

TWICKENHAM

By Herb Robertson

Before they immigrated to Canada, that occurring in Bert's thirteenth year, the family moved from Battersea to the other side of the Thames, westerly Twickenham, landing first on Camac, then Staines, and finally on Forth Cross Road.

Bert's father was in Canada by then, for reasons unknown to Bert. He thought it might have had to do with music. He knew his father went to Albert Hall to audition for a Canadian orchestra. His mother told him so when he asked why his father went out that morning in a suit and not his Scots Guard uniform. Two days later there was a steamer trunk in the hallway when Bert left for school and no steamer trunk, or father, when he returned. There also was no explanation either, other than, "Your father will be away for a while."

If his father was gone, his influence remained. The influence apparently caused the shuffling of residences. Money sent home came in diminishing spurts and Bert's mother kept a lookout for lower rents, twice hurrying them off to a new flat.

Despite all the shuffling in the last London year, the three Twickenham addresses had something in common. All were close enough to Strawberry Hill, a spot in a well-to-do area adjacent to all the less-than-well-to-do places Bert lived.

Strawberry Hill was a castle run amuck. It sat, with all its aesthetic glory, in a forest clearing, atop a crest, within what you would call an estate. The son of a one time Prime Minister had it built. Before construction, the son commissioned a committee of taste, and charged it with the responsibility of adding in anything Gothic that caught their fancy. To that end they copied in, without rhyme or reason, the most extreme screens and vaulting from cathedrals and abbeys, places that had been built without architectural restraint.

The son's name was Horace Walpole. "He was a queer old dear," volunteered Sally Comeuppance, a next-door neighbour and local oral historian. Her name really wasn't Comeuppance. But that's what she liked to say as in, "You're going to get your comeuppance, young Mister Bert, if you don't look where you're going," and "You're asking for a comeuppance if you don't hold onto the handlebar." It sounded threatening but Bert knew, by way of her repressed smile, that she was all bark and no bite.

Mrs. Comeuppance's real name was quite different. It was something Bert couldn't get his tongue around. It was "a name not from around here," as his mother would say. And Sally Comeuppance wasn't from around here. She was part of the early island immigration, or "black plague" as some unkindly preferred, that put a tan on the complexion of some London neighbourhoods. The tan wasn't unusual in Battersea where accommodation had almost reached the matter of fact stage. But in Twickenham it was a novelty, and not a particularly welcome one. The unwelcome mat was scripted in deeds, not words. Conversation became quieter when Mrs. Comeuppance came around. Invitations to community functions were misplaced. Distances on the St James pew were kept at a formal length.

Mrs. Comeuppance seemed above it all. I think the word is poise, and she had a lot of that. She also had a commanding look with her formal posture, flared cheekbones and generous expression. But it was neither her poise nor looks that gained dominion over the reticent neighbours of Forth Cross Road.

When Sally moved in she took to finding out everything about her community. Within a couple of months she had a full catalogue of its characters and their history, and a way with stories that impressed even the most tenured of residents. They may have been reluctant, but few could resist testing her knowledge. And to test it, they had to let her in. It was integration by wily subterfuge and young Bert would remember. He would remember discrimination could be trumped by dignity, and information was influence.

Mrs. Comeuppance told Bert all that he came to know about Strawberry Hill and Horace Warpole, including the fact that the "queer old dear" was a long time dead before Bert came on the scene. Bert chose not to be burdened by this fact. Indeed, he and his new friend, Dolores Comeuppance, Sally's miniature, two years Bert's junior, four years more mature, and always smartly turned out in a thrift store Liberty print, would run to the Hill front door after school and anticipate its opening. They hoped to see Mr. Warpole's eternal presence, still dressed, as legend would have it, in a lavender suite with silver embroidered waistcoat. Or maybe they would see his inheritor, also long dead, the sculpture Anne Damer, she in a man's coat, hat and shoes. But they never saw either. Were they aware that the subsequent occupant of the now deserted mansion was the St. Mary's Roman Catholic Training College, they may have guessed that the place had been exorcised of those eccentrics, as Catholics like to do. But they weren't older and they weren't aware. What they did see were other voyeurs, quietly roaming the grounds, hand in hand, people who according to their wear were of indeterminate sex. Bert didn't know what to make of that. Dolores said she knew, and would tell him later. Suspecting he'd still not understand, perhaps because he was too young. Dolores kept the knowledge to herself.

What Dolores did share with Bert was a story, something she called the legend of Strawberry Hill. She said it was the estate's greatest mystery, even greater than why Miss Damer wore men's pants. It was a story she learned as a girl from her mother.

"A girl!" Bert wondered. "How had Dolores escaped childhood at eleven when he, two years on, was still there?" The thought passed. His attention returned as Dolores, who, drawing a neatly folded page from her jacket pocket, started to read. She spoke with lighted eyes and twisted mouth, as if she, herself, was hearing the story for the first time. There was a lilt to her voice, a singsong cadence that attracted Bert to the telling as much as to the story itself. Bert looked at Dolores as she spoke.

"Two people, a man and a woman with years on their bones, stood at the side of the road. Behind them was a field. In front of them was a forest, the forest around Strawberry Hill. On the road was a young girl riding a speckled roan. She passed the couple and as she did, she slowed ever so briefly and glanced at them. They glanced in return.

The horse now galloped, its hooves a blur, its mane on end. It was a race with no opponent, the rider neither encouraging nor holding back the horse.

The road ahead curved to the right. The rider did not pull on the reins. The horse did not turn. They stayed straight and dashed into the forest. The forest was old. It was dense with thick trunk trees arranged in no particular order. There was no way to safely enter the forest at any speed.

The couple did not say a word, their only movement being a slight turn of the head, a sliding of eyes, as girl and horse disappeared. They heard nothing but they knew. They had to know.”

Dolores folded the paper and put it away.

“That’s it?” Bert asked. “There’s nothing more to the story?”

“That’s it, there’s nothing more. My mom says you make of it what you will.”

“And what do you make of it?”

“I make that it is great mystery, young Bert”, said Dolores, assuming her mother’s command. “Who were those people? Why were they here? What became of the girl and her horse? I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know what became of the girl and her horse? I’ll tell you what became of them,” said Bert, his voice rising. “They were killed. They had to be.”

“You think so? I don’t know myself. I wasn’t there.”

“You didn’t have to be there to know what happened. It’s clear what happened.”

“If it’s clear to you,” Dolores said, lightly smiling at Bert, “then you know how the story ends. But if it’s not clear to you and you don’t know, the story continues.”

“But how does it continue?”

“However you want.”

That was it. That was the last they spoke of the great mystery. Not another word would pass between them as they turned for home.

Dolores would glance at Bert from time to time as they walked. She’d cast comfort his way to help alleviate his bewilderment, while not casting enough that he was any less suspicious she knew more than she was letting on. Bert knew Dolores knew more but was just as sure she’d never tell. Somehow that was okay. He’d figure it out later. For now he was satisfied just walking home with Dolores.

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