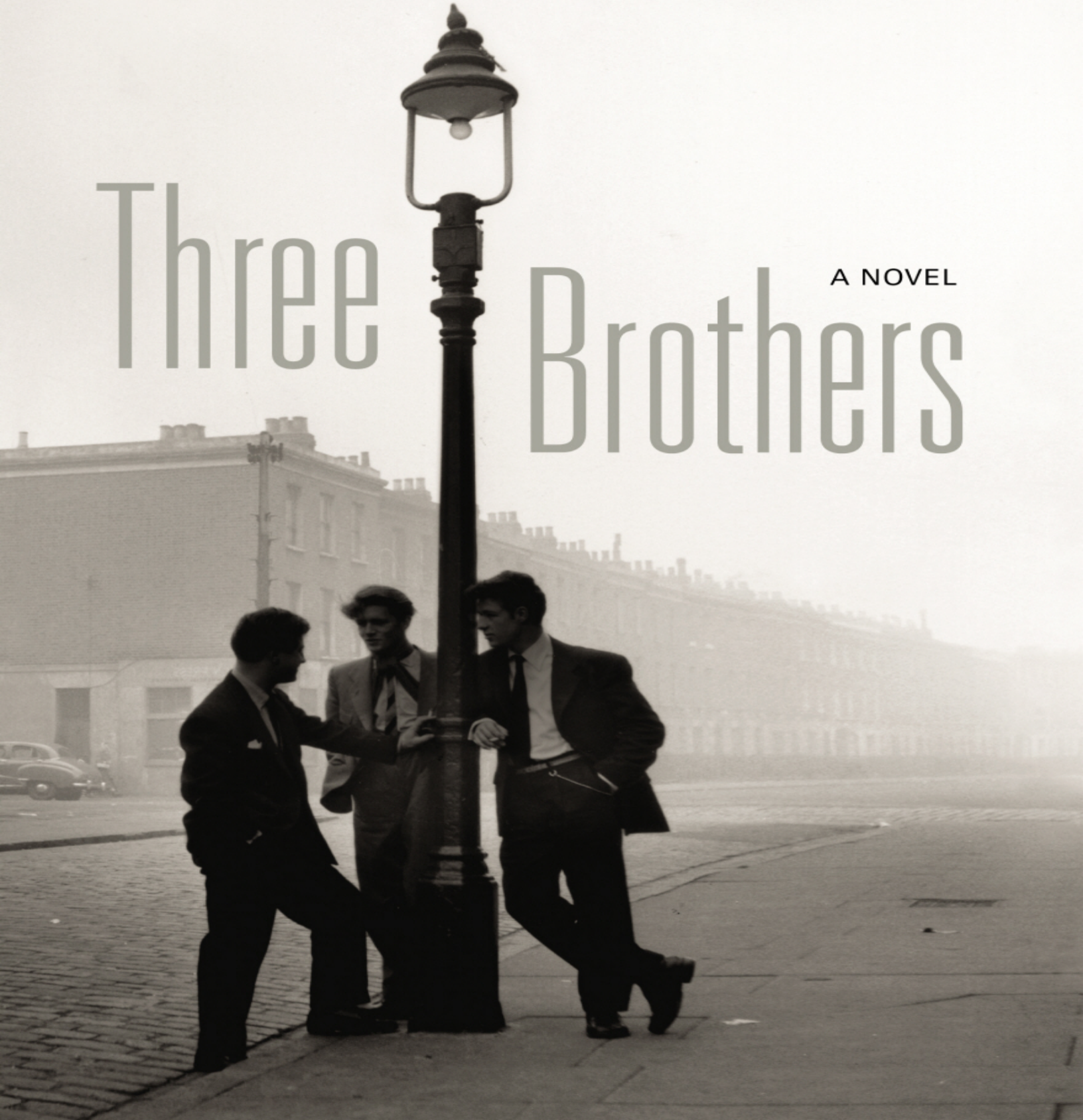
PETER

ACKROYD



Three Brothers

A NOVEL

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About the Book

Three Brothers follows the fortunes of Harry, Daniel and Sam Hanway, a trio of brothers born on a post-war council estate in Camden Town. Marked out from the start by curious coincidence, each boy is forced to make his own way in the world – a world of dodgy deals and big business, of criminal gangs and crooked landlords, of newspaper magnates, back-biters and petty thieves.

London is the backdrop and the connecting fabric of these three lives, reinforcing Ackroyd's grand theme that place and history create, surround and engulf us. From bustling, cut-throat Fleet Street to hallowed London publishing houses, from the wealth and corruption of Chelsea to the smoky shadows of Limehouse and Hackney, this is an exploration of the city, peering down its streets, riding on its underground, and drinking in its pubs and clubs. Everything is possible – not only in the new freedom of the 1960s but also in London's timeless past.

