

Memories of Childhood

By

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On Christmas Eve, 1894, Betsy Canham was left a widow with four little girls, the eldest eight years old, and the youngest eighteen months.

John Canham was a carpenter like his father, but had recently gone into partnership with John Cook, builder and stone mason. He was forty years old, and on that blustery morning he had gone off to Heighington, a nearby village, where work was going on at the church. Seven men were at work on the roof. Just as he arrived, a great stone hurtled down upon his head. The doctor was called; he was young and new to the village. Nothing could be done, he said, it was no use taking him to the hospital, better take him home. So word was sent to his father and, still alive, but quite unconscious, he was taken back to Branston, not to his home but to his father's cottage.

In the course of the day, summoned by telegram from Grimsby, his younger brother Joseph arrived. His wife's younger sister Emily also arrived from Lincoln, four miles away. Together with his father and his sister Rebecca, all kept watch over the unconscious figure lying on the green-covered couch; they did not attempt to take him upstairs. "Wouldn't he have had a chance if he had gone to hospital?", Emily suggested. "The doctor knows best", said old Joseph; Betsy said nothing, just watched. But for years after, especially when she learned of the operation of trepanning, sometimes in the night, agonised with sleeplessness, she wondered, "Perhaps they could have saved him."

The end came, and with it came a remark from old Joseph which Emily never forgot. "Well, Betsy" he said, "you'll have to manage without a girl now". The 'girl' helped with the four little children and was dedicated to the whole family. She was lame, a bit eccentric, but a real stand-by. How long she did stay, I do not know, but Emily stayed and Joseph took up work once more with his father. Help came from the hall where Betsy had been a much valued ladies maid before her marriage, and over the years as the children grew up, the carriage from the hall, or from the squire's sister in Lincoln, stopped outside the gate and rolls of serviceable materials were carried in by the footman. Miss Louisa lovingly greeted Betsy and the little girls, especially Sarah-Louisa the most mischievous of them all. Eleanor, the eldest, was always a serious little girl, always the wise one of the family. Edith was delicate and not as intelligent as the others, and the baby Ethel, with dark curls and laughing eyes, was the darling of them all.

"Of course I could never settle in Branston", Emily often said in the months that followed. She was the youngest of the Codling family, and as her elder sister often said, she'd always been spoilt. She had a good many

jobs in different houses, but had always shied away from what Betsy called 'good service'. She wore clothes as fashionable as she could get them, had her hair cut short at the back, and curled at the front, and grandfather and Becca thoroughly disapproved of her. However, the young men of the village, the young tailor, a shoemaker and others, were rather dazzled by a young woman, good-looking and liking to dance, though the Squire disapproved of dancing and it was hard to come by in Branston. However, the fact that she had lived in London – albeit not very willingly – in the household of her eldest brother, who in his apprenticeship to a saddler, had in fact been converted to Methodism and had managed, by amazing industry and devotion, to become a much-loved Methodist minister in East London. Though Emily's stay there was of short duration, it gave her a status in the village, and together with her good looks and the fact that she was not averse to a bit of flirting, made her something out of the ordinary in the village.

So when at the end of May or June, Emily and young Joseph, a quiet but determined young man, announced that they intended to get married in July, it was something of a shock to everybody concerned. Joseph was helping in the business, but his father showed no sign of retiring. There were no houses to be had, and if they thought his father and Aunt Becca would share their cottage, they were much mistaken, though there would have been plenty of room.

Emily was thirty-one, getting on so to speak, Joseph was twenty-six, and the business might look up; it needed to. Anyhow, the wedding was fixed for July 2nd, 1895 at Saxilby where brother Charles had succeeded his late father as the village tailor. Emily wore a blue crepe gown with a lace veil and orange blossom – all kept later in a horsehair-covered trunk studded with brass nails, into which I used to rummage when I was a little girl. They went to Scarborough for the honeymoon and returned to rent the two front rooms of Aunt Betsy's cottage while she and the four children crowded together in the back.

