Lord (Ian) Fraser of Lonsdale

Unfinished memoir
This chapter is about blindness over a lifetime from the age of eighties (I was blinded on the Somme in 1916) to date when I am seventy-five.

Blindness is regarded by the public and by those who are newly blinded, or who fear blindness, as one of the worst possible afflictions. My own experience and that of many thousands of blinded soldiers, sailors and airmen whom I know personally, leads me to think that it is nothing like as bad as many other disabilities, although I agree with the general view that the thought of it and the fear of it is very grave. I would say that paranoia, loss of two hands, total deafness and in a quite different field loneliness and poverty are worse.

I do not like the word 'affliction' although I have used it because it is a universal idea. I prefer to think of blindness as a handicap which, with training and the right spirit, can be overcome.

When first the doctors told me that my eyes had both been destroyed, and that lifelong blindness was inevitable, I was surprised and shocked but not immediately unhappy - probably because I did not know what it meant. As far as I can remember I do not recall ever having met a blind person - save for one old sea captain - during the first eighteen years of my life, nor had I thought about the subject except to notice, with a feeling of pity, the blind beggar in the street; although I do not think I was greatly moved. Perhaps my principal reaction in those early days was one of curiosity because curiosity about any matter was, has always been and still is, one of my strongest impulses.

Very soon I was a student at St. Dunstan’s and the presence of other blinded persons and the things that we were able to do interested me and directed me from introspection and depression.

Many I have known suffer for one week and in rare cases at frequent intervals from self-pity, and depression. I never did.

Perhaps I was lucky because within a year of going to St. Dunstan’s, Sir Arthur Pearson, the founder and Chairman, asked me to be his Assistant and I started work in what was then called the After Care Department. Thus I had a daily task, a guide or a motor car, occasional help, and the interesting problem related to the devising of plans to help themselves as they left the training establishment and went home to work, and thinking about organisation and administration.

At the end of 1921 Sir Arthur Pearson suddenly died and at the age of twenty-four I became Chairman of St. Dunstan’s. A few years later I am still Chairman. Before Sir Arthur Pearson died, my wife and I both got a severe dose of what I think was called ‘Spanish Flu’ and we were in bed for a week or more. I had made a very few speeches for St. Dunstan’s before Sir Arthur Pearson and had begun to think that a political life night be it me. Indeed, I had written to the only friend I knew ever in any party that I was not interested in politics, namely Sir George Hume, the leader of the Municipal Party in the LCC, and had obtained from him the literature of the Liberal Party which had been in power at County Hall for thirty years, the Conservative Party which was the principal
Opposition and the Labour Party whose representation was then minimal. As we lay in bed with flu, my wife read this literature to me and I became interested in the subject and decided that I was a Conservative or, as it was called in London Local Government, a Municipal Reformer and my friend, Sir George Ness, introduced me to the Director and the Wiops and I became Municipal Reform Candidate for North St. Pancras. At the time we were living in St. Pancras on the northern edge of Regent’s Park.

Suddenly on 9th December, 1911, Sir Arthur Pearson died and to my surprise and gratification the Committee of that day asked me to be Chairman. Thinking this would be more than a while time occupation, I gave up my candidature but a month later I decided to pursue this career partly as a matter of additional interest, but also because I thought a wider life would help my Chairmanship of the organisation. The St. Dunstan's Committee agreed. The St. Pancras Party had not filled the vacancy and by February of 1912 I was again a candidate. The St. Pancras constituency was held by Liberals but in March at the triennial election I was the next by a few hundred votes, and what has turned out to be a long political career had started.

Blindness was indeed a most severe handicap. There was much to read for a novice who knew nothing about politics or local government and who had to make two or three speeches a night during the election, but my wife was as keen as I was and read endlessly to me and I had the good fortune to have extremely good secretarial help. North St. Pancras as I have said, was Liberal, but it had a strong leftish and Communist element and I met with severe opposition and was frequently shouted down or counted out at election meetings. Counting out in those days - and perhaps to-day was a device whereby the Opposition in the audience would start shouting 'one two three etc.' and this chorus made it extremely difficult to think about one's speech or to be heard. However it was a challenge and I quickly learned some of the tricks of the trade as, for example, to divert the audience from the shouting by some outrageous or possibly interesting remark, and in the few minutes' silence thus obtain a chance to score a point and get a big clap from my supporters who were probably the majority.

At this date 1912 there were no microphones or loudspeakers and it was easy to lose your voice, and I sometimes did.

An interesting sentimental question here arises; whereas blindness was a severe handicap to me, it had an effect upon the audience, and possibly the electorate generally. There were those who said he is blind and cannot do the job properly, so what is the good of voting for him, but there were others who admired the perseverance and possibly the courage of the candidate, although I use that word reluctantly. Whether, on balance, the sentiment for the newly blinded soldier who was 'having a go', or the feeling that he would be an inadequate representative was the stronger, I do not know. I suspect the sentiment helped me if it did, I am not ashamed of this because it is a pleasant trait in the English character to be sentimental and sympathetic. Of course the candidate when he became a Member had to deliver the goods by representing his constituency's thought and aspirations at County Hall, otherwise he would have been found wanting.
There was a tendency for colleagues, who could not catch your eye and exchange smiles, to put you on the shoulder or the arm and express admiration or wish you luck. There were two ways of taking this kind of approach; one is to dislike the pity which is implied; the other is to be glad of the friendship. I dimmed the former and enhanced the latter.

Then came the first speech in the Chamber. Most people use notes and I had not learned to use braille notes nor had I the speaker's gift of learning a speech by heart. So I had a go and, as always in a public forum, the maiden speech is praised by friend and opposition alike; so this was encouraging.

There are many things about blindness which at first can be very annoying. You can learn the way from the lobby to your seat, the way to the lavatory or to the whip's room or the way out of the house; but one can, from time to time, be diverted by a talk with a colleague, take the wrong turning or the wrong angle, bump into a chair, fall over a friend or a stranger and feel a fool. There is nothing to be done about this except to put up with it. As the years go on you become more adept at finding your way in familiar places such as the County Hall building, or later the House of Commons and the number of accidents, or collisions diminishes and your colleagues, or the messengers, on duty, reassure you without much comment and without upsetting you or being upset themselves. Fortunately we have two ears and neither of mine was damaged by my wound, and they are an admirable base for direction finding so that every little noise is a guide so that you know the direction in which to walk or to speak. If you are wise when you are speaking, whether in a public assembly or on a platform, you will keep the backs of your legs touching the chair or bench as this will confirm your direction and give you confidence.

We had no radio in those days when talking books and the only access to information was reading aloud by your wife or Secretary or conversation by braille. But braille cannot be available at all times and, in the main, is only of use for books and magazines, not for news or ephemeral matter.

I disliked braille intensely; partly because for many years I was shy about using it in public because I felt I was making an exhibition of myself and that people would look at me and perhaps they would be sorry and I would feel that they were.

As years went on I learned to live with this and to ignore it and to use braille whenever it was of value; in particular I learned to make little notes, such as the side of a playing card, with two or three words on it so that a bunch of a dozen cards might contain the headings for the agenda at a Board or Committee Meeting or for a speech. Braille can be written on a quarto sheet but this is very awkward to handle except at a table, and the cards are very easy to handle and you never lose your place because, having dealt with one note, you can drop the card on the floor or put it in your pocket and the next one will be in the proper place. With a strange Committee or Board or a political audience there might be an inhibition in their minds which would tend to prevent them from interrupting you or challenging you out of a sense of courtesy or kindness; I decided, whether by instinct or deliberately I cannot remember, to avoid this by
in the County Council, later in Parliament, have never hesitated to interrupt me; I regard this as a compliment.

