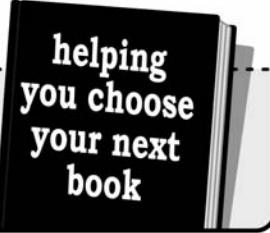


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50 Years of Hancock's Half Hour

Richard Webber

Chapter 1

Writing partnerships are born in a whole manner of ways: Dick Clement and Ian La Frenais, whose small-screen output includes *The Likely Lads* and *Porridge*, met at the Uxbridge Arms, a pub in London's Notting Hill, back in 1961, three years before 'Entente Cordiale', the first instalment in the life of Terry Collier and Bob Ferris, hit our screens. Bob Larbey and John Esmonde, responsible for, among others, *The Good Life* and *Ever Decreasing Circles*, became friends while on a school trip in Switzerland. Although Bob was three years ahead of John at Clapham's Henry Thornton Grammar School, they discovered they were 'both loonies... who had lots in common, including a crass schoolboy humour.' Other friendships evolve from working together. A year after Jimmy Perry was cast in a cameo role for a 1966 episode of *Hugh and I*, a sitcom directed by David Croft, he was offered the chance to play Reg Varney's uncouth brother in *Beggar My Neighbour*; while taking a break during rehearsals, Perry approached Croft with a script he'd written titled 'The Fighting Tigers' and asked him if he'd read it. Within months *Dad's Army* was born.

None, however, can match the unusual circumstances in which Ray Galton and Alan Simpson's partnership came into being during the late 1940s: both were patients at Milford Sanatorium, a TB hospital, set amid the Surrey countryside.

When a 16-year-old Ray Galton was admitted to Milford in January 1947, his chance of survival was so low that at one point he was given no more than two weeks to live. He was working in the head office of the Transport and General Workers' Union, in London's Smith Square, when he was rushed to the sanatorium. 'I had all the symptoms of TB without actually haemorrhaging or coughing up blood, including tiredness, a bad cough and loss of weight – I was only nine stone,' recalls Ray. 'My older brother, who was in the Merchant Navy, came home on leave, took one look at me and said: "You have got to go for an X-ray as soon as possible." ' Ray followed his brother's advice and, to his horror, learnt he was suffering from advanced



tuberculosis of the lungs. There was a two-year waiting list for beds in sanatoriums in those days, but Ray was admitted within ten days.

Fortunately, he was strong enough eventually to beat the infectious disease but spent his first year resting, unable to get out of bed. Aged 20 when he walked out of the doors at Milford for the final time, he'd endured three and a half years at the hospital – it had felt like a life sentence. 'Funnily enough, I did have some good times but it was horrible in other ways. Sometimes I got very depressed and would turn my face to the wall, not wanting to speak to anyone. I even thought there was a conspiracy among the doctors to keep me in there; it might sound silly, but that is what you start to believe.

Ray had been at Milford just over a year when an 18-year-old Alan Simpson arrived after enduring thirteen months at a holding base while he waited for a bed at the sanatorium. He'd been working as a shipping clerk in the centre of London when one fine morning in 1947, while travelling to the office by bus, he cleared his throat and discovered blood in his mouth. Upon reporting for work, he was rushed to St George's Hospital, near London Bridge, for examination. An X-ray revealed tuberculosis. 'I was given strict instructions: go home, don't run, don't make any sudden movements and go straight to bed. They gave me a letter and told me to make sure my mother took it to our doctor, which she did. The doctor came round and that night I suffered a full-blown haemorrhage in bed. I was put on the list to get into a local staging place prior to entering a sanatorium. Everywhere was full up, though, and I ended up lying at home for thirteen weeks.' It had been a tragic week for the Simpson household. Alan was taken ill on the Wednesday, and his father, stricken with leukaemia, died the following day. 'In one swoop, my mother lost her husband, and her son was given the last rites.'

When at last he was transferred to Milford Sanatorium, Alan spent a further two years there. Reflecting on his time in hospital, he describes it as like 'being in a very amenable prison'. 'You were confined, for your own benefit, to bed. Initially this meant absolute bed rest, you weren't allowed out. Then you were able to get out two times a day to use the toilet, then three times, and gradually you spent more and more time up and about, including a walk around the sanatorium. It was very institutionalised, but you got used to it. When you came out, it seemed a very strange world. Once I was given a weekend away from Milford and couldn't wait to get back in; everything seemed so claustrophobic: I felt like I was crushed at home, where the rooms seemed so small compared to the sanatorium.'

TB was a rampant disease during this period; a four-year stay at sanatoriums wasn't unusual and the mortality rate was high. Almost everybody would have known someone who had been whisked away from home to a sanatorium, often miles from their family.

