

A Holiday at Great-Aunt Sally's

They don't make holidays like that anymore.

If I hadn't been looking peaky because my brother had been killed in a lorry accident and I was missing him, and also my Mother was soon to be confined, I should never have gone on that holiday, but Mother said "I'll write to Great-Aunt Sally to see if she'll have you for a bit".

Now, I was only 8 years old and really scared when I knew I'd have to go alone, but children did as they were told in those days, and as my small cardboard suitcase was packed my chief worry was whether I could take "Ninny". She was a rag doll who had accompanied me everywhere since I was a baby.



Norah

Mother took me by train as far as Newark and then put me in the care of the Carrier who would take me in his carrier's cart, along with fat shopping ladies and their market produce, which seemed to take up so much room, as far as Beckingham.

Me and Ninny waved to Mother and the ladies all fussed round us. Then with a Gee-up off moved the cart. The ladies settled down for a gossip until we reached Beacon Hill and then we all had to pile out and walk up the hill beside the carrier and his horse until we reached the top. When we got to Coddington I expected to see my Aunt as I felt we'd already gone a thousand miles but I was told to "sit still and eat this apple" and I'd soon be there. I probably fell asleep because soon we'd stopped at Beckingham and there, standing in her cottage doorway, with roses growing round the little porch, and the sundial which gave the cottage its name glowing on the wall above her, stood little Aunt Sally.

She always wore high necked blouses with a “Modesty vest” of lace and long black skirts. She stood smiling her welcome and as she bent to kiss me, her silvery hair, coiled into a little bun at the back, tickled my cheek and for the first time since I’d left home I dropped Ninny’s hand and hugged her.



Aunt Sally

You went down a step into Aunt Sally’s cottage because it was very old and Aunt said it was so that the rushes which they used to spread on the floor in the old days would not keep moving out of the doorway, but now Aunt had rag rugs which she pegged every winter from old clothes, scattered around. They were lovely and soft and she taught me how to cut up strips of cloth for me to peg, while I was there. It had been hot and tiring on the journey but inside her little room it was shady and cool, even though a fire glowed in the black grate, and from the oven at the side came a delicious smell. The black iron kettle stood ready steaming to mash the tea and as the lid bobbed up and down it seemed to be laughing and the whole of the little room seemed to be saying Welcome. Even now, fifty years after, the smell of sweet peas will bring back again to mind the round table with white cloth set for three, and the bowl of flowers in the centre.

“Come and get a wash, I’ve put a bowl on a stool outside for you, and Uncle Tom will soon be home and we’ll have dinner”. Now, this water came from a rainwater tub and had tiny bits of black floating in it and funny wiggly things, but it always seemed like magic water because it was like washing in silk and I thought it must be that which made Aunt’s cheeks like roses and her blue eyes have such a twinkle in them, and it made so many lovely bubbles.

As I stood in the cobbled yard and dabbled my hands I thought how mysterious water was. At home we just turned on a tap and there it was, but here was this magic tub of water. And there was a different water which Aunt always used for washing clothes which she got from letting a bucket down a well in the floor of the wash-house and that was very cold and clear. Aunt told me never to walk near the lid which covered it or I might fall in and there were hundreds of frogs down below. Best of all was the drinking water which came from the pump. It was very slightly coloured water which Aunt said was iron and would do me good, but it tasted like no other water anywhere and was so cold it made you gasp.

No wonder that when the village had water piped to it with little taps standing on the edge of the road outside, that Aunt would never use it because it was ‘artificial water’ and she preferred her own. They never wasted a drop because in the corner of the scullery was a small earthenware sink. It had a hole in the middle and a rubber pipe and all water drained into a bucket underneath and was used to water the garden.

When Uncle Tom came home we sat down to ‘meat and taty pie’ and Aunt said I could have a second helping. I looked round the little room at the tiny windows with geraniums on the sill, white lacy curtains, plants on every available space as Aunt said she had ‘green fingers’, and there were brasses glowing with the firelight at one end of the room, and the sunlight at the other.

It was a crooked little cottage, very old, and I think had been two or even three smaller cottages. Walls had been knocked out and doors blocked up and there were strange little passage ways leading to nowhere. Aunt said it had once been an Inn because in one of the outhouses there were pew type benches round the walls and the brick floor had a hollow trodden out by many boots passing over it. It was a happy cottage and I used to think the walls still held the laughing and singing that must have taken place there.



