

## School Daze

My first school was an all-girls High School in Palmers Green; it was a mile away, and I walked there and back – first with my mother, and later on, alone. This would of course be unthinkable these days, but back then in the early 50s in suburban London, it was considered a quite safe way of conduct. It was all very exciting, I had a school uniform, winter and summer versions, and TWO school hats – a velour one for winter, and a panama hat for the summer months. And school shoes – ugh! What a palaver they were! I had very narrow feet (still do) and had to have special Clarks shoes that came in a triple A width fitting with special instep support and heel grips; which dictated a very small range of footwear, all very SENSIBLE, as I was to hear over and over again through the years. How I hated these clumpy frumpy shoes! But how glad I am today that my mother was so firm about them – I still have lovely feet that carry me around just wonderfully, even now – while others of my generation were allowed to ruin their feet with winkle pickers and stiletto heels, and now they hobble around with bunions, arthritis, and varicose veins. Thanks, Mum!

School was an ordeal from the first, for me. I was very clever, but awfully bad at all sports, except swimming – so I was not a popular girl in the playground. How I longed to be part of the cliques that surrounded the pretty, sporty girls; but somehow I was never accepted by my peers, and I spent many a lonely break-time alone in the playground. I finally teamed up with a girl who was as rejected as I was, and we spent the lunch hours bashing panama hats in in the cloakrooms, and then at this little beast's suggestion, we progressed to thieving money from coat pockets – a very dubious thrill, which I felt very guilty about; and I then spent all the money buying sweets to bribe the friendships of the fellow pupils I had probably stolen from! What a muddle! They still didn't like me, and I got very podgy...

The only high point in all these years was Miss Crane, my music teacher. A spinster in every sense of the word, a strict old dame who ruled her recorder and singing classes with a rod of iron. She took a liking to me, and encouraged my talent for singing by teaching me all she knew. I won several Gold and Silver medals for solo singing at the local Music Festivals, and even when I won the “Best of the Best” prize, she only told me I could have done better! But her gruff voice told me she was really all choked up with pride in me, so I didn't take her wrongly. She inspired me to sing, but I was absolutely petrified of public performance; I have an in-built relay which says if I can't do it well, I'd rather not do it at all - this has been a great handicap to me all my life . I now recognise it as my PRIDE, and I hope that finally I have moved on, but it's still not easy!

Come the 11 plus exam, which I passed with flying colours aged 10; and there were discussions at home about where I was to be educated next, as High School only took me this far. It was decided by my parents that I had the intelligence to aspire to something better than the local Grammar School. I had a dream of going to boarding school; I was full of stories by Enid Blyton of the adventures of such establishments; but to my dismay, my parents, in consultation with a child psychiatrist no less, decided that was “unsuitable for my temperament”. “Highly strung” was a term I heard in relation to myself, whatever that meant! I had a guilty conscience about my thieving, and thought I was being told to leave the school because they knew about my behaviour! In reality, this was NOT the truth of the matter, the teachers and my parents had high hopes for me academically, and wished to improve my prospects.

One morning I came downstairs to a huge commotion in the hall; my parents were weeping and shouting and Dad was waving a piece of paper about, which turned out to be a cheque from my godmother Hermione, for a thousand pounds! For my education! All I wanted was a pony...which I insisted on, and got... .but it was decided then that I would attend a very prestigious Girl's School , St. Pauls, which was situated on the opposite side of London to us, in Hammersmith. I was to travel 23 stops on the Underground every day, after a bus ride, all of which meant an hour and a half journey each way, every day. I was told how very privileged I was to have this opportunity, and I suppose I believed it to an extent; but the journey and the academic pressures took their toll, and

ultimately proved too great for me. I had no local friends at all, the standard of academic prowess coupled with the wealth and high breeding of most of the girls there, was overwhelming. The teachers were fabulous; they were all there because they LOVED to teach; but I was not mature enough to appreciate the benefits of such a splendid place, and I became insecure and friendless again. I will mention here that the school had a very high profile Christian ethos; and I developed a love of hymns that inspired me then, and continues to inspire me still.

At that time, my mother was a member of the choir at the local Anglican Church, and we kids (I had a sister and a brother by then) were encouraged to accompany her. Our father, however, did not attend the services. We were told that he was an agnostic who didn't believe in God! I found this information disturbing, as I knew that my mother had a Faith, which I had in my childish way accepted; how was it, that my Dad who I adored, did not share her beliefs? I would go to Church with Mum in the morning, and on Sunday night my father would take me for a walk, where he proceeded to demolish Christianity with his intellectual arguments. Every week I had this dilemma! I did at that time get confirmed (I had a huge crush on a choirboy at the time), but when the Bishop put his hand on my head and nothing happened..I was devastated and absolutely crushed with disappointment. I had somehow expected some huge blessing from God to descend on me at that moment. I lost interest in Christianity at that point in my life, and decided to search for God (if He existed at all) in other places. I am so glad that He never gave up on my childish vows!! I now believe that some kind of transaction took place between God and me, though I hardly understood what it was. It was to be many years later that I renewed my vows in earnest.