WEEDON STORY

By Rev. Ralph Bates
1969

FOREWARD

The people in this story live! and care has been taken to describe them truthfully, it would be a crime against the dead to libel them, and no offence against a living reader, to bestow virtues which never existed, upon characters named. The story is a chapter of family history. The people who appear were all ordinary folk, and almost without exception lived their lives in one of England's characteristic country villages. Not only did the people really live, but the happenings recorded really occurred. Whenever personal reactions to a situation are given, they are always in line with the assured character of the person concerned, and often are based upon traditions handed down through the years. Occasionally they are based upon the spoken word of the person concerned.

The sources of information intertwined in the story are of three types. First, there are the written records. These include parish registers; old Bibles with their entries of family births, marriages and deaths written on blank pages; family documents and papers which have survived the onslaughts of annual spring- cleaning, to say nothing of the devastating destruction which precedes "moving house" or succeeds a family bereavement; and occasionally the written record which has passed into print and lived on in newspaper columns, periodicals and books. The story owes a debt to all these types of record. The second source is the spoken word. Many of those who appear were know to the writer and he heard them talk of themselves and of others. If they had not shared in the incidents recorded they passed on what they had heard from those who had been involved personally. Because he was born in Weedon more than seventy years ago, the writer heard people speak of happenings and individuals belonging to a much earlier period. We can remember one person who was born in Weedon as long ago as 1804! Some of the personal reactions which may seem far-fetched were passed on to him by those concerned. For example, it was from the lips of Mary Ann, the children's Aunt Polly, that he learned of her reaction when her dying mother said that very soon another baby would come into the house of Edmund and Hannah. The third source is close personal association of a kind which goes beyond the spoken word. Several of the homes open to Herbert, Nina, Fred and Ella, were as freely open to him in his boyhood. The grandfather clock set down below the level of the floor was still in its place, though some of its more intricate mechanism needed attention; the Illustrated Children's Bible bought by his great-grandfather, William the preacher, became his own property; the intricate patterns which Edmund used to distribute among the lace-makers in the 1860's found a resting place in his own home; the photographic negatives showing the farmer's wife with her favourite geranium on a table by her side were among his playthings – and so on.

The genealogical tables are not strictly necessary to the story, though they may elucidate it and also add interesting detail without encumbering the narrative. The pictures at the end emphasise that this is a story of life and is not fiction.

It is not easy to recapture the atmosphere of an unsophisticated age, with characters to faced terrible odds with almost unbelievable heroism. The fact that their heroism often stemmed unquestionably from a very simple religious faith may make the story appear unrealistic; nevertheless it WAS a fact, and must not be discounted. It would be a pity for their amazing fortitude to pass entirely into the great silence of the past. There was an "incidental greatness" about their "unconsidered ways" which merits a tribute.

CHRISTMAS AT WEEDON IN 1869

The hamlet of Weedon in the county of Buckinghamshire is small and its two main groupings of houses lie at a distance from any busy thoroughfare. The former turnpike road between Aylesbury and Buckingham skirts the western edge of the two thousand acres which are within the parish bounds, but no first class road has ever penetrated the hill tops where the people have lived throughout some 1300 to 1400 years of history. Modern transport has destroyed the sleepy peace of former ages, yet it remains true that the inhabitants are spared the rush and roar of a busy thoroughfare.

A century ago the isolation of the hamlet was one of its distinctive features. Few people passed through it who had no business within it. The infrequent appearance of a stranger gave rise to question and speculation and became an exciting subject of conversation. Nevertheless, despite the relative insignificance of the place and its somewhat lonesome situation, there was always plenty for its people to talk about, weather and crops and rumours from the outer world were discussed, sometimes excitedly, but usually prosaically, and the discomforts of life provided a useful topic for the grumblers. Probably, however, no subject provided so much material for comment and conversation as the affairs of other people. There were births – suspected, expected and realised; there were marriages – usually preceded with conjecture, sometimes with surmise as to the reason for hastily arranged date, generally with a variety of opinions as to its suitability, and finally the event itself and its immediate aftermath; there were deaths – occasionally unexpected and according to the parties involved a "judgement" or "a bit of bad luck" but more often preceded by illness, and in the case of a very old person who was apparently unable to hasten departure from this world, the supposedly beneficent process of removing the feather bed from under him because "he couldn't die on feathers". In addition to the opportunities for conversation provided by the major events of normal life, there were everyday happenings of a minor nature which never lost their interest. These could range from the number of piglets a sow had littered to the enthusiasm of the preacher at the chapel on the previous Sunday. In a small sequestered community there was endless interest, and the topics which concerned other people's business loomed large in conversation.

1. The Stocking

As Christmas 1869 drew nearer, the rumour spread that Herbert, Nina and Fred, the small children of Edmund and Hannah Rolls were eagerly anticipating bedtime on Christmas Eve, because they were going to hang up their stockings at the head of their beds in the manner of royalty and gentry. It was the custom the Queen's husband had introduced from Germany in the 1840's when his children were small, and though some of his foreign practices were unpopular, this one was winning its widening way. In the 1850's it passed from the royal palace to the mansions of the nobility and gentry, and before the 1860's were through it was penetrating the humbler homes of England's countryside. The Rolls children were the first in Weedon to experience the mysterious thrill of looking forward to the visit of Father Christmas.

Not everyone who heard about it was favourably impressed. The rumour soon spread and the oracles pronounced their judgements. "Deceiving the children", said some; "Apeing and high-ups", declared others; "Others will want it if they do it", added the majority, with their eyes on their own slender financial resources. "Who's going to pay for it if they all want it?" was pertinent question repeatedly posed. The answer was obvious and unpleasant. The argument of the majority was sound. Before the end of the century all the children of the hamlet did hang up their stockings on Christmas Eve.

At first, there were many homes where the policy of "no surrender to new-fangled ideas" was strictly maintained. Such was the Watkins home, where the Rolls cousins were effectively restrained after one bold experiment. It was early in the 1870's when little Annie Watkins determined to invite the attentions of Santa Claus after the manner of Herbert, Nina and Fred Rolls. Her mother warned her that Father Christmas would not come to her! Annie persisted and early on Christmas morning felt for the stocking which she had hung up on the knob at the head of her bed. There was something in it! The something was a lump of coal wrapped in paper. In the bitterness of her disappointment she neglected to replace it carefully in its wrapping. The bedclothes suffered. So did Annie when her mother saw just what had happened. Neither she, nor her younger brother Charlie, ever dared to invite Father Christmas again. Their mother had a tender streak in her nature, but first and foremost she was a woman of strong opinions and firm decision. She "hadn't got no room for such new-fangled tommy-rot", and believed in "learning them a lesson" at the outset. When Annie whimpered to her more fortunate cousins and playmates there was another topic for conversation and once again the oracles passed their judgements.

2. A Privileged Home

There was no doubt about it, the Rolls children were privileged. The stockings were symbolic of much good fortune which came their way. Within the context of the life of the hamlet they enjoyed luxuries denied to the majority of their playfellows.

Theirs was not a wealthy home. Their father had four sources of income and he was fighting a losing battle with three of them. In the early 1860's he had been described as a lace-buyer, which indicated that he supplied patterns to the women lace-makers in the villages around, and then bought the Buckinghamshire home-made pillow lace which had been produced after many hours of hard labour, with the "pillow" in front of the maker, and the scores of bobbins clicking and flying round the pins carefully placed in the pattern which surrounded the said "pillow". Once it had been a prosperous business. Before 1869 the cheaper factory-made lace had almost killed the trade in the hand-made and skilled variety. Edmund Rolls, the children's father, was a kindly man and his sympathies were roused by the poverty of many of the elderly people who sought to "keep off the parish" by eking out a pitiful livelihood as cottage lace-makers. His shelves were stacked with goods which he had been too kind-hearted not to buy, but for which there was no market when he wanted to sell. Perhaps the people who said he was too generous to be a good business man had a case! The second source of income was as a buyer of straw plait. Straw bonnets were still in fashion in 1869, and the great centre of the industry, Luton, was in the next county to Bucks. Again, straw-plaiting was a cottage industry in the mid-Bucks area. Straws were gleaned from the harvest fields with the goodwill of the farmers and then, in the months ahead, were split into strips and plaited into lengths ready for use by the manufacturers of cheap bonnets and hats. Straw-plait was something the children could make, and before compulsory education came in the 1870's, the small girls in the cottages helped to keep hunger at bay by passing tedious hours as "plaiters".

But machinery and changing fashions were taking their toll by 1869. Ten years later the children's father still had a room in the house which was called the "plait room" and found a market for his reduced buying. However, he was too intelligent a man not to be fully aware that as a source of income straw-plait was on the way out. His third source of income had been photography. He was a pioneer in the new art of "taking likenesses". Probably he was the first in the district to set up as a photographer. "Have your likeness taken" was printed on his little advertising cards. By appointment he visited the houses of farmers and gentry for miles around and photographed both people and places. Farmers' wives, seated at tables outside in their fancy crinolines and their prize geraniums; farmers, seated on their best horses, posed grimly in their Sunday attire; and sometimes, a smock-clad trusted labourer was encouraged to "tidy himself" and "be took".

At one period the photographer was commissioned to travel further afield and to take his photographs of mansions and churches for the purpose of illustrating a limited and costly edition of a book which had these mansions and churches as its subject. Every illustration in every volume was printed individually from the photographic plate and carefully mounted. It was an enterprise which kept the young photographer busy for a considerable time. But even this source of income had almost ceased by 1869. Edmund might take photos of his family circle and very close associates, but that was all, as the 1860's drew to a close, a distant relation had opened up a photographic business in the town, with his own studio, and visitors to the hub of the locality could go there to have their likenesses taken. The venture had more flexibility about it and, to the subject of the photographer's art, had the suggestion of an "outing", though the final result might give the impression of endurance rather than delight. The town studio sealed the doom of the village photographer. Only the fourth source of income remained open with the prospects of expansion. This was the grocery business which Edmund's father had started in the 1840's and which, in 1869, belonged to the widow of the founder. Edmund acted as his mother's manager in the business and delivered the grocery orders which had been given by customers in surrounding villages. But the drain on the small village business was terrible. No less than thirteen people had to be provided for from that single shop. More than this, as Edmund's sources of income declined, his family increased. Four children came in five and a half years. First was Herbert, born in August 1863; second was Nina, born on New Year's day 1865; third was Fred, born in May 1867; and fourth was baby Ella, born in February 1869. But despite all, Edmund and his wife Hannah made sure the little children were not disappointed when they reached for their stockings on Christmas morning. Probably the contents were no more than a small orange of the three-a-penny variety, and apple grown in the orchard their father rented, a few sweets representing an outlay of another penny between the three stockings and wrapped up in a "twist" of paper, a small handkerchief which they would need sooner or later, no matter how it came to them, and lastly, for Herbert, the luxury of a slate pencil to write on a slate. That was all, but it represented the magic of Father Christmas and the romantic wonder of fairyland. Those Rolls children were lucky in their parents. Their tender-hearted father delighted in their happiness, and their spirited, hot-tempered mother, who was a genius at management, always wanted the best for her little brood. Money might be scarce, but Edmund and Hannah contrived the "extra" for their children.

Equally, Herbert, Nina, Fred and Ella were privileged in the little house in which they were born and which formed the material framework of home. Many of the cottages in the hamlet were dark and damp. Ceilings to downstairs rooms were low, and in some cases, the bedrooms were little more than attics under a straw roof, with little light and air. Sometimes a ladder served to reach the upper floor, in default of stairs. Walls crumbled, stone floors were cold, and earthen floors could never be cleaned. Several such cottages had reached a final stage of decay in 1869, and in the 1870's crumbled to final ruin. In such hovels families might be herded together with no chance of privacy by day or night for man, woman or child. Even in the better cottages the overcrowding was desolating. By the Census of 1871 the population of the hamlet reached its all time zenith. But the 1861 Census recorded six, seven and even eight people living in small cottages. In one case, where the family totalled only six, room was found for a lodger. The situation eased when the boys left home to be married and the girls went away to service, but meanwhile, one living room downstairs, one bedroom upstairs and a landing space where a bed could be placed at the top of the stairs, comprised the total accommodation in several instances for a community of half a dozen.

