

An Old Bundle

by Marie Corelli, 1855-1924

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“SHE’S a reg’lar old bundle—she is; more worry than she’s wuth!”

The speaker was a buxom laundress of some thirty-five or forty years of age, with a plump, merry face, a twinkling eye, and an all-round comfortable, kindly manner; and her words, though in themselves apparently harsh, were uttered in such a tone of genuine, if half-playful, affection, as robbed them of every suspicion of ill-humour. She was ironing out some dainty articles of feminine apparel profusely trimmed with lace, and though her attention was chiefly bent on her work, she glanced every now and then, with a curious mingling of wearied patience and keen anxiety, to the chimney-corner of her ironing-room, where, in a large chair, propped up by a large pillow, sat the “old bundle” alluded to.

“She will come in here on ironin’ days; it ain’t no good tryin’ to prevent ‘er. She can’t see a bit how the things is bein’ done; but she fancies she can, an’ that’s just as good for’er. Lor’, now! Look at ‘er, all droopin’ forward fit to break ‘erself in two! Here, granny! Hold up!”

And thus exclaiming, she hurried to the chair, and, with tender zeal, lifted the "bundle" into a better sitting posture, thereby disclosing to view a little old woman with a nut-brown wrinkled face like that of some well-preserved mummy. Two very small, very dim eyes peered up at her as she settled the pillow, and a weak wheezy voice piped out—

"That's 'er! That's my little Betty, my youngest grandarter! I knows 'er—I knows 'em all—fine-grown boys an' gels, for sure! Betty, she's a good hand at frills, but she can't do 'em as I could when I was a gel. Lor'! when I was a gel—eh, dearie, dearie me—" Here the voice sighed away into indistinct murmurings, and ceased.

Her "youngest grandarter" looked round with a matronly smile.

"That's the way old folks alius' goes on," she observed indulgently. "I 'xpect I'll do the same if I'm ever 'er age. She's a wonderful one for 'er time of life—ninety-five come Christmas. Such a memory as she's got! A bit mixed now an' then, but there's a'most nothing she can't remember. She was a married woman with a family before the Queen was crowned; an' once she was somewhere nigh Windsor Park an' saw the Prince o' Wales carried about as a baby. Didn't ye, granny?" Here she raised her voice to something between a shriek and a whistle. "Didn't ye see the Prince o' Wales in long clothes?"

A galvanic shock appeared to go through the "old bundle," and two skinny hands were thrust forth tremblingly in the air.

"Ay, that I did!" wheezed the weak voice again. "He wor the dearest little dear, as rosy as rosy—Lor' bless his 'art! I seed 'im on his marriage-day, too—me an' my 'usband; we were a'most killed in the crowd, so we was, but I seed 'im, an' he smiled at me—so did the beautiful princess from Denmark, she smiled, too—just straight at me. It's truth I'm tellin'—both on 'em smiled at me just straight an' pleasant like—it's truth I'm tellin'—"

"No one's doubtin' ye, granny," said the comely Betty, shaking out the ethereal-looking lace petticoat she had just finished, and unrolling another preparatory to further operations. "You were a fine, handsome woman still, then, worn't ye, eh?" This with a sly wink round.

"Ah, worn't I, worn't I?" screamed granny, now becoming wildly excited. "You ask William what I wor! He'll tell ye! He used to say, 'You'll never get old, my dear; that's what it is, you'll never get old.' Where's William? You ask 'im—he's the man to talk o' my looks; he thought a deal o' them—he'll tell ye. It ain't for me to praise myself"—and here an odd chuckle and creak came from the chair, whereby it became dimly manifest that the "old bundle" was laughing—"it ain't for me—you fetch 'im an' ask 'im—he'll tell ye—"

"That's poor grandfather she's chattering about now," said Betty very softly. "He's been dead these twenty years."

She went on ironing, meditatively, for a few minutes, and then said—

"It's queer how some folks never get quite what they want in this world. Now she"—jerking her head in the "old bundle's" direction—"she's had a particular wish all 'er days, an' it's never been given to 'er—now and again she do harp on it till she wears a body out. In all 'er terrible long life she's never seen the Queen, an' that's 'er craziness. She takes it awful badly. We've tried all we know to manage it for 'er, an' it seems as if there was a fate against it. She could never manage it for 'erself when she was well an' strong, an' now it's more 'ard than ever. We took 'er

with us on Jubilee day, an' she began to cry at the sight of the crowd, an' got nervous like; then we took 'er when the Imperial Institute was opened, an' that worn't no use neither, she was too feeble to stand the pushing an' scrambling. We've done our best, but something alius comes in the way, so I expect it's no good trying any more."

At that moment granny lifted herself up with a good deal of energy and peered at the ironing-board.

"What are ye doin' with them frills?" she demanded. "You ain't 'arf a hand at them. When I was a gel, I could do frills fit for the Queen to wear. Ah! she must be a fine leddy, the Queen of England, with 'er gold crown on 'er head an' 'er great jewels on 'er breast; an' 'er grand robes all round an' about 'er, an' trailing yards on the ground. Eh, dearie, dearie, dearie, mel!"—and she shook a sort of eldritch wail out of herself—"I'll never be at peace till I see 'er—never! I've seen the Prince of Wales many a time, God bless 'im!—an' the princess—an' they've smiled at me—but Lor'! the Queen is like the Lord Almighty—we've got to believe in 'er without seein' 'er!"