Now, nearly sixty years later, Ray still remembers clearly the day Alan arrived. 'Up until that time, the place was full of mainly exservicemen. I was the youngest in the place, so when Alan arrived, together with a load of other young guys, the atmosphere changed immediately. It was good for me because, at last, there were people of my own age to speak to.'

Only a matter of months separated the births of Ray Galton and Alan Simpson. Ray was born in Paddington in July 1930, and his family moved to Morden, Surrey, when he was just six months old. His father was a regular in the navy for most of his working life, serving in both world wars. He returned to civvy street for a short period during the 1930s and worked as a bus conductor but remained a naval reserve; he was called up again when the fleet was mobilised during the Munich Crisis of 1938. He remained in the forces until 1946, by which time he'd split from his wife. Ray says: 'It was a traumatic time for me. I was kept in the dark about their separation for some time – I used to wonder where he was. In those days, it was such a disgrace to even contemplate divorce or splitting up. I used to pray every night that the war wouldn't end so that the kids wouldn't ask me where my father was. It had a terrible effect on me.'

After leaving school at the age of 14, Ray started work as a plasterer's apprentice in a building firm. When the work became tedious, he turned his attention to labouring and was hired to repair bomb-damaged sites in Wimbledon. Before long, he was working behind a desk at the Transport and General Workers' Union in London, where he stayed until finding himself bed-bound at Milford.

Alan was born in November 1929, in Brixton, the son of a draughtsman. His father worked at Vickers just after the war, before becoming a milkman with United Dairies.

When Alan was four, the family moved to the 'posher suburb' of Streatham. 'My parents bought a house for £425 and had to save two years just to put down a deposit of £25!' recalls Alan. 'I lived most of my life in Streatham until I married.' Reflecting on his childhood days, he regards them as 'very happy'. 'I don't have many memories of Brixton, except the day my father looked after me one evening, as well as the boy next door. We were playing table tennis in the basement and this other kid started crying his eyes out – he must have been missing his mother or something. My father, normally a very patient man, was getting more and more frustrated, and I remember me, at the age of three, being a very smarmy boy, a right little crawler, saying things like: "Look at me, Daddy, I'm not crying." Being an only child meant I was very spoilt.'

Soon after the outbreak of war, Alan, who was attending Mitcham County Grammar School, was evacuated with the rest of the school to Weston-super-Mare for ten months: he hated every minute of the experience, feeling a deep sense of loneliness. During his first night in the Somerset seaside town, the docks at Cardiff, just across the Bristol Channel, took a pounding from German bombers. 'On their way home, the bombers jettisoned some bombs over Weston – it was a frightening time. Of course, I'd been evacuated to, supposedly, keep me away from such dangers.'

When his father was called up in 1940, Alan's mother allowed him to return home. 'I used to write such pathetic letters,' he recalls, smiling. 'When she died a few years ago, I found she'd kept all these letters I'd written as a ten-year-old, saying things like: "Mummy, I love you, please bring me home. I'll

do everything you want, including going shopping with you without complaining . . .”

Before the cessation of hostilities, Alan’s father was invalided out of the army after contracting Hodgkin’s disease. Within months he was dead, aged just 43. ‘He was such a gentle man. One of my great regrets is that he never lived to see my success. I owe him so much, including introducing me to show business because every Monday evening he’d take me to the pictures.’

Alan completed his education in disappointing circumstances. ‘I was brilliant as a kid up until the age of 11 – I was top of the class; it was downhill from then onwards, though. By the time I reached 16, I was quite thick, educationally. I took my matriculation but failed, ending up with a dodgy School Certificate. A meeting was set with the headmaster, who asked what I wanted to do with my life; when I told him I hoped to be a sports journalist he laughed his head off.’ There was an ulterior motive behind Alan’s desire to follow a journalistic path: being a keen sportsman himself, he thought the job would provide him with complimentary tickets to various sporting events.

In the end, Alan’s first job was at a firm of shipping agents in Leadenhall Street, London. He remembers his interview well. ‘I was considered for a position in the postal department by this very old man, one of the original partners, who must have been in his eighties. He said: “We can start you off at £81 a year, with annual increments of five shillings.” All I could think of was £81 – I’d never heard of so much money in one go. It wasn’t until I got on the bus home that I started realising that, of course, you had to divide it by 52, which worked out at something like one pound, ten shillings a week; after I’d deducted my lunch and fares into town each day, plus my board and keep, there wouldn’t be much left.’

But the onset of the disease brought his life to a standstill as he spent what seemed like an eternity trapped inside hospital, trying to recuperate from this deadly illness.