I spent three years on the London County Council and it was a most valuable experience. In 1924 there was a General Election for Parliament and in those days the Parliamentary constituencies and the London County Council constituencies were identical, the only difference being that each constituency returned one Member of Parliament and two County Hall members. Fortunately for me the Tory M.P. for North St. Pancras who was getting older, decided not to stand again and the Conservative Association thinking I had done my local government job effectively and that I might be a winning candidate, adopted me as their candidate. In 1924 I was elected to Parliament by a few hundred votes. A Parliamentary election in London was not very different from a London County Council election except that the audience were larger, the strain greater and the haranguing more vociferous. But by this time I had learned a good deal about controlling a noisy audience and I had acquired a microphone amplifier and loudspeaker. In fact, was one to the first to use a loudspeaker in an election and this occurred because I am by nature—though not by training—an engineer, and one of my greatest interests was the use of electricity and particularly wireless. So that I had made friends with Capt. Round PG, the head of a Marconi Scientific Department, one of the most advanced inventors of his day. It was said—I think truthfully—that Capt. Round invented the use of the thermonic valve as an amplifier and that he was the first man to design and apply a primitive form of radar. He had a receiver somewhere near London and another in Scotland with a telephone line connecting them and he was able to listen to the primitive radio transmitters and the German fleet when it was in harbor in Hamburg or when it was maneuvering in the Channel and to take a bearing on the ships and report their position. It was said—and again I think this was true—the Capt. Round, like some other inventors, devised so many things that he could not remember what he was doing: indeed directly he had devised something he was longer really interested in it but was going on to the next thing. But he had a marvellous assistant whose job it was to remind him of the things that he was supposed to be working on and used to write it on the wall with chalk. Capt. Round devised the first good microphone for the BBC and the first effective loudspeaker system.

I had made friends with him and he lent me what was then most powerful equipment which I used in my first Parliamentary Election. Thus I could shout my hecklers down but I soon learned that this was not the best thing to do. Far better to say something interesting or challenging and get them to stop talking. Heckling because they wanted to hear the rest of what I had to say.

Those were the days when outdoor meetings on the street corner were much in vogue and I used to hold exceedingly rowdy meetings at street corners with a loudspeaker to help me. Hecklers generally come to the front of the Meeting and shout at the speakers; the thing to remember is that the bulk of the audience is behind them and does not hear their heckling to the same extent as
On one occasion, on a street corner in St. Pancras, I was talking from the back of a motorcar with a loud-speaker and had a crowd of 2-300 people listening and interrupting. At the front of the meeting were some determined young men who tried to upset my vehicle and the loud-speaker by force. By some signal, the crowd then fell back and the motorcar was driven off with the help of a stranger who came to his aid. A Police Sergeant and Constable stood by and after the meeting was over I went over to them and said "Thank you very much for coming to the meeting, I quite understand that you did not intervene because the brawling had not developed into a riot". "By the way", I said, "Who was the chap that helped my chauffeur?". The Police Sergeant told me his name and that he was a burglar who had been in prison once or twice and was very well known to them. I asked the Police Sergeant "I wonder why he came to my aid?". The Sergeant replied "Well Sir, he is a tough chap who does not mind a fight and burglars are always Conservatives!" I remember thinking there's a lot of sense in that. There probably would not be much such if there were no Conservatives.

I thanked the burglar warmly and some months later he came to my office and told me "I have been framed by the Police for something I took no part in and I hope that you, as my R.P., will tell the Police to "lay off". I told him that the process of dealing with his case, having already begun, was not possible and there was nothing I could do by way of intervention on the legislative and the judicial system are quite properly entirely separate.

This disapponted him very much, so I asked him if I could help by securing Legal Aid. His reply was that he had no way to obtain Legal Aid, he had already tried all "lawyers", he went on, "If I had you, I would have you, you were to write to the House of Commons, a letter to the Governor asking how I am getting on. Nothing helps a prisoner more than if someone takes an interest in him".

I accordingly did this and received a formal reply. I hope it did my friend the prisoner some good.

Eighteen months later this man called on me to tell me that he was now out of prison and looking for a job and asked if I could help him. I said that I had no job for his but that I could recommend him to the Prisoners Aid Society. His reply was that they were no good and the only jobs they would offer were Builder's Labourers or the like, whereas I could easily make £5 a night helping my pals in some robbery and taking my chances again. I said you're just the kind of chap to go into the Army and his reply was that he would not do this until the bullets were made of rubber.

It amazed me 50 years later that rubber bullets were, in fact, introduced into Ireland because I had only been accustomed to old-fashioned lead and nickel ones.

I then said to my friend "So you were in it after all and the Polish did not find you?" He said "Well I was and I wasn't. It was a back raid and I only drove the motorcar." I have not heard from him in the last thirty years but I hope he has done well.
I learned one very important lesson, namely that to be heard in a noisy meeting you must pronounce your consonants because you must emphasize your consonants because they are the parts of speech that travel less well than the vowels sounds. If you shout out the consonants even to the extent of distorting your own speech, the vowels will take care of themselves.
I have already said that being now 76, I have been blind for 58 years. I am sometimes asked by a friend, if I have many regrets. The true answer is "yes" because I very quickly learned to live with blindness, realises my limitations and concentrate on the things I could do. 
I have, in fact, always had one regret and that is that my War Service was so brief - only a few weeks.

Having gone to Sandhurst when I was just 17 and spent a year there, probably one of the happiest years of my life, and then, still being too young to go to the War, having spent nearly another year with my reserve battalion in Pembroke Dock and the beautiful countryside surrounding it, I felt I was a useful young officer and that a wise army would have sent me to some quiet War in Mesopotamia or some other place like that. If they had done this, after a year or two I would have been of infinite more value because I would have had some experience and they would not have wasted my young life.

There were three boys of my age who went with me from Sandhurst to fight in France. We all belonged to the King's Royal Rifles Light Infantry though none of us ever served with that Regiment as on our arrival in France in the early months of 1916, we were sent to the First/9th Gloucesters who were short of Subalterns.

Incidentally, I led my Platoon over the top of our trenches to attack the German lines and so did my friends. Each of us were wearing an Officer's Jacket with a shirt and tie, whereas the N.C.O.'s and Privates wore tunics which buttoned right up to the neck. Thus it was easy for the Germans with a telescopic lens to pick out the Officers and shoot them one after the other and this they did. Of course, we did the same thing to them, but we learned such too late. Very soon after the Somme Battle, Officers wore ordinary tunics and webbing equipment so that they could not be so easily distinguished.

An aspect of blindness that frequently occurs to me is the approach to other people and their approach to me. There are those who are so absorbed in their own thoughts or affairs that they pass you by in the corridors of the House of Commons, or elsewhere, without comment. I can think of half a dozen politicians and statesmen of all Parties who were like this. It was nothing to do with blindness, I do not suppose they even noticed that I was in the corridor. But there are others, and they are the majority, who realised that they cannot make the usual contact with the blind man by a glance, a nod or a smile because he will not be aware of it; some of them have the sensitivity to touch you on the arm and say "Hello Jim", "This is Winston" or "This is Ramsey McDonald". Both of them were forbidding persons but neither need have said his name because each had such a distinctive voice. However, it was the right approach and gave great pleasure.
Blindness continued.

But I have just written makes me think that the reader will discern a certain bitterness in my mind. I may have felt this from time to time but I soon got over it, realising that human nature is made up of the introverts and the extroverts and they could not help it. The thing is to live with them all and not get upset and I do not imagine that for the last 50 years I have been.

Another question about blindness which I am often asked is "Is your outlook black or depressed?". The answer is no, not at all. I 'see' in front of me an aura of bright and cheerful light or snail-light. I can remember being depressed in the very early days, when everything 'looked black', but this was short-lived.

