

Alligator Wrestling (as related by Alan Harrap)

Chapter 1 - My meeting with Lingard

My life would not have been the same had I not talked about alligator wrestling on that Spring Sunday. And when Lingard mentioned Miss Shepherd, my guilty reaction must have been more noticeable than I thought. 'Guilty' - no, that's the wrong word, since I was in no way guilty, even though I had not come forward.

I had nothing to do that Sunday, and I thought it was going to be a very boring day. I was wrong! I decided to leave my Edinburgh flat at midday and headed for my favourite book shop. I was just outside the shop when there was a shout. "Harrap! How extraordinary to meet you here. I had no idea".

It took me a moment or two to put a name to the face - but fortunately it came to me. "Lingard. Of all people". Well, there were certainly people I would have preferred to meet. I knew him at school, though we were not in the same class. He was not academically very bright but he was very articulate. No, that's too polite. "Big mouth" is the right term. Just the right qualities for a politician perhaps.

"Harrap, let's have lunch over there" he said. I couldn't think of an excuse. And I was quite hungry.

We got a drink at the bar and then sat down and ordered.

"Harrap, Let me tell you what I have been doing. Making money. Big money! ". I listened politely and attentively as he continued talking, rather loudly. He probably wouldn't have stopped pontificating about his own achievements if he had not been alerted by an incoming message on his mobile. He glanced at it, then looked up and said "Your turn. I'm dying to hear about everything you have been doing". But he really wasn't interested at all; I could tell from his voice. And sure enough he turned his attention back to the smart phone. I started talking about my life since school, but he obviously wasn't listening; the little screen had his full attention. I told a few mildly amusing anecdotes, but Lingard obviously didn't hear them. Though in fact I did see him smile a couple of times while looking at his screen. Maybe some financial news pleased him. Or maybe he was simply playing a computer game with success. I really don't know and don't care.

Our starters arrived. Lingard put the phone aside and now divided his attention between the food and his wish to impress me with name-dropping. No, not just me. He made quite sure that he could be heard by other customers. But as soon as he had finished eating, he reached for the mobile. briefly looked towards me, saying "Harrap, you must have a great deal more to tell me".

I knew he wouldn't listen. So why not amuse myself at his expense? Time for an experiment.

I didn't really mind if the experiment failed and he thought I was making a fool of him - as I probably was. So I started telling my story in a steady, somewhat soporific voice, with no unnecessary stress, because I wanted him to remain immersed in whatever he was doing with the mobile.

That was when I went to America, travelling around. I found myself in Florida and I was getting very short of money. I met this guy in a bar and explained my predicament; he said 'Why don't you do some alligator wrestling - I can get you into that'. I thought that was utterly ridiculous, since I am quite small as you know. But he continued 'We'd do a poster of this weedy little guy called Cecil Lilywhite (that would be you). The audiences

would love it. We would give you some training, you'd make lots of money and it wouldn't be all that risky. Why don't you give it a try'

So I did and I went to the alligator farm and they signed me up. The first thing they did was to allocate an alligator to me - quite a big alligator - and they said that the alligator and I must get used to each other. For the first two or three days the alligator had a muzzle. I talked to him and I found that alligators are really rather intelligent creatures. I just talked quietly and read to him. It became apparent that he rather liked poetry. One favourite which actually made him giggle was 'An alligator on a cargo freighter ate the Captain and the navigator'. After 3 days we had established a real bond and I felt quite sure that he would not deliberately harm me. So that's when we started practising the alligator wrestling for a week or so. Then the event-manager felt that we were fit to go before audiences. The alligator was really a softy, but he understood that he must act fierce and make me cower with fright as we started our act. Then we'd do the wrestling. My blood (fake blood) would apparently flow profusely before my eventual triumph. The little guy wins! The audiences loved it and we had full houses week after week. So I made quite a lot of money and felt it was time to come home.

At this stage I saw the waiter heading our way with our main course, and I thought the time had come to reconnect with Lingard, who was still absorbed by his mobile phone. I reached forward, grasped his hand and said. "So do you think I was right to give up that teaching job in Huddersfield". He blinked, pulled himself together, and said "Yes, of course you were right in those circumstances". Clearly he had not registered any of the story I had related.

