

THE INHERITANCE: A TRUE STORY

My grandmother was a real granny. She didn't belong to the thirty-nine year old variety in pants and Daisy Duck sunglasses. When she came to live in an apartment near us, she must have been seventy-five and I suppose I was about ten. Like Mary Poppins she seemed to come out of the sky and have no past for I could imagine her no differently from when I first saw her.

The view of her from behind was as characteristic as from the front, and I often followed her bent, well-ballasted figure as she puffed her way up the stairs like a train that says, "I'm nearly there, I'm nearly there" and, with a sigh, "I'm there!" I remember her only in her Sunday clothes although, now I think of it, she must have worn other things too. But to me she remains forever dressed in a long, silk, navy coat simply and smartly cut, black buttoned shoes shining with elbow grease, a plain leather bag gripped firmly in her hand and, on top of this seeming severity, a hat, redecorated every season with an outrageously extravagant bow.

Her apartment was also different. Whoever heard of anyone having two treasure chests – like pirates must have found on galleons – in their hall? They stood opposite each other, so tall and wide that they made suitcases appear infinitely inferior and, with their high, curving lids richly bound in brass, speaking of distantly romantic times.

Very occasionally I was allowed to look inside. But first the patchwork quilts which covered them were removed and folded in four. And then I had to listen impatiently, but very politely, while she told me how she had made them long ago. Then out came her bunch of keys, such a large, jingling bunch, more than anyone could collect in a lifetime, I thought. But she always found the right one immediately and unlocked the gleaming brass padlock.

“There,” she said, lifting the lid gently. “Be very careful.”

As I leant over and peered inside expecting to see all the wealth of Ali Baba’s cave, I smelt a strong mixture of lavender and moth-balls and something else I have never been able to place. It was probably compounded of the contents of the chest and it is therefore not surprising that I have never smelt it since, for there was everything except an Egyptian mummy inside. In a small box I found a lock of hair, delicately curled.

“Was this your hair, Granny?” I asked

“No,” she answered, “it was Wee One’s.”

“Who’s Wee One?” I asked

“She was your father’s sister,” she replied. “She died when she was six.”

“Oh,” I said putting it away. There was nothing else to be said and Granny looked sad.

So I went back to the chest and dug out more treasure. This time it was a strange looking dress that trailed on the ground as I held it under my chin in

front of the mirror. Its neck was high and it was yellowish, like the clothes I had seen in the museum, and it had rows and rows of minute tucks forming a broad band at the hem. Granny must have noticed my puzzled expression because she said, "That's my wedding nightgown," and I saw her large brown eyes were soft and shining.

There were lots of queer things in those chests too, things that made me shiver and yet that drew me back time after time. She told me she'd brought them from South America where she'd gone as a missionary. She said it in such a matter-of-fact manner that it didn't seem at all strange. It was only when I was older, and a bit more knowledgeable, that I thought of a young girl – a genuine Victorian – packing those chests in the comfort of her London home and setting out to convert jungle dwellers in uncharted territories, armed only with an intrepid spirit and a Bible – and I wondered. Yet, even as I rummaged among those relics, I heard her playing hymns on her shiny black piano and singing to herself.

After my treasure hunting expeditions, we always had tea and rock buns, and I sat in the high-backed chair until she reminded me it was time to go. For I liked looking at her six Willow Pattern plates hanging on the wall, at the patched copper kettle gleaming on the floor and at the slender, reeded legs of the carved table beside the fireplace.

Granny had a friend as wonderful to my eyes as anything that came out of her treasure chests. And, indeed, eighty year old Miss Bellingham-Burke

astonished not only my young eyes. For this was just before the advent of the New Look and war-time austerity still shackled fashion. And so, amongst the severe short skirts and cropped hair, Miss Bellingham-Burke's floating pastel dresses, strings of amber beads and pearls reposing on her capacious bosom, hats like gardens in full bloom with the curled blonde hair and pink cheeks peeping out beneath them, presented a marked change, a challenge almost.

Miss Bellingham-Burke came to tea once a week for years. Though outwardly dissimilar they had much in common for she, too, had left home and family with a Bible in her hand. But whereas Granny had gone west and collected heathen fetishes and primitive carvings, she had gone east and collected copper trays with spiralling designs and peacocks beaten in silver and gold. And now they were just two old ladies drinking tea with an open Bible among the tea things.

Granny left me a love of patchwork, of blue and white china and of well rubbed old copper. And I, too, have a box of precious things. And perhaps, when I am old and broad and bent backed, some little girl will look at my letters and I shall say, "No, you mustn't read them, they're from Granddad," and perhaps she will ask why I have kept a ribbon from a baby's crib – it was all I had to keep – or will stare at a picture of Granddad digging the foundations of a church long ago. And I hope she, too, will see in my eyes the faith passed on to me, an inheritance, incorruptible and undefiled, that does not fade away.

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