

Mrs Ketley

I did not hear about the first tragedy in Mrs Ketley's life until four years after I had seen the second one finish her off. It was my mother who told me about it some three years after the war was over. I was eighteen at the time, and home on my first leave from my national service in the Royal Marines. Perhaps it was the uniform that belatedly persuaded her that I was a fit recipient for adult confidences.

Mrs Ketley had been our lodger. Like many working class families in the years before the Second World War, my parents took in paying guests to help make ends meet. My father's wages as a boilermaker, while comfortably covering essentials, left little for luxuries beyond his daily pack of woodbines, an occasional pint of beer and a glass of sherry for my mother. In those days, when the hum of a vacuum cleaner or washing machine had yet to be heard in a working class household, many women stayed home to fulfil what was widely seen as their proper role as wives and mothers. Indeed, among those aristocrats of the working class — the men with a trade like my father — it was a matter of pride that their womenfolk did not have to go out to work.

Mrs Ketley's contribution made all the difference. Not least, it enabled my parents to fulfil what they saw as their sacred duty — to send me to high school when I got my scholarship at the age of eleven.

Mrs Ketley came to live with us in the year before the war. I am not sure how old she was I was at an age when anyone over thirty looked ancient. But I reckon she must have been in her late forties. Her hair had grey streaks. She had a deeply lined face which, while sad in repose, could brighten up in a twinkling of her brown-button eyes.

Today I cannot smell either lavender or marmite with thinking of dear Mrs Ketley. She always wore the former and was addicted to the latter, which she loved to eat on toast made by holding a slice of bread against her fire on a long wire fork.

Mrs Ketley had a son. His name was Sammy. At the time the Ketleys came into our life, he would have been about seventeen. Sammy and his mother lived in a single room on the ground floor of our London terraced house. The room was lit by a window that looked out onto the back yard. She owned little beyond a few sticks of furniture, a wireless and a two-ring gas stove. Her sofa converted into a bed at night. Sammy shared a bedroom upstairs with my younger brother and me.

Sammy was our hero. With his newly broken voice, we looked upon him as a man. He enthralled us with tales of the Wild West; of Wild Bill Hickock; and the outlaw brothers, Frank and Jesse James. My younger brother, George, was his

favourite. My father had given each of us a toy gun for Christmas. Sammy made a holster for George's gun out of cardboard and insulation tape. He did not make one for me.

(I feel that little pang of jealousy to this day.)

Mind you, I have to admit that George was an outgoing and cheerful little chap. A total contrast to the shy and introspective boy that I was.

But it was Sammy's mother who had the soft spot for me. In those days of rationing she was always slipping me a sweet or two. She was, as I realise now, a well-read woman. She would always find time to help me with my homework. In return, I would often crouch down in front of her fire and make her a slice or two of toast onto which she would scrape some of her precious butter ration. She would insist on sharing it with me and, knowing my dislike for marmite, she sometimes gave me a little fish paste, which I suspect she bought specially for me.

Mrs K had a bad leg. I caught a glimpse of it one day when I entered her room without her hearing my knock. The doctor who had removed the bandage she always wore under her thick stockings was attending her. She had one of those painful leg ulcers, which never seem to heal. It looked awful. She could never go out without the aid of a stout, knobbly stick. But she still managed to struggle into town for her shopping, too proud to accept my mother's help in bringing stuff back for her. My mother would keep an eye open for her return, and the moment she saw the bus pass the end of our long street, she would send me out to help her with her shopping bags. She hobbled along at a pace slow enough to try a young boy's patience. But the two of us always found plenty to talk about, and the quarter mile back to the house went quite quickly. What's more, I knew I could count on a mint humbug or a lemon drop when we reached home.

Mrs Ketley was something of a mystery. Her past, about which she rarely spoke, was the subject of much speculation between my parents — and among the neighbours too for that matter. Her only contact with the outside world seemed to be the letters that arrived for her every few weeks bearing a Merthyr Tydvil postmark. We all assumed she was a widow. My somewhat prudish father, struggling to overcome his good-mannered reticence, once asked her about her marital status. I believe she neatly deflected his question by simply pointing to Sammy and saying: 'We lost his father shortly before he was born.'

War arrived some six months after the Ketleys. I remember the day well. Our short-wave wireless, my father's pride and joy, had blown one of its five valves. So, together with one or two neighbours, we all crowded into Mrs

Ketley's room to hear Chamberlain's fateful declaration of war on Germany.

Sammy joined up on his eighteenth birthday, halfway through 1940. He was stationed at Aldershot and managed to get home on a weekend pass shortly before my brother and I were evacuated to Devon. He had brought his rifle with him, and held George and me spellbound with his tales of hand-to-hand combat training with butt and bayonet.

Nearly four years passed before we saw him again. We had just returned home from our wartime foster parents in Devon. He was sporting a moustache and three stripes on his khaki sleeve. I well remember his departure on that sparkling April day in 1944. How he kissed and hugged both our mother and his. And how the daffodils in our tiny front garden nodded their heads in the breeze as he walked away up the street.

Mrs Ketley's only close friend was my mother. She would often come and sit with her in the afternoons while my mother was doing the ironing. They loved to chat over a glass of sherry. Eventually, inevitably, and probably spurred on by an extra glass of sherry, Mrs Ketley opened her heart. That was six months after Sammy joined up, which no doubt had something to do with it.

