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CHAPTER I

TEA WITH THE BISHOP

IT is very difficult to look as if you minded the death of a grandfather who, though you may have spent your holidays in his house, seldom remembered that you did. It was like that with the Forbes children. Their mother had died when Holly, the youngest, was quite little. Before the second world war they had lived in Guernsey with their father. As soon as war was declared their father, who had retired from the Navy to have time to bring the children up properly, rejoined the Navy, and the children were sent to England and given to their grandfather to look after.

Grandfather was a clergyman; he was vicar of a village called Martins, but Martins, though he did his duty by it, was far less important than a reference book he was writing on animals mentioned in the Bible. He was so absorbed in this reference book that when Sorrel, Mark and Holly first arrived at the vicarage all he said was, "There were four beasts." At the time the children, not knowing about the reference book, thought this both rude and inaccurate, but after a very little while they understood that he honestly did not realise they were there.

Holidays came and went and, except in church, the children hardly ever saw their grandfather. Sometimes they saw him on his bicycle going to visit somebody in the village, but mostly he was shut in his study, he even ate his meals there. Then, two years later, he spoke to them again. He told them about their father. This time he was not so much vague as buttoned-up looking. It was as if he had fastened an extra skin round him as a covering against feeling miserable.

" The telegram says ' missing.' "

" Nothing about ' presumed drowned ' ? " Sorrel asked.

" Nothing."

" Then he could easily be a prisoner in the hands of the Japs," she persisted.

Grandfather looked at her.

" Quite possibly," he said, and shut his study door. Sorrel was just going to be eleven at that time. Mark was nine and a half and Holly eight and a quarter. The telegram talk had taken place in the hall. Mark swung on the banisters.

" I bet he's a prisoner."

" If he's a prisoner or . . ." Sorrel broke off, she did not believe her father was drowned, so she was not going to say the word. " Who do we belong to ? Grandfather ? "

Holly smelt something good cooking.

" Let's ask Hannah."

Hannah was what made holidays with grandfather bearable. She had been looking after him for years and years, and she treated him with a mixture of affection and rudeness, but never with respect.

" I give respect where respect is called for," she would say to grandfather, " and it's not called for when you wear your suit so long you can see your face in it, and it's green rather than black. And it's not called for when, instead of taking an interest in decent Christian things, you get creating about eagles, lions and the like, which aren't what a person expects to hear about in a vicarage."

Hannah treated grandfather as if he were a piece of furniture, flicking him over with a duster or a feather mop.

" Look at you, looking like something thrown away for salvage ! Dust everywhere ! "

Perhaps because she had always liked them, or perhaps because she had lived so long in a vicarage, Hannah was a great singer of hymns. All day long snatches of hymn

came from her, often with bits that were not hymn stuck on and sung to the same tune, or something like it.

"We plough the fields and scatter, the good seed . . drat the butcher, that's a wretched piece of meat!"

On the morning when grandfather had his telegram Hannah was not singing. She knew what was in the telegram and she was very fond of Mr. Bill, as she called the children's father. All the same, singing or not, she was comforting-looking. She was all curves. A round top piece which was pushed in a little in the middle, only to bulge out enormously down below. Her legs had great calves, which curved only slightly at the ankles before they became feet. She had a curving face finished off with a round bun of hair. Usually her face was red, but that morning it was almost pale.

Sorrel looked at her, and quite suddenly she began to cry, and when she cried the other two did too. Hannah knelt on the floor and made room for them all in her arms.

"Do you think he's drowned, Hannah?" Sorrel hiccoughed.

Hannah hugged them tighter.

"Of course I don't. Nor does them at the top that sent that telegram. Gentlemen of few words they are in the Navy. If they mean drowned they say drowned; if they mean missing they say missing. Why, we're used to your father being missing. We're always missing him."

After that the children felt better. Hannah said worrying made you cold inside and she gave them all cups of cocoa and, as if there were no such thing as rationing, two spoons of sugar in each cup. While they were drinking their cocoa Sorrel asked Hannah what was going to happen to them. Hannah did not see at first what she was worrying about, and when she did she gave a big laugh.

"You never thought your father didn't arrange for something like this; of course he did. You'll go on just

the same until he comes back. You and Holly at Ferntree School for Girls, and Mark at Wilton House."

Mark frowned when he was puzzled.

" But who pays for us if Daddy can't ? "

" Who says your father can't ? Of course he's provided for you and, as a matter of fact, your grandfather pays your school bills, and always has."

Mark took a big swallow of cocoa.

" Why ? "

Hannah was cooking the lunch. She looked over her shoulder at him.

" What a boy for questions ! Your father lost money when the Germans took the Channel Islands, but your grandfather had enough, so that was all right."

Sorrel had two plaits. She fiddled with them when she was worried. She was fiddling now.

" He doesn't seem to get much for it. I mean, we aren't what you'd call a pleasure to him."

" I wouldn't say that," said Hannah. " There's pleasure comes from knowing you're doing your duty. When he takes his mind away from his lions and snakes and that, he knows you're safe here or safe at school and he can go back to his work feeling there's nothing more he can do."

In August grandfather died. He finished writing his reference book, and it was as if that was what he was waiting for, because he just ruled a neat little line under the last animal's name, and then he was dead.

" If only we had the coupons for decent black you couldn't want anything more seemly," said Hannah.