Lingard now divided his time between eating and loudly expressing his forthright views on politics and current events. I said earlier that he was not actually very bright at school, and I longed to contradict him when he made outrageous and illogical statements. But I kept quiet until he invited me to continue the story of my life.

"Lingard, you'll be really interested in what happened to me in Sleaford", I said. Sleaford? Well I apologise to the Sleafordians. I think of Sleaford as one of the most boring places, along with Heckmondwike and Wednesbury. I think Lingard was trying to sound really enthusiastic when he told me to go ahead. But of course the screen of the mobile took his attention as I began.

When I came back to England I was not short of money, having earned such a lot from the alligator wrestling performances, and I decided that I would do voluntary work for a charity. A friend suggested the "Dead Wringers Society". "Never heard of it", I said, "Dead Ringers Society. Is that a sequel to the Dead Poets Society?"

My friend said "No, no. It's 'wringers' with a 'W'. Otherwise known as the 'Society for Care And Repair of Old Mangles', or 'SCAROM'. (They'd really like it to be RoSCAROM one day) Wonderful work they do. Not many people realise that there are a lot of poor people who still use grandma's mangle on washing day. If something goes wrong with it, well-meaning people suggest that they get a spin-dryer - something they can't afford and don't need. Fortunately more and more Social Workers know about SCAROM. The SCAROM work load is increasing all the time, and they need practical and innovative people to repair mangles, even though spare parts are rarely obtainable."

Well that was just right for me. I like repairing things that others would abandon in our throw-away society. I keep all kinds of washers and screws and wood and metal and plastic - in the hope that they will come in useful; they usually do. So off I went with a vanful of such bits, as well as useful tools, and as 'mangle man' I made a great many people happy - which made me happy in my work. But I soon realised that splendid as these old mangles were, they could be made even better and more user-friendly with some modern microprocessor technology. - at very little cost.

I could have gone on and on with this nonsense. But the waiter was on the way to our table. So I coughed loudly, and when Lingard looked up, I said "Well, that was my time in Sleaford; have you ever been there and seen that extraordinary public sculpture? You've heard of it of course". "Oh of course I have" he replied sharply. He knew everything of course!

While we ate our puddings, Lingard talked about our schooldays. He remembered all the names and nicknames and little quirks. He was actually rather witty. He'd do little cameo impressions of different masters, changing his voice and employing face expressions and arm movements to complete the picture. He remembered all those favourite quotations, latin tags and long words. I was still laughing uncontrollably when he went on "I can't do the women though. They were an uninteresting lot anyway. Mind you there was the Miss Shepherd affair. You were in that Geography set, so perhaps you probably know more than I do". That brought me up short. I gulped slightly and stuttered "No Lingard, carry on; you probably have a better memory. Remind me".

He went on "Right frump she was. Definitely on the shelf. She'd seen staff-room romances blossom , and always hoped that Mr Right would appear and sweep her off her feet. But it didn't happen, and to ward off her loneliness she developed her relationships with her pupils. She had favourites - the athletic, good-looking lads (so obviously you wouldn't have been among them, Harrap). It was probably all very innocuous, and it only came out because of the school ties! Yes, a boy was taken to the Head because his school tie was in a sorry state and he blurted out a story about Miss Shepherd.. A rapidly convened Kangaroo Court of Governors summarily dismissed Miss Shepherd, and sent her home escorted by the Head's deputy - the prim Miss Fosset - who apparently said that Miss Shepherd had some rather rude pictures and sculptures. And she discovered a small collection of school ties "

Well I didn't quite know how to respond. But Lingard saved me the trouble. "My, is that the time; I must really rush. Wonderful to see you, Harrap. We must do it again. Can you settle up, and I'll pay next time" And he was gone. And he didn't forget his mobile phone."

It took me a while to recover my composure. What cheek to expect me to pay! After I'd placed my order for soup-of-the-day and a modest burger, he'd gone for the scallops, then lobster. And he'd had a liqueur with his dessert. And now I was paying for all of it. "Next time" would never happen (thank goodness!) Still, it had actually been an amazing lunch-time experience and I'd had some fun at his expense.