By contrast the Rolls home was brick-built, roofed with slates and modern. It stood on the crest of the hill, near the highest point of the main portion of the hamlet, and was one of the new houses which had been built to take the place of those burnt down when in 1853 a great fire destroyed a farm house, buildings and cottages and a converted barn, which served as a Wesleyan Chapel. It was only a rectangular brick-box, with two living rooms and a kitchen downstairs, and three bedrooms and a small landing upstairs. But it was dry, light and airy. Before their fifth baby was born in the summer of 1871, Edmund and Hannah had the whole structure remodelled, and added a spacious room both downstairs and up, beyond the south wall of the original house. These rooms, built where a wheelwright's saw-pit and yard had survived the fire, transformed the whole character of the dwelling. After that it was no longer a cottage. But, according to the prevailing standards of the time, the cottage housing Edmund and Hannah and their four little children was not overcrowded in 1869. They had a privileged dwelling.

3. Abundance of Relations!

Other houses where the children were welcomed had a place in their life and their celebration of Christmas. Both on their father's side and on their mother's, relations abounded. The homes open to them were of three types. First, there were the cottage homes of poor relations. Some of the members of the Rolls family had suffered tragic misfortune in the early 1860's, and some of the Seamons clan, to whom the children's mother belonged, had a grievous record of adversity. The second type of home was more spacious and less impoverished, but it did not necessarily follow that the children received a warmer welcome there than that offered in the cottages. The third type consisted of the two homes where the grandparents lived and where the children entered almost as into their own house.

Looking first at the cottage homes, two were occupied by their father's aunts. One of them, Aunt Mary, the widow of a George Rolls, had been cruelly widowed when her son William was a baby, and her second son was still unborn. George had left his native Weedon to find a greater opportunity in London, the mighty metropolis. He was of good physique and became a policeman. Then seeking to do his duty in the force, in 1860 he was killed in an affray in London. The next year, her son James was born. Life was never easy again for Aunt Mary. Her husband was 32 years old when he was killed and presumably she was about the same age. When he died she returned to Bucks, for she belonged to Whitchurch, and presumably was there when the Census of 1861 took place and she gave birth to her husband's posthumous son. After that she made a home at Weedon for her small boys, until tragically, through a blow on the temple from a cricket ball, the younger died. It was no fault of hers that she was always impoverished, but it was to her credit that the children of Edmund and Hannah always found a welcome from her.

The second of their father's aunts was the widow of his uncle John Rolls and was known as Aunt Sarah. Uncle John (the children's great-uncle) had been a butcher. When he died in 1863 he was 42 years old. Tradition said that he need not have died so young had he ordered his life more carefully. But he lived hard, enjoyed the sports which society condemned as bass (such as cock-fighting until it was abolished as illegal in 1849) and drank heavily. Aunt Sarah was seven years older than her husband, and thus was nearly 50 years of age when widowed. Her son was 20 and her daughter thirteen. On the face of it, her plight was less tragic than that of her sister-in-law, Mary Rolls. However, the son married the following year and Aunt Sarah fell on lean times. But again, the children of Edmund and Hannah always found a welcome from their great-aunt. In her old age, Aunt Sarah lived in London, where her daughter made a home for her in comfort.

The serene eventide was still twenty years in the future. But in 1869 the Seamons relations who were very poor were legion and the kinship was not as close as with Aunt Mary and Aunt Sarah Rolls and their families. They were descendants of one who may be called John of Quarrendon, because it was in the parish of Quarrendon, adjoining Weedon, that he farms his lands. Even Hannah, the children's mother, could not remember her great-uncle John, though he had lived to be 86 years old. He was the brother of her grand-father, William Seamons. But because her father was a younger son in a large family and had married fairly late in life, the grand-father had died before Hannah was born. But the story of Uncle John's tragic family lingered. He and his wife had a large family, only two of whom were sons. Both sons died young, but both had married and left behind them widows with small children. Old Uncle battled on with his farm until he was eighty and did his best for the numerous orphaned grand-children. At last he had to give up and finish his days with a married daughter. At the time of his death, his descendants were so many that his once considerable estate could make very little provision for most of them. Several of these impoverished Seamons relations lived on in Weedon and, one in particular, was the friend of the children's father because of a common musical interest. But perhaps the home which was closest among them all was that of Mary Seamons, a stalwart at the Chapel, who, with her husband had blazed the nonconformist trail in the village in a unique way. Mary's maiden surname was Burrell, and in the 19th century the Burrells in Weedon were almost aggressively "Chapel". Her husband, a grandson of old "Uncle" John Seamons of Quarrendon, was named after Henry King, a Methodist pioneer, whose daughter had married John of Quarrendon. This young Henry King could not remember his father, for he was the first of the two sons of John of Quarrendon to die young. Young Henry King Seamons was only a year old when his young father had died. But he drank deeply from the Methodist font which had nourished both John of Quarrendon, his grand-father, and the first known Henry King, his great-grandfather. After his marriage to Mary Burrell, young Henry King Seamons lived at Hardwick, and seems to have taken an active part in founding a Methodist society in the small, church dominated village. When their child was born, Mary and Young Henry King broke with all previous tradition in the village and hamlet, and had his christened, not by the Rector of the parish or his curate, but in the Methodist assembly, by the Methodist minister. It was a bold step to take and they had everything to lose and nothing to gain materially by such action. But they took it from conviction, and there is no record to say it was unpleasantly defiant. In her widowhood Mary lived in Weedon, and attended the Chapel, and when the time came was buried in the plot at the rear. Mary Seamons, though only a distant relation and that by marriage, was especially dear to Edmund and Hannah by ties of common concern and affection, and to the children would be "Aunt Mary" by courtesy. To the end of her days she was poor in this world's goods, but experienced a life transfigured from the unseen world. In her the children could see a religion which transcended formality.

The second type of home into which the children had family access was more spacious than their own, and much less cramped than the cottages where the poor relations lived. There were two such houses: old Uncle Billy lived in one and Lizzie Watkins lived in the other. Because the children had tow Uncles named William, and both had the same surname, it was necessary to distinguish between their mother's uncle, who was dubbed "old", and her brother, who was just plain Uncle, and was no more than a youth in his teens in 1869. Similarly because the children had two aunts named Elizabeth, one father's sister and the other their mother's, it was necessary to distinguish between the two Aunt Lizzie's. Their mother's sister was married, and could be called Aunt Lizzie Watkins without likelihood of any further change of surname; their father's sister was unmarried, eligible for marriage and until she changed her name from Rolls to Honour by taking a husband, was merely Aunt Lizzie. After marriage she became Aunt Lizzie Honour, just as Elizabeth Seamons had become Aunt Lizzie Watkins by marriage; but the wedding of Aunt Elizabeth Rolls was still eighteen months away at Christmas 1869.

Old Uncle Billy's house silently stressed that he had made a success of life. It was detached, almost new, brick-built, slate-roofed, sizeable, and had three acres of land, together with outbuildings. The latter included stabling for his horses, and a "coachhouse" for his cart. Old Uncle Billy had worked hard, saved hard, and in the process had contributed to the unfolding of a strange life story. He was born in Weedon in 1798 and was one of a family of ten, nine of whom grew up. Until their father died in 1831, Old Uncle Billy and four of his five brothers continued to live in the old farm house where they were born, and to subsist on the proceeds of their small landholding. It did not require an acute intelligence to deduce that one small farm could not provide for five sons indefinitely, or to figure out that when their mother died, and the estate had to be shared between six sons and three daughters, the sum to be received individually would be small. All the boys were too cute to stand by and await events, but it was William who took the first move. In 1832 he left Weedon to seek his fortune in the New World across the Atlantic. It was a bold move, and his younger brother Edmund decided to follow suit. However, there was a complication. Both wanted to get married, but William's intended bride was not free to leave England. So both brothers married at Hardwicke Church in the spring of 1832 and Edmund sailed with his wife while William set out without his. Long before 1869 it had become a legend that on his wedding day Old Uncle Billy had said farewell to his bride at the church door, and the following day had set off for America. Accordingly, Mary Judge returned to Whitchurch on that April day to earn her living as Mary Seamons by making pillow-lace, and to await the return of William her husband, one day, with his pockets full of American gold. On their wedding day, William was in his 34th year and Mary was 42.

Eight years passed before they met again, so that Mary was 50 when her bridegroom husband came back to claim his own. In America he worked with the fury the more intelligent of the Seamons clan could display when they were bent on a triumph, and to his ferocious labours added skill and sagacity. He does not appear to have had any difficulty in finding a purchaser for the land he had cleared and cultivated. With the result that he was able to return to his home district equipped to take his patient wife from her lace-making and to install her in their own farm house. Waddesdon, where they settled, and where William continued to work and save, was conveniently close to his old home at Weedon and her old home at Whitchurch. After a few years he decided to buy land in his native parish, to build a new house, and to farm only a few acres. In this way the new house was the symbol of his success. Unhappily Mary, his wife, died a few years after taking up residence in Weedon. Therefore, Old Uncle Billy, as he became in the 1860's, needed a housekeeper. His niece, the daughter of his oldest sister, obliged until her septuagenarian uncle decided to embark on the sea of matrimony for a second time. The new adventure was vastly different from that in 1832. Mary, his first wife, was already a middle-aged woman and, has been stated was his senior by eight years. Elizabeth, his second wife, was more than 40 years his junior and the contemporary of his many nephews and nieces. Those children of his brothers and sisters were not amused. Even Uncle Billy could not live forever and presumably his estate would come to their parents or, if there parents were not living, to them. Suppose Old Uncle Billy, despite his more than seventy years, and his wife Elizabeth not yet thirty years, had family; that would mean their expectations would be unfulfilled, argued the nephews and nieces. The comforters said, "But surely he couldn't at his time of life". "You never know with Uncle Billy" was the natural retort! Events showed that the comforters were wrong. Uncle Billy's wife conceived and brought forth a daughter. When the expectation of the birth leaked out, tongues began to wag. Some refused to believe that Old Uncle Billy could be responsible, and after scouting round for possible alternatives darkly hinted that one of the most worthless of all the young men in the village was accountable. It was hardly in keeping with the character of the young wife to form such a liaison, and Old Uncle Billy himself never doubted that his second wife had given him what the first marriage could not provide: a child to inherit his estate. As it happened the child, Annie, was born in 1871 and died in 1883. But the young wife lived on for nearly a quarter of a century after Uncle Billy had been lain to rest, so that the nephews and nieces who survived her were elderly when their pickings from the American adventure of the 1830's could be enjoyed! At Christmas 1869 the second marriage had still to take place and Harriet Watkins was still caring for her uncle. But Uncle Billy never got through to his numerous relations of the younger generation. His modern, spacious, detached house was not the place where children played happily.

It is quite likely that Herbert, Mina and Fred, the children of Uncle Billy's niece, Hannah Rolls, looked in at his home on Christmas Day 1869. There were special services at the Chapel that day, connected with a memorial to Mr Charles Seamons who was Uncle Billy's older brother, and Edmund Rolls was the leader at the Chapel and Uncle Billy's house adjoined the Chapel plot.

However, it is not likely that they wanted to stay very long. All the children of the village had loved "Mr Charles", as they called him, and they knew that the kindly generous old man loved them. It was different with Old Uncle Billy. No one called him generous or compared him favourably with his gentle older brother. His house was not the place where children expected a warm-hearted welcome! Old Uncle Billy was honest, and when his brother Charles's estate came to him through intestacy, made distribution faithfully according to the spoken wishes of the departed. But his nature was cold and calculating and the circumstances of his life provided reinforcement to his natural disposition. Undoubtedly, the children were happier in the cottages of their widowed aunts than in the Victorian, solid, middle-class house which was Old Uncle Billy's status symbol.