About the Author

Peter Ackroyd is an award-winning novelist, broadcaster, biographer, poet and historian. His novel *Hawksmoor* won both the Guardian Fiction Prize and the Whitbread Novel Award. His fiction includes *The Lambs of London*, *The Clerkenwell Tales*, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and, most recently, *The Casebook of Victor Frankenstein*. He is the author of the acclaimed non-fiction bestsellers, *Thames: Sacred River* and *London: The Biography*. He lives in London, and holds a CBE for services to literature.

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Three Brothers

Peter Ackroyd

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

I

Cheese and pickle

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

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

The three boys were young enough, and near enough in age, to enjoy the same pastimes. On the pavement outside their small house in Crystal Street they chalked the squares of hop-scotch. They played marbles in the gutter with fierce concentration. They hardened the seeds of the horse

chestnut with pickle juice and brine, so that they could compete with conkers. They raced each other on the common, at the edge of the council estate in which they lived. They explored the deserted tracts of land beside an old railway line, and trod cautiously among the debris of an abandoned bomb shelter.

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

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

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

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

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

‘I want to be a pilot.’

‘I want to be a detective.’

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

The sky was growing darker, and a cold breeze had started up across the common with the promise of light rain. ‘Come on,’ Harry said, pointing to the abandoned bomb shelter, ‘let’s all go under the ground. I’ve got some matches. We can start a fire. Mum won’t miss us till teatime. Let’s start a fire that will go on *for ever*!’

‘I dare you.’

‘I double dare you.’

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

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

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

Any stranger who happened to walk through the neighbourhood would not have come away with any distinct impression. It was a council estate, built in the 1920s, of two-storey red-brick terraces. That was all. One row of houses was interrupted by some small shops – a newsagent, a hairdresser, a butcher among them – and on the corners of the narrow streets were general stores or public houses. There was a fish-and-chip shop, and a bakery, in the street where the Hanways lived. The district smelled at various times of dust and of rain, of bonfire smoke and of petrol. Its

sounds were not of cars but of trams and milk-floats, with the distinct but distant roar of London somewhere around the corner. It had the forlorn calm of a poor neighbourhood, yet for the three brothers it repaid the closest possible attention. It was the source of curiosity, of surprise, and, sometimes, of delight. The centre of their lives was very small, but it was brightly lit. And all around stretched the endless streets, of which they were largely unaware.

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

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

The Hanway boys were in separate classes, according to their age, and in the playground they did not care to fraternise. Harry was the most gregarious and thus the most popular of the brothers; he laughed readily, and had a circle of acquaintances whom he easily amused. Daniel had two chosen friends, with whom he was always deep in consultation; they collected bus numbers and cigarette cards, which they would compare and contrast. Sam, the youngest, seemed content to remain on his own. He did not seek the company of the other children. And they in turn left

him alone. But Sam had a temper. One morning, at the gate of the school, a boy remarked on the fact that Sam had torn his school jacket. Sam struck out at him with his fist and knocked him to the pavement. His two brothers witnessed the event, and adjusted to him accordingly.

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

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

He had been called up for the army, in the third year of the War, but in fact travelled no farther than Middlesbrough where he was assigned to the barracks as a clerk of munitions. He remained in that post until the end of the War when, with army pay in his pocket, he returned to London. He had been brought up in Ruislip, but he had no intention of returning. Ruislip was the place where he had waited impatiently for his real life to begin. Instead he set off for Soho. He believed that he was destined to be a writer. When he was a schoolboy, he had read an English translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* over several weeks; he had devoured it, page by page, elated and terrified by the turns of the plot. The day after he finished the novel, he began his own story. He never completed it. He put the pages in a

biscuit tin, where at the time of this narrative they still lay. Yet he was not discouraged. He began writing other stories, to which he could never find a satisfactory conclusion. The more disappointment he suffered, the more intense his ambition became. He recalled the last words of *The Count of Monte Cristo*, ‘wait and hope’.

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

When his army funds were low, he sought work in the neighbourhood. He became a barman in the Horn of Plenty, a pub in Greek Street that was the chosen spot for a group of hard-drinking and sometimes bellicose Soho residents. Philip Hanway was happy here. He called himself a writer, and enjoyed the anecdotes of the journalists and advertising copy-writers who frequented the bar. And then he met Sally Palliser. She worked in a cake shop, or ‘pâtisserie’, in Meard Street. He had passed its window, with a display of almond tarts and buns and pastries, and had seen her delicately picking out an angel cake for a customer. His first impression was of the graceful way she moved behind the counter, her skirt slightly creasing as she bent forward. On the following morning he paused, opened the gaily painted door, and ordered a macaroon. He purchased a macaroon every morning for the next few weeks.

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

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

‘Now that’s interesting.’

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

‘But what will *I* say?’

‘You just have to smile.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Ouch.’