I got up, smiled slightly ruefully, and turned round to go to the cash desk. At the next table-for-two there was a young lady whose companion had no doubt gone to 'pay a visit'. She smiled at me. " I've seen that Lingard man in here in the past. Always the same. Bumptious and domineering, and making sure he gets a free lunch at the expense of an unsuspecting companion. But it was rather different today, though perhaps he will never realise that you made such a fool of him in public. I don't think I was the only one to notice". At that point she saw her companion returning, and said "And I've always wanted to meet an alligator-wrestler" As she said this, she pressed a small card into my hand.

I left it for two or three days before I made further contact. The card had given me her name (Jill Atkinson) and her phone number. We arranged to meet on the following Saturday for dinner.

Saturday came (slowly). We had barely sat down when she said "And you're going to tell me all about Miss Shepherd. That stupid man Lingard may not have noticed it, but it was obvious from your reaction to her name that you had been involved".

So I admitted it and went on:

I never knew Miss Shepherd's Christian name. She was my Geography teacher. I suspect that she was no more than 30 years old, but she was extremely plain and wore her hair in a bun. Apparently a career school-maam.

I was not yet 17. We were learning about Africa and Miss Shepherd made it very interesting because she had spent a year teaching there, as well as having a brother who farmed near a big-game park. It was the last lesson of the day, and Miss Shepherd called me up to her desk and said "Harrap, would you like to see the souvenirs I have at my home. I'll give you an extra lesson; so School Rules apply". Of course I would! I should explain that teachers always used our surnames - unless there was any ambiguity which meant adding 'Major' or 'Minor' and (rarely) 'Minimus'. Of course she knew that I was Alan, but it was always "Harrap". As soon as we got to her flat she took me into her sitting room, and then left me alone while she went to the bathroom or something. She had wonderful native carvings - and framed photographs of natives and scenes. Quite a lot included bare-bosomed native women (which no doubt had shocked prim Miss Fosset) and one was an amazing portrait - a fine black-and-white photograph. I didn't hear Miss Shepherd return while I was gazing at this quite goggle-eyed. "Wasn't Mutare beautiful as a young woman" I heard her say. "She was an actress and singer in South Africa. She was in her sixties when I knew her. Her singing could still display every emotion. Many songs were wondrously happy; others, often relating to Apartheid, revealed her sadness during that period. She taught me a little of her singing. "

And the dowdy Miss Shepherd was suddenly transformed as she began to sing. She became Mutare for a moment. It was hauntingly memorable, conveying deep sadness. It was quite brief - and then she realised I was there and became Miss Shepherd again.

Let's get on with the lesson I have in mind. In that portrait, Mutare is taking part in an African play with two characters, a man and a woman. You'll learn quite a lot about Africa if we play the roles ourselves. We'll dress as they did and read the parts"

" Harrap, go and draw the curtains so that other people don't watch. Then go into the other room and find some African trousers to put on. Nothing else - except your School Tie; school rules are school rules".

This was fun - and I was far too naive to realise that this was rather weird.

Well, I did as she said and found the trousers in the other room. The trousers were much too big, but I could hold them up. I was tempted to use my School Tie around the waist - but then I put it on 'normally'. How odd I must have looked! At that moment the phone rang, and I heard Miss Shepherd answer it. It was a long conversation which I couldn't really hear, and I soon got bored and started looking around. There was a picture of Miss Shepherd's brother labelled "HUGH SHEPHERD WITH BIG GAME TROPHIES". Then I started opening drawers and cupboards out of naughty curiosity. Nothing exciting - until There on a table was a polished wooden box. It was actually locked, but the careless Miss Shepherd had left the key nearby, and I opened it! On top was a card on which she had written "SMALL GAME TROPHIES". And underneath that was a pile of items. Each one was the bottom inch or two of a School Tie, and each one had a name written on the white diagonal stripe; many were names I knew!

