

Grandma and the Drunken Sailor

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My maternal grandmother lived with us in England during the Second World War. She remains a formidable though somewhat tragic character in my memory. She suffered from rheumatism and had been hard of hearing since she was in her twenties. Communicating with her was always a challenge and sometimes necessitated the use of a cumbersome ear trumpet that she often kept beside her.

She was a strict teetotaler with no obvious sense of humour, and moved slowly through a life permeated by the clinging scent of mothballs. She was a product of a rigid Non-Conformist upbringing who married an older man with strong moral and religious views, particularly regarding behaviour on the Sabbath. Widowed in her fifties, she was in her sixties when she lived with us, overseeing the raising of three grandchildren.

She was also a stern disciplinarian, who meted out punishment regularly for various offences, chief among which was failing to put away our toys after play. The penalty for this sin typically comprised a sharp rap on the side of the skull with a metal thimble lodged on the end of her forefinger, or a hard whack on the posterior with her open hand. Periodically Grandma would read us stories from a collection of horrific cautionary tales for children called *Struwwelpeter*, by Heinrich Hoffman. This was a large hard-backed book translated from the original German and profusely illustrated in vivid colour, which told in rhyme of the dire consequences awaiting wayward children. Harriet, who insisted on playing with matches, accidentally set her apron on fire, and finished up as a pile of ashes, with only her small red shoes remaining unconsumed. Young Conrad, who ignored his mother's warning not to suck his thumb, was visited by the long, red-legged scissor-man. This fiendish character proceeded to snip off both his thumbs, all illustrated in detail, including spurting blood! Needless to say, we children lived in terror of committing similar misdemeanours and suffering the corresponding dreadful fates.

Grandma expected small children to be seen but not heard most of the time, except on Sunday afternoons. Then we would gather around the family piano for a sing-along and Grandma would play a mixture of mournful dirges, ribald sea shanties and some surprisingly inappropriate songs. There was "The Burial of Sir John Moore" (after the battle of Coruna) and "John Brown's Body Lies A'mouldering in the Grave." There was also "My Grandfather's Clock," which was one of our favourites. When it came to the line "stopped, short, never to go again, when the Old Man died!," we would fall on the floor and writhe in unison, much to Grandma's annoyance. We also sang "Little Brown Jug," which eulogized carousing in the Prohibition era. She certainly enjoyed the melody and rousing chorus, but for a long time I honestly didn't believe she knew what it was all about! Another favourite was "The Campdown Races" which celebrated betting on horses. Again I didn't think Grandma understood the implications.

Only recently did I begin to suspect that there was more than the lure of an attractive melody to her selection of songs. I have now come to the conclusion that this was Grandma's reaction to the stifling strictures of her upbringing, and that she knew perfectly well the connotations of these songs.

From time to time I have this wild vision. I am a small child again, standing alone in a large room surrounded by discarded toys. At one end of the room, Grandma is seated at a piano, alternately brandishing her ear trumpet with one free hand, and stabbing the air with the thimble-tipped forefinger of the other, while pounding away at the keys and belting out the chorus of "What shall we do with the Drunken Sailor?"

Something tells me that Grandma would be amused at the idea. Bless her soul!•

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