The other family home of the larger type was very different. It was an ancient yeoman homestead, probably at least 250 years old, and standing of the site of earlier dwellings. In existing records the continuous story of those dwellings could be traced back to the Black Death, but the silent record probably went back into time immemorial. It was spacious, and snug under its thick covering of straw thatch. Nearly all its windows faced due south. Its great central chimney stack, with a hearth on one side for a fire in the kitchen, and on the other side a fireplace to warm the chief living room, was ideally constructed to create a warm house. Sheds and farm buildings came almost to the front door and a deep well of spring water was just outside the back door. Beyond the small yard at the back of the house was an orchard and paddock. It was a property which the Seamons family had held on copyhold tenure from the year 1533 and it was from a Seamons descendant that Joseph Watkins, husband of the children's Aunt Lizzie Watkins, rented the house and its lands. They themselves were both Seamons descendants. In that house, and the one which preceded it, altogether about ten generations of the family had lived out life's joys and sorrows. In the 1760's, the lane which led past it to the top of the westward facing slope of the open fields, was called "Edmund Seamons Lane". For nearly 250 years an Edmund Seamons had been connected with that site. Then, when the open fields were enclosed and a straight road three furlongs in length was driven to the top of the hill, Edmund Seamons Lane became the upper limit of the New Road. In that way the children knew that Aunt Lizzie Watkins' house was "at the top of New Road". This Aunt Lizzie had married her cousin, Joseph Watkins, and their daughter Annie was the one child of the marriage up to 1869.

Later events showed that she was representative of the last generation of Seamons descendants to be born in the old family home. It was a home into which the Rolls children went frequently, partly because there were cousins of similar age.

It would not seem that they were always entirely at ease there, however, for the Aunt Lizzie who lived there was a disciplinarian who expressed her mind clearly and forcibly when things went wrong. Their own mother was "tarred with the same brush" but the children knew by living with her, how much she cared for them and the wealth of love she possessed. Aunt Lizzie had married a mild man. Joseph Watkins was as gentle as his wife was spirited. All the children knew he was their friend. He had the nature of "Mr Charles", Old Uncle Billy's older brother. Early in life he was robbed of the sound of gentle voices, and bird song, and sweet music by acute deafness. Yet the children still loved him when he could no longer hear their greetings. No boy ever dreamed of robbing his orchards, because he knew that whenever fruit was abundant, Mr Watkins would share it. A stranger might have wondered why so many children were to found on the stretch of the road between Watkins' Farm and the Closes' Gate on a winter Saturday morning, but had he waited for a time he would have discovered the answer to his questioning. Mr Watkins was the cause of the strange phenomenon! Before he set out on what section of his farm inspection he filled the capacious pockets of his great-coat with little apples for the children he might "chance" to meet. The kindly old man never heard their thanks, for all that, however, he saw the smiles which answered his own, and their happiness warmed his own heart. Had he really been the head of his own household, it might have been a dream home for the children. But he was not! As it was, it was better than Old Uncle Billy's! But the children from the Rolls home told not to mention hanging up their stockings if they saw little Annie, their cousin, that Christmas Day? Perhaps not. She was still too young to venture on the ill-fated experiment which has already been recorded.

The remaining two homes into which the children had entrance concerned a third granny. They were larger than the cottages of the widowed aunts (or their own home, for that matter) and more akin to Old Uncle Billy's and Aunt Lizzie Watkins' houses in spaciousness, but possessed a special relationship with the family. In the one lived

Grandma Rolls, and in the other Grandma Seamons. Both homes bustled with life. Seven people lived in the Rolls home and six in the Seamons farm house. Homes and people were very different. Yet each establishment made its own appeal. At Grandma Roll's there was the fascination of the shop, and at Grandma Seamons's the activity of the Manor Farm house, with its butter-making and sometimes its ale-brewing. Behind the Rolls home and on one side of it was a paddock called the "Close".

Adjoining the Close were the Seamons garden, orchard and Home Ground. In the days of their courtship, Edmund Rolls and Hannah Seamons did not have to travel far to meet each other!

The Rolls home boasted a stone-floored hall, a parlour of somewhat limited dimensions, a living room of ampler size, a spacious kitchen and four bedrooms. The bedroom over the hall was small, but it was a fourth room. Behind the hall and parlour a long and somewhat low addition had been built to house a grocery business. Two doors led into the shop; one for the family, opening into the hall of the house, and the other for customers entering from the backyard of the house. Between hall and shop were two steps and small children needed to be warned against tumbling headlong down to the shop floor. The grocery business belonged to the children's Grandmother Rolls. It was managed by their father and had been established by their grandfather. None of the three children had been born when Grandfather Rolls died at only 46 years of age. Nevertheless, they heard stories about him and at a later date came to understand that he had been a somewhat remarkable man.

They heard that their Grandfather Rolls had been a farmer's son, and that even the grandfather of an earlier generation had been a farmer. At one time there were three of the same name in the village. The oldest William Rolls had been called "Mr Rolls"; the second William Rolls had been called "Master Rolls"; the third had been called "Young William" until, by force of character, he became "Mr", like the grandfather who had by then died. "Young William" had broken with tradition by naming his eldest son, Edmund. The children also learned that their grandfather had forsaken farming to start his business. He began merely as a retailer of tea, and when his customers wanted to place an order for coffee, acted as a "middle-man". At first it was hard and he had to walk from village to village, carrying his wares on his back. Next he bought a pony and cart, and was able to add a variety of groceries to his tea and coffee business. Thus the shop was started and the business developed. The delivery round in neighbouring villages was as important as the shop at the back of the house.

In addition, the children learned that the grandfather who had died before they were born was a remarkable preacher. Later they understood that his style could be dramatic, that his words had a piercing sincerity, and because he was one of them, ordinary people recognised him as God's messenger in a way the rector never was. He understood them, and because he had experienced a struggle for livelihood and had shared some bitter occurrences which were never far from their own lives, he was the man they called on in times of deepest need. When hard times in the hungry forties and the bitter fifties drove men to seek a new life on the other side of the world, and they craved God's blessing before they departed for the unknown, it was to William Rolls they turned for the farewell word which had the comfort of God in it.

One memory which old people recalled sixty years after the event was of a service in the chapel at Wingrave, a few miles from Weedon, on a winter evening in 1847. The chapel was packed and the anguish was almost unbearable. The emigrants had waited to have their last Christmas in England before they left the place which spelled out the word HOME for them. There were nineteen of them on that occasion. They gathered with the crowd of relations and friends on that December 27th in the sure knowledge that they were unlikely ever to meet in that place again. They were leaving the known for the unknown and it was a journey from which they had little hope of return. Young William Rolls (he was only 32 years old at the time) stood in the pulpit before them, and to parents who were saying farewell to their loved ones, as well as to the younger people who were leaving because the homeland no longer offered them the prospects they wanted for their own children, declared that the ever present God was refuge and strength to the end of men's days and to the ends of the earth. The next morning the nineteen set off to embark on their long voyage from London, and William Seamons, a local farmer and distant Kinsman of Old Uncle Billy of Weedon, recorded their names in his notebook. The voyage before them was hazardous – sometimes little children died on the high seas and passengers became hungry before they reached journey's end, as Edmund Seamons and his wife were to discover when they in turn made the journey in 1849 – but the venturers found comfort and strength in one another, and in the lure of promise far off. Ringing in their ears was the message that though the took "the wings of the morning and dwelt in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there would God's hand lead them and His right hand uphold them." A full seventy years elapsed before the last personal memory of December 27 1847, with William Rolls in the chapel pulpit speaking the right word to the need of the moment, finally faded from the human scene.

Less than thirteen years, however, were to pass before the people left behind wrote to their relations in Australia, "Mr Rolls is dead. Died suddenly. We can hardly take it in." To some of them it seemed as though the

Devil had got control on 17th May 1860, when William Rolls was so unexpectedly taken from them. There was nothing wrong when he preached his last sermon in Weedon chapel. He looked the embodiment of physical health and strength. His stocky, sturdy build, coupled with his boundless energy and vigorous mind, betokened a ripe age for him. On May 14th he had been about his business as usual. Three days later he was dead. The trouble was diagnosed as "inflammation of the bowels". The word peritonitis was beyond the locality where he lived. He was 45 years old. The multitude mourned his loss and then returned to their daily round and common tasks to carry on as usual. It was different for Elizabeth Rolls, his widow. She was left to carry strange burdens which he had assumed bravely, and from a sense of Christian duty, but which were more than enough for one pair of shoulders. With his death, those burdens devolved upon his widow, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Rolls, the mother of Edmund and, therefore, the grandmother of the children of Edmund and Hannah, was no weakling. In some ways she was very different from her husband. Her family background was humbler than his; his father was the son of a highly respected farmer who farmed a large acreage in Weedon; her father, George Battams, was the village cordwainer. It was believed that the Rolls family "had money", possibly because they were distantly connected with the Rolls of Lewknor, just over the Oxfordshire border, who were landowners on the manorial scale: but the Battams boasted no such lineage, though Ann Howse, who married the first of the Battams to come to Weedon, probably descended from Widow Howse of the early Tudor period, who had considerable estate. Furthermore, William Rolls was full of energy and ambition and openly confident, whereas she was cast in gentle mould. Yet both were deeply affectionate within their family, and both drew strength from their religion. Elizabeth knew the secret of "turning to the strong for strength", as the Methodists said in their Class Meetings, and in her life, "still waters ran deep". But she needed all the resource she could muster on that fateful May day when her powerful husband was unexpectedly snatched from her side, just when he was in the prime of his life. At forty years of age she became the head of a household of eight. Nine years later, in 1869, two of the eight had left, but another had come, so that there were still seven under the Rolls family roof.

The complexity of the household is hinted by the children's memory, many years afterwards, of the sentence they used to repeat when they entered. "Please", they used to ask, "how is grandma today, and how is big-grandma and how is the other grandma?" Three grandmas lived in the same house! Not only was it the home of their father's own mother, but of both his grandmothers. "Big grandma" was his father's mother, and "the other grandma" was his mother's mother.

"Big grandma" was a powerful old lady of 84 years at Christmas 1869. Life was never easy in the Rolls home after she came to live with her son, William and her daughter-in-law, Elizabeth. She had been a forceful character for as long as anyone could remember, and as she grew older she became more and more domineering and dominating. Buckinghamshire was not her native county, though she had lived there for so many years that Godalming, where she had been born, had become a distant memory long before 1869. In her twenties she had come to Weedon as the cook in the Lilies Mansion, and while there had become friendly with William Henry Frederick Rolls, the son of Mr William Rolls, the farmer on Weedon Hill. She was five years older than William Henry. They became very friendly indeed and, in 1815, when he was 24 and she was 29, they were married at Hardwick Church. On March 6th William Henry Rolls and Maria Hooker became husband and wife, and on July 8th of the same year, their first-born son, later christened William, came into the world at his mother's old home at Godalming.

From then onwards, until she was 46 years of age, Maria presented William Henry Frederick with another son or a daughter almost every other year. Thomas, the youngest, was born in June 1832, and brought the total to five sons and four daughters. One son and one daughter died in infancy. Maria could boast that she had reared seven . Nevertheless she out lived all her sons. Thomas died at 21, George was killed in the London police affray when only 32, John the butcher undoubtedly hurried himself to the grave at 42, and William the preacher was taken – it seemed cruelly – at 45. The daughters, however, outlived their mother.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Maria was a powerful personality, because that was just what her husband, William Henry Frederick was not. Everybody respected his father, "Mr" Rolls. William Henry Frederick was cast in a different mould. Perhaps he suffered from being the only son in a comfortably placed home; perhaps the curse of weakness was in his physical system, for he had a slight tendency to epilepsy; perhaps drink was his capital curse. Two things were certain; in his hands the Rolls family fortune dwindled, and he came to a tragic end. It was in the Autumn of 1856, when he was 66 years old, that he was drowned in a little stream just below his father's old farm. Was the cause drink or epilepsy? Friends of his honoured son, William the preacher, gave him the benefit of the doubt and said it was epilepsy. No drunken man, they argued, would have been able to carry the sack with chickens in it which was found by the side of the stream. Others were not so sure. The intensity of his preacher son's anguish as the lifeless body was lifted from the farm cart into the house was not easily forgotten by young Edmund and his sister Elizabeth. Young William had never turned his back on his feckless father, William Henry Frederick, and it cut him to the heart that the end, whatever the cause, had been tragic. From that time, Maria the widow, made her home with the preacher son and his family.