No way my tie was going to end up in that box! I grabbed my clothes and school bag and ran to the door - still wearing my African trousers. I heard a call of "Harrap" behind me. Once outside, I dodged behind a bush and put on my normal clothes, leaving the African trousers under the bush.

Back at school, I remember the School Tie inspection which took place only a few days later. Quite a lot of lads in my set were found to have shortened school ties and were questioned. But of course my tie was still complete!

I'll never forget what happened. Miss Shepherd's singing is imprinted on my soul.

I had been immersed in telling my story, and I now realised that Jill was speaking "What a wonderful, wonderful story. But I have to ask - is it like Alligator Wrestling?" "Well", I replied, "that is what actually happened to me, though maybe I've added a slight embellishment here and there".

We finished our meal, and I said "If you'd like to come back to my flat for coffee, then I'll show you something which sort-of proves my story". "I'd like that" she said, "though you don't need to prove anything. I believe you (thousands wouldn't)"

So I was able to show her my picture of Mutare, framed opposite my bed. I'd discovered it in a junk shop (how very inappropriate) and paid £5. Was it Miss Shepherd's ? Or were there other copies of this wonderful portrait. I don't know.

Coffee together capped a wonderful evening and we made a date for a week later. She hoped I would then have another story to tell.

And yes indeed I decided to tell her about my work with Instant Topiary.

Conventional Topiary requires years of skilful work. And that does not suit the nouveau riche, who want Topiary for their mansions, and want it now, or even sooner. So I set up "Instant Topiary". Well nearly instant. I had "TTT" at my disposal ("Trubshaw's Topiary Technologies") I could produce "Real Topiary" or "Digital Topiary". For "Real Topiary" I could manipulate the most unpromising vegetation, and graft on new branches so that a couple of hours work created a topiary cat - or whatever took the client's fancy. Or I provided Virtual Reality topiary which was amazingly realistic! And that could be keyboard-controlled to provide the client with ever-changing choice to suit his mood. Speaking topiary was also an option. I really thought that rather vulgar, but then the client (with money) is always right.

To start with I sought perfection - until discerning clients reminded us that wonderful old topiary is never perfect. So we often incorporated a dead branch here and there, a few old birds nests , strands of ivy or bindweed or brambles.

"That's marvellous", she said. "It could almost be true.

In the weeks that followed I told her about such great advances as "Striped Paint", "Amplifying Silence" and "Animatronic Tadpoles" (all inventions of mine). We were spending more and more time with each other, and my stories became just one part of our developing relationship. Jill was a wonderful companion, amusing and intelligent. Her interests became mine - and mine hers.

Happy times. I was trying to summon up the courage to ask her to be mine for ever, but I was afraid of a refusal which might end our relationship. But after my description of Animatronic Tadpoles and their natural transformation into Animatronic Frogs, she looked at me and said

"You know, our children would love to hear your stories!"

Alligator Wrestling

Chapter 2 - From my engagement to revelation

Well, the next year was eventful. Our 'engagement' period was short. No need to wait. A 'big wedding' involving fancy clothes and months of planning was not for us. So it was the Registry Office on a day in July (I've forgotten the actual date, but Jill doesn't mind at all; she knows I'm a dreamer). Then an easy-going party for family and friends.

And we didn't wait very long before Jill told me that I really was going to need that good stock of stories. She was in a delicate condition. Our twins, two boys, John and Alex, were born in the following May. When we brought them home, Jill hugged me and said "Do you think we can find Lingard and get him to be godfather or something. None of this would have happened but for that lunch with him, and your crazy story about Alligator Wrestling". She was joking of course - about inviting Lingard. to join us in our happiness. Fancy christenings were not our thing anyway. Mind you, it did occur to me that Lingard may have a good deal in common with Don Vito Corleone. Dark secrets may be behind his "Making money, big money" (There must be a story here!)