The people who lived in the parish were always very nice to the children, and when grandfather died they were nicer than ever, asking them to so many meals that they could have had two or three lunches and teas every day. The children did not go to the funeral, but after it they had tea with the Bishop, who took it. Hannah had been

so pleased that the Bishop was taking the funeral, and so sure that the furniture ought to be given an extra polish because he was coming, that the children were prepared for somebody they would simply hate, but he was not at all hateable. They had tea in the dining-room with cucumber sandwiches and a jam sponge, and he was just as openly pleased about the sandwiches and the jam sponge as they were. It was when the last sandwich was eaten that he began to talk about the future.

" I suppose you three have got on to the fact that you won't be living here any more."

They had, of course, realised that a new vicar must be coming. Mark said so.

" Hannah thought I was the person to tell you about your future. Hannah has a very great respect for gaiters. She thinks where there are gaiters there must be great intellect. It's not correct, of course. I'm just an ordinary person that you can ask ordinary questions from. So stop me if I tell you something stupidly and you don't understand what I'm saying. How much do you know about your mother ? "

The children thought.

" I can remember a little, I think," said Sorrel. " I'm not certain though ; I may just think that I do."

" Did your father never talk to you about her ? "

" Oh, yes, of course," said Holly. " She was so beautiful that people used to turn and stare in the streets."

Mark leant forward.

" She was very gay. When she was in the house it was as if the sun was always shining."

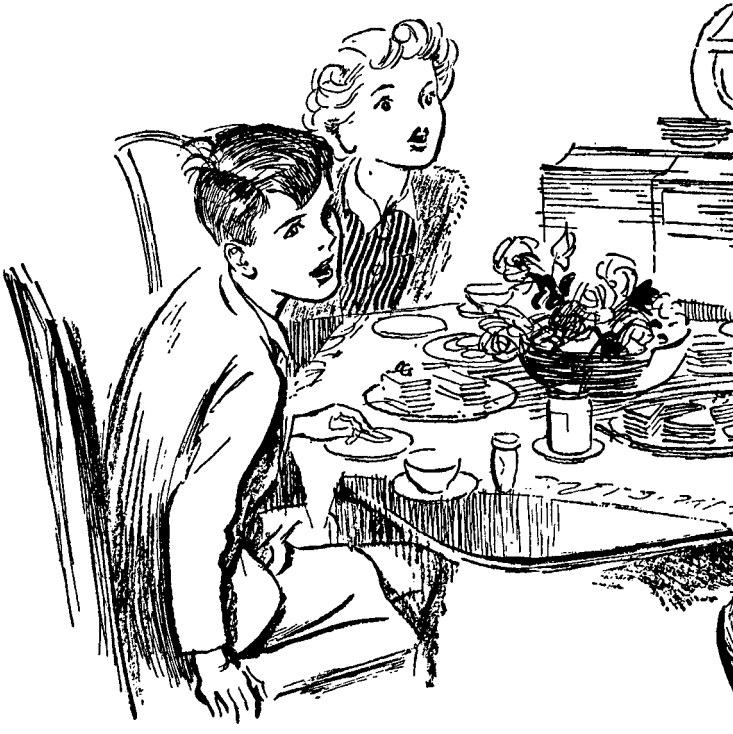
Sorrel flicked back a plait which had fallen forward.

" In Guernsey everything lovely in the house she chose and Daddy never would have anything moved from where she had put it."

The Bishop nodded.

" Very lucky children to have had such a mother, but she was even more interesting than you know. She was a Warren. Adeline Warren."

He said Adeline Warren as if it was something



that tasted good. Holly said:

" We knew her name was Adeline. Daddy called her 'Addie.' "

" But you didn't know she was a Warren, or what the

name Warren means. The Warrens are one of the oldest and one of the most distinguished theatrical families in this country."

The children were so surprised that for a moment they



said nothing. Never once had their father said anything about the theatre.

"Do you mean our mother's father was an actor?" Sorrel asked.

" Her father was an actor, her mother was, and still is, an actress. Her brothers and sisters are all on the stage. So were her grandparents and great-grandparents. So was she for just one year. Lovely Adeline Warren ! I had the good fortune to see her."

Mark liked his facts clear.

" Did she stop acting because she married ? "

The Bishop looked at each of them in turn to be sure they were attending.

" She was eighteen and your grandmother was very proud of her, so proud that she thought she ought to have the very best of everything, especially husbands."

" And she chose Daddy," said Holly.

" No. She chose somebody else. A very important man. Your mother was very young and perhaps a little afraid of your grandmother, and she did not say ' I won't marry him, I love somebody else,' so preparations for an enormous wedding went on, and then, when everybody was in the church, including the bridegroom, a message came to say that she was sorry, she was not going to be married that day, and never to that bridegroom. She was going to marry your father."

" And so she did," said Holly.

" Yes, but it wasn't as easy as all that. Your grandmother was very angry and she never saw your mother again."

" What, because she married Daddy ? " said Mark. " I should think she ought to have been jolly pleased to have Daddy in the family."

" I know, perhaps she should. Perhaps she's sorry now, but at that time she felt she'd been made to look foolish, and she lost her temper. Very understandable, you know."

" I don't think it was very understandable," said Sorrel. " To be angry at the time was all right, but fancy never seeing our mother again ! "