There are three kinds of blind persons. The majority are over 60 years of age, having gone blind from natural deterioration of health or perhaps just of the eyes; another category are those who have been 'born blind'. These words 'born blind' are erroneous. I doubt if anyone is born blind except in the very rare case where a baby may be born without eyes or without vision.

When I was young, 50-60 years ago, there were said to be more than 30,000 blind babies in the country and they were described as having been 'born blind'. They vary, in fact, cases where the mother was suffering from a serious disease called Smarsson's and the Genouscous got into the baby's eyes and caused inflammation leading to blindness or partial blindness. The Doctors then became aware of this and the authorities made it compulsory for every doctor or midwife, attending a confinement, to insert a spot of Silver-Nitrates in the newly-born baby's eyes and this effectively killed the Genouscous.

I think in this year, 1974, there cannot be more than half a dozen blind babies born in the United Kingdom. Thus the simple spot of Silver-Nitrate - now, no doubt, replaced by some new drug - has wiped out Ophthalmia Neumorphism and thus this is now a thing of the past.

"What are the two great handicaps of blindness?". One is the inability to move about freely. Now-a-days in the United Kingdom, we teach mobility in our schools and colleges for the blind and when the pupil gets over his first fear of moving about alone, be can, with the aid of a stick, a long cane or a guide dog, become very mobile and independent. Every school in the land should teach mobility and fortunately there is a society called the Mobility of the Blind Association in Birmingham which is teaching instructors who are becoming available to Local Authorities and Schools.

It is much easier to walk about alone when you're young, but I know of some middle aged and some quite old persons who go about quite independently, not only travelling to work and walking on familiar ground but also in unfamiliar places.
Blindness continued....

For example, one blinded soldier, now dead, known to me, told me that he had hardly moved alone at all during 50 years of blindness, but when he was over 70 and even when he was 80, having taken the trouble to learn to move about with a long cane, he was able to walk down to the Pub or Post Office or to visit a friend and that this had made an enormous difference to his life.

A blind woman in middle life, who was a friend of mine, told me the same.

The other great handicap is the inability to read. This is compensated by Braille. Braille is a system of tactile reading, invented principally by a Frenchman called Louis Braille in 1866. Essentially it consists of some 63 separate signs, each of which is made up from a cell of six dots, like the 6 of Dominos.

The cell is so disposed that there are three dots in the vertical position, as if the 6 of Dominos were standing on its end. There are, in fact, 63 permutations that can be used and they are used for the 26 letters of the alphabet and for a considerable number of contractions and syllables and short word words such as THE, THE, TIDE, FART, etc. It is no more difficult to learn Braille code than to learn shorthand, but in both cases it probably takes a year or more to become fluent.

I did not become fluent in reading Braille at first. Indeed, I hated it, but when the Second War approached, I realized what a bad impression it would make for the Chairman of St. Dunstan's, who would be urging every new blinded ex-serviceman to learn Braille, but was unable successfully to use it himself. So I set about reading a quarter to half an hour a day and after a month or two I became very proficient. I now read Braille easily for pleasure, even so, it is slow and I do not suppose my speed is more than 80-100 words a minute. Whereas the ordinary reader can read at 250 words a minute and a sub-editor who has been properly trained or been to a special school can probably read at 500 words per minute.

There is a splendid Braille library known as the National Library for the Blind at Great Smith Street, London, S.W.1 which also has a northern branch at St. John's Street, Manchester and the Royal National Institute for the Blind which is a leading publisher for the United Kingdom and for many overseas countries.

Between them they provide thousands of books and magazines. I would urge other blind persons, unless they are really too old or failing in concentration, to learn Braille and to use it. It is a source of great pleasure and a splendid past-time.

As I have said before, it could also be used for notes for speeches at meetings and can also be used for correspondence with another blind person or in writing articles for subsequent transcription into typing.
Blindness continued .... - 4 -

Another tactile system is the Moon Code, invented by a blind Dr. Moon in 1847. In this code, the normal printed letters of the English alphabet are used in a simplified outline and a blind man's finger can discern and interpret them. This system has two disadvantages. One is that it is slower to read and another is that it takes up very much more room than Braille.

Both Braille and Moon are bulky. For example, the familiar Reader's Digest which in ink-print is like a small magazine, when put into Braille occupies four volumes, each the size of a book Magazine an inch or so thick.

Accordingly it is hardly convenient for a blind man to have a personal library in his own home, though no doubt many have a few to refer to from time to time.

The other sources of information are, of course, broadcasting and the Talking Book. Broadcasting is of course a source of entertainment and a great pleasure no doubt to music lovers. For my part, unfortunately I do not care greatly for good music and less still for bad music and pop, but I do find the spoken word of tremendous interest and well worth following and I also enjoy broadcast plays.

The Talking Book is now a highly developed service. As the name implies, this is a system of recording which is done in central studios in London and to be reproduced on an individual machine in the blind persons home.

There are approximately 40,000 blind persons in the U.K. who use this method and 4,000 technical system has been adopted by a dozen countries throughout the world.

The cassette is about the size of a small ink-print novel, and can be posted in an ordinary pillar-box and this is, in fact, the way it is distributed from the library to the reader or returned by the reader to the library. Or was the very early days the Post Office delivers these cassettes free of charge.

The reproducer is a sturdy electrically driven piece of apparatus fairly easy for even an unskilled older blind person to operate himself. The library has thousands of books in it and produces about 250 titles a year. A blind person normally pays a small annual fee to rent the machine. For legal reasons, the machines retain the property of the Talking Book Committee for this is one of the conditions upon which T.B.C. is not charged by the Customs Department.

It happens that I was the first to start the Talking Book System in England by some personal experiments in my own little workshop and I consider it is the most important invention for the blind since Braille itself.

I recall an enthusiastic blind soldier who was not very well educated, writing to me in the early days, saying he welcomed the invention but he hoped there would be no poetry and no prose. Of course, there are both but it must always be remembered that effective as the system is for its purpose, it can only provide a very small percentage of all the literature that is available to the sighted world.

Authors and publishers have generously agreed not to charge copyright fees and every cassette bears the words indicating that no charge, or a nominal fee only has been paid for the copyright and for the use of the blind only.
So I left South Africa in 1907 when I was ten years old. This year during which I am writing this book is 1990 so I am now 73 years old and I will be 74 in August. I came to England with my father, a man with white hair and a grey beard and he seemed to me to be a very old man. He was, in fact, about 60 years of age. He had married late and I was born in 1917. He and I went to Cape Town and sailed for England on a ship called the S.S. 'German'. She was one of four vessels which I think belonged to the old Union Company, which had merged in with the Cunard Company to make the Union Castle Company. There were the 'Britannia', the 'Herman', the 'German' and

and I don't remember. She was a little ship of 4,000 tons but, of course, seemed to me to be a very big liner, and I enjoyed myself on the ship spending many hours with the engineers in the engine room, because I had a mechanical turn of mind.

My father had a younger sister, Mrs Howard. She was a widow and she lived in Woking, a town in Surrey, England and she was not very well off and was glad to have a nephew as a paying guest, and she looked after me, during my schoolboy days in England. She was a very stern and strict lady and I owe much to her upbringing.

and we lived moderately and frugally. Somebody bought me a bicycle and I used to cycle all over the countryside especially to Brocklands to watch the early racing motor cars. I can think of no incident which is worth remembering or recalling.

My father had no other relations a sister called Mrs Pass married to a rich businessman who had a strong scientific background and was the owner and the head of a smalling business in Bristol which I shall mention again later in this book.

