

Five Aunts and a Joint Birthday Present. **(from Child of the Thirties)**

To be fatherless in the Thirties was an unenviable experience for any child, but was especially so if your mother did not have a home of her own and had to support you and herself on the 35 shillings a week she earned for 5 ½ days of labour in a boot and shoe factory.

My father, died when I was three, leaving my mother with an uphill struggle for survival. But although fatherless, I was blessed – or cursed – with five aunts. Their names were Nell, Elsie, Flo, Kate and Maud and they were big and buxom women who all looked like a picture of the music-hall artiste, Florrie Forde.

Over the years they brought me joy and unhappiness in just about equal proportions. They were tough and uncompromising women – far more aggressive and assertive than their generally gentle, mild-mannered husbands. This was surprising, bearing in mind that all five husbands had served in the trenches in the Great War and had taken part in appalling battles. But perhaps that was why they were so compliant, feeling that even a minor domestic squabble was not worth becoming involved in after all they had been through in Flanders.

Such was the awesome reputation of these five aunts that when they called a family meeting at my grandmother's council house a few weeks before my ninth birthday, my mother and I feared the worst. As far as I was concerned, the event that followed confirmed my fears.

The aunts sat in a circle in granny's sparsely furnished living-room. Their husbands perched on the well-scrubbed dining-table or propped themselves against the wall. They all puffed away at the Woodbine cigarettes with a dedication to the task that verged on the fanatical. It was all too much for me. I went into the kitchen and tried to listen through the door.

Aunt Elsie, most forthright of all the sisters, made the announcement. 'We've come about Ronnie's birthday,' she said.

My heart gave a jump. There must be something special in the wind if they were all prepared to turn out on a dingy Sunday afternoon to reveal plans for my anniversary.

'We are not going to waste money on buying toys or books for him this year,' she continued. 'We are going to put it to better use.'

My heart, which was working overtime, did not jump at this revelation. It sank.

'We've decided on a joint birthday present,' said Aunt Elsie, in a positive tone that left no room for modification. 'We are going to kit him out.'

For a moment I thought she had said 'kick him out', but then it dawned on me that she was using one of Uncle Ted's army expressions.

'Flo and Bill are going to buy him a nice overcoat they have seen in the Co-op,' said Elsie. 'Maud and Jack will get him a new cap and some socks. Kate and Harry have seen a smart pair of trousers and a tie, and Ted and me are thinking of a shirt and some gloves.'

Aunt Nell butted in. 'And my Walt's going to make him a pair of boots,' she said proudly. All members of the family recognised that Uncle Walt was a true craftsman of the boot and shoe industry. 'A hand-made pair of boots,' said Aunt Nell pushing the fact home to make sure my mother did not underestimate the value of the gift. 'They'll last Ronnie for years. They'll never wear out, will they, Walt?'

Uncle Walt voiced his agreement. By this time I had opened the kitchen door

and stood watching the family scene. I knew it was ungrateful, but it was one of those moments when I almost wished I had been an orphan. Once Uncle Walt had measured my feet, the clan departed, assuring my mother once again that, come my birthday, I would be the best-dressed kid in the street, if not the town.

On the morning of my birthday – a Saturday – my mother produced the combined family presents. She watched as I slowly and reluctantly put on the clothes – shirt, socks, trousers, overcoat, gloves, boots and finally the cap.

‘Let’s have a good look at you,’ she said. I stood to attention with my arms tightly by my sides, struggling against the urge to burst into tears.

There was no doubting the quality of the clothes, but there was something terribly wrong. None of them fitted. Not only were they too big, they were far too big. The size of everything practically suffocated me.

The trousers reached down to the top of my socks and the overcoat fell only a few inches short of my ankles. The shirt collar was almost large enough to accommodate another neck. As for the cap, it came close to defying description. It was as big as a dinner plate, with a massive peak that jutted out several inches. To crown it all, it had a decorative button on top that looked like a gobstopper.

Worst of all were the boots. They were at least three sizes more than they should have been and the bulbous toecaps were as hard as rocks. True to his promise, Uncle Walt had made them to last. I hated every item of this joint birthday present but I hated two of them far above the others – the monster cap and the giant boots.

My mother and I set off on a grand tour of all the aunts and uncles so that they could see me attired in my new outfit. From my point of view it was a depressing outing; from their point of view my appearance was the realisation of a master plan. Without exception, every aunt said, ‘We bought them big so that he could grow into them.’

