

## Another Language

by Penny Humphrey

I grew up in another language. In the language of hate and hardship where love and pleasure have no place.

We lived in one room somewhere down the Old Kent road, my two brothers, my three sisters and my Mum and sometimes my Dad came to live there too. We liked it best when he was away cos Mum let us take turns at sleeping with her in the bed. I can't remember now who was the oldest or who was the youngest but I know I was born sometime in 1800 cos my Mum told me that once.

When Dad came home, he took off his crusty leather belt and hit us all with it. He said it was to teach us good manners and we were all very bad. Mum cried a lot when Dad came home, she cried quite a lot when he was away too. Dad was always angry and smelled of booze and he swore a lot and Mum used to ask him not to blaspheme in front of the children, whatever that was. He hit her when she said that and she cried again.

My brother Jack and I used to go down the market and pinch some bread, we never got caught but some did and they paid for it with a whipping or a bent ear. Margy next door said things like 'Saints Alive' and 'You're skinny as a whippet' but she took pity on our family sometimes and gave us some dripping for the bread.

We shared a privy with Margy and her family, it was cold and damp in there and there were big spiders on the wall, we thought they would eat us when it was dark. If you were lucky there would be bits of newspaper to wipe with, otherwise when our insides turned to water and we couldn't wait, we used the gutter outside.

I must have been about ten when two of my sisters caught the scarlet fever and went up to heaven with the angels, I remember their still marble faces and my mother's tears dripping down their cheeks.

One day a man came to the house, he said my Dad had been killed crossing a road and he was going to help us. Turned out he was an uncle and he gave my Mum some money to buy us food. He took us all away to his big house in Pimlico and fed us and looked after us and my mother learned to smile and I saw that she was very beautiful. We learned what it was like to have a full belly and not to be scared of the man cos he never hit us. We learned that we weren't bad. We learned a whole new language, the language of love and caring, we hardly dared believe it was true but it was.