Sundial cottage with Aunt Sally and Uncle Tom

Uncle Tom was a carpenter and loved making toys for children as he had none of his own. He used to send me at Christmas boxes of wooden bricks, or a wooden horse or monkey-on-a-stick, or suchlike. After dinner he sat in his high backed wooden chair by the fire and puffed at his pipe until time to return to work, and his eyes twinkled as he pulled me on his knee and teased me about my doll Ninny.

It was fun to wash up at Aunt's because she had a bowl of water on a table and a black tray for the crocks to drain on and I stood on a stool and helped while she chatted to me and the old Grandfather clock ticked away and looked at us. The kettle which always stood at the side of the fire sang to us and it wasn't a bit like washing up at home at my mother's white sink, all by myself in a cold kitchen. When we'd finished and put the willow pattern pots on the dresser and the jugs in the larder we took the knives from the jar of hot water they were standing in and Aunt put some sand on a piece of cork and rubbed them till they shone, and put them away in a drawer.

"We'll go and see if the hens have laid, and then I'll put my feet up while you go and play in the garden". To a town child the first glimpse of new laid eggs in a nest box is never forgotten and as I cupped the warm brown egg in my hands Aunt said "that is for your tea" and I thought I'd never be able to crack it and eat it. "While I rest you can get some raspberries as well" Aunt said and gave me an enamel dish. They grew thick and the bowl was soon filled with juicy fruit, red ones and also white raspberries which I've never seen since.

As I picked in the hot sunshine, all around was the buzz of flies and bees and the scent of roses and mignonette and pinks. I thought I must be in fairyland and that home and my Mother were millions of miles away.

Teatime was at 3.30 because Aunt never altered her clocks in the summer and all the year round they had breakfast at 7.30, dinner at 11.30 and tea at 3.30. When it came to bedtime Aunt poured some water from the kettle and I washed at the little sink and when my hair had been brushed and my long nightie on, she took me with a mug into the larder where, on a stone slab, stood a huge bowl of milk thick with cream and I was allowed to dip a little can with a long handle into this and fill up my mug and take it back to drink by the fire. While I drank Aunt told me a story of when she was a little girl and Uncle Tom took out his fiddle and played dancing little tunes. Although at home I would never have dreamed of performing, in this little cottage, in the fireglow, I danced around the room feeling like a little spirit, until Aunt said "Tom, now play 'All things bright and beautiful' and then it's bed" and as I sang to them I can remember seeing a little tear trickle down Aunt's cheek and I didn't know why.

Aunt lit a candle for me and went up the bendy little stairs before me and as the candle made funny shapes on the walls I clutched tighter at Ninny's hand until I was in the softest feather bed in the world. Before Aunt blew out the candle she heard me say my prayers and I saw that there were tiny roses all over the wallpaper and I thought they'd be looking at me all night and smiling at me and saying "have a happy holiday" and I fell asleep.

I woke to hear Uncle Tom going off to work and he was saying "Are you going to our Lizzie's today Sally?" and she said "Yes, I'll be taking the little lass". I wondered about Lizzie until Aunt said she'd be making some butter to take to Uncle Tom's sister. She let me help turn the little wooden churn into which the cream had gone, until it was nearly 'on the turn' and then Aunt took over. She seemed to know by the sound when the cream was turning to butter as the continual slurp slurp changed to plop. The golden butter was patted into shape with little wooden butter pats and then a special pat made a pattern on the top, of a cow and buttercups, which Aunt let me put on myself. She wrapped the butter in muslin and then sent me down the garden to get two of the biggest rhubarb leaves I could find and these she wrapped round the butter muslin, and taking some eggs from the brown bowl in the larder we set off down the lane. I played ball on the way and once a car came along to spoil my game and Aunt said "That's the third of those dratted things this week". She hated cars and must have instilled into me my life-long hatred of those dratted things.