I had hoped that my mother would walk back to my granny’s house without passing along Edmund Street. If there was one area of the town to be avoided by a small boy it was Edmund Street – especially if he was clad in the way I happened to be.

The reason? It was happy hunting ground of Maxie York and his gang, a villainous bunch, who, even at the tender ages of nine or ten, seemed hell-bent on getting to borstal by the quickest possible route.

For some unknown reason, as we turned into Edmund Street my mother took hold of my hand. I was horrified. If Maxie and his boys saw me hand-in-hand with my mother my reputation at school, such as it was, would be in tatters. My hopes of avoiding confrontation were unfulfilled. Maxie and his wrecking crew were watching and waiting, and as we drew nearer they were able to take in the full nature of my apparel. They shrieked with laughter, pointing their fingers and stamping their feet.

‘Look, he’s got his dad’s boots on,’ howled Maxie.

I stopped and tried to turn back, but my mother took a firmer grip on my hand and pulled me along.

‘Take no notice,’ she said. ‘They are only jealous.’

For the life of me I could not see what they had to be jealous about.

‘Go and fetch seven pounds of potatoes in your cap!’ Maxie shouted.

That was too much for me, even in my demoralised state. I wrenched myself free from my mother’s grasp and tried to set off across the street to challenge my tormentors. But my mother was too quick for me. She grabbed me by the shoulders, clipped my ear and pushed me ahead of her as though rolling a boulder up a hill.

The spectacle filled Maxie and his gang with delight and they trailed along behind us, chanting, 'He's windy, he's windy!' – a schoolboy term meaning cowardice in the face of the enemy.

My humiliation was complete.

I dreaded the following day. It was Sunday, which meant Sunday School and the wearing of the 'Sunday best'. Up until this moment I had never had a 'Sunday best', but now I had – in the shapeless form of the family's combined birthday present. I knew that my mother would insist that I wore every item and I knew that meant more merciless ragging if the Edmund Street gang set eyes on me. I did not have to worry about meeting them at Sunday School. Maxie and company believed that only cissies went to Sunday School and their parents did little to persuade them otherwise. It was the journey back from Sunday School that I was worried about.

It was during prayers when I should have been concentrating on matters affecting my spiritual welfare, that I came up with an idea that just might alleviate my current situation. I suddenly remembered the fate that had befallen a boy from a private school who had been unlucky enough to ride his bicycle along Edmund Street while wearing his school uniform. Memories of that incident raised my hopes to such an extent that I was able to put my worries behind me and concentrate on the Scripture lesson.

The class concluded, I pulled on my overcoat, drew my cap low over my eyes and set off home. I marched along Sackville Street and turned left onto Edmund Street. Dusk was on its way but it was still light enough for me to see Maxie and two of his pals hovering around one of the entries placed at intervals among the terraced houses.

Maxie spotted me immediately and was plainly ready to give chase as soon as I turned tail and ran. But I just kept walking towards them, almost as though they did not exist. Maxie and the gang could not believe their luck. It was like manna from heaven. They waited with ill-concealed excitement until I drew level and then the three of them began to circle round me like mongrel terriers tormenting a sheep in a field.

I stood stock still, with my arms by my sides as two of them capered about in front of me and Maxie sneaked behind, ready for the pounce I hoped and prayed would come.

Then Maxie did it. He leapt forward and snatched the cap from my head and waved it around in triumph. This was followed by a little jig as he teasingly held out the cap, daring me to take it back.

'What you goin' to do about it, what you goin' to do about it?' he jeered, a chant taken up by his equally delighted lieutenants.

I remained still and silent. Maxie, his little blackcurrant eyes dancing and his cheeks red with pleasure, had known all along what he intended to do, but my refusal to attempt any form of defence led him to shorten the torture and get on with the deed. He turned away from me, gripped the cap by its peak and hurled it skywards in the direction of the sloping roofs. The cap flew off like a boomerang but, unlike a boomerang it did not come back. It struck the side of a chimney and slid down the roof, ending in the guttering. All that could be seen of it now was about an inch and a half of the monstrous peak.

'Well, what are you goin' to do *now*?' howled Maxie, flushed with achievement and wallowing in the admiration of his henchmen.

'Nothing,' I replied. I turned and walked away, deliberately scraping the steel tips of my heels on the pavement so that the sparks flew brightly in the fading light.

I had my back to them, so Maxie could not see that I was smiling the broadest of smiles. I was a happy lad at that moment, but already my mind was wrestling with the next big problem in my young life: How could I get rid of those bloody boots?