

LESLIE CHARLES FRAMPTON

9th February, 1907 – 20th October, 1985



Affectionately known as “Framfam”, this nickname attached to him after he produced a recipe containing Yams. He was convinced this recipe would sustain the starving population in the event of either a nuclear holocaust or a breakdown in civil order, bought about by a total collapse of capitalism. He never had any doubt in his mind that this would happen and famine would be the consequence. The possibility of a nuclear holocaust always troubled him deeply; he would be beside himself in argument when trying to explain, to anybody prepared to listen, the absolute horror that would ensue in the event of nuclear war and the effect of Strontium 90. He would usually end his tirade stating that he was not sure what weapons the next World War would be fought with but he knew, without any doubt, that the war after would be fought with sticks and stones having blown ourselves back to the Stone Age.

This was the early fifties and he was once again staying with us in Southfields. My father, a very patient man, putting up with his wife’s somewhat eccentric elder brother. My mother never saw any wrong in him, even when, after my father had decorated our kitchen/breakfast room with new wallpaper, he wrote a long poem, “An Ode To a Cornflake Bomb”, in large print on the new wallpaper . (Alas, I am sorry to say, the text of the Ode is lost to posterity). The Ode was an attempt to explain to us that governments saw us, the proletariat, as no more than Cornflakes of which they had millions of boxes available to them; they could choose to scatter sugar or strontium 90 over us just as they pleased.

He was an avid reader if somewhat left wing. He was the only person I have ever known to own a copy of Das Capital and to have read it and be able to quote from it. He also thought very highly of Robert Trestle’s “The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists”, stating it was the best “worst” novel he has ever read. But Gibbon held a special place for him. He so admired his work “Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” that for six months he went every day to the reading room at Westminster Library to read and study the work.

He was also one of the unsung brave man who served in the Merchant Navy in the second world war. He was at sea from January 1941 to July 1944: he told me the indifference shown by the governments to the loss of so many young lives had a profound effect on him for the rest of his life. His concern at the futility of war came from his parents. They were both pacifists in the 1914-18 war and were regularly castigated by their neighbours for their outspoken pacifist views, even to the extent of having white feathers put through their letter box.

If asked what he did for a living he would always reply, "I do what I have to do and that is rarely what I want to do". But to quote my mother; he was so handsome, he rarely needed to work as he seldom lacked a beautiful woman who wanted to look after him.

I had a somewhat mixed relationship with my Uncle Leslie: he would call on me for help in situations that were unfamiliar to him or, more likely, my mother insisting on my involvement. In general he used to refer to me as "a running capitalist dog", purely because I was in business and an employer, in his words "grinding the face of the labouring classes".

On one occasion when visiting him at his flat he told me of his disappointment that no socialist revolution had yet taken place. It was a day in which he was complaining of many things especially the lack of flavour of the modern onion; suggesting that if these had been grown on a collective farm, as they did in the Soviet Union, this poor quality would never be accepted, as workers' committees controlled the quality; adding there was little or no point eating them. When I looked closely at the bag of onions they were in fact gladioli bulbs!

The reason for this particular visit was because my mother had informed me that he had been summoned to appear before a Magistrate to answer a charge of theft. The charge was as a result of him being caught shoplifting in Tesco's. I suggested that there had been no necessity to do this as he was not particularly short of money and that my mother was very upset to hear that he was in trouble with the police. He totally dismissed this argument saying shops were full to overflowing with food that they would prefer to let it rot sooner than sell at a fair price. He could see nothing wrong in his actions. He said that he had observed his fellow workers looking at the high prices of the meat wishing they could afford it and he did no more than demonstrate to them their irrefutable right to take food if they were hungry.

He finally agreed to let me attend the Hearing; it was my intention to speak for him. I was surprised how tidy and well kept he looked, quite an imposing figure. He was a large man with a mass of silver grey hair, looking very distinguished, wearing his old Crombie overcoat which had seen better days.

When asked for his plea of guilty or not guilty he replied, "I only have the guilt of a hungry man, if it is guilty to feed one's hunger then I am guilty as charged". Prior to him speaking there had been a noticeable lack of interest in the general proceedings of the court, solicitors and their clerks quietly talking, court officials shuffling papers. It changed to rapt attention when the Magistrate looked up from his desk, purposely clearing his throat, looking long and hard at Frampton, "Would you kindly repeat your plea to the court?" There was now total silence in the court as he repeated the same plea in a strong firm voice which was somewhat surprising to me as he always had a tendency to stammer and speak slowly if confronted with a stressful situation. This tended to suggest to those who did not know him that he was not very quick-witted but this slowness disguised a very able, if somewhat tilted to the left, brain.

The Magistrate told him in a stern voice that he would not tolerate any disrespect shown to the court, and that he must consider his position most carefully, and should remember that this was a court of law and that his flippant attitude to the proceedings would inevitably lead him into even more serious trouble than he was all ready in. If it was the Magistrate's intention to intimidate him he had completely wasted his time. Frampton replied, "This corrupt Capitalist system has finally, in

your words, reduced me to stealing and I cannot imagine what else the system can do to an honest worker.”

The Magistrate sensibly instructed the court clerk to enter a plea of not guilty and instructed the prosecuting counsel to continue. Things got a little difficult when the prosecuting counsel asked him why he chose to steal only the best fillet steak. He replied, “Are you suggesting that this court looks more sympathetically on a worker that only takes cheap cuts of meat? If so that can only suggest that I am also charged with stepping above my station,” adding, “I expect you and the magistrate see yourselves as best quality.”

At this point a representative from Tesco’s indicated to the court that they were unsure whether they still wished to press charges. The final outcome was that he was bound over to keep the peace and banned from Tesco’s for life. It made little or no difference to him: he continued to shop at Tesco’s but with the staff keeping a close eye on him.

My Mother spent an uneasy few days fearing the Wandsworth Borough News would pick up on the story, she was greatly relieved that not one word appeared in the local paper saying she would have died of shame.

About two years after the Tesco’s incident, he was stricken with Encephalitis and was hospitalized for some considerable time. This complaint has been a trouble to the Framptons. My mother and their elder brother Leonard were stricken with it in varying degrees. When he left hospital we all thought he had been cured but unfortunately a few months later it became evident that it had seriously affected his mental abilities; he became an in-patient at Springfield Mental hospital in Tooting.

He was making slow progress, so much so that the Senior Psychiatrist asked to see me as he wished me to explain to my mother that her brother was an extremely sick man and unlikely ever to really make a full recovery. He explained that they had asked him very simple questions, for instance the day of the week – what year it was – do we have a King or Queen – whether a summer was hot or cold. The Psychiatrist told me they had little or no response from him. I carefully explained to the Psychiatrist it was not the type of question or conversation that he would respond to, he was somewhat taken aback and asked me to explain. I suggested that he should try asking him, possibly about his war experiences, which I felt it might lead him into a political response but even better to ask him a Zen question such as “What is the noise of one hand clapping?”; he shook his head and reluctantly said he’d give it a try. The next day, he telephoned me at my office, telling me in disbelief that he had decided to take my suggestion seriously and had put together a series of questions including the Zen question and had been amazed at the response that he received. From that moment on the staff took a greater interest in him and after about another six months he was discharged but never fully regained his old fire.

He lived on for about eight years, but finally his way of life took its toll. He died in St John’s Hospital Clapham Junction.

Written with affection and fond memories of a remarkably interesting man by his nephew

James E. Probetts, 1st March, 2005