We started the boys on bedtime stories before they were two years old; they were then becoming fascinated by books. To start with I read the usual stories and fairy tales from childrens books - gradually introducing more and more of my own quirky additions. They were then far too young for my stories of impractical inventions such as self-hammering nails, so I developed their understanding through animal stories new and old. Of course there were the usual popular heroes like Peter Rabbit. I discovered that Beatrix Potter had in fact considered writing about a crocodile called Amelia, but never did (True!). So after telling them about Captain Hook and the alarm clock, I wrote one of my own compositions which began

**Alligator Amelia at Arthur's aquarium
Began by biting Brian's bum
Continued, chewing cheerily
Dee-Dum-Dee-Dum-Dee-Dum**

.....

and more stories with a crocodile or alligator theme

Eventually I told them a version of alligator wrestling. Well, was that a real hit! They loved that. From then on they were always asking for the alligator wrestling story. So I varied it each time to cover my experiences in different performances, complete with angry alligator noises. Of course they weren't frightened at all, since Jill, always matter-of-fact, told them it was all nonsense, and their Daddy was an old softie, was never really in such a dangerous situation, but likes to invent silly stories. They knew that anyway.

The twins were now showing curiosity about all kinds of things they noticed, and I soon found myself giving them illustrated explanations of ball-cocks and door locks and much else in their world. More of my own stories then followed. I related them to reality, and they soon understood that self-hammering nails and striped paint were just another bit of my nonsense.

They learnt to read early, and quite soon we were playing games with language. They liked me to talk about reversoland, where the ecreif rotagilla lived in the sedalgreve. They soon got the hang of that and talked to each other in that private language which their small friends didn't understand.

I used Florida as the location for many other stories - making cheese sandwiches for Mickey Mouse; impersonating the eighth dwarf, 'Creepy'; how I lit the blue touch-paper at Cape Kennedy; and more. But we always had to go back to alligators, and alligator wrestling in particular.

Of course by now the boys were at school, and doing well.

Jill used to collect them from school at the end of the afternoon, and would chat to other mums in the playground. One day she was talking to Gary's mum, Melissa - who of course had never met me. Melissa knew about the stories and had picked up on the Florida connection and wondered how often we'd been there. Jill told her that she'd never been to Florida herself - and that the Florida and alligator stories were just the product of my over-vivid imagination.

"Oh you really must visit Florida", said Melissa. "Mike and I went for the first time when we were engaged, and go back every year. Gary loves it, especially the Theme Parks and the rides, and I'm sure your twins would too! We've put all our best photos in a Magic Memories'book right from our very first visit. I'll lend it to you - just promise to look after it!"

A few days later Jill came home with the twins, and bringing (unbenown to me) **'Mike and Melissa's Magic Memories'**.

I was in the garden, and a little while later I was alarmed to hear Jill cry out

"Oh My God!"

"Harrap, come here"

"Harrap, you toad, **Harrap!, Harrap!** "

By the time I got in (taking off my muddy boots of course), I found Jill shaking with laughter, pointing at the open page in **'Mike and Melissa's Magic Memories.'**

(now you're ahead of me, I think!)

I saw an enlargement of a crowded arena, showing a stage (like a boxing ring). And there was a clearly recognisable figure grappling with an alligator. And in front was a poster saying **'See Cecil Lilywhite Conquering Again'**

Yes, I really was an Alligator Wrestler !

Chapter 3 - My Alligator Wrestling

Phew! How very lucky that Melissa and Mike had been to a Wednesday performance - Hannah's night off.

But I'll explain that shortly.

I looked up from "**Mike and Mellissa's Magic Memories**" with the revealing picture. of my alligator wrestling. Jill was smiling. "What a secretive man you have been!"

"Secretive?" I said. "But I'd told you - and the twins - all about it over and over again. I never actually said the story wasn't true. I wouldn't lie to you!"

No, I wouldn't lie, I thought, but I could be economical with the truth. I'd always told Jill that I'd never had any serious relationships before I met her. She always responded by insisting that such an attractive man as me (!!!) must have had the ladies queuing up! And I of course responded in similar vein.

So back to my story and my relationship with Hannah, and her involvement in my act.

When I started alligator wrestling it was a solo act. But then Arnie, the Proprietor of the Gulf Gatorium decided we should introduce something new, to spice it up and boost the audiences. It had to be Cecil saving a beautiful maiden from the fearsome alligator. And who could play the part of the maiden in distress? Well, Dusky Dawn got the vote. She swam with the dolphins, and was used to confronting the killer whales. And she was beautiful in a slim and vulnerable-looking way. Just what we needed.

