

A Simple Man's Treasure

The day started out just like any other day in cold dreary London: Full of people bundled up in overcoats rushing off to nowhere.

I was about to join them when there was a knock on my bedsitter door. A uniformed man wearing a cap handed me a monogrammed envelope with the word URGENT written boldly across the face.

"Please come with me sir," he said in a polished voice.

"I'll get my scarf," I said a little perplexed after I read the letter.

The stately country house with its carefully manicured lawn and gardens loomed ahead as we drove up to the ornate entrance. I was being chauffeured in a large maroon Bentley with a white roof. The letter advised that this was a matter of urgency, and I should waste no time. I had no idea why someone of my lowly standing was being summoned.

People in the area euphemistically knew the estate as "Buckingham Palace". The polished brass plate at the entrance read: "GREY OAKS".

It was elegantly deposited at the grand entrance near the fountain. The chauffeur pushed the enormous brass doorbell and was rewarded with melodious chimes from somewhere behind the large ornately carved oak doors.

I held the letter tightly in my grip ready to show it to whoever may question the reason for my unusual arrival. A smartly dressed butler with grey hair swung the heavy looking door open and eyed me surreptitiously before beckoning me to enter.

He did not ask to see the letter. Instead I was led to a large, airy room. Closer examination revealed that the walls were covered in floor to ceiling shelves of books. Two stern faced men stood in silent contemplation. They turned when I entered and bade me sit. I lowered myself nervously into a plush leather chair that looked as if it had spent its long life being polished with expensive leather restorer. I have never felt so desperately out of place in my life, sitting there dressed as I was on my way to work in the Council stores.

"Do you have any idea why you have been so hastily summoned to Grey Oaks?" It wasn't so much a question but more an announcement of things to come.

My answer seemed inane. "I was handed this letter by the driver. It doesn't say much but it seems to indicate that I had better come if I know what is good for me. Am I being sued for something?" I was conscious that my fingernails were broken and dirty and that the cuffs of my jacket were badly frayed. I ran my fingers through my unruly hair in an attempt to improve my appearance.

They turned to look at each other. It wasn't an unkind look. But it was clear from their expressions that they found themselves faced with a ludicrous situation. The shorter of the two men came over to me and placed his hand on my shoulder but then withdrew it and examined his palm.

"What I am about to tell you is going to be extremely difficult to comprehend. Believe me when I tell you it is equally confounding for the two of us." The man cleared his throat and immediately apologised. "It is quite obvious to us that you have no idea why you, of all people in the world, should be sitting here. That being the case," he continued with a flourish of his hands, "I think it would serve both of our purposes if we start at the beginning. Okay?"

"H-hell yes...yes of course." I secretly pinched myself hoping like mad I would wake up and find myself back behind my counter in the bus depot.

"We represent an international legal firm based here in London, who have been retained to locate and identify beyond any reasonable doubt the next of kin of ninety-three year old Dame Sarah Lessing. Inter alia the owner of Grey Oakes. The search has taken our organisation many years and has cost a great deal of money. To cut a very long story short because we simply do not have the luxury of time. We believe we have finally located that person." With that they both turned to look at me.

I stared back at them blankly. *So what the heck has that got to do with me?* They stared back at me and for a brief moment the room was quiet. I shrugged because I did not know what else to do. My reaction must have triggered something in their minds.

"You really don't get it do you sir? You *are* that person," they said in unison.

Right there and then I had had enough of their crazy behaviour. I still did not know what they were getting at. "I have been called many things in my seventy-five years of life but I have

never been called *Sir*. I am Oliver Temple and I work for the bus depot as a store man." I was sure they would detect the irritation I was beginning to feel.

They threw their hands in the air and came over to where I was seated and stood looking down at me. "We are wasting valuable time. Are you Oliver Temple?"

"Y-yes I am I just said so," I affirmed looking from one to the other.

"Then Mr Oliver Temple you are the very person we have been searching for over the past three and half years. You, Mr Temple, are the last sole surviving member of Dame Sarah Lessing's family. Right now Dame Sarah is dying and not too long from this moment, you will inherit the entire multi- million Pound Lessing fortune as well as property and business rights. You will also inherit a Knighthood title. Sir Oliver Temple it is our duty to inform you that Dame Sarah Lessing is your birth mother and her dying wish is to lay her eyes on her son. That is why everything is so terribly urgent." They both hung their heads in a show of solemn compassion.