The state of my life, their house, the Manor House at Weston Fitzpaine, a little village in West Dorset was of great importance to me because they were kind enough to invite me down, well, she was kind enough, that's my aunt, Mrs Pass, Aunt Lilla, she was kind enough to invite me down for my holidays and a week or a fortnight there but seemed to me to be, and was a rich country house and a stately home with hundreds of bedrooms, nevertheless a big well-furnished house in a big garden in a big estate.

I used to ride and go out with my cousin her son who was then at Cambridge and used to come down for the vacations. He was a Territorial in the Worcestershire Territorial and we frequently went out motorbike or on horseback for the Yeomanry. He was a Captain of one of its Squadrons. Although I didn't shoot or fish at this stage then, being only ten years of age, I nevertheless went out with him and learned a good deal about these two sports, and about the countryside. Within a few years, whenever I was fifteen, sixteen or seventeen, I used to go out riding and then later with various packs of hounds including, particularly, the Cotley, a country house's pack of hounds in the neighbourhood and I had very great fun. They were great to watch as they occasionally hunted the fox. As I said in another chapter I had started to ride when I was a little boy in South Africa, and by the time I was 16 or 17
I was a reasonably good horseman. Another relation was one of my father's brothers called Ronald Fraser. He was younger than my father. He was one of the founders of a business in South Africa which I shall refer to again, and he had retired to England where he had a big estate in North Buckinghamshire and there he ran a racehorse breeding establishment. He had some very fine horses there.

I think we must have come to England in the English autumn and one of my first recollections is that we had a mild winter, or what is not called a "white Christmas". There was snow about; the first I had ever seen in my life, and there was ice and a count of nine, Vera Sower, daughter of my old aunt, and I used to go skating. This was a novel experience, especially for a boy who had never seen snow or ice.

(This must be inserted after "I can think of no incident which is worth remembering or recording.

Second insertion: Insert after "The Colebys, a country farmer's pack of hounds in the neighbourhood, and I had very great fun" The Coleby Hounds were a farmer's pack run by a famous family called Dene and I had been in that family for, oh! many decades, possibly for several generations. They were lemon coloured hounds, not black and tan and they were Harriers, but they occasionally hunted the fox.

We first went to his Racecourse Breeding Farm at Titchfield Park near Newport Pagnell in Buckinghamshire. Buckinghamshire is an English County a few or fifty to a hundred miles north of London. My uncle had a famous horse called "Dark Ronald". This was a horse at stud, a stallion at stud which had got a good many winners, and I remember in the year 1912 or 1913 playing the weekend with my uncle and some Germans came to stop with him, or at any rate had lunch with him with a view to buying "Dark Ronald". I think "Dark Ronald" was then 37, but they wanted some of the finest English Racehorses blood for the German Cavalry. I believe they were called the "Wbars" and they distinguished themselves in the German Army in the First War. So my uncle sold "Dark Ronald" to the Germans and he bred some of the finest German Cremers. "Dark Ronald" changed hands for many thousands of pounds; big money in those days when the pound was worth so very much more and I call to mind them raising their payment in £3,000 Bank of England notes. I remember handling these notes with awe; I had never heard of a thousand pound note and I have never heard of one since. I do not even know whether they are still in existence, or what is the largest denomination issued by the Bank of England now.

I went to a Preparatory School at Kensington called Saint Cyprians. It was
a very well found school with a good reputation and incidentally it had the only flat really flat playing field just below the golf course. I was there from 1977 to 1981 by which time I was just 14 years of age and I then went on to Marlborough College. Marlborough College was a school with a very high reputation for scholarship and discipline, a very cold place in the middle of England and a severe school. The Captain of the Changing Room, the Captain of the Dormitory, the Prefects as well as the Housemaster used to chase boys who offended the rules. There was a great deal of caning and almost any offence such as being late in bed or being rude to a prefect or taking too long to get something which he had fagged you to get, would lead to your being beaten with a cane. There was a system under which, when you went to your classes you had to take along a slip of paper with you which was called "satisfait". That is Latin for "satisfied" and in effect it said "teacher has satisfied" and each Form Master had to initial it. If he did not initial it or he wrote "satisfait" which meant "satisfied", and this occurred more than once, then when you went to your Housemaster on Sunday evening, he would say, "I see that you were twelfth in the Form last week and you are only sixteenth this week" and he would can you. Now this question of caning is an interesting one because in Britain there is a considerable antipathy to physical punishment of any kind. I think it arises out of the fact that the leftish people, the "working class" as they used to be called in those days, thought that corporal punishment was one of the methods whereby the rich kept the poor down, and perhaps in earlier times it was. Over the last 30 or 40 years since I was a schoolboy there has been a good deal of resistance to corporal punishment of all kinds. Flogging of prisoners has gone and I am bound to say I do not regret this because flogging was rather barbarous, but caning youngsters seems to me to be a sensible kind of punishment, very similar to using a slipper on the bottom of a child or a baby. It need not be cruel and it is certainly effective! It is assumed by some that caning makes boys harsh and beastly and themselves cruel, but I do not agree with this. Looking back over a long life I do not think I was ever the worse for being caned, and it certainly was true that when I got caned by my Housemaster for going down in form I immediately went up again the following week. I think Britain has lost a good deal by what I call a "weak know" attitude towards moderate physical punishment and that the lack of discipline among our young people now is due to a great extent due to this.

I did relatively well at Marlborough. My particular interest and the subject in which I was best was Chemistry and Physics and I got an outstanding prize for this when I was a little older, otherwise I never attained the heights, never became a Prefect or a Captain nor was I very good at games. I think I grew
I think I grew too fast and I was very tall and thin, almost skinny and therefore I couldn’t compete with other boys and get into the "15" or the Cricket "XI", and on the whole I had a unistinguished career at Marlborough College. I look back on that period as a valuable one because, as I have said already, it was a tough school, and I think it is a good thing for young people to be brought up tough. The only thing which I distinguished myself slightly at was in the Officer’s Training Corps, the "O.T.C." I was rather interested in this and very soon became a Sergeant and I must say I enjoyed this aspect of life at Marlborough College. When the war broke out in 1939 I was still at Marlborough and it so happened that there were a few vacancies at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. This is the British School for the education of Officers of the regular Army. Normally one would have to pass a special examination to get there but the authorities wanted to fill Sandhurst up and certain of the Public Schools were permitted to nominate boys for these vacancies and I got a nomination and was admitted. At the end of the first 1945 term, that is to say, at about Easter, I went to Sandhurst. It was not my intention to be a regular officer but I became one by this accident. This had no great effect upon my life because, as will appear, I was soon out of the Army and the difference between a regular officer and a temporary officer wasn’t very great, during the war time.