Of course "Dusky Dawn" was not her real name. She was Hannah Finckelstein, a name which would have frightened any alligator, of course. Arnie loved alliteration, so he thought about posters for the new attraction and came up with "**See Cecil Saving Cissie**". So Hannah Finckelstein aka Dusky Dawn became Cissie Spenser.

Well, I have to admit that this was even more successful than my solo act, and Hannah knew it. She soon negotiated equal pay with Arnie, and her name appeared on the bills in the same size print as mine. It was a very professional relationship - to start with. At the end of the show we'd go our separate ways saying "Good night Mr Harrap", "Goodnight Miss Finckelstein", just as if we were nine-to-five workers leaving the office, rather than leaving a stage where we had conquered an alligator, and had the audience's applause ringing in our ears.

Wednesdays were different. That was Hannah's night off, and so I did the original solo act which still drew crowds, partly because the ticket prices were quite a bit lower than for the Cecil/Cissie shows. So Melissa and Mike must have been there on a Wednesday (I'd suspected that they were tight-wads)

One Thursday night the Cecil/Cissie act went a little wrong. After all it was quite dangerous. Julian, our alligator was rather frisky, and didn't play his part in the usual obedient way. We managed to get through the show without serious injury, but it was pretty scary. Hannah was thoroughly professional throughout, but when we left the stage she was trembling. She started to say "Goodnight Mr Harrap", but she could barely speak. Some reassurance was clearly needed, so I opened my arms and gave her a quick hug and said "Miss Finckelstein - or may I call you Hannah - perhaps I should see you to your van".

We became "an item" for a couple of weeks.

I really hoped it would be for ever, but there was a little snag - no, a big snag - "Big Jake". He was the alligator-stable manager. He was also the mail-man (and certainly a male-man!). All Incoming mail came to him very early every day and he delivered to our vans. I didn't get much myself. But Hannah obviously had lots of mail, because I often saw Jake coming from her van

before eight-oclock every single day. I didn't think of any other reason at that time, and I hadn't seen anything significant in the fact that Jake's day off was Wednesday, like Hannah's.

Of course I had to work as usual on the following Wednesday afternoon when Hannah and her ex-boy-friend Jake had their usual day off. Hannah gave Jake the heave-ho which didn't please him at all! But he left us alone to enjoy our new relationship for just a few more days, before he took action. Another Wednesday came around and the time came for me to go on stage and display my puny body as part of the warm-up. Then it was time for the entrance of the alligator through a gated tunnel. Beyond the tunnel I spotted Jake. That was unusual for a Wednesday, but then his assignments with Hannah were over. He was grinning broadly as he operated the gate. And in came the alligator. But It wasn't Julian (my lovable and usually obedient Julian). This time it was a larger and altogether fiercer alligator called Tyson. What a struggle! I won, very very narrowly, and kept all my limbs intact. Exhausted, I looked towards the tunnel and saw Jake who mouthed "That was just a warning". But applause was rapturous as I left the stage.

But despite that ovation, there would be no repeat of that triumph for Cecil Lilywhite. My life was too important. So I scarpered and managed to board the next flight out of Orlando. I was never going to go back there. (That's what I thought at the time!) My alligator wresling career was over. I heard that Hannah had gone back to being Dusky Dawn in the Dolphinarium. I heard that Jake left, but continued elsewhere with alligator husbandry. He is now known as "Jake the Peg" for some reason. And of course I reverted to being Alan Harrap, former alligator wrestler. and now a cautious family-man, good with guinea-pigs.

I certainly wouldn't go near the Gulf Gatorium again! (so I thought)

Chapter 4 More Revelations

Jill didn't mind learning about Hannah. But she did say "You'd better tell me about all the other ladies in your life"

"Well, none really" I said. "Apart from Polly!"

"Sounds interesting!".

"Well, yes. She often cuddled me in bed, and often saw me in my birthday suit!"

"Now you're teasing - aren't you?"

