Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

The Five Lost Aunts of Harriet Bean

written by

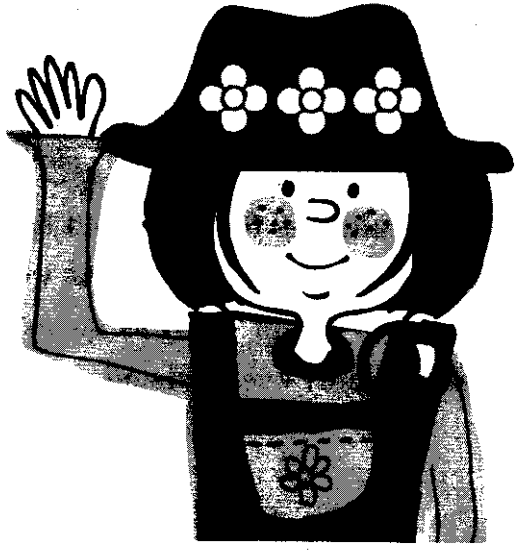
Alexander McCall Smith

published by

Bloomsbury

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



CHAPTER 1

A Surprise Discovery

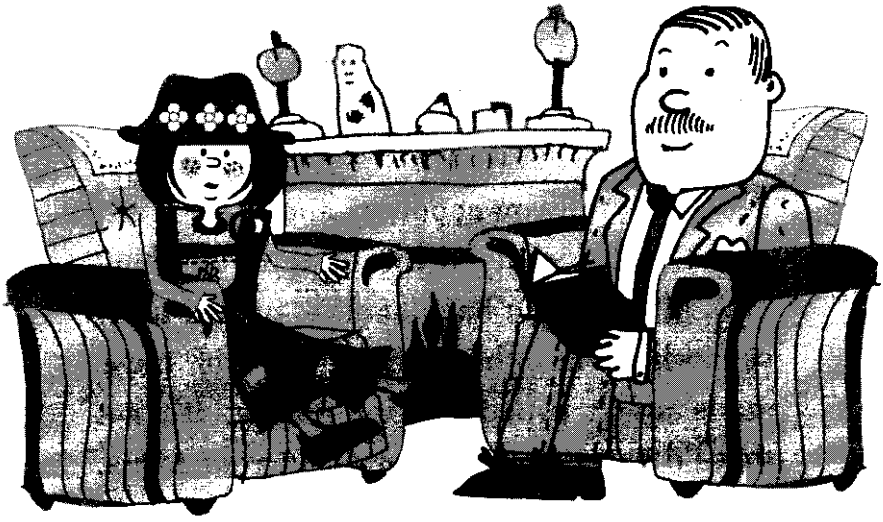
Did I ever tell you about my aunts? Well, if I didn't, that's what I'd like to tell you about now. Most people have aunts – tucked away somewhere or other – and most of these aunts aren't especially interesting. It's not that I'd never want to hear about *your* aunts, it's just that there's something about my

aunts that makes them very, very peculiar.

Strangely enough, I didn't even know I had any aunts until I was nine. Then, quite out of the blue, my father said to me one day:

'Your aunts would like to hear about that!'

I forget what it was that my aunts would have liked to hear about – I was so astonished to hear that they even existed.



'Aunts?' I said in surprise. 'What aunts?'

'Oh,' said my father rather vaguely, as if it weren't at all important. 'All those aunts of yours. You know – my sisters. All those aunts you have.'

I was almost too surprised to speak. It was just like my father, though. He had always been extremely absent-minded, and he was quite capable of forgetting all about his sisters. He was a very strange man, my father – in so many ways. I shan't tell you too much about him now, because it's really my aunts I want to talk about. I will tell you about his job, though, because it was so very unusual. My father, you see, was an inventor. He invented the most extraordinary things – but unfortunately, most of them were quite useless. He was the inventor of the automatic book, for example. When you were reading an automatic book, the pages turned automatically, every few minutes. This was meant to save you the effort of turning them yourself, but, as you can guess,

different people reached the end of the page at different times. So it was always very irritating reading an automatic book, and not many of them were sold. In fact, none of his inventions was successful, and most of them came straight back from the factory with a little note saying, 'Very interesting, but no thank you'; or, 'How remarkable – but do you think anybody really *needs* this?'

Most of the time, my father seemed to be in a bit of a daze, thinking about some strange thing he was planning to invent. Days could pass without his saying a word, and when this happened I knew that he was about to come up with an invention.

So it was not all that unusual for my father never to have mentioned his sisters, and if I had not said anything more about it, then that was all that I might have heard about the matter. But I was not going to leave it at that.

'I didn't know I had any aunts,' I said, trying not to sound too cross. If I did then he would go out to his shed in the garden,

which is what he always did when I got annoyed with him. He had an unusual invention there, which he never quite finished and which nobody was ever allowed to see.

'You didn't know you had aunts?' he said, sounding rather bemused. 'How very strange!'