Lizzie was not like Uncle Tom, she was tall and thin with a mole on her cheek with hairs on it like a spider. I felt she was like a witch and her house felt cold and scary. She lived alone and I don't think she and Aunt Sally got on very well but as Aunt said "after all she was Tom's sister". I was glad to get out into the sunshine again and I had been given a penny to spend which Lizzie had taken from a tin on the mantelpiece. A dark green fringe with bobbles on hung round the mantelshelf, with dozens of oddments on top. In the middle was a picture of a soldier in a silver frame.

The sweetshop was tiny and had millions of things in it, from needles to brooms. The jars of sweets were low down so that children could see whether to have bulls eyes or pear drops, or liquorice sticks or gob-stoppers. You got a lot for a penny and I chose a lucky bag with fizzy stuff inside and a liquorice stick to suck it up with, and some raspberry drops, and saved a halfpenny for another day. No sweetshop ever afterwards smelled the same as that one.

The next day Uncle Tom said "I hear Harry's hay-making, take the little lass down to the field today" and early in the morning Aunt and I went down the lane to help. The scent of the newly mown grass was intoxicating and I remember rolling in the drying grasses and looking up at the blue sky where the larks sang their hearts out. I was given a hay fork and shown how to turn the hay. Aunt told me as I looked at the sweat dripping from the men's shoulders "horses sweat, men perspire and ladies glow" and I wondered what little girls did for I was very very hot.

The men sang as they worked. The only sounds were the men singing and the birds, and afterwards at school when we sang 'One man went to mow' I saw again this sunny field. When we stopped for lunch the men untied their red spotted handkerchieves and took out bread and cheese and drank cold tea from enamel jugs. Aunt unpacked meat sandwiches from a muslin cloth and an apple for us both and then everyone, me as well, fell asleep.

Harry, whose field we were in, was a cousin of Uncle Tom's and the next day he said he'd take us to Leadenham in his trap. The pony stood outside the gate and I was lifted up and Aunt climbed in beside me. Never has anything sounded sweeter than the slow clip clop of the pony's hooves. The trap gently swayed from side to side and I imagined I was a princess sitting up there looking down at all the flowers by the roadside. The shady lanes wandered on and on and little cottages appeared and were gone. Never again, though I've travelled in many places, has the wonder of that outing been recaptured.

At the bottom of Aunt's garden stood a small platform with a ledge to rest Uncle Tom's binoculars on because he used to watch the birds, and from there I could see a stream at the bottom of the hill. I didn't stand on this platform much because I hated this part of the garden. It was where Uncle hung the hens up by their feet when he'd killed them "to drain the blood out" he said, and I once saw one twitching and I thought it was still alive and couldn't eat my dinner.

One day Aunt said we'd go paddling in the stream. In the cool water among flat stones, Aunt with her skirts lifted high, we kicked and splashed until we were both wet through. On the way home Aunt picked some Ivy leaves for Uncle Tom's corn. In the evening she washed one of the leaves and put it on Uncle's corn and bound it up and in a few days it became soft enough to take out easily.

Uncle had a workshop where he used to go 'to potter'. He also made wine which he kept there. Aunt would say "I guess your Uncle's gone for a little tippie" and when I went to fetch him in for his dinner he would be wiping his moustache and with a twinkling eye would say "don't you tell your Aunt".



Uncle Tom Whitney

One afternoon Aunt took me into church to help her to clean the brasses and in the damp-smelling gloom she hummed happily to herself doing what she called 'the Lord's work'. The sunbeams flickered with many colours through the stained windows on to my Aunt until she looked just like an Angel.

The last evening was a Sunday and we sat in the parlour. I was fascinated by a screen with many picture postcards stuck all over it of Victorian scenes, and on the wall hung a glass walking stick filled with hundreds and thousands. There were many books, as Aunt was a great reader and lent books to all the village as there were no libraries then.

When she lit the lamp and sat in the soft glow with her needlework I felt such peace as I have never felt again, and many, many times since have I wished to holiday again in Sundial cottage.

But they don't make holidays like that anymore.

Norah Gutteridge.

Norah Gutteridge was the great-niece of Mrs Sarah Whitney nee Hewitt (Aunt Sally) and took her holiday at Sundial Cottage in 1923.

Aunt Sally was born in Beckingham in about 1847, one of six children. The rest of the children were born in Sutton. Her parents, John and Sarah Hewitt came from Brant Broughton and Besthorpe.