A PICNIC

by FRED BASON

CHILDHOOD is made up of moments. My childhood was lonely and unhappy, since both my parents were over forty when I came unexpectedly into the world, and I was often told I was unwanted. But there were moments; and one that stands out in my memory now I am over forty happened when I was eleven.

My grandfather in those days lived in a turning immediately behind Walworth Road Baptist Chapel—no distance at all from 152 Westmoreland Road, S.E.17, where I am living today. On the corner of his street there was a rather high-class provision stores, a little gold-mine of a one-man business. I know it was a gold-mine because the grocer chain-smoked Manikin cigars, and wore a heavy gold watch chain.

This grocer had one child, a girl called Gertie, who was his pride and joy. Nothing was too good for Gertie. Even I, with my lack of worldly wisdom, could see she was a cut above the average, for she wore a special school kit and a straw hat with a crest on it.

I often went to visit my grandfather, and on my way there and back I passed the grocer's shop. My mother never knew that Gertie was the real reason why I seemed to be so fond of my granddad.

This lovely young lady had a hobby—the collecting of cigarette cards—and we spent many happy moments outside her dad's shop, swopping cards. We also played a game called 'Closest to the Wall,' in which we flicked cigarette cards in turn towards the wall, and the one whose card fell closest to the wall took the other one's card. I often won back from Gertie all the cards I had swopped with her, because I was pretty good at this game. The reason why I was pretty good at it is that I used to lick the edge of the card and press my fingers hard against the wet edge until it became stiff: then it would fly faster. Gertie would never lick; she said it was not healthy or ladylike.

But Gertie was very kind to me. My parents were poor, and I was very often very hungry. Gertie knew a great deal about food, and in consequence she was nice and plump. I was then—as now—on the slim side, and I greatly admired plump and cuddley ladies. Not
that I had ever dared to cuddle anyone. Gertie was my very first love, and I loved her more and more every time she ran into the shop and came out with some tasty little bit which she called a ‘sampler.’

One day I remember Gertie giving me a very creamy French pastry. It was the first French pastry I had ever tasted. It made me very sick and bilious, and I had to explain to Gertie that I wasn’t used to such rich things. But I learned a few days later, through one of her school friends, that Gertie wanted me to have the best of everything, as she had a real crush on me. That bit of news made up for the biliousness.

We didn’t kiss. We didn’t hold hands—**people might see**! But being together for a little while—well, that was sheer happiness.

One day Gertie invited me to go with her on a picnic. ‘We’ll take our bikes,’ she said, ‘and go up to Peckham Rye, and have a lovely picnic,’ I told her I couldn’t provide any of the food. ‘Food!’ she said. ‘I’ll get all that. Leave it to me. Hasn’t Daddy got a shopful of food?’ And we arranged to meet at Camberwell Green on Saturday afternoon.

For five days and nights I dreamed of this picnic—the first picnic of my life. I didn’t call on Gertie in the meantime. I suppose I realized that absence makes the heart grow fonder. But I thought of her all the time—and of the lovely food she would bring.

On the day, I made myself as respectable as I could, even to the extent of combing my hair for a second time. I polished the chromium handlebars on my very ancient bicycle. Gertie’s bike was a wonderful one, with three-speed gears, a huge bell, and a brilliant blue enamel frame. Mine was painted with black tar, which always came off when my hands were hot. But this Saturday at any rate I made the handlebars sparkle. Then I sat down to my dinner, which consisted of a slice of bread and dripping and a cup of thick, unappetizing cocoa. Not that I minded: wasn’t I going to a marvellous picnic? As I sipped that cocoa my mind flitted over all the lovely possibilities of the afternoon. It couldn’t fail to be a real smashing turn-out. Maybe she’d even bring strawberries and cream: I knew her father stocked both. I had never eaten them, but I knew they were luxuries. My, what a tuck-in it would be!

I got to Camberwell Green a quarter of an hour before the appointed time. And there I sat on my bike, leaning against a lamp-post, and watching the traffic go by. It was a perfect day. I was at peace with the world.

Gertie arrived on the tick. I said, ‘Hullo.’ Just that. She said ‘Hullo.’ Just that. And off we pedalled down the Peckham Road, towards the Rye, the largest open space in our part of London. I noticed that Gertie had a box and a blanket on the carrier at the back of her bike. This excited me, and I set a pretty smart pace as we cycled along. Gertie kept up with me all the way: I was quite proud of her.