A mention of Marlborough as a Public School leads me to observe that this is a curious name looked at from outside in other parts of the World. A Public School in England was a school in those days where boys whose fathers had money or influence used to go and it was select in that it was really a private school and not a public school. A public school might be thought to mean a school belonging to the State or the local authority, but it does not mean that in England. Many arguments about the English Public Schools, the left especially, the left of the Labour Party constantly criticises the Public Schools and say that they perpetuate a class feeling. There was some truth in this in earlier times, but now recently boys of different classes have found admission to the Public Schools and I would think that they still render a most valuable service to the Country. They are well disciplined on the whole and they produce a sense of responsibility and leadership that is of the greatest importance in business and in the Civil Service and throughout life. The Labour Party or power or some of them threatened to abolish the Public Schools. I wish hope this will not happen or if it does happen that it will be long delayed. My interest at Marlborough in the O.T.C. meant that I was keen about soldiering and the result of this was that I became an under officer at Sandhurst and being rather young I was asked to stay on for an extra period. In passantize a key went
In Sandhurst for 18 months or two years but as soon as the war came on 1914 the courses were cut down to six months in order to obtain more young officers, but as I was so young I did a year there and it was one of the happiest and most fruitful years of my life, and I much enjoyed being an under officer. An under officer is nearly one of the Cadets who has been chosen by the Commanding Officers to be a Head Boy or Seargeant Prefect, to put it in Public School terms. I was a good shot, a marksmen with a Service Rifle and a first class shot with a revolver, which did not do me much good in war as it turned out, but it was nevertheless a very interesting hobby. I also joined the Argyle and Sutherland Highlanders or at any rate some other Highland Regiment because my family were Highlanders, generations before this, but I had no advice and as my two or three friends at Sandhurst couldn't come into a Scottish Regiment with me. I went into an English Regiment with them, and then I became a 2nd Lieutenant in the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, a very fine Regiment with a famous record in war and peace. I was posted to the 3rd Battalion at Plymouth Dock, South Wales. In those days if you were too young to go to war even though you were trained, you went to the 3rd Battalion and spent a little time growing older, and this is what happened to me, and in order to find some occupation for these young men the authorities used to send us to Courses. I went to a Course in Signalling and a Course in Scouting both in Lancaster one at Chester and one in the middle Peninsular, and then round about May of 1916, I went to France. Curiously enough I never met my own Regiment at War, never served with the King's Shropshire Light Infantry, but whilst I was waiting in a Camp near Le Havre, I was posted to the 4th South Gloucesters, a Territorial Regiment based mainly upon Bristol, and my short military service was done with them. The Gloucesters are a fine Regiment with a great history and I was very proud to serve with them. Up to this time I had been living in England, very different from the present England, we might call it Ian Maugh England. Ian Maugh is a Schoolmaster and a writer, who made many books just before the First World War in which the culture and the behaviour and the man of what might be called the Upper Classes in England were portrayed in novel form. There was a considerable class system in England at that time and it was evident in various ways, for example, the owners of land in the main and the men in the
professions, like the Law or Accountancy or the Church were spoken of as belonging to the Upper Classes and others might be called Middle Class or Lower Middle Class or Working Class. These terms ceased to be used in England now in 1770/1771 or if not used frequently, at any rate, not stressed, because times have changed, there is much more equality amongst the classes or much less classlessness and this I think is a good thing. Much as I admire the King's Shropshire Light Infantry and the Gloucester Regiment I wish that I had been told by some wise man to go to a Highland Regiment, because I would like to have learned to wear the kilt, and I would have liked to have carried, through the rest of my life, a tradition of being a Highlander and a Highland soldier. If there hadn't been a war at that time in my life I imagine I would have tried to go to Cambridge and I might probably have got there and I would have studied Science and probably Chemistry. Certainly some kind of technical career; a chemist, an engineer, a physicist because that was my bent and although I never was trained I have all my life been an amateur engineer or an amateur scientist. This has served me in good stead in many ways.

Chapter 3:

Typist please remind me to put in Chapter 3 a little piece about Signalling Course on the at Chester and how I became head of a little Signal School at Penally in South Wales, during the winter and spring of 1915/16.

Although I was intensely interested in Sandhurst in Military Law and Military Science and enjoyed the command being to a limited extent a junior commander and an under officer, I was nevertheless anxious all the time to get to the front. A curious thing that one should want to get to the front where you are likely to be killed or maimed, when you see other people coming back wounded, but I am quite sure, that about 95 percent of us at Sandhurst were anxious to get to the Front, but I was only 18 and there was no hope for it for quite a time. The rule was that you want to France, got your commission early but went to France to fight when you were 20 and that was why I spent a few months in England at various Courses waiting to get old enough to go. So one day in May three of my friends and I who had been in the same Company at Sandhurst, set sail for France and we were sent to a kind of general camp at Le Havre where officers were stored, a kind of reserve camp before being sent here and there. Normally one would go to one's own Regiment in due course but at that time, May, 1916, they were just beginning to fill up the Regiments in preparation for the great mass movement of the Somme Battle and you tended to get sent anywhere where there was a vacancy, I had been Signals Officer of my Company in South Wales and Signals Officer of the little school I mentioned, and inevitably, therefore, I was picked out to be a signals Officer and was sent up because there
were vacancies in the Gloucester Regiment. Two of my friends went with me so none of us ever saw the King's Shropshire Light Infantry. On July 1st we crossed the English Pass word charged across No Man's Land and a few of us arrived at the other side, I wasn't bothered with the history of that battle which has been written so many times by experts, all I can tell is from my own point of view that a few of my men and I got across, then we got there the Germans had fled. This was not so everywhere, there were places where more were killed in No Man's Land and few survived and the Company or the Regiment didn't take the German line opposite but we did and we found ourselves in the line hitherto occupied by the Germans. This was very interesting because we saw what kind of dugouts they had how they placed their machine guns and what rifles they left behind indicated their way of behaviour and their rations and all kinds of things about them. Now although my Company had taken our little bit of German line the Germans were at one end of it and we had to try and put them out.

They, in turn, wanted to try and get us out. Consequently we barricaded the end of the trench with sandbags and hoped that that would be, and any rate a temporary hull, then we started looking over the sandbags to see what the Germans were doing and we wouldn't get shot. They did the same looking over their corners to see what we were doing. Then we would approach, keeping low over the sandbags into their little trench hoping there were some of them about and if we heard cries or groans we would see where they were, they were doing the same to us.

It just shows you how foolish men can be especially when they are young, but it was really great fun, a little like a game of football even though your life was at stake, we enjoyed it. I only met one man in my short little life who was so frightened that he couldn't stand it, but he couldn't and he tried to run back during one of these epidemics. Even in those days to run away was one of those crimes which could, in theory, lead to the death sentence at any rate it could lead to very severe punishment. I don't know why because I have been taught the military law and I had not been taught to think very seriously about the ethical situation or one's duty to one's soldiers and neighbours. Of course it was the officer's tradition to look after his men. It was also his duty to carry out the rules, but I didn't put this man under arrest, I just told two of the other fellows to take him to the Doctor. You see that was the right course. What happened to him I don't know.
As we settled down in the German trenches, in some ways they were better than ours. They were deeper, extremely well camouflaged, the dugouts were deep and were almost entirely lined out with boards, all the way down the stairs and in the rooms underground, and they had beds of timber and chicken wire. We were quite impressed with them, I must say. We found a lot of papers but didn’t find time to analyze them and I just sent them back with an orderly to my Company Commander, who, no doubt, sent them back behind our lines to the Battalion Office. Whether they were of any value I don’t know, but I suspect the Germans had taken anything away that was worth our seeing. Now in a trench system there is the front line with a narrow pit in front of it between you and the enemy and then there are communication trenches running backwards to the second line of defense which may be 100 or 200 yards behind. We pushed our way down the communication trench sometimes having to fight all the way, with similar methods to those I have described, of a sandbag barrier and lobbing bombs over it, and eventually we got to the second line and took that. The Germans were leaving or had left and we didn’t have very much fighting, so there were no new enemised in the lines of trenches, separated by a communication trench.