A year went by and on July 3rd, Joseph and Emily's baby was born, 'Joseph Roy'. Perhaps the grandfather was a bit reconciled, perhaps not. Aunt Betsy thought sadly of the eldest child she had lost, a little boy too, and perhaps was a bit jealous, though she was the kindest and dearest of aunties. But things did not go too well, the children spoilt the baby, and in four months time, Emily realised that another child was on the way. They must move somehow; two new cottages, semi-detached, had just been built under the shadow of the old mill on the outskirts of the village. The east winds beat upon them, only the scullery and the back bedroom got any sunshine and the plaster mortar was hardly dry, but they moved in and I was born on July 27th 1897 – an inconvenience as I wasn't expected until late August.

It wasn't a bad cottage, if it hadn't been so cold, a front room, horsehair sofa, stiff shiny 'easy' chairs, a 'chiffonier' that Dad always called

'the rabbit hutch' and a rug knitted by my mother while I was on the way, with tufts of red braid unravelled from the hangings of an enormous bedstead mother bought at the Dean's sale when she went into Lincoln by carrier's cart one day. She got it for a few shillings, it was solid mahogany. It had a flock mattress under a billowy feather bed – I was born in it, so was my brother, and later on my twin sisters. Mother had white dimity hangings on it instead of the old red ones, and muslin covered shiny blue cotton stuff draping over the dressing table legs, Victorian fashion. I used to think it was lovely.

We only used the front room on Sundays, and not always then. The kitchen had a rag rug with lots of red material Aunt Betsy gave us from the red coat of Uncle John's grandfather, Sergeant major John Brooke, said to have fought at Waterloo. She had his sword too, and a print of the battle of Waterloo. My father was sceptical about the Waterloo story. Uncle John was the son of grandfather's first marriage, my father the second.

The mill was still there, but its sails had gone, but I remember being carried up a special stairway by my father right to the very top and looking down to see Joseph Roy, a tiny figure moaning loudly because I was being taken and he was not.

But I am getting forward a bit; by the time there were three of us, we also had Mary. I remember Mary pushing the pram with me in it at one end and the baby at the other. There was a fringe of bobbles, I could just catch by leaning forward, but Mary slapped my hand and I drew back. Possibly that was my earliest memory. Roy was contented and self-reliant, he is said to have gone on errands to the village shop at the age of three, but he had long curls until he was four. I remember mother taking him to have them cut off, and how she cried about it, and auntie said, "It's nonsense, a big boy like that having curls." I was very conscious of my straight 'rats tails', as my grandfather called them, though Mary and her sister Emma and her successor, did their best with rags and little bumps all over my head, which prevented me from getting to sleep.

An historic event I do remember was the death of Queen Victoria. We were told about it one Sunday afternoon by my father, in the front room where Roy was playing with toy soldiers, some on horseback in red uniforms, others khaki-clad. I don't think I was much impressed, but when I started school and sat for about a year in a classroom with a picture of the Queen, surrounded by all her sons and daughters and grandchildren, I felt a bit as though I had known her by the fact that I remembered being told of her death.

The Methodist uncle paid a visit to his old home at Saxilby and came to see my mother and father, but he took no notice of me sitting on the rug by the kitchen fire. They went grandly into the 'room' where there was another fire in honour of his visit. I must have been about four, but I

remember sitting there rather forlornly because we had heard quite a lot about Uncle Harry and he didn't speak to me.

I went to school when I was five but I could already read. Aunt Becca read pious stories to us about Little Dot and the gravediggers and the daisies in the churchyard. Little Dot eventually occupied one of the graves, no doubt that was why my favourite hymn was 'Within the churchyard side by side, lie many long low graves' which goes on, 'Full many a little Christian child, woman and man lies there, and we pass near them every time when we go in to prayer'.

My father was often ill while we lived at the mill house. He used to tell the story of arriving at work unobserved, and overhearing one of the men say, "He'll not be here today - he won't be here long anyhow, poor chap". He lived, however, to be eighty-three. About that time, the two boys had scarlet fever. Mother was left to look after them by herself as Dad couldn't be in the house for fear of carrying infection to the Hall or the Rectory. Mrs Applewhite lived next door, and was a great help. I went to grandfather and Aunt Becca. I had already started school and wore a green frock, rather tight with buttons all down the back. Two other little girls started school on the same day. Both had cropped hair, and wore lilac print dresses. I envied them as my frock had been made out an old one of my Aunt's and didn't fit very well, was too tight and also I didn't like green. The little girls with cropped hair, one dark, the other fair, were just like the tiny china-headed dolls with bodies filled with sawdust, one could buy for a penny in those days.