It was said that William, her first-born, was the only one who could really manage the determined old lady. Certainly he managed, on one occasion, to persuade her to enter the village Chapel. Maria boasted that she was "Church". She was emphatically "Church"! That did not mean she ever attended regularly or gave the parish church any support beyond her boast. It indicated that she was not "chapel". She disapproved of her oldest son becoming "chapel", though she accepted the situation with better grace when he became one of the most popular preachers in the neighbourhood, and she could bask in a reflected glory! One day the miracle happened. William was preaching and she went the CHAPEL! It only happened once. She did not honour the dissenting conventicler with her presence even when her grand-children were christened there. However, she turned up just the once with the rather dubious motive of "hearing" her son. In all likelihood, her first-born was the light of her eye. Thomas, the youngest, was dead, John was jolly and irresponsible, George the policeman was away from home, and there did not seem to be anywhere else competing for her presence when she was widowed.

So she lived with William and Elizabeth, and after William's death, stayed on. In 1869 she was till there. The tensions remained and so did she. Life had dealt her some hard blows, and they had never mellowed her. Had the daughter-in-law been as the mother-in-law it would not have been a happy home for the children to enter. Fortunately Elizabeth, the widow of William, was what she was. When the children asked how "Big grandma" was, they little knew the problems created by the old warrior.

"The other grandma" had a home of her own when William the preacher, her son-in-law, died in 1869. Her cordwainer husband, George Battams, was still living and working. Their little whitewashed cottage, with mud walls and thatched roof, stood near the chapel. It was the last of its kind to be built in the village, and in 1860, was almost new. From the outside it looked trim and neat, and inside it was clean and here and there was an item of furniture which betokened a measure of prosperity in earlier generations. One such item was a mahogany bureau, at least a hundred years old, which had held the papers of the Howse family, the village weavers, before Benjamin Battams married his master's daughter, Ann, on Christmas Eve 1764. At the end of the cottage was an annexe in which the cordwainer and his wife and daughter worked to produce boots, harness and the general leatherwork which provided the family living. George and Phoebe were a respected couple and among the earliest supporters of the chapel which Mr Charles Seamons provided for the hamlet in 1833. At the time of their marriage in 1817 George signed his name, and Phoebe made her mark in the parish register. Their early home stood at the top of the old highway known as Stockaway, opposite the old inn, which in the 1780's had been given the name "The Five Elms". When the home was demolished in the early 1850's, together with a cottage adjoining, George and Phoebe bought the relatively new whitewashed cottage just a little further along the road and settled there. Everything had "worked out" very nicely. Not all their life, however, had worked out with such satisfaction. It was a disappointment that no son lived to carry on the name, and even more, that no son lived to bear the name Elisha. Three sons and two or three daughters had been born to them. The first son was named George, after his father, and lived only a single month. Then came twins, a boy and a girl in 1820. The boy was named Elisha, an honoured family name. He died in 1827. In 1831 a third son, again named Elisha, was born. Three years later he too died. After that, George and Phoebe submitted to fate, and it was left to a kinsman to produce another Elisha. Two daughters remained to them, namely Elizabeth, twin sister to the first Elisha, and Mary, born between the death of the first Elisha and the birth of the second to be given the name. Elizabeth had married "young" William Rolls in 1840, shortly before her 21st birthday, and there was everything in the marriage to bring satisfaction to the cordwainer and his wife. It was a marriage without a stain on it, and the young couple lived in the cottage next to the Battams home.

William had no land to farm, though it is likely he had a few pounds set aside. His character resembled that of his honoured grandfather, Mr Rolls, and it was clear that he did not intend to be labelled "Labourer" throughout the years, even though that was his standing at the time of his marriage. All the same, there was one shadow on his wedding day. The honoured grandfather just missed witnessing the event. The wedding took place on the last day of August; Mr William Rolls had died suddenly the previous May at his home at Weedon Hill. The second daughter in the cordwainer's family remained unmarried throughout her father's life.

It was December 1867 when the cordwainer died and Phoebe, his widow, faced widowhood after more than fifty years of married life. The blow was cushioned by the fact that Mary , the youngest daughter, had never married, and was able to share the little whitewashed cottage with her mother. By careful living, and possible with slender earnings, Mary was able to muster because she was skilled at her father's trade and after his death the hamlet no longer possessed a cordwainer, the two were able to keep home together. The cottage was their own and there may still have been some slender remains of the once substantial Howse estate. The dread of old people that they might lose their independence, or worse still in their estimation, have to "come on the parish" for poor relief, did not apply in Phoebe

Battams' case. Then, like a bolt out of the blue, Mary received a proposal of marriage. The suitor was a widower of fifty-eight years and therefore twenty years older than she. His name was Thomas Fincher and he was a leading light at the chapel. His oldest son was a married man in his thirties and his eldest daughter was in her mid-twenties. The younger daughter, aged seventeen, was of a happy-go-lucky disposition, and more likely to desire the experience of "service" in a better-class home than stay in her father's cottage. Mary accepted the proposal of Thomas Fincher and on May 11th 1868, five months after the cordwainer's death, his daughter became Mrs Fincher.

Phoebe, the cordwainer's widow, was frail and at three score years and ten quite unable to remain alone. Probably the cottage home of Thomas Fincher did not offer the measure of comfort to which she had become accustomed in her own little home. An alternative was possible. She might go to live with her daughter Elizabeth Rolls, and all the others who shared that hospitable dwelling. That was what happened. In the summer of 1868 "the other grandma" went to live with "big grandma" and "grandma".

The position of the children's grandma must have been almost unbearable. On the one hand washer imperious mother-in-law and on the other hand her own sensitive, sorrowing mother. The two old ladies were remarkable opposites. "Big Grandma" had passed her 80th birthday and had surrendered nothing; the "other grandma" was more than ten years younger, and was frail and inclined to sorrow. Both had known bitter bereavements, but Maria Rolls met hers defiantly, while Phoebe Battams carried hers with acute sensitivity. Phoebe was anxious to fit into a scheme "so as not to be a trouble", Maria was more true to herself when she asserted herself than when she was submissive to any other.

The year 1869 had added sorrow for Grandma Battams. On the 14th July of that year, her beloved daughter Mary, died after only fourteen months of married life. The cause of her death has been forgotten in the course of a century. Possibly the hazards of a first pregnancy for a woman in her 40th year are part of the forgotten story. Be that as it may, Thomas Fincher found himself bereft of his second wife, and Phoebe Battams had only one daughter left. The Rolls great-grandchildren, Herbert, Nina and Fred, greeted a very frail, sad, "other grandma" on Christmas Day 1869.

That, however, was not the full toll of Elizabeth Rolls' burden. There was the care of afflicted Jessie, her late husband's niece, who in some ways was the greatest burden of all. Certainly she was the greatest anxiety. Grandma Maria was difficult; Phoebe Battams needed care; but Jessie could be a nightmare. There was a sad story behind it. William Rolls, the preacher, little dreamed that the burden of Jessie, which he took on his own shoulders, would have to be carried by Elizabeth his wife throughout long years, and would get heavier as the years rolled on.

The story of Jessie in the Rolls home started when her mother died of cholera. Her mother, Elizabeth Ann, was "Big Grandma's" eldest daughter. William the preacher was Elizabeth Ann's eldest brother. Elizabeth Ann married a man named John Gardner. There were three children. Jessie, born in 1847, was the oldest. Then followed Tom, born in 1850, and finally Charles who appeared in 1852. In 1854 Elizabeth Ann succumbed. Cholera had done its dread and deadly work. An actress Aunt, Ann Gardner, decided to adopt Tom. Preacher William may have had his misgivings, but young Tom wanted for nothing, including an upbringing in moral principles, and his actress aunt honoured the obligation she assumed when Elizabeth Ann died. Jessie and Charles remained to be cared for, and their grandmother Maria Rolls, took them into her care. When her husband was drowned, her son William had them in his home and played the part of father to them.

His tragic and unexpected death in 1860 placed the responsibility for his motherless niece and nephew on his widow. Jessie was thirteen at the time and Charlie was only eight. By that time Jessie was pitifully afflicted.

The trouble with Jessie really started when she was twelve years old, about a year before her uncle's death. The village people said she had "brain fever". Presumably it was a form of meningitis. She was not expected to live, but as by a miracle she survived.

Physically she developed to the full maturity of womanhood: mentally she remained a self-willed girl of twelve years. At times she needed to be treated as a naughty child and according to the thought of the age merited a "jolly good hiding". But who was to administer the chastisement? Jessie was the biggest and physically the strongest member of the household. Nevertheless, however intolerable the burden might become one day, in 1869 Elizabeth Rolls was still carrying it. That Christmas a new dread began to shadow the life of Jessie's faithful aunt. The owner of The Lilies, Weedon's mansion, had died and the estate had been sold. Rumour had it that the new owner intended having the old mansion demolished and a splendid new Victorian residence, with farm buildings and workmen's houses, erected in its stead. The work would involve the importation of a horde of workmen from other places. Jessie was 22. Suppose, thought her guardian aunt, one of the strangers took advantage of Jessie's physical maturity and her mental under-development, and there was consequently another baby to be cared for. Happily the problem never arose, though Jessie remained a problem for nearly another half-century. The problem was relieved in later years by the fact that Jessie's brother Tom, cared for by the actress aunt, was able to provide some financial relief and show concern for a sister who, necessarily, had to live in an institution. For all that, in 1869 it was Elizabeth Rolls who carried the burden.

The other members of the household were Elizabeth's own children, and therefore the aunts and uncle of the three Rolls children. Jessie Gardner's younger brother Charlie, seventeen years of age in 1869, was old enough to go to London to begin to earn his own living, while his cousins, the younger sisters and brother of Edmund, remained in Weedon.

The oldest daughter of William the preacher was named Elizabeth, after her mother. In 1869 she was 23 years old, and well able to support her mother in the care of the aged grandmothers, Jessie, and the other members of the family, and also in the work of the grocery business. Young James Honour, the wheelwright, had not at that time made his proposal of marriage to her. Mary Ann, the second daughter of William the preacher, was ten when her father died. In 1869, at 19 years, she was shy, somewhat nervous, and clearly had inherited the disposition to worry which Grandma Battams had developed. The youngest of the family was Tom. When his father died he was nearly eight years old. Herbert, his young nephew was born when Tom was still a boy of eleven years. By 1869 Tom had become a hero to his nephew. He carried his swashbuckling stick with him, had his own ideas of life, and needed a father's care and guidance. He was good-natured, but at times his mother had reason to fear that the weaknesses which had spoiled the lives of some of the Rolls men might be his downfall too.

This strange mixture of three grandmas, and afflicted "sort of cousin", two aunts and an uncle who was just emerging from childhood, made up the Rolls home into which the children had entry.

Despite the strange combination of personalities – perhaps partly because of it – the place made an appeal to the youngsters, and a visit to fetch some small item of grocery constituted a treat for them. Young Uncle Tom could perform his heroics to entertain his six year old nephew Herbert; Aunts Lizzie and Polly could kiss five year old Mina and little Fred; "Grandma" carried too many burdens kindly not to want to add to the happiness of her little grand-children; "The other grandma" sat very quietly on her low chair, never intruding her attention, yet always ready to welcome and never offering a rebuff; even "Big grandma" had to approve of the way Hannah, their mother, was teaching them to do what they were told, to be seen and not heard, and to respect their elders. Jessie was unpredictable, but liked to think that she was liked. In addition to its people, the house had its interesting furnishings. The great grandfather clock, which had belonged to their great-great-grandfather, "Mr" Rolls, had pride of place. Above its dial, just beneath its domed top, were sun, moon and stars and a mechanism for reading the date. It was tall and magnificent. In the farm house on Weedon Hill there was space for it. No room in the home of the three grandmas was lofty enough for it, so that its transfer from the Hill into the village created a problem which was solved by lifting a large stone from the floor of the living room, and digging a hole deep enough for the clock to be set down in it. When the time came for the clock to be wound, its weights were below floor level. The small pinnacle on its dome almost touched the ceiling. There was always excitement when the clock announced the hours as the children listened.