We still had Germans on our left and there were the ones we had to fear because they were able to us, and we continued the same process of creating a sandbag barrier and trying to lob over it and trying to find positions from which we could shoot into their trench in the hope of clearing them out. Twenty three days later that is the 23rd day of July was the day on which I was wounded. I was, in fact, engaged with some of my men in one of these operations in front of our sandbag barrier or the sandbag barrier which separated us from the Germans and we were throwing bombs over at them when suddenly I fell down, shot in the head. I cannot know for a fact but I assume that a German sniper had found himself a position fifty yards back or a hundred yards back, a little above the trench line so that he could look down into our trench. He might, possibly, have been on a little bit of a rise, he might have taken advantage of the falling ground, he might have been sitting behind a steel armoured plate with a hole in it through which he could put his rifle and telescopic with a telescopic sight. if he had a clear line of sight he could see us in great detail, and no doubt pick out the officer which was myself. At that time, July 1916, an officer, even the 2nd lieutenant, went over the top and went into battle with an officer’s blouse and that meant that he had an open collar and a shirt and a tie whereas the other ranks including the N.C.O’s wore a tunic which did up all the way up the neck in the old fashioned manner. Moreover the officer carried a revolver and pass by a pair of binoculars on a belt round his waist whereas the soldier carried his weapon equipment and a pack, the soldier also carried a rifle.

It is obvious, therefore, that with a telescopic sight and often without it you could...
the Germans could pick out the British Officer and distinguish him and there is no
doubt whatever that they had orders to shoot the officers first. Obvious enough,
because if you can get rid of him a large percentage of officers there is no chance
of the enemy getting into disarray. In fact officers were shot and killed and wounded
by the thousand, in those first few days of July. So were the rank and file, but not,
proportionately to the same extent. My young friends who came with me from the Sherpa-
airies to the Glencoe were all killed, I was the only survivor and I was totally
blindfold. The bullet entered my right forehead where the eyebrow ends on the outside
and went laterally straight across and came out just below the left eyebrow at the top
of the cheekbone. It was sufficiently far back not to wound the skin, the eyelids or
the nose, and sufficiently far forward not to go into the brainbox for in that part
of the head in all the head for that matter, the brain is in a separate box and
the cavities in front of the head, called the frontal sinuses, not part of the
brain system but are in front of it and separate from it. The bullet, therefore,
traversed these two frontal sinuses right and left and made a big hole in the back
of my nose but it didn’t show outside except for the point of entry and the point
of exit of the bullet. This I discovered much later, of course, at the time I fell
down, shocked, a trifle nauseated but not knocked out. It is an interesting point
that so small a thing as a bullet, I don’t know what a bullet weighs, but it can only
be a portion of an ounce, is sufficient to knock a man over, and I was conscious
again in I should think a very few seconds, maybe a minute or two. I then found
myself picked up by two of my comrades who wrapped an emergency bandage round my
face with a pad on the wound which, presumably, was bleeding and there I was. I had
no pain and I could still think clearly I knew that I had been shot and that I
couldn’t see but, of course, my idea that this meant blindness had not entered my
head. For quite a time I was told to lie still while they fetched a stretcher-bearer
but I said I could walk and I put my hands one on each shoulder of one of the fellows
and we walked down the trench and once more to our advanced medical officer’s dugout.
There he lay me down and treated me. The treatment was first aid, of course, that is
to say they bandaged me properly and put something on the wound, some kind of antiseptic
I suppose, and they drew a big cross with an indelible pencil on my forehead.
This indelible mark on my forehead was to indicate that I had been injected with anti-
tetanus sera. One of the great risks of being wounded in the field where there are
many bodies about and decay and so on is that you may get tetanus. It used to be called
Lockjaw in the old days and it was a killing disease so the very first thing they did
after they tied you up was to inject a dose of anti-tetanus into you and they marked
you on your forehead with an indelible pencil in order to prevent the next doctor you
met down the line from giving you a second dose which might have been too much.
Curiously enough the medical officer who turned out later to be a certain Dr. Finch and I got to know him in later years because his brother married my sister, though not for any reason of my knowing the Doctor or for any other reason the reason was quite a different one, which I shall come to later. Dr. Finch was a most remarkable man. He had been a surgeon in the army and had seen a great deal of action. He was still conscious and remember being put on a sort of a truck, a thing with wheels with a pair of handles, the kind of thing you sell vegetables from in the street and I was wheeled on this truck or trolley down a hilly path or road quite a distance and then I must have gone to sleep. It may well be that one of the doctors had given me a shot of morphine. I suppose that was a regular part of the treatment as well. I woke up later, I don’t know whether it was three hours later or twenty three hours later, but I woke up in a comfortable hospital bed on the North coast of France at 7 where the then Duchess of Westminster had opened what was then called “The Duchess of Westminster Hospital”. In the old days, and this was a beautiful place for a hospital there was no strenuous bombing in those days; indeed I don’t remember any bombing at all, though I think a little did occur in England later. In that war. It was a beautiful place; well adapted for a hospital with an enormous balcony. I later was wheeled over there. The Duchess herself acted as kind of hostess. I suppose in those days she would have been a social worker or a V.A.D., and she came and sat by our beds and talked to us about one thing and another. I remember her charm and kindness. I also remember the general practitioner and the nurse who looked after me, both of whom I met subsequently in Marylebone where they lived. Then one morning a surgeon came to my bedside and said we want to take you to the theatre and do a little lighting operation. One of your eyes has gone completely, the other needs a bit of tending up. This was his kind and modest way of telling me that this also was of no great use, but that I didn’t find out till later. However, I began to realize that I was likely to have very much impaired vision and possibly would be blind. This was an occurrence that had never entered my mind and, I suppose, it was a great shock. I don’t remember suffering from shock in any sense that I was unconscious or wildly upset; I was just curious and anxious. I don’t think I had ever met a blind man or woman in my life before though I had seen them sitting at street corners for in those days the care of the blind was not as advanced as it is now and there were unfortunately many blind beggars and if not beggars persons who sold bootlaces and matches in the street, and occasionally played an instrument. I did just remember one person who lived in Woking and who had a son about my age and the son and I used to be friendly bicycling together. This man, who seemed to me to be an old man, was an ex-captain from the Merchant Service and
I remember having food at their house, taking this chop for a walk in his own garden with his son or sometimes without him. He was the only blind man I really remembered having spoken to. I still didn't give very much thought to the future. In every family there is an aunt or a cousin who doesn't get married and who generally gets called upon to go and help when some other member of the family is in trouble and it was the case with me. Miss Lilias Howard, a woman perhaps then in her fifties, got permission from the authorities and was brought over by the Red Cross from England for a few days to my hospital and lived in lodgings nearby and coming in daily to read to me and talk to me. Lilias Howard was a dear friend of my family and I don't think there is any branch of it that didn't receive her kindly administrations from time to time. Now, although my wound was a very serious one because it had destroyed both my eyes it was, in effect from the medical point of view, a minor flesh wound no bone had been broken except the fractures to the bone in the nose and a bone at the top of the jaw just below the left eye, but these weren't serious and the consequence was that I healed up very quickly and in about a fortnight I was able to go back to England. I don't remember the journey back; they say it gave me a sedative for that but I remember arriving in what was called No. 2 London General Hospital. I think it must have been an old school that had been turned into a hospital somewhere in London and the correct of it is of no importance now except to say that very kind doctors and nurses and V.D. was looked after us all.