"No it's true! And I owe everything to my relationship with Polly. If it hadn't been for Polly I would probably have followed father's guidance and now be an Actuary or an Insolvency Practitioner or a Compliance Auditor. Incredibly boring, but we'd have lots and lots of money, and bankers' bonuses and all that sort of thing. If it hadn't been for Polly I'd be hopeless at anything practical. And if it hadn't been for Polly I would never have had the guts to be an Alligator Wrestler".

"I'm intrigued" Jill said. And so I told her about Polly.

"Polly depends on us; she couldn't cope in the big world on her own". I'd heard my mother say that so many times that I almost believed it. Almost, that is. I probably didn't question it until I was in my early teens and started to think for myself.

I was an only child. My father, Robert Harrap, was a successful stockbroker . His life was centred on stocks and shares, money and finance. He seemed to have no other interests and he was certainly useless at practical tasks around the home. Mother certainly thought this was a very good thing. She was scornful of husbands who repaired things themselves and was often heard to say something like "That's what uneducated tradesmen and staff are for; Robert is a brilliant man, and has better things to do with his valuable time than do manual work".

I think that mother thought the same about herself. Her own highly paid job was in a City Bank, where she thought she was indispensable. Certainly when I was born she regarded this event as an unfortunate interruption and she returned to work after just a very few days. So that's when Polly came into my life.

It was an affluent area, and one might have expected my parents to engage a "Norland Nanny". Of course they could easily afford it. But that would be "Keeping up with the Jones's" , and mother had nothing good to say of Mr and Mrs Jones, who had a "Norland Nanny" for little Osbert Jones, So what did mother do? I don't exactly know since I wasn't consulted, but I have a mental picture of her putting the problem to father, who was deeply immersed in valuing his stocks and shares and just said "Why don't you ask Dr

Stevens what he would suggest". Which would have been a pretty sensible suggestion, since Dr Stevens was a wise old bird, who I do remember quite well.

In my imaginings Dr Stevens went home and asked his wife if she had any ideas. She certainly knew about child-rearing; the eldest of the six Stevens children would have been about 17 years-old at that time, and the youngest, Colin, just three.

"Polly's the girl" I hear her saying. "Polly left school last year with no academic qualifications, and she's helping temporarily at the Day Nursery where I take our Colin. She's absolutely brilliant with the children. She's a practical girl too, and from what I hear that would be no bad thing at the Harraps.

Well all that is a product of my vivid imagination, and probably rubbish. (Though I do know that Polly worked at a Day Nursery before she came to us) She was actually Mary Potter, but of course she was always Polly - Polly Potter, just the sort of name that Arnie would have liked.

So Polly took me on when I was a few days old! She lived in and her life was focused 24/7 on my upbringing throughout my childhood.

Outings with Polly - lots of them - were always an adventure. Polly was observant; her eyes were everywhere noticing the things which other people missed; little quirky things up on the roof-tops; little creepy-crawlies on the ground. We'd go to the woods close by and she encouraged me to climb the trees - which small friends, children of cautious parents, were not allowed to do. I discovered that if I climbed right up to the canopy, then I could cross the busy road and come down the other side, where Polly would be waiting. On one occasion I had just crossed when a fire-engine pulled up near by and we heard a fireman say "Motorist reported small child stuck up in the trees round here".

I didn't have many children's toys at home. But I wasn't deprived. There were so many interesting things. Polly gave me my first little tool kit on my third birthday and we added to it gradually. (I was really thrilled when I got a small chain-saw). Plumbing repairs, electrical faults, tree surgery, car servicing - I helped Polly with them all. She taught me to be inquisitive about how things worked, disassemble things, and put them together again without too many left-over bits!

Of course I had started school with quite an advantage over other kids. I certainly didn't have to be taught how to tie my shoelaces! And I was still quite young when Polly first sent me off alone on my little bicycle. That caused the worried Headmistress to phone my mother who (to her credit) said "Mind your own business", and went back to her financial spreadsheets. She trusted Polly.