Three bureaus, two with book cases above them, had their interest. In one of the book-cases was the great picture bible which their preacher grandfather had purchased for his family. Isaac carrying the faggot of wood on his back as he climbed the hill of sacrifice; David cutting off a fragment of Saul's cloak while he slept in the cave; little Samuel listening to the voice which called him from his slumbers in the "house of the Lord" at Shiloh; the angel with his flaming sword at the gateway to the Garden of Eden; and a hundred other stories from the Old and New Testament were told and illustrated. The treasured book was carefully guarded from harm because it had cost grandfather a lot of money and, of course, it was the Bible. To be shown the pictures and told the dramatic stories was rather a special treat for Sundays.

Grandfather's great Bible in three interleaved volumes, with his study notes on most of the blank leaves facing the printed page, was their grandma's special pride, not theirs! There were other books which had been bought for their father and his brothers and sisters which appealed to them, especially the one with the bright blue cover, and coloured pictures on almost every page, and a fable printed opposite its illustration. That again had cost their grandfather "a lot of money" and was only for inspection under supervision.

Two brightly coloured pictures, printed on glass and representing New Testament scenes, invited a few minutes of story telling on Sundays, when there was a fire in the parlour.

In a case with glass front and sides, standing on the mantelpiece, was the great speckled hen, professionally preserved, which had been their great-grandfather's treasure. Big grandma could tell how her husband believed that the hen had laid more eggs than any other he ever possessed, therefore, he had it stuffed after a natural death at an unusual age. Somehow the story got mixed up with hens in a sack when great-grandfather was drowned in "Little Birds" brook. But it was all the same to the children. They were not sensitive to details like death: something, or someone, was always dying in a country village and they watched hens having their necks wrung and pigs having their throats slit.

Outside the home of the three grandmas was the freedom of the paddock called The Close and the interest of the two gardens their father cultivated. The top garden, or more properly, "the upper garden" was near the house. Apples and plums grew there, with a sprinkling of soft fruit. The garden at the bottom of The Close was known as "the corner" because the gateway into it was near the bottom corner of the field. On a plan of the village the garden gave the impression of being a small foot sticking out from a very large leg. The history of the peculiar appendage which had been allowed to remain when the Enclosure of the village lands took place in 1802 was lost in the silence of far distant vegetable plots which stretched out beyond the bushes to rough pathways by the side of the boundary hedges. Their father's pony grazed in the paddock. The large Blenheim apple tree, just beyond the kitchen wall, at the top of the paddock, provided many a treat for the youngsters. It stood like a mature oak when its photo was taken in 1863. Fifty years later it was equally mature. The people of Weedon believed that the Blenheims grown in the village had their own distinctive flavour. Be that as it may, the children knew that when their grandma gave them an apple from the Blenheim tree, it was good. When that tree and the "Doctor Harvey" in the orchard-garden near the "Upper Garden" fruited well, there was plenty for all the family.

In addition to all this, there was the thrill of the shop. By modern standards, its contents were few and meagre. Chocolates were unknown, and sweets were limited to bull's eyes, acid drops, and a home-made boiled variety. Biscuits belonged to the future, and sugar was cut from a "loaf". There was tea (at a price), and coffee, and spices such as cloves and nutmegs, and foreign fruits like currants and "plums" (raisins). The dinner men took for the midday break on the farm often included "spotted dog", a boiled pudding, livened up with a few currants. Lard and flour and cheese had no appeal for the children, though the crinkled surface of a tin of home-made lard roused curiosity as to how it happened and why. A handful of currants between them, though the handful was likely to very small, was a luxury treat which only grandma could bestow.

There would not be any difficulty in persuading Herbert and Mina to take their smaller brother Fred between them and trot along the path by the quiet roadside which led to the home of the three grandmas to say, Happy Christmas to grandma; Happy Christmas to Big grandma; Happy Christmas to the other grandma; Happy Christmas to aunties and uncle – and to Jessie! It was the second Christmas that Herbert and Mina had been able to make the greeting to all three grandmas under the one roof. As it happened, it would be the last. Almost unthinkable changes were to take place in a mere eighteen months.

In October 1870, Grandma Battams quietly slipped away. It was no surprise. For months she had been failing, and even on summer days had shivered as she sat in her shawls. Because they all loved her, and wanted her photo with descendants, the frail little lady agreed to have her likeness taken. When the photo was developed it showed her looking very old, but with the hint of a smile on her face. Her snow-white frilled house-bonnet framed her head and face; and over her Sunday-best black dress (in the photo it shone like silk) a white patterned shawl hung from her shoulders. The deep lines of the cares she had carried throughout the years, and never carried lightly, were in her face, and the hands which had spent years in shoe binding lacked the delicacy of her grand-daughters by her side. Without doubt the family knew her days were numbered, yet as she sat there, she represented the serene light of a summer evening rather than the chill darkness of a winter's night. Phoebe saw the summer through, and as the autumn days drew in, quietly faded out. She was the last in the parish to have practised the art of shoe binding, and the last to bear the name of Battams. In 1841 the census returns included a dozen of the name in Weedon. On October 11 1870, when Phoebe was laid to rest with her husband in the parish churchyard at Hardwick, none were left.

That winter, "Big grandma" began to lose her hold on life and its affairs. Unlike Phoebe Battams, Maria Rolls battled through the long winter, almost until the first day of spring. To the last she was determined in spirit, but even she had to bow eventually to the inevitable. Mid-march came and she left the scene of her battles and triumphs. On March 17th, St Patrick's Day, on the eighth anniversary of the wedding of her grandson Edmund to Hannah Seamons, the powerful Maria was laid to rest near the foot of Hardwick Church tower, where her husband and his parents had been buried. It was almost unthinkable that she had gone. Her stories of The Lilies went back to the days when Mr Edward Nugent had lived there. Then followed Lord Nugent the boisterous man of the world and his gentle wife, the Lady Lucy. After him came Dr Connell. Big Grandma had known the long story and by 1871 Dr Connell had gone and a new stock-broker Squire was to come to a new mansion. Few, if any, in Weedon were as old as Maria when she reached her 85th birthday. Her passing marked the end of an epoch in the family story. No others of her generation remained. Her husband had been christened at Hardwick Church 80 years before and was the first of the Rolls family ever to be registered there.

For the first time in fifteen years the third grandma found herself free to live in her own home without the dominating presence of her husband's mother. Of course there was still afflicted Jessie to be cared for, but Lizzie and Polly could help with her.

It was bitter irony that the third of the grandmas had no time left to enjoy her new freedom. Only thirteen weeks after the funeral of "Big grandma", the daughter-in-law breathed her last. For those left behind, it was an unforgettable series of funerals. First, Grandma Battams, October 11 1870; second, great-grandma Rolls, March 17th 1871; third, grandma Rolls, June 21 1871.

The family group taken by Edmund Rolls in the summer of 1870 included grandma Battams; her daughter Elizabeth Rolls; her grand-daughters Lizzie and Polly; her grandson Tom; and her great-grandson, Herbert. Elizabeth, seated by her mother's right hand, was beginning to look gaunt and spent. Maybe she knew even then that all was not well. No sooner had Grandma Maria followed Grandma Phoebe than young Grandma Elizabeth had to admit she herself was not well. By June the growth had done its work and the cares she had not been able to live to see through had to become the responsibility of others. She was only fifty-one when she died. Her mother had reached seventy-two, and her mother-in-law, as has been mentioned, had touched eighty-five. But she met death as she had met life, calmly, resolutely and with clear eyes. Others had more pity for her than she had for herself. Her death would mean the end of the family home, and the transfer of the grocery business to Edmund's home. As she lay dying, Elizabeth shared in making plans for those who would be left behind: Lizzie, Polly, Tom and Jessie. Her conversation with Polly, her younger daughter, was characteristic.

Polly (christened Mary Ann) never forgot what her mother said to her and quoted it many times in after years. "Polly", said the mother, "I've got to leave you and you will have to leave here. Jim will marry Lizzie quickly after I am gone, so that she can stay on here. Jessie will have to go away where she can be cared for. No-one else can have Jessie in their home. You and Tom will have to go to live with Edmund and Hannah. You'll be a good girl, won't you? There's another baby coming at Edmund's in a few weeks ("Needn't tell me that", thought Polly, through her tears. I'm not blind.") and they will need all the help you can give them, with the shop and five little ones to look after and with Tom being a bit wild. You'll be a good girl, won't you? There will be some money to be shared out one day, and some of the things, Edmund will have his grandfather's bureau, and Lizzie will have her father's. You will have the one which your Grandma Battams brought from her old home. It doesn't look as good as the others, but it is the oldest of them all. Nobody remembers when that was bought. But always remember, Polly, when Hannah is hasty and impatient, that it is Edmund and Hannah who will give you a home as long as ever you need one. You must do all you can for them."

The end came quickly. It was on the longest day that the one who had carried so much laid down her burdens. The funeral followed quickly. But it was different from the others. Elizabeth was not buried at Hardwick. For some time the chapel people had been saying they "ought to have a graveyard" of their own.

The problem was that the convenient plot belonged to old Uncle Billy Seamons and he did not find parting with his hard earned assets an easy matter. However, on this occasion, even old Uncle Billy was touched by the poignancy of the three deaths in the one home in just over eight months, and especially by the collapse of the youngest of the three grandmas, and the plot behind the chapel was surrendered for the purposes of a burial ground. It was planted with potatoes at the time, but the first space was cleared and there Elizabeth Rolls was laid to rest. There was no service of consecration or dedication. The body of the saint who had worshipped in the chapel provided its own hallowing of the new burial ground. The plot was wide open to the heavens and the mid-day sun.

Six weeks later the fifth baby came into the home of Edmund and Hannah Rolls. She was named Elizabeth, after the grandmother who had gone and the one who remained, namely, Grandma Seamons. Within those weeks a lot had taken place. Edmund and Hannah had seen new rooms added to their house, and the grocery business was transferred to a building which, at a later date, was joined to their house by covering an open space and creating a large kitchen. Polly and Tom, sister and brother of Edmund moved up to the new shop: Lizzie, the eldest sister, married James Honour and stayed on in the old family home which had become uncannily silent as just the two lived where a year before there had been seven; Jessie was taken "where she could be looked after" and where she remained for the rest of her life, by some means adopting the name of Georgina Rolls instead of Jessie Gardner! Baby Elizabeth was born in the large new room only just completed and paid for by a loan from Grandfather Seamons. The rooms which transformed the cottage into a middle-class residence were indicative of the changes which had taken place in two years. When baby Ella was born in 1869, the family home for the Rolls was the house where the three grandmas lived; when baby Elizabeth was born in 1871 it was the home of Edmund and Hannah which had become the focal point for the whole family. The old order appeared to be secure for the considerable future on Christmas Day, 1869. When the winds of change blew and swept all before them.

The remaining special home into which the fortunate children had entry was the farm house where they had dinner on Christmas Day. Six people lived there: grandfather and grandma Seamons, Aunts Patty, Becky and Bertha, and young Uncle Willie.

The house was old. A tablet on a rebuilt wall at the front gave the date 1649. Probably some parts of the house were older than that. Its long frontage to the road gave the impression of spaciousness. For centuries the house on that spot, with its buildings had been known as "The Manor Farm". Downstairs was a hall with an impressive staircase, a kitchen, a main living room called the sitting room, and a special room for special days and occasions, simply known as "The Front Room".

The kitchen was large enough to contain five wheelbacked Windsor chairs, an easy chair, a settee, three tables of various kinds, a sideboard, a dough trough and an 80-gallon brewing copper, set with furnace, together with a host of accessories. The sitting room accommodated half a dozen wheelbacked chairs, a mahogany sofa in horsehair; with cretonne cover, a circular mahogany table, a secretaire with bookcase, a mahogany cupboard, and accessories in solid Victorian mahogany. The front room boasted a Brussels carpet, a valuable circular inlaid walnut-wood table, and characteristic furnishings of the period. Upstairs were only three bedrooms, but one was large enough to take two four-poster beds and usual furnishings, a second held a four-poster and an iron bedstead. Dressing tables, washstands, wardrobes, cupboards, chests of drawers and chairs abounded. At the sale, nearly twenty years later, the well-used furnishing realised £69. This, to the average person of the village, indicated luxury. The sum would pay a man and a boy's wages for a full year's work. A labourer who saved £5 thought he had enough to marry, and to furnish his house. At a sale he might buy chairs for about a shilling each, a table for three or four shillings, a bedstead, or a dressing table, or even a cupboard for five shillings, and a veneered walnut chest of drawers for a pound. The Manor House where the children's Seamons grandparents lived was well furnished for its period and its social standing.