"Gentlemen, I know that somewhere in this world I have, or once had, a mother like every other soul on earth. But I beg you just look at me. Surely it is obvious to you that what you are saying is quite frankly preposterous."

I could see the two men seemed somehow to sympathise with my incredulity but were nevertheless anxious to reach resolve.

"Right now we desperately need you to delay what ever questions you have and accompany us into her chamber to be with your mother while there is still time. When this is over Sir Oliver we will answer all your many, many questions."

I was far too dumb struck to even think of a question never mind actually verbalise anything. I was led mumbling unintelligibly as if by a providential steamroller that was out of control, past sumptuously furnished rooms leading off a wide carpeted passage bedecked with original paintings. We arrived at a very large dimly lit bedroom and entered silently through double doors. It felt as if I was entering church.

The person in the four-poster bed was very clearly desperately ill judging by the attendant doctors and oxygen cylinders. I was ushered to the bedside by a sombre faced nurse and what I saw shocked me. I thought the woman lying there was

already dead. Her hair was snow white and it lay in thin strands across her almost bald scalp. Her skin was a delicate film of grey silk stretched tightly across the bones of her skull.

It was abundantly clear to me that she had very little time left.

“She is fading fast Sir Oliver, please don’t waste a moment of time,” said the doctor gently.

I could see she was fading away quickly and there was nothing any of us could do to stop it; like trying to stall the very last glimmer of daylight.

“It is all right if you wish to sit on the bed Sir,” said the nurse.

I looked down at the gaunt face on the pillow and my throat constricted. “Mother?” It sounded strange to be saying that word to someone I had never before laid eyes on. That didn’t mean that I did not have compassion for the dying woman. I lay my hand gently on the shrivelled skin of her arm. It was cold to the touch.

Her eyes opened slowly as if heavy weights were attached to each eyelid. What I saw in those desperate eyes was a prodigal mother begging silently for forgiveness from a son she deserted a long time ago.

“I forgive you.” To this day I am unable say with certainty that those words came from my heart. But in that brief instant I think God did something inside me...I knew beyond any shadow of doubt she was my mother and that it was right to forgive her.

Her nod was imperceptible.

“Oliv...” Her lips trembled like the wings of a butterfly and her eyes were filled with a million unspoken words of gratitude and the terrible pain of regret. It must have taken every ounce of strength left in her frail body.

I felt her life spirit beginning to ebb under my touch. There was no power on earth greater than the anguish I was feeling. I drew on everything within my being to plead to God to add one more brief moment to her life. Tears stung my eyes and rolled freely down my face.

“Sir Oliver?” The hand slid gently across my shoulders. “She’s gone Sir Oliver. She is finally at peace.”

I closed my eyes in silent prayer. I had lived all my life with a question. It was like a loaded gun always at my side, cocked and ready to fire. If ever God allowed me meet my mother before she or I departed this earth, I would ask my question: *Why?*

“The family resemblance is quite remarkable,” whispered the lawyer as he left the room with his colleague. I looked up to acknowledge their comments and found myself looking directly into a large mirror and sucked in my breath.

“We’ll leave you alone for a while Sir Oliver,” said the doctor as he and the nurse followed the attorneys out of the bedroom.

Somewhere in my heart is a priceless treasure. It is all the wealth I possess. It’s a precious moment long ago when I was cradled in my mother’s arms while she sang me to sleep. I surveyed my surroundings and compared everything it represented to the treasure in my heart. I considered all that lay ahead and all that lay behind.

I looked down at my mother’s shrivelled form and shook my head as cold realisation struck home.

There by the grace of God go I.

Deep in thought I weighed up the enormous cost and burden of great wealth. With a deep sigh and with the all the wisdom of King Solomon I went in search of the attorneys. I had something important to say to them.

“Gentlemen, you have the wrong person...I claim no relationship to this woman nor do I make any claim to her estate.”

I left them shaking their heads in disbelief.

I am a simple old man and I am set in my ways. I have no family nor have I any ambition for wealth. What memory I have of my mother is all the treasure I need.

As I headed back to the bus depot in a shabby London cab a wry smile spread across my face.

The day had started out like any other day in cold dreary London.

Roland Willis