I found it was a hospital where our nurses had been to a large extent concentrated and a leading ophthalmic surgeon, Mr. Crossman, was in charge of our ward. In the ward there were two or three others whose eyes had been affected and certainly three of them I met subsequently because they had, in fact, lost their sight and we all went to St. Dunstan's and became friends there. I learned later that there were many scores of other ranks whose eyes had been hurt worse or less seriously who were in wards next to mine and at a much later stage I used to visit some of these men in that very hospital. I must correct that I did not visit all of these men I used to visit men in this same hospital, there had, of course, been a fair number that is to say a few more of men blinded before this time, that is to say before the middle of 1916, but they had not been concentrated in one hospital and this month of August 1916, I arrived from the Soma Battle was the first time that casualties had begun to arrive in fairly large quantities. The hospital, therefore, was not fully accustomed to dealing with blind people and because blindness of both eyes was a very serious matter, to the individual it was therefore a very serious patient. The consequence of this was that blind sisters and nurses came and washed us in bed and attendants brought us bottles, wrote letters, bedpans and came to shave us, but after a very few days...
discussed this matter and came to the conclusion that there was no reason in the world why we should not begin to do something for ourselves. Why shouldn’t we get up? Why shouldn’t we walk to the bathroom and the lavatory? Why shouldn’t we try to shave ourselves? and so we sat about it and very soon we did this. We would be got to the bathroom and then naturally would lead to one trying for oneself, possibly would come out of the bath a minute before the sister or the V.A.D. or the orderly came back to fetch you, you’d start wandering along to find the way yourself, very hesitant, very much afraid of bumping your face, but marvellous to relate, you gradually found you could do it yourself, and so we had begun the first lesson in independence. Walking to and from the lavatory and the bathroom, shaving ourselves and then were asked whether we could not get dressed and sit up instead of lying in bed. It was obvious that we were convalescent and it was time that we left hospital. However, before I left hospital, I had a visitor, one of the most important events in my life. There were two reasons for this. One, the visitor asked me to go to St Dunstan’s and told me what it was, that it was an institution for the blind and that I’d subsequently married her, and we lived happily ever after, and indeed we are still living together most happily some 50 years later. This girl who came to visit me, Miss Irene Mace, who was acting as a V.A.D. at St Dunstan’s and the personal assistant of the Chairman, Canon Arthur Pearson, was away on her summer holiday and he had heard about my case and asked her to come down and visit me in hospital. She came and gave me a watch, it was always a matter of some irritation to us, to me, that I had to ask somebody or other in another bed whose eyes were not damaged ‘what’s the time’. The hours went slowly and one constantly wanted to know the time. So when I received my first watch which I could feel and could tell the time for myself, I had really learnt something which had an importance far beyond the eye itself. I learnt subsequently that Mr Pearson used to give a watch or send a note to every newly blinded man, and when I became the Chairman of St Dunstan’s I did the same, and have done so ever since. The watch might be called a symbol or a token of this dependence and freed you of the necessity of asking, I met that there is any harm asking — people are only too willing to oblige — but one does not like having to ask all the time; it’s very agreeable to do it for yourself. Parties of office men used to go up to St Dunstan’s from this hospital every day of the week, I think I went off at eleven in the morning by bus and we had lunch there and we met blind ex-service men who had been before us and there was a band on the lawn and we chatted with V.A.D.’s and visitors and people and then went back to hospital. It was something to do and it gave us an insight into what St Dunstan’s was. So far as I was concerned, I accepted the invitation to go to St Dunstan’s because I didn’t know what else to do. About the end of August I left hospital and went for a month to
spend a holiday or a period of convalescence with a cousin of mine in Dumfries.

I have already mentioned Douglas Pass in an earlier chapter. Well, this was his house. He, himself, had already gone to the war, the Middle East, and was serving with his Regiment, the 2nd Yeomanry, in the Soudan. In fact, by this time he had been taken prisoner and was a prisoner in Turkey. My cousin very kindly asked me and my sister, a girl who was four years younger than I was, to go there to a house which she had taken by the sea at Wimborne in Dorset. We spent the month of September there. I bathed once or twice. I started learning French. I was very unhappy. I was rude to my friends and my relations short with people, disagreed with the food or said the food disagreed with me; everything seemed wrong, but, of course, what was really wrong was that I was beginning to suffer the reaction of blindness, beginning to think most consciously and subconsciously what this meant to me in the future. Beginning to grieve about myself. It is a common feature amongst those who have recently been blinded to grieve about themselves, to find everything wrong and to complain, and much patience is required amongst nurses and V.A.D.'s and relations who look after such people. It is not surprising that a man should be cross with life, cross with Fate, and find things wrong because almost everything irritates him. He finds his way about, no doubt, hesitantly at first, but more confidently as time goes on, but then every now and then he trips over something and he bangs his face on a desk and it makes him very irritable and cross; and the awkward thing is that nothing that the people who are with him can do about it; they say they are sorry, but that doesn't make him feel any better. The trouble is that he is crosser for himself, and he has to get over it. The best way to get over it is to be amongst other people who are also blind any of whom had been blinded a few months before and had begun to whistle and to be cheerful and sing and happily engaged in something and this is what you need when you go to St. Dunstan's.
Thus, as soon as possible, we went to St Dunstans. It was the policy of St Dunstans to ask the Army, Navy and Royal Flying Corps medical authorities to transfer blind or lightly blinded boys to No. 2 General Hospital as soon as possible, and we had regular visitors going there keeping in touch and bringing encouragement and hely hope and we tried to get the men transferred to St Dunstans at the earliest possible moment. I found myself at St Dunstans and immediately began to feel better for the reason I have given namely that I was amongst men who were themselves blinded and who had been blinded before I had and who had begun to find their way about, had been encouraged to walk alone and the paths in the buildings and in the grounds at St Dunstans were so arranged as to render this easier with appropriate railings and warnings when steps were coming and so on. The staff knew their business and although they might watch you to see that you didn’t come to any harm, didn’t interfere too much and left it to you to find your way, so getting about alone is one of the first lessons, then the example of the other men, the pride in feeding yourself, shaving yourself, dressing yourself; all these things contributed towards a sense of independence, and gradually the grief about blindness ended and a hopeful attitude took its place. In spite of this, however, the shock of blindness is a very severe one, I, for example, was a young man, I had just turned 20 at the end of August when I went to St Dunstans in early September. I had not had a career, except this very brief one in the Army itself and perhaps the battle was not quite as difficult for me because I had not been deprived of something I knew. It must have been harder for men who had started a career let us say as an engineer or a teacher or some assistant to realise suddenly that they just couldn’t do that, or if they were persuaded by the authorities at St Dunstans that they could do it, they were only half persuaded and weren’t yet convinced. I suffered for many months, possibly for a year or two from mild spells of despair and discouragement. I was very shy about being blind nobody likes to be disabled and nobody likes to show his wounds unless, of course, the poor chap is a confirmed beggar in a country where nothing is done and where it is the only way he can get along and a donation from the sympathetic passerby. I can remember walking along the front at Brighton or in the street in London with a crowd of men or with a V.A.D. and being full of anxiety and apprehension lest a soldier should salute me and I would be unable to return the salute. You may think this is a trivial matter but it wasn’t so to me. In regards returning the salute, of course we remained in uniform for a few weeks or months after we came to St Dunstans. That is why this question arises. Then there was the fear that somebody would come and say they were sorry for me, ‘Your old chum’ they would say and this is very disturbing and tends to make you feel a ‘poor old chap’. I can even remember a year or two later when I had learned to read Braille, I was literally opposed personally to take the Braille book with me in the train and reading it. Even if I had been four hours of journey to make I didn’t like to take
that the other people in the carriage would be sorry for me or would see me reading slowly, painfully aloud, this code. Now indeed after ten years or twenty, certainly now, I am quite untroubled about being blind. It doesn’t worry me at all and I hardly ever think about it, and I certainly don’t mind the whole world knowing and seeing me get over my difficulties, what would we do for money. Well the war pension in those days was very small; but then we were wages, and every 20/- pound brought about ten times as much as it does now, and I suppose never having had any money, we felt we could jog along all right, and then we had begun to learn that men at St Dunstan’s were engaged in starting profession and handicrafts and could make some money as well. So we became encouraged as time went on. There was no wireless in those days and one’s only occupation when one was not in a lesson, was to have somebody read aloud to you or read Braille and it was quite a long time before one could read enough Braille to be fluent. The first lessons at St Dunstan’s were in typewriting and Braille. It is quite easy to learn to typewrite and this is an immediate encouragement to the young man. Indeed it is commonly known that dexterity of type is very slight, and it is not by sight so that touch typing is well understood. I suppose within a month, having a lesson each day, one could type a reasonable letter to one’s parents or to one’s relations or to one’s friends and here was a new piece of independence, though, of course, the latter had had to be read aloud. Braille is much more difficult. The code itself is learned in a week or two and memorized quite easily. It is a simple code, logical and as I have said, easy to learn and to generally learn to read it fluently is another matter. You’ve got to teach the fingers, exactly the foreground of the right hand and the hand itself and the arm and the brain to this unaccustomed way of bringing messages to the mind, and it really does take quite a time, some years. I have sometimes likened it to shorthand which so many young women or girls learn. They learn the code very easily, but to become fluent to be able to write at 60 or 80 words a minute takes a long time — a lot of practice, as it is with reading Braille.

