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Katrina
Kirkwood

The Mystery
of **Isabella**
and the **String**
of **Beads**



A WOMAN DOCTOR IN
WORLD WAR I



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LOKE
PRESS

PROLOGUE

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“There might be German blood on these,” I warned as I placed the box on the table. From its battered cardboard top poked a rectangular, twill-covered object and a length of red rubber tubing. On the box’s side, a red stamp postmarked 1972 partly hid its label, ‘Flower Press’. Carefully, my friends drew out a couple of photographs. Then some forceps. A wooden box flipped open to disclose a set of scalpels. The twill cover unfastened to reveal an engraved metal canister clanking with surgical implements, while the red rubber tubes straightened into an ancient stethoscope.

But there was no flower press. The box had been the nearest container to hand when I had received this legacy from Isabella, my grandmother. I had always intended to do something with it, sometime. I did not know what, but definitely something, sometime, and until that sometime came, the precious legacy would have to continue masquerading as a flower press.

Tracy began to examine one object in more detail, turning it over and peering at an inscription. “It says, ‘Leith’ here,” she deciphered.

“That makes sense,” I replied, “That’s where Isabella was brought up.”

“This one says Aberdeen, so that’s Scotland too,” another voice added.

I had never taken the trouble to examine the collection closely. I had never noticed the inscriptions, but my friends’ observations made sense. Family tradition held that Isabella had quali-

fied as a doctor in Edinburgh and had served in France, Malta and Egypt during the First World War. And the things you have lived with since childhood seem normal. Lots of grandmothers must have worked as doctors during World War I. It was nothing special.

But people's reactions told me otherwise. "What, she was a doctor in the First World War? Really? There can't have been many of them. How fascinating ..."

That day and afterwards, the comments kept coming, and I began to realise how little I knew about the story that had been hiding in my flower press box. First of all, was it true? If it was that unusual, maybe it was not. But if it was true, how come nobody knew anything about that part of Isabella's life? Why had she never talked about it? What had she actually experienced?

And how did I square my perceptions of the First World War, with its trenches, explosions, mud and gore with my fun-loving and utterly affectionate Scottish granny? How does being a war doctor fit with jelly in a silver dish, cheese on a bright green platter and mince pies from Fortnum and Mason; with her huge four-poster bed and its damask curtains, frilled pillows and thick silky bolsters? I used to stare up at the big, round hat boxes balanced on top of her wardrobe. When she opened the cupboard, there was a curious, woody smell and I could reach in to stroke her fur coats, bury my nose in their softness and breathe in their strangeness. She would pass me the ornate silver hairbrushes from her high dressing table and I would press them against my hand. They were soft, so much softer and yellower than mine.

Sometimes she would lead us through the white door in the corner of her kitchen and up the rickety iron steps onto the roof. Just like in *Mary Poppins*, we ran and chased and hid among the chimney pots. We crept to the very edge and looked all around the city, proud to point out the landmarks. Then, terrified but intrigued, we peered dangerously down and watched. Far, far below were cars smaller than the ones my brothers played with. The people scurrying alongside were tinier than their toy soldiers. Visiting Isabella was fun.

Fun, that is, apart from the scary room where Grandpa had died. I hated going in there. But his photograph remained; he was the soldier staring down from the sideboard at the bald patch on the rug where his sword had slipped as he sliced the wedding cake. Or so the story went. The bald patch was real. But the sword? The First World War?

I shiver and bring myself back to the present. 'Sometime' has arrived. I must discover the story of my mysterious legacy. The final item in the box clinches my decision. To me, it has always been the heart of the collection, and I draw it out cautiously – Isabella's string of beads. Like a necklace with no clasp, intricately woven and scarily delicate, its crazy colours stretch for nearly a metre. It is as narrow as my little fingernail, and matches no jewellery or clothing that I have ever seen.

I remember Isabella telling me that these beads had been given to her by a grateful German prisoner of war. As a teenager, I hoped I sniffed a clandestine romance. As an adult, I loved the way the gift transcended the barriers of gender and enmity. Today though, I notice that one of the linen threads

has worn through. As a single, glassy bead drifts loose, I catch it in my hand. Scarcely larger than the grains of sand from which it came, it has the advantage of them. It possesses a hole. That hole has given it connections. That hole has joined it to its companions and together they have lived a story, a story in some way linked to Isabella's secret medical past. As I roll the bead in my palm, I know it is time to reconnect my inheritance with its history before it is too late.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katrina Kirkwood, a former medical research scientist with a passion for stories, is Doctor Isabella Stenhouse's granddaughter. Equipped with two science degrees and an art degree, she spent many years helping people in the South Wales valleys turn their stories into mini-films before embarking on her quest to solve the mystery of Isabella and her beads.

Following features about Isabella on the *BBC Antiques Roadshow*, in national newspapers, and on local radio and television, Katrina has been invited to write about Isabella for the magazine of the Medical Women's Federation and for *Beyond the Trenches*, the blog of the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

REVIEWS

A great deal has already been written on the Great War. Isabella's tale does not take us into the trenches but to the end of the casualty evacuation chain. It gives us an intimate and often emotional perspective of a woman doctor as she battles to succeed in her chosen profession. The narrative kept me captivated. I found myself unable to lay down the book until I reached the final full stop.

Col. Walter Bonnici L/RAMC (Ret'd)

Tonight I felt drawn to Isabella again and couldn't stop. I rarely re-read a book and even though I know this story I wanted to follow it through to the denouement – which I felt you gave me ... An expert might disagree with me, but this reader feels you will entice other readers to follow the trail too.

Lila Haines, Director of Eginno C.I.C.

The writing's great, and you come away with a very strong composite picture of Isabella and her context. Really enjoyed reading it.

Patrick Dillon, Author, architect and broadcaster