The atmosphere of plenty extended to the food Herbert, Mina and Fred enjoyed there. At home they had to be content with one egg between two of them for breakfast. Compared with other children in the hamlet, even the half egg was luxury. At the Manor Farm the youngsters had an egg each. Butter was made in the dairy and was always in plenty, milk was there in abundance, and Grandma was a wizard in concocting savoury dishes. With the plenty went a wide range of interest. Throughout the winter, George, the horse man, spent a part of many days in threshing the corn from the wheat sheaves on the floor of the great barn near the big doors which were large enough for a loaded wagon of harvest produce to pass through. George could wield a flail with the ease of a boy bowling a hoop. His craft was doomed, for the "thrashing" machine would soon do in a couple of days as much as he could do in a couple of months. In 1869 the children loved to watch him, to see the chaff blown before the wind, and to help collect the grain of corn to fill the barn for the next feeding time. Ale making was a busy time when they were best out of the way! Their mother had her memories of the day when, because her hand was smaller than those of her sisters, she was set to clear out the residue in the beer casks in readiness for the next brew, and after an hour or so, overcome by the fumes, could no longer walk straight! Life was never dull at the farm house.

It was part of the triumph of Joseph Seamons' life that he finished his days in the Manor Farm of his native place. Like his brother, Old Uncle Billy, he had to make his own way. Unlike Uncle Billy he never went to America, and unlike his brothers Edmund and John, he never set sail for Australia. In the 1830's he left home to work as a labourer on a farm several miles from Weedon. There on the slopes of the Chiltern Hills, at Ellesborough near Chequers, he worked with all William's intensity and intelligence. Before long he was able to manage the farm for the owner who was getting old. Next, Joseph became a partner. By 1849, when Edmund and John sailed for Australia, he was able to return to his native Weedon and farm in his own right. Finally, he added to its lands and entered the Manor Farm. By tireless energy, fierce determination, eager initiative, terrific toil, practical sense and good character, Joseph Seamons won through at a time when thousands failed. In 1869 he was nearly 65 years old, and the curse of deafness had already smitten him. Otherwise he was as fit as ever, he was only of modest height; little more than five feet six inches of slender build and wiry constitution. It was his boast that in his youth he could return from a dance or a party in the early hours of the morning, and be perfectly fit for his duties at 6am, so that his parents had no knowledge that Betsey, his eldest sister, had paved the way for him to steal indoors when others were fast asleep! Even more, it was his boast that he could "jump a five-barred gate easily". After his death, it was his family's boast that at eighty he could mount his horse unaided. His temper was a fierce as his determination, though his men said he was "alright as long you worked hard at what the wanted". In any case, if they were aggrieved by his anger, the sight of Elizabeth, his wife – "the missus", they called her, always smoothed down the ruffled feathers. "Missus" was their friend, and if anyone doubted it, the answer would have been very ready, "See what she did when our baby was bad", or "See what she 'allus' does when the babies come", and so on. Joseph loved his chapel, even when he disapproved strongly of the new teetotal movement which was invading Methodism. When he died one bill to be settled was for 14 bushels of malt at 45 shillings a quarter, and 21lbs of hops at a shilling a pound. There was also a beer duty demand for 17 shillings and 6 pence from the Collector of Inland Revenue. He was an independent man whose family knew they owed much to him and who had the capacity to draw on sources of emergency labour which nobody else in the parish possessed. Who else could persuade the grocer to leave his counter and the tailor to forsake his accustomed bench, for the hay field or the harvest field on a summer day, because it was "just right for carryin and next day might be wet". Perhaps because he was usually right in his forecasts the unlikely men forsook their tasks at his call. Nobody else drew them. When challenged with having a field full of folk, Joseph had his reply ready, "Wha's difference?, six men for one day just when its ready, or one man for six days, with five on wet?" Yet he was always a stranger to the little children. He had nothing of the genius of his nephew, Joseph Watkins, for gaining their affection despite deafness. "Children should be seen and not heard" was the old saying. Not that he could hear in any case! The real difference was in the men themselves. Once the frivols of his youth were over, Joseph Seamons had a grim intensity unshared by the kindly Joseph Watkins.

Grandma compensated for all he could not be to his grandchildren. She was ten years younger than he, and was as gentle in all her ways as he was brusque. The partnership was a happy marriage of opposite temperaments. She was the embodiment of tenderness and approachability. Long years afterwards, her grandchildren remembered her for these qualities. "Grandma was sweet" said "baby" Ella when she in turn had come to old age and was calling to mind the nice things of long ago. She was a capable as her husband, but without the fuss and turmoil. She had borne with disappointed resignation that her first eight children were all girls, and Joseph was impatient for boys. The ninth child was a boy, and they named him William, after Joseph's own father. A tenth and eleventh confinement followed, but on each occasion, the baby was a girl. Ten girls and one boy was a record which seemed to defy all the laws of averages! Grandma loved them all, no matter how much they disappointed her. It was true to her nature when news came that her beloved youngest daughter had given birth to a son out of wedlock that "Grandma" should send one of the daughters living at home to her aid, and send the choicest rose from the garden, with the words "with mother's undying love to her dear child".

The year 1869 had not been a good year for Grandma Seamons. On New Year's Day, her second daughter, Sarah, had died in childbirth. Eighteen months earlier, Sarah had married her cousin, another William Seamons, at Hardwicke Church and had gone to Luton to live. The young mother was twenty-eight years old and she and the baby were brought back to Hardwicke for burial. The grave was where the little Saxon window looked out, and where, fifty years later, the village memorial to men killed in war was erected. Scarcely was Sarah buried, than Sophie, the seventh daughter, disclosed that she and her husband had decided to migrate to America, a land of promise. Sophie had married Edwin Griffin of Tring before she was eighteen years old, and in the two and a half years between the wedding in 1866 and sailing from England in the spring of 1869, had given birth to a son and a daughter. She and Edwin had little money for their new life, but his mother had been thrifty and Sophie's father seemed to be ready to make an advance on his children's expectations after his death whenever they asked for it during his life. Her departure from the homeland hit her mother as a second bereavement. Most of those who went across the Atlantic never returned to England. Granted, old Uncle Billy had come back, and in so doing had shown once again that he was different from most people. When Elizabeth Seamons said farewell to her daughter Sophie, it was in the expectation that it really meant goodbye. As 1869 moved on to its last month a third "bereavement" became imminent. Annie, the oldest daughter, and her carpenter husband, William Sharp, broke the news that they intended following Edwin and Sophie early in the New Year. Perhaps they had been encouraged by the cheery, optimistic letters which Sophie had written. It was always the way of that younger sister to live on hope. She was a compound of courage and optimism. Her father's determination and indomitable spirit lived again in Sophie.

The years were to unfold a series of tragic happenings. First, her husband died in 1872, leaving her to fend for herself and her two children under pioneering conditions in America's mid-west. Her proud independence forbade a return to the dependence of home life at the Manor Farm and for four years she worked to keep the three of them. Then came a second offer of marriage and she accepted. Her husband, named Griffiths, was jolly, somewhat irresponsible adventurer, with the good sense to recognise that the young widow of twenty-nine years, who was a cook to the hotel station bordering the new lands then being parcelled out, would make a good wife. A year after their marriage, twins were born, a boy and a girl. Then came the prairie fire, sweeping through their little earthen cabin cut in the hillside and destroying all their few belongings except the little mahogany tea caddy which Sophie had brought from England and which she managed to save as her relic of the Manor Farm. Worse than all, as she fled before the flames, carrying the heavier baby and such necessaries as she could manage, and encouraging ten year old Joe and eight year old sister to keep up with her and between them carry the second babe, the scorching heat drew nearer, the eight-year old faltered, and before help could come was so badly burned that she died. Later that year, 1877, the father of the twins fell from a wagon, injured himself, and throughout the remaining twenty years of his life, Sophie, rather than he, was the breadwinner for them both. What she endured in those years 1877-1897 was enough to break the heart of the strongest. Her jolly, adventurer, semi-invalid husband, liked his drink, and was almost unmanageable when "under the influence". Only young Harry Sharp, a nephew, could deal with him under those conditions. Yet through it all Sophie had a dream in her life. She never gave up the hope that one day she would pay a visit to England; enjoy the plenty of the Manor Farm at Weedon; stand on the hill always called Cook's Hill (nobody knew why it was so called) and gaze across the valley through which the brook meandered, to the Church on its hill on the other side, the Church where she and Edwin Griffin had pledged themselves to each other; and best of all, sing hymns on a Sunday night in Uncle Charles's chapel. When Joe, her firstborn, left her and his step-father to make his own adventurous way, the twins became her special care. At ten years, the boy twin, George, had to set out to fend for himself. To the end of his days it was his mother, Sophie, who was the guiding star of his life. Her parting words never left him, "George, be a good man. Keep off the drink". "Mother, I will" he responded, with a sideways glance at his father. He kept his promise. The sculptor might have taken Sophie to be his model for the statue of the pioneer woman. One day her dream came true in some respects. She paid two visits to England, though the Manor Farm had passed to other hands and her parents had been dead for many years. Her mother's farewell in 1869 was more than an adieu.

The optimistic, indomitable Sophie may have been the source from which William Sharp and Annie resolved to follow to America, with their two little boys, Arthur and Harry, and their baby, born in August 1869, and named Joseph, after his grandfather. At Christmas in that year, Elizabeth Seamons faced the third break in the family circle. Once again, the farewell proved to be goodbye. Annie and her husband never returned to England after they left it early in March 1870.

None of the grandchildren, however, carried a memory that the sorrows which cut the heart of their Seamons grandmother spoiled their own happiness. Christmas dinner at the farm was one of the highlights of the year. Numerous twentieth century accompaniments had yet to reach farm houses. The era of the turkey in such homes was still in the future. The roast beef of old England had pride of place in the Seamons home, with the possible alternative of a suckling pig roasted whole and stuffed with all the tasty herbs Grandma knew how to use. Christmas pudding, real Christmas pudding, not spotted dog or plum duff, followed with mince pies lavishly filled with mincemeat. There was a difference between the mince-pies which Grandma Seamons made and those which came from the home of the three grandmas. The latter reflected the fact that thirteen people had to be fed from the small grocery business. Their pastry wasn't quite as soft, and the mincemeat wasn't quite as plentiful as at the Manor Farm. The decorations lacked the glitter of a later age. Tinsel and baubles hadn't arrived. Nor did bright holly berries shine out along the evergreens which lodged across the top of the pictures. Holly seldom took root in Weedon. Nor were there Christmas cards on the mantelshelf. In 1869 village homes knew nothing of their existence. Without turkey, holly or cards, there was plenty else to make the feast: the warmth of farm house fires, the delicious plenty of good food, and the fun of a party gathered round the big circular table in the "sitting-room".

The family numbered at least twelve. The guests were Edmund and Hannah and their four children, including baby Ella, for whom it was a first Christmas. The ordinary household consisted of the children's grandparents, the three aunts who had not yet left home, and young Uncle William. The three aunts were the youngest of the ten daughters, and in order of their age, were Martha, Rebecca and Bertha. Martha was known as Aunt Patty, Rebecca was called Aunt Becky and Bertha was just Aunt Bertha. Aunt Patty, at nineteen, was the one on whom much devolved. The children liked Aunt Patty. Rebecca was only fifteen years old, and Bertha had just entered her teens. Uncle Willie, the only son, was seventeen, kindly, gentle and somewhat reliant upon the affection of his sisters. Apart from the grandparents, every member of the party was young. Edmund himself was only twenty-eight, and Hannah was three years his junior. Between their elder son, Herbert, and his Aunt Bertha, was an age gap of only seven years.