When we got to the Rye, Gertie suggested that we should walk up a hill to some distant trees and sit under them. But they seemed to me to be a long way off, and I was both tired and hungry. So I pointed out to Gertie that things are apt to drop on you when you sit under trees, and we didn’t want anything to spoil the picnic. ‘Very well,’ she said; so I quickly untied the box and the blanket on her carrier.

As I spread the blanket out on the soft grass Gertie stood and watched me, with a smile on her pretty face. I began to get more and more excited, but I wasn’t going to rush things. I spread the blanket out very neatly and placed the box of good things in the exact centre of it. Then I sat on one edge and waited for Gertie to be hostess.

She sat down close to me, and for a brief moment she held my hand. Her face was very near to mine, and she smelt lovely. I very nearly kissed her. Very nearly, but not quite... **people might see.**

Gertie seemed to wait a bit, and then at last she took her hand out of mine and began to open the picnic box. This was the great moment, the moment I’d dreamed of for five days and nights. What would it be? Lemonade? Cream pastries? Strawberries and cream? Or something so luxurious that I’d never even heard of it?

Gertie lifted the lid of the box. She turned back the paper wrappings.

I gasped. In the box were two bread rolls, two small pieces of cheese, two apples, and a lemonade bottle containing **milk!** There were also two paper napkins, with forget-me-nots at the corners.

I could have cried with disappointment. So this was what I’d been dreaming of! Bread and cheese! And **milk!** Suddenly I felt very angry. For a moment I felt like smacking Gertie’s face.

But she was talking. ‘I was going to bring ever such nice things,’ she said. ‘Crab, and a tin of real pineapple, and lots of jam tarts and things. But Daddy said you were probably used to plain food, and rich things wouldn’t agree with you. And I was afraid you’d get bilious, like you did when you had that French pastry. And Mummy said something plain would be better for a growing boy.’

A growing boy! Something plain!

‘Well, don’t talk so much,’ I said. ‘Let’s get on with it.’
The roll was crusty and dry, and the cheese tasted like soap. The apple had a maggot in it. I managed just one sip of the milk. I ask you: what Walworth man would be seen drinking milk—and with a girl?

‘Don’t you like our lovely picnic, Freddy?’ Gertie asked.

I didn’t answer. I got up, found a large stone, and threw it at a little dog that was hanging round. When I turned back again Gertie was crying. Well, blimey! That capped everything.

‘Cor, luv a duck,’ I said. ‘Put a sock in it!’

But I suppose she was enjoying herself in her own way, for she didn’t stop. So I went for a walk, feeling a bit windy with indigestion from the dry roll and the cheese. The little dog that I hadn’t hit with the stone came trotting at my side and I amused myself throwing sticks for it to pick up and carry back to me. At least the dog wasn’t weeping.

Ten minutes later I returned to Gertie, as the sky had got overcast. While I was tying the blanket on to the carrier of her bike it began to rain. Gertie, of course, had a cycling cape, which I undid and handed to her. Then I kicked aside the picnic box, chucked the empty milk bottle at the dog, and told Gertie to get started. As we set off I saw one of the forget-me-not paper napkins on the grass, so I picked it up.

On the way home I got soaked from head to foot. Although I pedalled at a furious pace Gertie kept up with me. At the top of my street I said ‘Good-by.’ Just that. She said ‘Good-by.’ Just that.

At home I got into proper trouble for getting wet, and had to explain just where I’d been. ‘Picnic? Picnic! I’ll give you picnic. Go upstairs and change everything. And stay there!’

It was all of six weeks before I went to see my granddad again. As I passed Gertie’s father’s shop I looked in at the window—to see what lovely grub was there—and whether there was any sign of Gertie. Perhaps I ought to say I was sorry. After all, it hadn’t been her fault. She’d meant well; she merely hadn’t wanted me to be sick.

In the middle of the window was a big notice which said Under New Management. But still the same High-Class Standard. I plucked up my courage and went inside. The shopkeeper wasn’t Gertie’s dad. He had no watch chain, no cigar. He told me Gertie’s father had had a stroke, and the family had moved away. ‘Can I serve you with anything, my little man?’ he asked.

Right up to the blitz I kept that paper napkin with forget-me-nots printed on it.

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Opposite: Merlin Rockets racing from Ranelagh Club