Well! It's hardly strange not to know you have aunts when nobody has ever said anything about them.

'Perhaps I should tell you about them,' my father went on, a little doubtfully. 'You are their niece, after all. Mind you, there are so many of them, I hope I don't get mixed up.'

I waited for him to begin. I was dying to hear about my aunts, and yet my father seemed to forget about them almost as soon as he had mentioned them. I knew, though, that if I asked him to tell me about them straightaway he would only become quiet and start to read his newspaper. So I said nothing right then, and waited until the next

day. Then, after he had come back from work with another rejected invention, I made him a cup of tea and a buttered scone. I knew that there was nothing he liked more than that.

'About those aunts . . .' I began.

He glanced at me, but his eyes were fixed on the scone. 'Is that for me?' he asked eagerly.

'Yes,' I said. 'If . . .'

My father frowned. 'If what?' he asked.

'If you tell me about my aunts.'

My father stared at me, and then looked again at the thickly-buttered scone.

'What would you like to know about them?' he asked. 'There isn't an awful lot to hear, you know.'

'I want to hear everything,' I said quickly. 'Everything you can remember.'

My father sighed.

'May I have the scone first?' he asked.

And so my father told me about my aunts, although he did not tell me the whole story in one sitting. I had to coax it out of him, and it was only after several days – and a whole plate of buttered scones – that I heard all that he had to say about my newly-discovered aunts.

My father had been the only boy in the family. They lived on a small farm in those days, and there was not much money. It would have been all right if there had been just one or two children, but there were six children altogether, and that meant there were eight mouths to feed.

With so many children, there was never enough money to buy the clothes that were needed. My father told me that he had to wear girls' shoes, handed down from his sisters. So while other boys wore proper boys' shoes, he wore red shoes with bows on them, right up until he reached the age of eight. This embarrassed him horribly. Whenever anybody came to the farm, he

would quickly take his shoes off and walk around bare-footed.

The children did much of the work on the farm. They did have a tractor once – he thought it must have been one of the first



tractors ever made – but it was so old that eventually it couldn't be patched up any more. At harvest time, they used to cut the crops themselves, using scythes and sickles. And if things needed to be dragged around, they also had to do that themselves. As a result of this, he explained, most of my aunts grew up very, very strong.

Slowly, as I wrested the story out of him in dribs and drabs, I was able to build up a picture of my marvellous aunts. With a growing sense of excitement, I realised that every one of them had something rather special about her. Even to have one aunt like that would have been a treat – but to have five, well, that was very good luck indeed!

He told me first about Veronica. She was the oldest, and also the strongest. She could lift four bales of hay at once, without feeling the strain. If the plough got stuck in a ditch, then they'd call Veronica. She'd walk round it for a moment or two and then, with a

quick heave, she'd have it out of the ditch and back in its place.

My father told me that they were all proud of her strength. At the agricultural show each year there was a strong man competition. All the farm hands who fancied that they were stronger than anybody else thought this was the highlight of the show, and they would puff and go red in the face picking up all sorts of heavy objects.

My father wanted Veronica to enter, but there was one problem. They said that the competition was for strong men, not strong women, and that girls couldn't enter.

'Anyway,' said the man who was in charge, 'whoever heard of a strong girl?'

This sort of thing seemed terribly unfair to my father and so he made a plan with Veronica. They got hold of some boy's clothes and dressed her up in them. Then they tucked her hair up under a cap – the sort that all the farm hands wore – and there she was: a boy.

That year the strong men had to pick up pigs. There was an awfully fat pig in a pen – he was called Norman – and the contestants had to try to pick him up. So far, nobody had succeeded in lifting Norman. One man had got two of Norman's feet off the ground, but then Norman had given him a nip on the ankle and he had dropped him.

When Veronica went forward, all the spectators had laughed.

'You're just a boy,' one farmer called out. 'Come back in ten years' time!'

Veronica paid no attention to all this. She paid her entrance fee and stepped into the pig ring. Then she went up to Norman and put her arms around his fat body. He really was the most enormous pig, and he must have weighed hundreds of kilos. She took the strain and with a sudden heave, up went Norman into the air.

The pig was so surprised that he forgot to try to nip her. One moment he was enjoying a good guzzle of turnip scrapings and the

next he was in the air, his feet pointing up towards the sky. He let out an awful squealing noise at first and then went absolutely silent. All the breath had been squeezed out of him by Veronica's mighty grip.

Veronica held Norman there for at least a minute. Then she gently lowered him back on to his feet. Norman gave a gasp, followed by a grunt, and finally he lurched away to a corner. He stood there, glaring at Veronica, every rasher of his bacon quivering in fear.

Veronica was very pleased. She stepped forward to receive her prize, and gave Norman a friendly pat immediately afterwards. He just squealed with fright though, and my father said that he thought Norman would remember that day for the rest of his life.