

SMALL BEGINNINGS

Half-way down the High Street in Sutton was an archway. It opened into The Arcade—only a small arcade but the only one I knew and for that reason alone it was special. All the shops were small and dark and we took no notice of most of them. I dimly remember one stuffy window with just a few hats on display but I never saw any sign of life inside.

The Arcade was built on a slope leading up to the park and the swimming baths. Right in the middle, where the sunlight never seemed to reach because the glass roof was always grey, was the shop we loved best. My two brothers and I never noticed its name; it was just “the toyshop in the arcade”. But in the Autumn it became the centre of our world. Then the toys were cleared away from the counter and the glass cabinets were filled with fireworks: loose individual ones on sliding trays, just below the glass top scratched through years of coins sliding across; boxed collections underneath behind the shiny glass front. We could never understand why anybody would want to buy a box and lose the fun of choosing their favourites.

Other shops displayed rings and bracelets on trays like these but our jewels were made from gunpowder and had brightly-coloured printed designs and the shopkeeper always showed the patience of a jeweller whilst we took ages to spend our pocket money. We chose our fireworks like sweets: "one *Snowstorm*, one *Chrysanthemum Fountain*, one *Mount Vesuvius*, three *Wrip Wraps*, one *Roman Candle* and one more *Vesuvius* please". We had to choose the smaller fireworks to make our money go further.

I carried home my fireworks loose in a brown paper bag and kept them under my bed. Every night I took them out and spread them on my blanket. Every night they

left a sprinkling of dark sparkling gunpowder. I read and reread the labels: the names and the prices and then every word of the instructions. My fireworks were always Brocks and I quickly made up my mind that these must be the best—Astra, Wessex, Pains and Standard were all poor substitutes for me.

When pocket money had built up again, we went back. Six penny *Bangers*, *Golden Rain* 1d, small *Sky Rocket* 3d. We knew they were small but they were precious for all that. We pressed our fingers hard on the milky-white misty glass of the counter, pointing at individual favourites we already knew were good and wondering if it was worth risking new ones. We loved the bright designs, the different shapes, the dry rustle of the blue touch paper and the smell of the leaking powder. Each year, I splashed out on one big rocket. If it was big enough for its stick to poke out of the bag, it was proof to me that I had got a 'big one'.

Pinned to the walls of the shop were giant rockets, crossed like swords, and even bigger and more expensive constructions with wooden frames and white ignition fuses that linked several fireworks together. Way beyond our reach, these white fuses became the object of our dreams.

When I was about 12, I went to the shop on the way home from school. I had money but I left without buying anything. I was on the edge of a big decision that I found hard to make. In the cabinet was a big firework with smaller ones wrapped round it and they were all joined together by white fuses. It was 3/9d. I had 4/- saved. On the second visit, with great fear that it wouldn't go off properly, I came away with one firework in my brown paper bag. It was a *Devil Among the Tailors*. On November the 5th, we saved it to the end. It fulfilled all my hopes. It was noisy and it was powerful, it flashed like crazy. And it lasted for ages. I was hooked.