were exhausted. We were told later by a friend who happened to be passing that as George was holding his own, he did not interfere

in the fight. Needless to say, as so often happens, the two boys were firm friends from that day onwards.

Life in Colchester

So, I must return to Colchester and back to 73, Mersey Road, with memories, and tales told of it by our parents. There we were, Nelly, (my mother) and Grimmy, as my father was called, Venie, myself, and little Nelly in our little cottage where we lived until I was about five years old. Then we moved to Ilford, and later, on to Manor Park where, as I have already mentioned, George was born. My own memories of Colchester are like a series of pictures. They are like "stills" from a film. Some are sharp and some are faded. The sharp ones we know are there and true, but the faded ones are those we are not quite sure of as we peer into the past trying to get the details right. Some of the things we remember and some we are told by our parents and other elders, but the problem is to decide which is which. I remember being sat on a table while a uniformed nurse washed my face and hands. This, I was told, was the nurse who attended to my mother at the birth of her third little girl. I remember a colourful Christmas tree. I remember playing in the garden on a little patch of greenery that little Nelly and I called "our little green."

I remember that the woman next door had a prop holding up her linen line which swayed and moved in a most alarming way to us children. We lived on the corner of Mersey Road and Claudio, and our home had a back garden and a small front garden. It was here in this front garden that my sisters and I would run to the gate in great excitement to hear and see the Gordon Highlanders come round the corner of Pownal Crescent, turning left into Mersey road, swinging their kilts as they marched to "The Campbells are Coming", played on their bagpipes. For some time afterwards Nelly and I would go around with our toes turned outwards, and making bag-pipes of our fingers we would wail, "Ow-ow-ow-owowow", to the air of "The Campbells are Coming."

As well as a small front garden, we had a long back garden ending in a narrow, pointed patch of grass that we called "our little green". There we had our tea-parties, played with our toys, and made mud pies. The fence seemed very high to us, as we could not see over the top or through it. I remember on one occasion when the back gate was left open to let Nelly and me see something of the outside world, on condition that we did not move from the gateway. Three events stand out in my mind from that day. One was when a horse and cart came by with a wooden crate on it and standing inside this crate was a man holding on to it, probably to keep it from falling off, but it filled me with horror. I ran indoors sobbing that I had seen "a man in a cage."

I thought he was being punished for something he had done wrong. It took quite a long time to comfort me. Another time we were at this open gate when a crowd of people headed by a man dressed all in white came marching up Claudio Road singing loudly. This we enjoyed very much. My father told us afterwards that this was an Easter parade. It was real when we were all very small that early on one Good Friday morning at Easter, a baker's boy threw a pebble at the bed-room window, and as it was opened by our father a bag of hot cross buns came sailing in through the window. This had been arranged by our father, but to three very small girls this was magic indeed. I must have been about four and Nelly nearly three when we had our first taste of male chauvinist piggery. Once again we were watching the world go by outside the back gate, but we must have ventured a little further afield than usual, for two small boys aged about six or seven came up saying one to the other as they drew near,

"You take the big'un and I'll take the littl'un!"

They pounced on us and putting their arms around our necks, bore us to the ground, then ran off laughing. This incident had a traumatic affect on me, and I gave the male sex a wide berth after that incident. I felt them to be rough and menacing, to be avoided at all costs in the future. This feeling remained with me until my mid-teens. If I saw a group of boys when I was out, I would go out of my way to avoid passing them.

Schooldays

When I was five I joined my big sister, Venie, at the National School in Claudius Road. How long this lasted I cannot remember, but only one day stands out in my mind. I remember I had a navy blue "reefer" coat with brass buttons on it. It was a wretched day there for me, as I cried most of the time. First we assembled in the hall for morning prayers. There seemed to be little brass knobs all over the floor, one of which was allotted to me to kneel by. It hurt my knees as I knelt on it! The head teacher, one Miss Flitton, showed me some sweets on top of the piano, telling me I could have them if I stopped crying. I did not have them! When it was time to go home, I could not find my coat. All that I knew was that it had brass buttons on and some "ABC" biscuits in one of the pockets. I remember the joy and relief at seeing my mother coming down the road to meet me. About this time Mother took a part time job teaching art in a private school run by some ladies named Stewart, (or Stuart). Venie then went to this school and Mother took us smaller girls with her. I have no recollection of any more school days in Colchester. Our next school days were not until we moved from Manor Park to Sidcup after little George was born, just before World War One.