The full total may well have been not twelve, but seventeen. No diary exists to tell if Annie Sharp and her husband and three children came from Aylesbury to swell the party. There were two good reasons why they should spend Christmas at Weedon: it was expected to be their last in England, and on that day there were special happenings for the Seamons family at the Chapel built by Uncles Charles. Moreover, travelling was reasonable for the time of year – it was not a white Christmas – and if they wanted to be present young Uncle Willie was available to fetch them with the pony and trap.

On that particular Christmas Day there was a service at the Chapel in the afternoon. The preacher at the Chapel, especially if he happened to be one of the ministerial staff, usually had tea at the Manor Farm. It was no longer easy for the Rolls family to entertain the preacher at the home of the three grandmas, or Old Uncle Billy to do the honours with his housekeeper niece. Only once, during the relatively short periods when his wife was living with him, Uncle Charles was delighted to have the privilege of the preacher's presence. After he was left a widower for the third time, the Manor Farm was the regular "preacher's home". That Christmas Day, Mr J Exell, was due to take the services. He was not a minister, but an evangelist employed by the Aylesbury Wesleyan Circuit, with a special responsibility for Princes Risborough, the most southerly place of the group, situated at the foot of the Chilterns. He was therefore a member of the ministerial staff, though not "quite" a minister. Grandma had her special tea-service for special days. It was a luxury specially purchased for the great day in August 1854 when the new chapel was opened. Compared with dinner, tea-time was something of an anti-climax, and needed the special cups and plates to give it character. Iced cakes, like turkey, had not yet arrived in farm houses. Nor was Buckinghamshire a county which favoured "high tea". Good cake, however, was a luxury in itself.

Dinner at noon, chapel at 2.30, tea soon after 4, evening service at 6: that was the programme on Christmas Day 1869 for the Rolls and Seamons families, though the 25th came on a Saturday that year. The children were too young for the evening service and were happily in bed before their father returned. The children in Weedon had spent such a privileged day. Yet for everyone the occasion came nearer to being a general holiday than any other day in the year with the exception of the Club Feast. Most of the cottage homes had the luxury of the joint of beef which the farmer employer gave to his men to celebrate Christmas. For the remainder of the year, pork was the normal diet, unless a sheep had died through being cast and therefore became available for food for farm workers. Those able to keep a few chickens shared, from time to time, the taste of a tough old hen whose "laying days were about done". A hare was a special luxury handed out by the gentry to a favoured few, and rabbits were scarce in those parts. Therefore the beef of Christmas Day, cooked under difficult circumstances in a cottage home, turned dinner into a feast. Christmas pudding was very plain in most homes: little different from "plum duff". An orange of the three-a-penny variety, possibly an apple and a few nuts, were the full extent of extra fare as most of the children were concerned. Nor was there space in the crowded cottages for fun and games in the evening time. Therefore, the Rolls children, Herbert, Mina and Fred, were lucky in their festive day.

The services at the chapel had a very special significance for Edmund Rolls and the Seamons family. They were Memorial Services to the honour of Mr Charles Seamons, who had built the chapel and presented it to Methodism. Nobody thought it strange to have such services on such a festive day. On the contrary, it was a splendid opportunity for paying tribute to a good man who had been dead for nearly two years, because people were more free to attend on Christmas Day than on any other day of the year, except Sundays. Moreover, the festive family Christmas night was not possible in small crowded homes, and the special conditions which enabled family reunions to take place were only just beginning to emerge. Even in the Rolls family, which before the end of the century delighted in the gathering of the clan for Christmas and a jolly evening of fireside fun on THE day, in the new room Edmund and Hannah had added to their house, even in that family the time for a reunion had to wait. When Herbert and Mina, Fred and Ella, and those who followed them, were grown up and away from home most of the year, the festive family reunion would come. In 1869 a full programme at the chapel on December 25th interfered with no festivity and supplied a need. For many years a Service of Song was arranged to provide entertainment and suitable inspiration for Christmas night. In 1869 the tasty morsel was a Memorial Service!

Only a curmudgeon could have begrudged Mr Charles Seamons the posthumous tributes paid to him in the chapel on that Christmas Day, or the memorial tablet then unveiled. Had it been possible to measure the imponderables it is likely that his name would have come near the head of the list of benefactors to Weedon in the first seventy years of the nineteenth century. His wealth was slight, his position was merely that of a farmer who employed six or seven men on about 140 acres of land, and his personality was never of the dominating, domineering type. Yet, through establishing the first chapel and the building of the second, and in founding the Sunday School in Weedon, the influence of Charles Seamons penetrated most of the ordinary homes of that place, before he did any of those things, his place within his family circle was of untold importance. He was the oldest son in the family of nine, and the youngest brother was a mere toddler when their father's health gave way. At that time Charles was in his early twenties. It was no easy matter to handle a family of strong-minded characters. William (Old Uncle Billy) was the second son. It was more congenial to him to go his own way than fit into a scheme. John was the third son, and no less independent than William. While the father was still alive, John contracted out and left home, the only one to do so.

Fiery Joseph was the third. Then followed Edmund, with a determination intensified by his religion. Last, little James, who needed a father's guidance and had to turn to his oldest brother Charles to find it. The girls matched the boys in spirit. Betsy, the oldest of the family, was as astonishing as Old Uncle Billy. She did not marry until she had reached her 44th year, but that was early enough for her to give birth to a daughter the following year, and a son the year after that. Mary was the youngest sister and not much older than little James. Only Sarah married in the early stages of her father's invalidism. She and her baker-brewer husband, William Judkins, lived at Aylesbury and therefore were near enough to the old home to understand the part Charles played in caring for his parents from 1815 to 1831, and in managing a team as diverse as William, Joseph, Edmund, James, Betsy and Mary, then, when the inevitable happened and William, Joseph and Edmund went their separate ways, Charles continued to care for his mother, and young James, and the two sisters, for a long as all needed his care. He was well past his fortieth year before he thought of himself, and took his bride into the old family home. In one respect life continued to be hard for him. His long-delayed marriage was of short duration. Mary Loader died within a few years and there were no children to perpetuate her memory. Years later, Mr Charles married a second time, and again he was left a widower. Finally he married a third time, and his bride was a widow slightly older than he. She also predeceased him. He loved, among much else that was lovely, home, children and music. It was his fortune to have little of home in the sense of married partnership, and to be denied children. He might have said he had loved other people's children as his own in the Sunday School he superintended for more than thirty years. That, however, was not quite the same thing. His generosity went deeper than most men knew. In 1854 the first chapel, his Uncle's converted barn, was burned down. It was Mr Charles who secured a better site for a new chapel, built a seemly place of worship at his own cost, and finally gave it to Methodism. For several years he held it as his own property. There were two reasons for that. At first, the conflicts which then were robbing Wesleyan Methodism of tens of thousands of members were raging and Mr Charles, who had no place for autocratic pretension, was not quite sure his sympathies could come down on the official side. So he had the stone on the front gable of the chapel, which was inscribed "Wesleyan Chapel 1854" covered with a board. In due course the little man decided he could fit into the Wesleyan pattern and the board was removed. Albeit, he continued to delay handing the building over to a Wesleyan Trust. Finally, he did so, and the reason for the delay was in the Deeds. In 1854 he lacked the ready money to pay for the building and had to raise a mortgage on one of his fields. Not until the mortgage was cleared and he could hand over the premises free of debt, did he make his final gesture and the chapel became Wesleyan property. His death, in January 1868, removed their Moses from the little society. The Joshua who followed had no difficulty in paying a heartfelt tribute to the one who had led them so faithfully through nearly forty years.

Just as the tribute to Mr Charles Seamons was in every sense fitting, so it was entirely proper that Edmund Rolls should preside at the evening meeting. The mantle of Mr Charles had fallen on him. He had become Sunday School Superintendent, society steward, class leader and trustee, and both old and young looked to him for leadership. His father, William the preacher, had been a close friend of Mr Charles Seamons, and those two men were kindred, and complimentary, spirits. Mr Charles was never a preacher and his leadership was of the kind which almost unconsciously draws men to follow, rather than that which fires the brave to rise up and take the challenge of a crusade. William Rolls was preacher and crusader. Possibly the work of Mr Charles actually needed to be supplemented by the qualities of the young enthusiast, and William Rolls was, in a true sense, the man for the hour in that little community. Furthermore, William's son, Edmund, had been friendly with Mr Charles before he married into the Seamons family, in spite of an experience of religious unsettlement. Edmund was too independent to become the leader of the chapel because of what his father had been or of what his wife's family continued to be. For a time he hesitated. At the critical moment, just after his marriage to 18 year old Hannah, the young bride spoke the right word, and it proved to be decisive. Before that, however, the friendship with Mr Charles remained unchallenged, and Edmund's diary recorded "Music with Mr Seamons". On every count Mr Edmund Rolls was the right man to preside, and not least by his own personal qualities. His father had given him a grounding in reading, writing and arithmetic such as no other boy in the village received, and the son took to it like a duck to water. The cultural qualities which Edmund's great grandfather on the Hill had possessed lived again in William the preacher and passed onto his son. In the circuit, though only 28 years old in 1869, Edmund Rolls was fast rising to a place of honour. His speech lacked the fire of his father's utterance. Even so, there was weight in the words quietly and deliberately spoken, and in the opinions judiciously expressed. His link with the Seamons family may have been enshrined in his name, Edmund. From the days of Queen Elizabeth the First, there had always been an Edmund in the Seamons family at Weedon, until 1896, when the last died unmarried. The father and mother of Mr Charles came to the rescue! Their next son was born in 1808 and they named him Edmund. This Edmund became Weedon's first local preacher and in 1869 he was riding horseback across the wide spaces of Australia in fulfilment of preaching appointments. The second local preacher from Weedon was William Rolls. How much inspiration the second owed to the first is not recorded, but it is interesting to note that when his oldest son was born the name given was Edmund, never a Rolls name, but almost always in the Seamons tradition. In any case, the chairman at the Meeting that Christmas night had no rival for the honour.

The congregation gathered, happy to be together and to do honour to the benefactor whose modesty never asked for any honour. The young people could only remember him as an old man with a bald head, deeply furrowed brow, thin clean shaven face and spare build.

Despite his smile and fresh colour, he had seemed very old at the last when his hand began to shake and his eyesight was fast failing. His latest signatures, showing a trembling hand, were also in large letters. Of course, he was 75 when he died, which was a big age for most people, but nothing very special for a Seamons. Old Uncle John, who was uncle to Mr Charles and remembered Joseph Bradford, Wesley's travelling companion for many years, stabling his horse near the barn which became the first chapel in that long-long ago before the young preacher was finally approved by his revered leader, lived to be 86. Old Uncle John's father lived to be so old that they lost count of his years after he reached the four-score. Nevertheless, by ordinary standards, he was a very old man whom the youngsters honoured as tributes to Mr Charles were paid. The middle-aged could recall the day the chapel was opened and the rejoicing of the crowd which gathered from many places, while Mr Charles, the man who had made the day possible, sat sadly among them. His second wife had just died. Earlier than that, they could recall the barn chapel, and its benches; its high pulpit with the big candlesticks; its small pews by the side of the pulpit where the specially privileged sat; and Mr Charles at the end of one of the pews pitching the tunes as the preacher lined out the hymns two lines at a time. A few had even longer memories. They could recall the youth: lithe, slight in build, fresh complexion and auburn (they called it brown) hair, always friendly and always modest. Perhaps his sister Elizabeth, always known as Betsy, was the only one who could remember the boy who watched the quick setters, the surveyors and other men a hoard of "foreigners" who invaded the quite village when its lands were enclosed and the age-old pattern of its open fields was swept away. Through all the changes he had always been trustworthy and thoughtful for others. There were men to whom he had always been "Master". Mr Charles had never needed an Elizabeth to smooth the troubled waters after a storm of angry words, like his brother Joseph had done. Could any among them have been honoured so unreservedly? Even his weaknesses, such as his over-trustfulness of his nieces in his own home on winter evenings when he went to bed early and left them in complete charge, had their good side. Admittedly the nieces were not out of their teens, but wasn't it likely that the baby who hurried on marriage for one of them was conceived in his house while he slept upstairs? Those who were tempted to blame him for being too trustful had to admit that lack of suspicion was a sweeter trait than the spirit which imagined evil when none was there.