We all sat with the babies in the gallery to begin with, but I was soon promoted to second class because I could read. There we did 'thimble-drill' and learnt to hem on bits of brown cotton stuff with red dots to tell you where to put the needle in and out. The thimble-drill didn't help much, I always sewed better without one. I could add up a bit and soon could make up tens; 7+3, 6+4 etc., but I was impatient with some kind of apparatus intended to help us to add up - it muddled me. There were also some brown story books about a family of pigs. I thought them rather silly, I was used to the strong meat of Old Testament Bible stories. All the same, I can still see the cupboard where they were kept, and feel that they were intended as a treat, and I ought to have been pleased about them and wasn't. Nearly all the girls, big and little, wore scarlet cloaks, with hoods edged with black braid. The lady at the Hall gave them to every child for regular attendance, but I stayed at home every time I had a cold, and I had colds so often in the winter that I never had a good record of attendance. However, I always had a red cloak as my four cousins handed theirs down to me as they grew out of them.

In 1903, we left the house where I was born. Old Mr Rooke died and his daughter went to Canada. Their cottage belonged to grandfather, and though small, it was warm and cosy, detached and overlooked grandfather's orchard, which had been an old quarry, the garden and the field where Charlie, the grocer's old pony grazed. We were now a family clan, as my aunt

and four cousins lived 'across the road' and we went 'down to grandfathers' by the side of the stone pan-tiled wall which separated his garden from the road. Over the top of the apple trees, we could see from the bedroom window my aunt moving about in her kitchen when the lamp was lit. It was quite a step along the road, but we felt we were all together.

Anyhow, it was a good thing we moved, as I doubt whether we should have survived that winter, 1903-4, in the old house. My twin sisters were born in November and after Christmas we children all had whooping cough. The babies had it dreadfully – they were baptised privately in the room where I was lying in bed, also with whooping cough. I sat up, put my hands together, watched and said the Lord's prayer when we came to it. The twins and I developed pneumonia and the little things both died one night in the room downstairs where aunts, cousins and the district nurse had all done their best to help. A steam kettle boiled and whistled on the open fire to relieve my breathing. I was thought to be asleep, but I saw nurse bathing the babies in the middle of the night and it seemed very strange, and somebody said, "Hush, she's awake," somebody else said, to console my mother for the loss of her babies, "You'd have lost that one if the others had lived".

The boys got better quickly, but I didn't go to school for about six months, and when I did go it was into a classroom with narrow pointed windows and to the ordeal of multiplication tables. I was only six, I hated that classroom. I soon knew all the books by heart, but even when I was seven the multiplication tables, at any rate 9 times baffled me, especially 7 times 9 and 8 times 9 or the other way 'round. Also I couldn't knit. Roy said all you had to do was to put the stitches from one needle to the other. Somebody cast on for me and I tried, but it didn't work and I cried. There was a horrible dark brown model kind of relief map of England in a big tray which I disliked intensely. There were compensations, however. I sat on the back row with Betty Frith and Fred Miles. Fred had pocket money, most of us hadn't, and he bought ABC biscuits and sugar coated animal biscuits, which we munched contentedly without being caught, though I got the reputation of being a 'talker'. And once was caned – not very hard – for it.

Later when we got into the 'big room' I caught up. Arithmetic didn't bother me again until I met long division. It was really the same story, then. I tended to find that if the figures went 9 times it was too big, and if I tried 8 times, I got a remainder bigger than my division, which was baffling. It sorted itself out, however, and as all the children from nine to fourteen were all in one room I learnt quite a lot from all the rest. The big ones recited 'How Horatius kept the Bridge' and 'The Armada' and 'The Revenge'. We learnt 'Ring out wild bells to the wild sky' and 'The goose that laid golden eggs'; read 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' aloud and I did my first composition, the 'Story of the Dog' and 'The Shadow', amazed that I could write down something not dictated. In winter it was often cold at the back though the stoves might be glowing. Our education must seem odd to modern minds, but at about ten, I knew thirty-two pages by heart of 'The Song of the Last Minstrel' and would break into, "Before their eyes the wizard lay, as if he had not been dead a...."

and go on until Mother said, "it gave her the creeps". Dad knew most of the 'Ancient Mariner', and when we read 'Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare', we all started on Macbeth, and would spout the witches' scenes with gusto.