Well, surprise, surprise, it turned out that Mrs Ketley was not a widow after all.

'Please keep all this to yourself, Milly,' she had told my mother. 'And especially not a word to Reg.' (Reg was my father).

She went on to say that, apart from Sammy, the only family she had left was her younger sister, Agnes, who was married to a coal miner in Merthyr Tydvil in South Wales. Her mother had died giving birth to Agnes in 1902. Mrs Ketley who was nine at the time took on the job of nursing her baby sister. Her father started drinking after his wife's death and had trouble holding down a decent job. But they coped. And when Mrs Ketley, as a prematurely mature youngster of 14, found work in a laundry, they coped a little better.

Two years before the Great War she had met Fred — a stockbroker's clerk in the City.

'He was such a good looking bloke,' she told my mother, 'and so masterful. I fell for him like a ton of bricks. We got engaged in the summer of 1912, just six months after we met.'

But it was to be a long engagement. Fred, it seemed, was one of those men to whom the time is never quite ripe. Yet, when war broke out in 1914, he was one of the first volunteers to cross the Channel with the British Expeditionary Force. With the luck of a rogue, he survived the great massacres of Ypres and the Somme.

Mrs Ketley waited faithfully for him during those long harrowing years — while Fred kept her on a string by asking her get ready for the wedding when

he was demobbed. She even had her wedding dress made. But after the war Fred found one excuse after another to keep her hanging on (and all the time, as she subsequently found out, he was dallying with other women).

Then, nearly ten years after they had become engaged, fate took a hand. Mrs Ketley became pregnant with Sammy. The two fathers got together and read the riot act to Fred.

A hasty wedding was arranged. Because of Mrs Ketley's condition — it was becoming more visible by the day — the parties agreed on discreet and simple ceremony at the Tottenham registry office.

At that point in the story, I can picture my mother and Mrs Ketley, heads close together in cosy intimacy across the kitchen table — Mrs Ketley's aura of lavender and marmite augmented by a hint of the contents of the sherry bottle standing between them. And, in view of the poignant turn taken by her story at that point, a tear would be welling up in Mrs Ketley's eye. I can picture exactly how, in her broad cockney accent, she would have told the story:

'As you know, Milly, in those days we would have had problems with a church wedding what with the short notice an' all. But I was determined to wear my wedding dress. So what we arranged was that Fred and I would meet his parents and my dad, and Agnes of course, at the registry office in the morning. Then, in the afternoon, we would all meet again at our house where a few friends would join us and we would have a proper ceremony done by a vicar my dad knew from the Masons. There'd be a bit of a booze up, and then I'd put away my wedding dress and Fred and I would take a train to Bognor for nice week's honeymoon by the sea. Only it didn't 'appen like that.'

The tear started to trace shiny ribbon through Mrs Ketley's face powder.

'To catch the bus to Tottenham Court Road registry office Fred and I had to walk through Leicester Square. Half way across he said he needed to relieve himself. So he disappeared down the steps into the public lavatory.

I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a lovely autumn day. A nice warm breeze was blowing the dried plane leaves in circles around my ankles. Across the road on the front of the Leicester Square Theatre a giant photo of the young actress, Cicely Courtenidge was smiling down at me. Milly, I have never felt happier. But, when I came out of my daydream, I noticed on the big clock just down the road that five minutes had passed. Soon it was ten minutes and no sign of my Fred.

'Oh dear,' I thought, 'I hope he hasn't got a tummy bug on this of all days. After nearly half an hour I was beside myself with worry. I asked a passing copper to go down and look for him. He was soon back up the steps shaking his head. "I 'ad a good look, Miss, but there's nobody down there."

'What he said next, well, it felt like a cold hand had squeezed my heart.

"You do know, don't you, that there's another entrance across the road." Following his pointing finger, I stared across unbelievably at a square of green railings surmounted by a sign. It said "GENTS". Up above the sign, Miss Courtenidge went on smiling at me as though nothing had happened.'

The tear had reached the corner of Mrs Ketley's mouth. She tasted its salt then brushed it away and smiled.

'You know, Milly, after all these years I can see the funny side of it. I really can. Fred was a bastard. I don't miss 'im. I don't owe 'im nothin'. Except my Sammy of course.

'I never saw 'im again. None of us did. I heard he'd gone to South Africa. From that time on I put a Mrs in front of my maiden name. You know how narrow-minded people are. My father died of a stroke a few months after that, leaving Sammy and me to fend for ourselves as best we could. Now Sammy's a man, with a good job to come back to. They say the war is nearly over. He's a good boy. He'll take care of his old mum.'

June 6th, 1944. D-Day. Death Day. The headlines screamed as a khaki tide surged up the Normandy beaches and smashed against the walls of Hitler's Fortress Europe.

Within days the War Office's messenger of death was busy about the realm delivering his poisonous little envelopes. With meticulous egalitarianism, he delivered one to Mrs Ketley. I was at school when the telegram arrived — but I'll never forget the sight of Mrs Ketley's bewildered, tearstained face when I got home.

It turned out that Sammy had driven his truck over a mine and had been blown into a dozen bloody bits.

Within six months Mrs Ketley was dead. They said it was her leg. Cancer. But we knew better. It was the death of her Sammy that finished her. That was one Mrs Ketley could not laugh off.

Al Todd