I'll skip a lot of the detail of my schooldays. Polly always wanted to know exactly what I had done each day even though the more academic subjects were beyond her. I remember telling her all about the affair with Miss Shepherd. And I remember her saying "Alan, I

think I've helped you to love adventure. But sometimes adventures can go badly wrong. Adventurers are like bomb disposal experts and things can go wrong".

I didn't understand this at the time.

After I'd finally left home, Polly stayed on for a year or two, still doing useful things in the house and garden. But eventually she told mother that she would be leaving at the end of the month, assuring my concerned mother that she really will be able to cope!. On the final day father asked her to come to his study. His "Goodbye" was terse - as ever - but he handed her an envelope. Inside was a letter and an enclosure. She was amazed. It was a wonderful, kind, appreciative letter. And the enclosure was a copy of a letter instructing his Solicitor to set up a substantial Life Time Annuity for Mary Potter.

A few months after that I returned from my Alligator Wrestling at the Gulf Gatorium in Florida and met Polly. She wanted to see the world. She would use her savings, knowing that she had the Annuity. I gave her some addresses of my contacts abroad including my friends at the Gatorium. And off she went. "See you in a year's time" she said. I had a very occasional card, always from interesting places off the main tourist track and often 'dangerous'. Seven months had taken her through Syria and Iraq, into Central Asia, down through Tibet and Burma, and through South East Asia to the Antipodes. Then up through South America in six weeks or so. She sent a card from Guatemala. Then no further news, but I knew she'd be OK.

But the year was nearly up, and I began to worry a bit. No need of course! A large envelope arrived with a United States stamp. A wedding invitation. The marriage of Arnold Sullivan Now who's that? It's Arnie at the Gatorium. Good old Arnie. Found someone at last!

.....to Mary Potter of England, daughter of the late Peter Potter O.B.E.

My goodness, that's Polly! It's really Polly!

Of course I went to the wedding a few weeks later. I worried slightly about how I would be received in view of my earlier hurried departure. and abandonment of my commitments, But no. No one really liked Jake, or the way he had treated me. And I had a special part to play. I 'gave the bride away' at the marriage ceremony and I made a little speech at the reception, part of which went:

"Peter Potter should be standing here. He'd be so proud of Polly. He brought her up after her mother died when she was still a baby. He taught her to be adventurous, resourceful inquisitive and practical. (And Polly went on to teach me these things) Peter was actually a bomb-disposal expert. And that's why he was awarded the O.B.E. Posthumously though. He took a risk - a risk which saved the lives of many, but cost him his own - when Polly was only 15 years old."

I'll move on again. Polly was then nearly 40 years old. So it was hardly surprising that Arnie and Polly acted rapidly! Alan Arnold Cecil Sullivan was born seven years ago, just 10 months after the wedding. Naturally young Alan is learning to be 'adventurous, resourceful, inquisitive and practical'. He plays with the small alligators and has quite a rapport with them.

He could well become an Alligator Wrestler - though not for a few years. And if so, then I've been promised a ringside seat at the Gulf Gatorium for his Opening Night whenever that is.

"A ringside seat" said Jill. "That's no good. We're all going. That'll be five seats. You and me and John and Alex and I was going to tell you after dinner. "

That was on a Spring Sunday, just like that meeting with Lingard nine years earlier which brought Jill and I together. Jill insisted that we get back into closer touch with Polly and Arnie and young Alan. So they were soon to know that we were expecting a further bundle of joy - to be named 'Polly'.

A visit to Florida that summer led to continuing close friendship and regular visits (both ways). John, Alex and Alan got on really well, and I could easily write another chapter about their adventures together! I was 'Uncle Alan' and young Alan loved my stories. Polly was 'Aunt Polly' to our children, and often took our Polly swimming with dolphins.

Alan will certainly take over the Gulf Gatorium when Arnie retires - and he'll be the chief Alligator Wrestler. There was quite a row of us at the ringside for his very first public performance! The five of us were there, together with Arnie and Polly and local friends - and my mother and father too (now retired). It wasn't a huge alligator but Alan handled it well and he was loudly applauded. I did catch a snatch of conversation just behind us. Jill heard it too, and smiled.

"..... I reckon he's going to be as good as that guy Cecil Lilywhite - do you remember him?"