Before long, Alan and Ray were moved into the same ward and it soon became apparent that they had much in common. ‘When we got talking we found we had identical likes in terms of entertainment,’ explains Alan. ‘We were both comedy fans. We were also film fans and had the same taste in music – in fact, it’s amazing how close our thoughts are regarding politics, culture, wine, food. More importantly, though, our sense of humour was almost identical, which meant that as soon as we started working together we became almost telepathic. We could finish off each other’s sentences.’

The seeds of their working partnership were sown at Milford. The hospital possessed its own radio system, installed by the Friends of the Sanatorium, a charitable organisation who tried its utmost to make the patients’ lives just a little more bearable. Eventually additional money was provided for a dedicated internal network system, and Ray played a part in the creation of Radio Milford. ‘These two guys – Tony Wallis and another patient called Saunders – installed the radio line throughout the entire sanatorium,’ he

recalls, 'and although I wasn't allowed out of bed, I spent ages drilling wooden blocks for the wall in which the sockets were inserted.

'Between them, they not only developed the idea but also equipped the sanatorium with this additional network. In their pyjamas and dressing gowns they ran around the entire place, including the administration and the girls' block, fixing up the new channel.

'The sanatorium blocks were all one storey, divided into two and four-bedders,' recalls Ray. 'At the time I shared a room with Tony Wallis. He was a mad engineering geek whose father owned an engineering firm. The walls and the floor were covered with engineering and radio equipment – there was hardly enough room for me and my bed to be in there.

'He had a lovely RAF radio called a 1155 which had come out of a Lancaster, I think. This radio allowed us to listen to American Forces Network AFM Munich-Stuttgart at night-time, and also in the afternoon if the reception was good. If he approved of some of the people in other cubicles he'd run the wire to them and let them listen to it as well, and we'd be up half the night.'

Initially, Radio Milford broadcast for an hour a day, playing record requests from a converted linen cupboard acting as a studio. Lots of romances blossomed at the hospital, with patients meeting each other at film shows or card evenings in the utility hall, and records would be requested for partners. As the station's popularity grew, a radio committee was established to evaluate new programme ideas; it wasn't long before Ray and Alan were identified as fervent supporters of the station and invited to join the committee. 'The station had become more ambitious; we'd extended the broadcasting hours to two a day, and started introducing new aspects rather than just playing records,' explains Alan. 'We tried our own version of BBC panel games, like Twenty Questions, and a show called A Seat in the Circle, where once a week, the presenter would go to a cinema and record a half hour programme; if you were listening at home it was like being at the pictures. We thought that was a good idea, so at our film show every Wednesday evening we made our own version of A Seat in the Circle.'

'Alan and I happened to mention one day that we weren't doing any drama or comedy shows, so they [members of the radio committee] asked us to come up with an idea,' adds Ray. 'We decided on a comedy series titled Have You Ever Wondered? and agreed to write six 15-minute instalments – trouble was, we ran out of ideas after four! But that was the start of our partnership. The show contained extended sketches, and in 1949 we received our first fan letter, which was published in the Milford Bulletin, the hospital newspaper.'

Galton and Simpson enjoyed the process of writing comedy sketches so much that they realised they wanted to pursue the art further. Although still far from being fully fit, their stay at Milford was coming to an end and they would soon be returning to civvy street. Neither had any idea how to nurture their interest into, perhaps, a future career, so sought advice from two of their heroes, Frank Muir and Denis Norden. Muir began writing for the Forces radio while serving with the Royal Air Force in Iceland during the Second World War. After demob he acquired an agent and subsequently met

Norden. They had just begun writing their hit show, *Take It From Here*, when a letter from Galton and Simpson dropped through their office letterbox, asking how they could become scriptwriters. The would-be writers offered their services as tea boys in their office, hoping to observe how Muir and Norden went about their job. Keen to advise, Muir and Norden replied, suggesting they send a sample of their work to Gale Pedrick, who was employed as script editor at the BBC. It was another year before Alan and Ray had scripted a piece of work they regarded fit for scrutiny by the Beeb. In the meantime, they continued on their recovery programme and looked forward to the day when they could wave farewell to the many friends they had made during their enforced stay at Milford.

Alan left hospital six months before Ray, reasonably fit and able to resume work, albeit part-time, at the London shipping office. Ray wasn't so fortunate: he wasn't allowed to work, was ordered not to smoke or undertake anything strenuous, and had to ensure he had early nights. He didn't take too kindly to the doctor's suggestion that he adopt a more sedentary lifestyle and spent the first night of freedom tapping away to the music at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in London.