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

So Harry was saved.

She informed her parents of the pregnancy before she told Philip. She wanted to present him with a family ultimatum. And so, five weeks later, Sally and Philip were married in the

registry office on St Martin's Lane. Philip then exerted himself to find work, and applied for the job of nightwatchman. The two of them formally requested a council house, as a newly married couple, and to their relief they succeeded. So they moved to Camden, where Harry was born four months later.

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

'Where is she?' Daniel asked him.

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

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

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

A year after the disappearance Harry progressed, as he had expected, to the secondary modern school on the other side

of the borough. He had sat the 11-plus examination, but he had not excelled in any of the papers. He changed from one school uniform to another, and caught a bus in the morning. Then, a year later, Daniel passed the same examination with much higher marks.

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

His work was rewarded when it was announced, after passing the 11-plus, that he had won a place at Camden Grammar School. If his mother had been there, she would have danced with him around the kitchen; she would have lifted him up, and pressed her nose against his. Philip simply shook his hand, and gave him half-a-crown. Harry joked with him about a school for swots. Sam never mentioned the subject.

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

Then Harry started playing football for his school team. He enjoyed the exhilaration of the dribble with the ball, the clever pass, and the sudden shot at the goal. He enjoyed the exercise of his own body – the exercise of his power in the world. He called out to his teammates, he shouted at the linesmen, he whooped with triumph at every goal his

team scored. It was a world of expressive noise. The physical sensation of movement delighted him. He revelled in the wind and rain and sunlight as he ran across the pitch.

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

II

The path is clear

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

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

‘Say that again.’

‘I want to get a job.’

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

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

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

‘But what do you think, Dad, of the newspapers? That’s a good life, isn’t it?’ Harry loved newspapers. He enjoyed the appearance, and even the texture, of them. He liked their smell. He relished the size of the headlines and the neat rows of type. He was excited by the thought of thousands of

copies despatched from the printing plant into waiting vans. In the evenings, after school, he flattened the *Daily Sketch* on the kitchen table and slowly turned its pages. Sometimes he read out paragraphs aloud, just like the news broadcasters on the wireless.

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

'Dry up.'

'I was only asking.'

'Sod off.'

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

'I have thought about it seriously.'

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

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

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

'I run, sir, when I see the path clear.'

'That's good. That's what you must do.' He had an emphatic manner of speaking, reminding Harry of the fairground barkers who came to Camden once a year. George Bradwell was not used to being interrupted or

contradicted. He explained that Harry was supposed to take the ‘copy’ from the office to the printer, and then bring the ‘proof’ back to the *Bugle*. Copy of what? Proof of what? It was very mysterious. Bradwell then showed Harry some pages of typing, with various scrawls and symbols in the margins. ‘These,’ he said, ‘have been marked up.’ Harry nodded, as if he understood perfectly what he was being told. The air was heavy with the stale odour of tobacco. ‘Cadogan Street.’ Pinned to the wall was a large map of the borough. Bradwell pointed with tobacco-stained finger to the street in question. ‘On the right is Lubin the printer. Just tell him you’re from the *Bugle*. This is Tony, by the way.’

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

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

Harry soon became accustomed to his duties. He was so exhilarated by his new job that he mastered its details easily enough. He dashed from the *Bugle* to the printers. He ran between ‘Editorial’ and ‘Advertising’, picking up the copy from both departments. In ‘Editorial’ Tony was news. George was interviews and reviews. An elderly man, Aldous, was sports. Aldous hardly ever spoke, and seemed to Harry to exist in a state of self-pitying gloom. Stress and tension were always in the air. Bradwell would answer the telephone and announce himself as ‘editor in chief’. Tony would then give a sarcastic smile. Bradwell would often snatch his hat and coat, and stride purposefully out of the office. Sometimes he would not come back for an hour or more. Then he returned with an air of mystery, and with the odour of alcohol.

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

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

Harry enjoyed his time in Lubin's printworks. He savoured the pervasive smell of ink, and the steady metallic beat of the electrotyping machines. He saw the curved plates of metal type being inserted into the presses, and watched as the paper flowed between them. It was a cheerful and good-humoured place, filled with shouts and the noise of the machinery. This was the newspaper world that Harry had envisaged – a strident, exciting, declamatory world.

Harry was walking back from the printer one evening, after delivering the last of that day's copy, when he noticed a

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

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

The cry had roused the curate of the church, who had been dozing in the sacristy amidst the mild perfume of lilies and beeswax polish. He came running out, and was astonished at the spectacle of Harry straddling the man and pressing him against the floor of the church. Harry

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

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

Harry told George Bradwell the following morning. He became so excited by his own narrative that he knelt on the floor to demonstrate the manner in which he had pinned down the arsonist.

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

‘But it’s true.’

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

‘But I’m not a reporter.’