Mother was ambitious for us, as our London cousins all got scholarships to Public Schools; they were the Methodist children. There was an 'Exhibition' one could try for, a local bequest from some seventeenth century Fen adventurer, which had been arranged as a scholarship to take a girl to the High School or a boy to the Grammar School. It was worth £7.00, three villages were included in the scheme and when I sat for it there were seven candidates. One afternoon I was sorting stamps 'down at grandfathers', when Mother came tearing down full of the news, "Bella has got the Exhibition!". I hadn't time to be pleased, or proud, or to realise anything about it, for grandfather, sitting in his armchair in the corner, looked up and said, "And how do you think you are going to manage it!" Mother just looked at him, made no reply, seized me by the hand and we simply ran back to our own cottage where we could escape from that cold and chilling remark.

It wasn't easy. The solicitors paid fees and books, but nobody advanced anything for uniform or a bicycle, but somehow or another it was managed, certainly without grandfather's assistance; though I rather think he did advance £5.00 for the grocer's bill about that time and Dad did overtime to pay it off - at 7½d an hour. There was also the matter of 2/6d a week rent for the cottage, but in that case Dad put his foot down to point out that he had no pay for doing accounts and getting out estimates, and though grandfather still kept an account of what Dad owed him nothing was paid. Business was improving, though the Cook partnership had been dissolved, and Cook was now a rival carpenter, but we struggled on. Mother was a wonderful cook, but not a methodical housekeeper. Spring cleaning was a dreadful ordeal, with everything out of place all at the same time. Mercifully, old Mrs. Armstrong did the washing at 1/6d a time and a bottle of stout for eleveses, tea at 3.30 and "no children about". She was very small, wizened and wrinkled - like Toad when he dressed up as a washerwoman. She wore a print bonnet, a little red and black woollen shawl over her shoulders, a print dress, a white apron with a coarse sack apron over it, and she had clogs. When we did come in contact with her, she related to us all the virtues of the children of another family where she washed. She went on washing until well over eighty and it was only with much reluctance that she gave up, feeling that she was really ill used. I believe, though, that the 5/- a week old age pension had come in by then. Mother tried to do the washing for a bit, perhaps sometimes when the old lady was ill, but that was an ordeal added to the Spring-cleaning and we suffered accordingly. The washing hung around over racks for days, especially in winter. It wasn't Mother's strong suit, but she was up every morning at six to get everybody off to work and school, with a well cooked breakfast, by a glowing kitchen fire, and pies and puddings, stews and steaks were our fare usually at dinner time - "Emily's extravagance", grandfather said. Stewing Beef was 7½d a pound, steak 11d

or, for the best quality, 1/2d. I don't know about bacon, but we always kept a pig and, 'getting the pig out of the way' is a story to itself.

The scholarship was, of course, a landmark for me, but we were still in the little cottage with sweet violets in the Spring sunshine under the hawthorn hedge on one side of the garden, and on the quarry side a hedge of plums, starred with white blossom in Spring, and sprinkled with small sweet black plums in the Autumn. The great pear tree down in the orchard rose above the hedge, white too in April, and the 'field' was dazzling later with lace-like hedge parsley, buttercups and daisies. What Charlie found to eat, I don't know, but one summer when Roy and I were away from school for a fortnight, when Bill had measles, we were provided with sharp sickles, and, with much enjoyment, cleared spaces in the field – so perhaps he got something then. How anyone could have allowed children of nine and ten to brandish those sickles I don't know. Yet when we went to school in Lincoln, Mother made us promise solemnly to get off our bicycles and walk down Canwick Hill and Lindum Road, a great humiliation as other children sailed down, hats flying in the wind, and we only got back on our bicycles at the bottom.