

## **Aladdin's Cave of Memories**

Just inside the front door of our council house there was a small hall cupboard which we used mainly for hanging outdoor clothes. Opposite this was an under-stair curtained recess which was home to a heavy dining table with two large drop-down leafs and a central storage section in which was kept some nappery, a few small glasses, and a bottle of cream sherry. Both the table and the sherry would be brought out at Christmas and New Year and, very occasionally, when we had visiting relatives. There was also a massive chest of drawers. Three of the lower drawers stretched the full length of this sturdy piece of post-Victoriana and were surmounted by two smaller drawers with voluptuously curved fronts and large round wooden knobs.

It was the left-hand upper drawer which drew me back time after time from when I first explored it at around the age of 7 or 8 and found my Aladdin's Cave.

My father was born in Paisley in 1911, the eldest in a family of 3 boys and 3 girls. Like everyone else at that time he left school at 14 to help support his parents and siblings. There was no question of going on to higher education. This, however, was the dawning of the age of wireless and in 1925 he secured a job as an apprentice radio mechanic with a firm in Glasgow and thus began a trade which he followed until the outbreak of World War 2.

Leaving his wife and two young children reluctantly behind, he joined the RAF and with his training and experience it was fairly inevitable that he would be drafted as a radio operator. Some months later, after serving as a fighter plotter at Biggin Hill airfield in Kent and with a corporal's stripes on his arm, he was assigned to duties in the Far East, firstly in India and later in the disastrous Burma campaign. It was the last time my mother would see him for four long years and at one point it seemed she might never see him again as he was reported missing in action during the chaotic retreat from the Japanese.

Thankfully, the report was unfounded and he was located safe and well a few weeks later.

The war over, he took up where he had left off, repairing and servicing radio equipment at his old job in Glasgow, eventually becoming workshop manager. Those were the days when most people worked six days a week and my father was no exception, travelling by train from Largs, Monday to Saturday.

Having been born in January 1946, I was nine years younger than my elder brother and a full decade my sister's junior, and both were wage-earning teenagers by the time I started primary school. Consequently, I spent my childhood more like an only child than a member of a composite family group. Fortunately, I was generally content in my own company and, having tired of conventional toys and games, would happily spend hours reading voraciously or playing on my own with wooden clothes pegs which, in my imagination, became soldiers, cars, tanks, and castles.

It was about this time also that I started exploring areas of the house which had begun to attract my attention, especially around my birthday and in the weeks leading up to Christmas when I would surreptitiously sneak from room to room when I thought my mother wasn't listening and softly prise open cupboards and drawers in the hope of locating hidden presents. That was when I first found the cache of strange and exotic artefacts in a wooden box in the top left hand drawer under the stairs. To my childish eyes it seemed that I had uncovered buried treasure. There were elephants, tigers, gods and goddesses, bracelets and necklaces, and all exquisitely carved in ivory. There were shiny, unfamiliar, coins which I later knew to be annas and rupees from India along with low-value kyat currency from Burma. And at the very bottom of the box were the medals and medal ribbons from the Burma Campaign and other theatres of war in the Far East in which my father had been engaged, but about which I never once heard him speak.

All these ivory trinkets were souvenirs and presents for my mother which father had lovingly collected and protected during his years on active service. She never wore them to my knowledge, not surprisingly perhaps, as they would have looked somewhat alien and out of place in the greyness of post-war Scotland. They were of little intrinsic value, but to me they were the stuff of dreams from distant lands, firing my imagination on every occasion that I sought them out. Visualising my father, bloodied but victorious in battle, wresting them from a cruel and fearsome enemy and bearing them back home in triumph to his waiting bride.

Of course the reality was somewhat different. In many respects my father was unremarkable, an ordinary working man caught up in extraordinary events beyond his control which those who were not involved can never hope to fully understand. The trinkets have gone now, my parents long dead, but I still have the medals as a tangible link to my hero-father and an Aladdin's Cave of childhood memories to sift through which I will forever cherish with pleasure and pride.