This book does not purport to be a text book on blindness — there is therefore no need for me to describe the Braille system. What I am more concerned to do is to describe my attitude towards it, in fact I dislike Braille so much that I did not become good at it for a very long time. Indeed I say that it was not until the Second War came along twenty years later that I really got about teaching myself to read Braille fluently. I was then the head of St Dunstan’s, indeed I had been since 1921 when Sir Arthur Pearson died and I anticipated some hundreds of young men coming back from the battlefields, for the sea and from fighting to St Dunstan’s and I totally blind and the head of the organisation was not myself good at Braille, so I set about a systematic self-discipline and read a passage every day of my life and I did, in fact, become quick and fluent at reading within a very few weeks. The in my old age I read Braille every day of my life. I have a book by the side of my bed and before I go to sleep I almost invariably read...
few pages - indeed it helps me to go to sleep. I like well-written books - books in which the author is capable of saying what he wants to say shortly, clearly, and without too many adjectives or parentheses. Braille is slow anyway and even though I am a fluent reader I don’t suppose I can read more than 50 or 60 words a minute, whereas a sighted person can read by writing or print at 300 or 500 words a minute, and some experts read much faster than this, and if it is to be a slow business I won’t say a painful business, but a difficult business, to pull all the words off the page with your fingers, then you want to be sure that the words are worth pulling off. In many respects we led a normal kind of life. We had rowing on the lake in Regent’s Park and cricket on the River Thames. We had parties in London, dinner at various houses to lecture us, we went to theatres and we went for walks and met people and talked and entered into the life of the country. Every new battle brought more men to St Dunstan’s and the great battles of 1914/15/16 led to a situation where there were as many as 100 blinded ex-service men here at this organisation.

But this is the story of St Dunstan itself. I have written one already called A Story of St Dunstan, but I must, nevertheless, include a brief summary of what St Dunstan’s was at the time and go on to tell what it was at the Second World War and after. St Dunstan’s had been left a great house in Regent’s Park called St Dunstan’s Lodge and it became the first place in which blinded ex-service men lived and began their re-education or training. Classrooms were there and quickly temporary buildings were added. The extensive grounds made a great workshop for handicrafts, classrooms for teaching poultry farming and telephonic telegraphy and telephone operating and, of course, a medical section - indeed a complete institution and very soon this was too small and other big houses in the neighbourhood were taken on at one time we had ten or twenty houses or ex-schools or other buildings in and around Regent’s Park.

There was a skilled paid staff and a considerable number of young women came as what were called V.A.D.s. I sometimes think that at my present age in 1973, my own grandchildren were all born during or after the Second World War, and most of them, if asked, wouldn’t know what a V.A.D. was, so let me tell the new generation. There were three letters: V.A.D. meant Voluntary Aid Detachment and referred to a group of women who worked for the Red Cross on various jobs including being assistant nurses at hospitals. But one word: V.A.D. came to mean the girls herself rather than the Detachment, and you spoke of one particular young woman as our V.A.D., or the V.A.D. The word persisted in St Dunstan’s, possibly in the Red Cross generally, but it is not as common now as it was in those days. Teachers of Braille and shorthand were found at first from other blind institutions, but later we discovered we could train them ourselves, and now St Dunstan’s was a tide of industry with all kinds of occupations going on throughout
the day and entertainments in the evenings. It was not only available for the men of the Home Country but also for the men of the British Empire as it was then called and the Commonwealth as it was later called, and men came from thousands of war where they were engaged fighting alongside the British and we had at the same time some Canadians, Australians, South Africans and New Zealanders. Regent's Park is about 600 or 500 acres in extent and is surrounded by a three mile circuit called the "Outer Circle". This road had to be crossed to get to some of the dormitory houses to some of the training places or classrooms and blinded soldiers who got about alone were often crossing these roads by themselves, and motor cars used to speed along. This was good practice for the blinded men, but it was also a little dangerous, so big notices were put up by the local authority and the notices read " Beware blinded soldiers". We made a joke of this and said it was a warning to all the girls to beware especially of the Australians and the South Africans and the Canadians and the New Zealanders who were so far from home, but that those visitors from overseas behaved badly in any way, but they behaved naturally and it would have been quite right to warn the girls who used to come in groups to visit St Dunstan's and go for a walk or read aloud or help in various ways, to warn them to beware of blinded soldiers. In the early evenings the lake in Regent's Park could be seen full of little boats, people rowing, swimming, singly or in pairs or in fours and once a year we had a regatta the tideway at Putney, where we competed in both fours, 7 or single sculling, with some of the tideway clubs. I remember one time rowing against the Fire Brigade, another time against four members of Parliament who happened to be Old Etonians, and so on. After I had been working or learning at St Dunstan's for about a year the Chairman, Sir Arthur Pearson, wanted, sent for me one day and said I was to come in and work in the organisation itself. I could represent him at meetings and speak on behalf of St Dunstan when he was unable to go, I could be put in charge of the after care department. After care meant exactly what it implies. Care of the St Dunstaner after he leaves St Dunstan, and has gone to his own home, it was our policy to try and return the blinded man to his own home where he would be in familiar surroundings or if not to his own home then at least to his own town. If he was going to get up and get married and if he was going to be in his own familiar town it would be much easier for him than if he had to start as a strange place. At no time did we contemplate arranging workshops for the blind because we did not believe that segregation was the right course to live in or work in a workshop specially designed for the blind. It may be easier in some respects but it is not so satisfying and we therefore set about finding all kinds of occupations that could be undertaken from one's own home and as a rule we tried to start the man off in his own district. This proved very successful but a great part of the success was due to the after care department which is still to my lot to found and start. I had a separate office, a St
...job gradually grew from half a dozen to quite a considerable number of men who lived in various parts of the country - we called them after care... who would go to see the men in their homes and I soon built up a staff of experts such as property men, to find houses to let or to purchase for our men to live in if they could not go back to their own homes and trade experts who could go round to teach those who had learnt art making, basket making, carpentry or tailoring, new models or to make sure they were maintaining a high standard. This system of after care still persists and will be continued for the rest of the lives of our men, though we now call it the welfare department.

The after care department also had funds at its disposal from which it could make grants to men who were in difficulties to get them started in business, and we had also a separate department called the 'Settlement Department' whose business it was to actually find this and get the men started on their careers or their professions.

(Note for Lord Fraser to read this - Its not a part of the book but it is to remind him when he comes to look at this again in a few weeks time what he is going to follow with for example - I shall start a new chapter now about some of the professions and handcrafts which are under this - I shall deal with the starting of the business Department probably devote the whole chapter to lessons, occupations, hobbies, professions, games, etc. Then there will be a further chapter on the subject of funds, raising of funds and how that went on between the wars and then we shall get on to another chapter getting ready for the second war.)

Mother came to England.