To Ilford - 1913

My Uncle Josiah invited my father to come and share a shop premises in Ilford in Ley Street where he had started a small business, manufacturing things like Weather Flowers which turned blue for sunshine and pink for rain.

He also made Bats out of black tissue paper, fine cane and elastic, which one wound up and put into envelopes that one sealed 3/4 of the way and posted to friends or took to parties. When the envelope was opened, the bat flew all around the room. At the time of my father moving to Ilford the business was not going too well, but in the years to come my Uncle Joey earned a good living with these things, WH. Smith and Son being one of the biggest and best customers. My sister Nelly in later years went to work for him making these delicate things. We went to live with our Uncle Josiah.

My father used the front of the shop for Cycle Repairs. We shared the rest of the building with my uncle Joey, his wife Lily, and his family.

He and his family had the front bedroom, the small bedroom over the sitting room, and the room at the back of the shop.

We all slept in the one small room over the kitchen which we had to live in.

Unfortunately, the shop did not pay and my father regretted the move. Before we came my father does not seem to have realised that my uncle was seriously in debt.

Neither was my mother happy there, but she was kept sane by her brother Jack who paid frequent visits and took her out. My uncle Jack who was then living in Barking was Head stevedore of the Surrey Docks. On one occasion he gave my sister Nelly and myself sixpence each (equivalent to 2 and 1/2 newpence)- a considerable sum in those days. I remember that as soon as he had left the house with my mother our Auntie Lily made a lovely suggestion to us. If we gave the money to her, she would buy some cakes and we could have tea with her! So we gave her the money and had tea with her in her part of the house. We have never forgotten that tea! That shilling must have gone a long way then.

There was an occasion when Uncle Joey sent his ten year old daughter Dorothy to collect and pay for a small order of Weather Flowers. At home my Aunt was waiting to buy food with

Another memory of 73, Mersey Road is of being near my mother while she was talking to a tall young man. They were apparently saying some sort of "Goodbye". This I now know was my Uncle Reginald Brown. I remember that his fingers, which I could just reach with my nose, were stained brown, but I have learned since that he was a keen photographer. He went away shortly after to South Africa with the Mounted Police. Contact seems to have been lost after a year or so, not to be remade until the 1930's, when my cousin Donald Strathern, son of my

aunt Rosie traced him. He had married, had an Orange grove, and had 2 children. It seems that the breaking of contact was his choice. Perhaps he married a native girl. No one knows.

My mother's tales

When we were young and Mother wanted to keep us quiet, amused, or wanted to brush our hair, we would badger her with, "Tell us about the things you used to do when you were a little girl!"

Her memory was amazing. She could remember as far back as when she was two or three years old and kept us enthralled for hours while re-counting her stories. My memory could possibly be a little at fault, but, I am not making up fantasies to amuse you, for as far as my sisters and I and concerned they are all true.

My father also told us many "tales" as he called them, of his childhood in Colchester in the 1870's and later, until he left Colchester for Ilford when I was about five years old, little Nelly being nearly three and big sister, Venie, going on for eight. My father never went back to Colchester again except for one or two fleeting visits, when one of his sons-in-law took him there in a car. But he always missed his roots and there were times when he expressed a wish for his "time over again". He, Grimmy, his younger brother, Joey, and sister Ophelia, were very close together, remaining friends until they were all in their nineties. When we were living on Canvey Island in the early 1920's, Nelly, my mother, had five of Jack's children to stay for a holiday by the sea. She had six of them, Iris, Joey, Bobby, Frankie, Denis, and baby Bessie who was called "My Peachy" by her adoring older sister, Iris. So, with four of her own as well mother had quite enough to do. As it happened, my father had bought an old ex-army round "Nissen" hut made of corrugated iron and this is where they all slept on camp beds. My father was not over keen on having so many children but he put up with it for Mother's sake.