From the age of 14, Alan Simpson had been a member of his local church concert party, occasionally contributing to their performances with a stand-up routine or a mime act based on the antics of comedian Red Skelton. As soon as news of Simpson's release from Milford reached members of the concert party, they got in touch asking if he'd return to the fold. He declined the chance to perform with the group, but agreed, instead, to think up ideas for sketches. Alan immediately made contact with Ray and they resumed their budding partnership. Their writing sessions were limited mainly to evenings and weekends, when Alan wasn't trying to earn a living as a shipping clerk, and took place at Alan's mother's house at 6 Church Walk, Streatham Vale, London. One evening they were intending to generate a few ideas for the concert party but before long had devised their own version of the popular soap opera, *Mrs Dale's Diary*, titled 'Mrs Low Place Between Two Hills Diary'; when it was eventually performed on stage, the show received a healthy reaction from the audiences who had crammed into the tiny church hall to watch the local production.

Suitably enthused by this, Ray and Alan settled down for some serious discussion about where their future lay. Although becoming professional scriptwriters was a mere dream, they remembered the advice of Muir and Norden, a year before, and decided it was time they prepared some material for Gale Pedrick at the BBC. 'We didn't know if we had the ability or not, but knew there was only one way to find out,' explains Alan. 'We'd started writing together again and knew it was time to take the plunge.' Shutting themselves away each evening in Mrs Simpson's front room, they scribbled ideas on sheets of paper until they had formulated a synopsis strong enough, in their view, to warrant a stab at a full-blown script.

Ray says: 'By this time, Muir and Norden's *Take It From Here* was a big show. It contained three main sketches; one of these was often an eight- or nine-minute pastiche, taking the mickey out of a current film or something,

so we wrote a piece about Captain Henry Morgan, the pirate, sent it in and crossed our fingers.'

Pedrick was so impressed with the sketch, and the quality of Galton and Simpson's writing that he invited them to the BBC for an informal interview. When the invitation arrived at Alan's house, he was ecstatic. 'I remember running down the street to Ray's house, waving the letter above my head – we were over the moon with excitement. On the strength of the letter, we went out and celebrated with friends by getting drunk. We must have taken the view that even if nothing happened, we had a letter from the BBC stating they were "highly amused" with a sketch we'd actually written. We couldn't believe it.'

In the subsequent meeting, script editor Gale Pedrick agreed to gauge the reaction of various producers in Light Entertainment. One copy landed on Roy Speer's desk. At the time, Speer was producing Happy-Go-Lucky, a comedy vehicle for Derek Roy, which was rapidly running out of steam. In his accompanying memo, Pedrick said: '... if you are really up against it for some material, you might do worse than give a chance to Alan Simpson and Ray Galton. They are new to the game but I know they would be anxious to have a shot at anything on spec – and no harm done to anybody if nothing came of it.' In Pedrick's opinion, for inexperienced writers, their script showed promise: 'they seem to me to have a good wit and a really good grasp of situation,' he added. 'But everybody has their own opinion and if you think their material stinks, don't feel that there is the slightest obligation to do anything but say so!'

It wasn't Speer who responded to the memo, but Derek Roy himself. While he was in the producer's office one morning, he picked up the script and started reading. He liked what he saw and asked who had penned the material. Upon hearing it was two young writers trying to break into the business, Roy arranged for Galton and Simpson to contact him direct. Alan called Derek Roy's home and a meeting was convened for 8.30 that evening at Roy's house in Bryanston Street, just behind Marble Arch. It was a meeting that would launch their careers as professional writers.

The rain had begun to fall as Galton and Simpson turned into Bryanston Street. After welcoming the writers, Ray's secretary Johnny Vyvyan ushered them through the opulent flat to Roy's study, where they awaited his presence. 'I remember the meeting so clearly,' explains Alan, 'partly because there was Ray and myself, both over six foot, being met initially by little Johnny Vyvyan, who was under five foot tall, saying: "You are the boys we are trying to help, aren't you?" When Derek Roy finally joined us, he said: "I read the script, lads, and think there is potential. Tell you what, you go away and write me some one-liners and I'll pay you five shillings for every one I accept.'" Being offered the chance of writing for one of the nation's top comedians was too good an opportunity to miss, so Galton and Simpson rushed back to Mrs Simpson's house and began compiling an array of one-line gags which spread over three pages of paper.

'We tried hard to make it our own material and not to be influenced by the radio or joke books,' recalls Ray. 'When we had enough we arranged a

further meeting. Derek looked through the list, saying, “Yes, no, yes, yes, no” and so on, and the seven one-liners he liked he bought for five shillings each. Thirty-five shillings – seventeen and sixpence each. We were professionals!’ Their writing careers had begun.