A full programme was planned for the evening. In addition to the chairman's address, three speeches were planned. Why not? There was no hurry. A crowded chapel was as good as a crowded cottage, when the pews were full and the paraffin lamps alight, the place got really warm: "warm as toast" said one of the four women, two of whom wore crinolines, who with a child occupied a pew made for four. Because it was Saturday, and only those who did Sunday work on the farms had to be up early next morning, there was no hurry to get away to bed.

The first of the three speakers was the Mr Exell who had preached in the afternoon on "Enoch walked with God". The second was a young draper from Aylesbury, Charles Samuel Madder. He was a comparative newcomer to the district. Norfolk was his native county, Windsor the place of his apprenticeship to drapery, Kent the scene of his employment after apprenticeship and finally, Aylesbury the town where he possessed his own business. He soon won an honoured place on the list of local preachers and William Rolls was one of those whom he in turn immediately honoured. Then developed his friendship for William's son Edmund, which continued as long as both lived. The third of the speakers was different from the other two in that he was a man of Buckinghamshire. His family had an honoured place in the little town of Haddenham, near Aylesbury, for many generations. Everyone who knew the name of Rose of Haddenham respected it. Mr John Rose was a young surveyor who came to Aylesbury supported by the affection with which his father was held in that circuit. For many years the father had been a welcome preacher in the Aylesbury area from the Thame circuit. In the 1860's Mr John Rose was fast climbing the ladder in his new circuit as one of its most desired local preachers. Thus the scene was set for a "good time", with the right man presiding, an evangelist as a new speaker, and tow of the most acceptable of the younger preachers of the circuit to take their call.

Something of what happened was recorded in the "Aylesbury Monthly Friend" in February 1870. The report may be given as it then appeared:

"Weedon. On Christmas Day interesting services were held here at the chapel in connection with the uncovering of a tablet erected to the memory of the late Mr Charles Seamons. In the afternoon Mr Exell preached from "Enoch walked with God" and in the evening a public meeting presided over by Mr Edmund Rolls was held. The chairman, in his opening address gave a succinct account of the rise and progress of Wesleyan Methodism at Weedon, and in doing so he referred especially to the valuable labours of him whose tablet had been that day uncovered. Mr Seamons' object in life was to do good. The two chief works which will endear his memory to the Methodists of Weedon, were his efforts to build a place of worship, and to establish a Sabbath School. Both undertakings resulted in success. In the erection of the old chapel he was the principal help, and in the erection of the new chapel, he was, in a sense everything. The chapel, built at his own expense, he gave to Methodism, free of debt. Suitable addresses were also given by Messrs Exell, Madder and J Rose."

The Memorial Tablet, of whitish-grey stone, was placed on the wall to the right of the pulpit, where all the congregation who had mastered the art of reading might try to read it. Not all could read. Despite the advantages the parish had through the charity bestowed by the late Rev. Dr Bridle, there were many who had "never been to school". Compulsory education hadn't quite arrived in 1869.

Even those who could read might have to spell out some of the words on the tablet and wonder why they had been used. They understood that Mr Seamons was "modest, devout, gentle, charitable and sincere", but why the tablet stated that "in 1834 he originated the Sabbath School" when Mr Rolls had said clearly that he established it, was an unresolved mystery. Again, they understood when Mr Rolls said that Mr Seamons built the chapel, at his own expense and gave it free of debt, but they had to think twice to grasp what the words, "This sanctuary is a tribute to the motive of his life and the largeness of his heart". Just meant what Mr Rolls had said in more straightforward words. Was it really designed to hide from later generations what it really meant, or was it planned to be an exercise in reading during sermon time for later generations of children? Whatever the answer to the question, the crowd in the chapel that Christmas night rejoiced to see the name of Charles Seamons clearly inscribed there in stone.

After all the speakers had "delivered their message", and the last hymn had been sung, and the chairman had called on Mr Exell to pronounce the benediction (Mr Rolls had a sense of proprieties, though he believed in local initiative!) the little chapel emptied. The lamps which so frightened the daughters of Thomas Griffin were put out, the door securely locked, and the new memorial was left in silent darkness. Mr Rose collected his pony and trap from the Manor Farm and took Mr Madder and Mr Exell back to Aylesbury. Mr Madder, the draper, had no horse of his own and always relied on the help of a friend for transport. Mr Exell was planned to preach at Aylesbury the next day, both morning and evening, so that there was no need for him to travel the extra eight miles to his lodging at Princes Risborough. Either the Madders or the Roses could "put him up". The members of the congregation dispersed to their admixture of comforts and cares, many of them looking back on the day with satisfaction and looking forward to hearing Mr R Ward from Aylesbury preach on the Sunday. Old Uncle Billy had only a hundred yards to go to reach the comfortable shelter of his status-symbol house, and possibly to bask in the glow of his own generosity in handing over his brother's house to the chapel, as he settled down on the feather mattress, curtains drawn around his four-poster bed. He was a lonely old man, though the comforts of life now encompassed him rather than the cares which he had mastered so valiant in earlier years.

Joseph and Elizabeth and their son and daughters had much to think about; the children at dinner-time; the preachers at tea-time; Sophie and her little ones far away; Annie and William and their three children so soon to set sail for America; and everything which had been said about Charles Seamons. Most of what was said had to be repeated for the benefit of Joseph who, despite cupping his ears in his hands, hadn't heard much of the speeches. He had tried to hear though perhaps not with the passionate intensity of later years when he made his ears bleed with strain and "cupping". Betsy Watkins, the oldest of the Seamons family, had never been as enthusiastically Methodist as her brothers. Yet the day had a unique place in her life, for she was the one who had been playmate to Charles when both were very small.

Sarah Judkins, who came between Charles and William in the family procession of births, was especially near to her oldest brother partly because the zeal of Methodism had captured them both, but even more because both had turned unusual trials into remarkable triumphs. Mr Charles had grown old graciously in spite of his bitter bereavements and all the hardships life forced on him. So had his sister Sarah. In her teens she had to meet difficulties which he never experienced, but she won through to a serene old age despite a long list of misfortunes which might easily have made her bitter, or full of self-pity. Neither of those curses afflicted her. She had borne eleven children, three of whom had died in early childhood, two more at eleven years, two more in their teens, and two more later on. The two sons who remained were both in Australia, striving to side-track the fatal weakness which had defeated their brothers and sisters. The first of her sons to seek long life in a southern climate had reached thirty-eight years and then succumbed. Sarah Judkins was proud of that son, named Charles after his uncle. Was he not the first white man in the state of Victoria to teach the children of aborigines in school? In 1869 she was widowed and alone, yet so ordering life in a part of the house where her brother Charles had lived, that the youngest members of the Seamons clan liked to visit Aunt Judkins. Every word of tribute to Charles Seamons on that Christmas Day found an especially congenial response from his sister Sarah. Elizabeth Rolls, too, as she made her way home to face again the responsibility of afflicted Jessie and her mother and mother-in-law could be happy with the day and the part her son had taken in it. It was wonderful that he was following in his father's footsteps. The young men he had gathered together to form a small orchestral band before he was married now turned to him as the one who could guide them in other ways. It eased the burden of feeding so many from one small business now that Edmund was a strength instead of an anxiety. There might be strain written across her face, but as the old clock ticked on and the heavenly bodies moved in their courses, Elizabeth Rolls had cause for thankfulness on that Christmas night. Though her mother now slept in the place which formally had belonged to her husband, Elizabeth never grumbled.

Similarly, Thomas Griffin and his wife Sabina returned to their yeoman homestead in Weedon's East End well pleased with the day. Their house had lost its lands and Thomas laboured for others. His speech was in the native dialect of his village, and he had never lived elsewhere. Yet Thomas breathed the atmosphere of infinity, and time, for him, was the doorway to eternity. He and Sabina had comfort in the zeal their daughters Lizzie, Patty and Clara showed for the chapel; and their zeal helped when the daughter they had named Comfort failed them, and at seventeen years had been obliged to marry David Seamons. The baby died within a year and no more had been born before Christmas 1869. Thomas and Sabina would have maintained that it was in the mercy of God they could not see ahead to the birth of the second baby, whom they would have to take into their own home because in the process of confinement, Comfort had died. Thomas and Sabina, Elizabeth, Patty and Clara could not have enough of religion. Therefore, for them all, Christmas Day was well-spent if it provided them with two services at their chapel. In point of fact, Thomas and Sabina needed all that religion could bring them by way of succour for they had an afflicted son who was stone deaf and had never spoken. In his frustration the boy snarled like an angry beast, and in their unwitting cruelty the children taunted him. He could not hear the nickname they had for him, though he sensed that he was the object of taunts. However, he could feel the blows they dealt as they crept up behind him stealthily and then ran way to taunt him from a distance. Thomas and Sabina kept him at home because an afflicted son was still their son. In the process of caring they needed all the light of religion to relieve the darkness of their Gethsemane.

The other Thomas at the chapel, Thomas Fincher, would be equally well pleased that the sacred place built by Mr Charles Seamons had given him so much on Christmas Day. There was little for him at home since his wife, Mary, had died after that brief fourteen months of married life. Nevertheless, he had his Bible and in the candlelight searched out its comfortable words. Already he was learning the lessons which transfigured hardship, and which would enable him, twenty years later, when he was bent nearly double with rheumatism and was dependent upon parish relief, to say at the Annual Society Meeting at the chapel on the first Tuesday in the New Year, "Bless the Lord, O my Soul! My cup runneth over". He was then little taller when he stood than when he sat, and it was hard to smile if the parish loaf was pushed across to him as though he were a criminal, yet thanksgiving filled his days. After work was beyond him, old Thomas set out once a week to visit homes where old people couldn't read, and to impart to them the truths which transfigured his life. He carried his stick in his right hand; that was necessary as support for the frailty of his body. In his left hand he held his Bible; that was the secret of the smile on his face and radiance in his life.

Two services at the chapel on Christmas Day were better than Christmas dinner. They were nourishment in themselves. There could be no doubt that Christmas Day had been a feast for Joey Simonds. The people in the village had a name for Joseph Simonds. They called him "Happy Joey". Like old Thomas, Joey Simonds revelled in all he found at chapel. Life had been hard for him. He was 23 when he married seventeen year old Ann Miller. Eighteen months later their first son was born. Ann was still in her twenties when her sight failed and she became totally blind. She never saw some of the children she bore. Joey took it all in his stride, with the help of his religion. Poverty, adversity, and sometimes unemployment without any state benefit, bore down on his life, and undaunted, he went on. Wonderfully strange things happened in Joey's life. One Sunday one of his children happened to whisper that they had nothing for dinner that day in their home except potatoes. Joey's small earnings had gone in mending shoes and there was nothing left for meat. That Sunday they had two dinners! "Joey", said Edmund Rolls, "this must never happen again. If you can't pay for a bit of pork you must have it without. How can I sit down to my dinner when one of my class members hasn't got any?". "But Mr Rolls," retorted Joey, "we 'ad got some. We got 'taters".

On another occasion Joey took his last penny to the Class Meeting on Sunday morning because God must have it. His blind wife reminded him that it was their last until he was paid at the end of the week. But he took it. On his return his wife greeted him with the words, "Joey! I've had a visitor. I don't know who it was but look what she gave me". It was a shilling. "Just like God", said Joey. "You give Him what belongs to Him and he pays you twelve times over!" On still another occasion, Joey was sent home because a hard frost made his work impossible. That meant a day without money as well as without work. It happened there was a team meeting at chapel that day. Joey longed to go, but he hadn't the sixpence to pay for the tea. He set out for a walk across the fields, and behold there was a sixpence lying on the footpath before him. Christmas afternoon and evening at chapel were bliss for him. And then there was Sunday to follow, without the need to get up in darkness, light the fire, boil the kettle and help his wife before he set out to work in the chill of a December morning. It really HAD been Christmas that year for Joey Simonds.

The Rolls children were fast asleep long before their father returned to his humble home. It really had been Christmas for them as truly as for Joey Simonds, but for different reasons!