Her granddaughter looked gravely shocked.

"Lor', granny, you shouldn't talk so—it sounds as blasphemous as if ye were in church," she said, with a most curious irrelevance. "I'm just surprised at you—a decent, God-fearing body like yourself. Surely there's no such need for us to see the Queen; it's enough to know that she's there."

"Tain't!" shrieked the "old bundle" vehemently. "Tain't, I tell ye! She's there, is she? Where? Where is she, ye silly gel? Don't make me a fool nor yourself neither! Where is she?"

"Why, granny, in 'er palaces, for sure!" replied Betty soothingly.

"Don't she never come out o' them palaces?" expostulated granny, getting shriller and shriller. "Don't she never take no air? Then it's a shame to the country to let 'er be stifled up an' hidden away from the people who would love to see 'er with 'er robes an' crown on 'er 'ead, poor pretty dear! I call it just disgraceful, I do! Get 'er out of it—yes, you tell William what I say; the country ain't got no business to' keep 'er shut up first in one prison an' then another—an' I tell ye, Betty, there's something very queer about the way they send 'er to Scotland for such a long time—'tain't right, Betty!—you mark my words, 'tain't right!—it's a plot to keep 'er away from us, you see if it ain't! Lor'! she's a young woman yet—just lost 'er 'usband too! it's 'ard on 'er to shut 'er up—it's powerful 'ard—"

Here granny sank back exhausted, her withered head shaking to and fro involuntarily with the violence of her emotions.

"Lor'! bless 'er 'eart!" cried Betty, running to her, and tenderly caressing what now truly appeared to be nothing but a sunken heap of clothes. "How she do mix up things, to be sure! She can't get 'em right nohow. She ain't forgotten nothing, an' yet she can't sort 'em straight. Hullo, granny! Lord love 'er! If she ain't cryin' now!"

"They ain't got no right," whimpered granny dolefully, burying her wrinkles in her granddaughter's ample bosom, "to shut up the Queen. Let us 'ave a look at 'er, I say—we all loves 'er, and we'll 'earten 'er up a bit—"

"Don't you worrit, granny," said the buxom Betty consolingly. "She isn't shut up—don't you think it! She can go out whenever she likes."

"Can she?" and the "old bundle" lifted her tear-stained, aged face, with a faint hope expressed upon it.

"Ah, well, if it's the truth you're speakin', I'm glad to 'ear it. I'm glad an' thankful she can come out o' them palaces. But I've never seen 'er, an' I wish—I wish"—here came a prolonged and dismal snuffle—"I wish I could see 'er with my own eyes afore"—a long pause—"afore I die."

The poor "old bundle" was by this time completely done up, and meekly submitted to be put comfortably back on her pillow, where in a few minutes she was sound asleep. The kind-hearted Betty resumed her ironing, and, glancing up once wistfully at the interested visitor who had witnessed the little scene, remarked—

"It do seem a pity that she can't 'ave what she wants! She won't last long!"

The visitor agreed sympathetically, and presently withdrew.

It was then the "season" in town, and in due course it was announced in the papers that the Queen would visit London on a certain day to hold a special "drawing-room," returning to Windsor the next afternoon. Betty was told of this, and was also informed that if she got a bath-chair for her "old bundle," and started early, a friendly constable would see that she was properly placed outside Buckingham Palace in order to view the Queen as she drove by on her arrival from the station, and before the carriages for the Drawingroom commenced to block the thoroughfare. There would, of course, be a crowd, but the English crowd being the best-natured in the world, and invariably kind to aged persons and little children, no danger to "Granny" need be anticipated. The joy of the old lady, when she was told of the treat in store for her, was extreme, though her great age and frail health made her nervous, and filled her with fears lest again she should be disappointed of her one desire.

"Are you sure I shall see the Queen, Betty?" she asked, twenty times a day. "Is there no mistake about it this time? I shall really see 'er; 'er own darling self? God bless 'er!"

"Quite sure, granny!" responded the cheery Betty. "You'll be just at the Palace gates, an' you can't help seeing 'er. An' I shouldn't wonder if she smiled at you like the Prince o' Wales!"

This set the "old bundle" off into a fit of chuckles, and kept her happy for hours.

"Like the Prince o' Wales!" she mumbled; then nodding to herself mysteriously: "Ah, he do smile kind! Everybody knows that. He do smile!"

The eventful morning at last arrived, ushered in by the usual "Queen's weather"—bright sunshine and cloudless skies. The "old bundle" was wrapped up tenderly and carried into a comfortable bath-chair, wheeled by an excessively sympathetic man, with an extremely red face, who entered con amore into the spirit of the thing.

"A rare fine old lady she be," he remarked, as he fastened the leather apron across his vehicle. "Ninety-five! Lord bless me! I hope I'll have as merry an eye as she has when I'm her age! See the Queen? To be sure she shall; and as close as I can manage it. Come along, mother!"

And off he trotted with his charge, Betty bringing up the rear, and enjoying to the full the fresh beauty of the fine sunny spring morning. Outside Buckingham

Palace a crowd had commenced to gather, and a line of mounted soldiery kept the road clear. Betty looked around anxiously. Where was the friendly constable? Ah, there he was, brisk and business-like, though wearing a slightly puzzled air. He joined her at once and shook hands with her, then bent kindly towards the aged granny.

"Lovely morning, mother," he said, patting the mittened hand that lay trembling a little on the apron of the bath-chair. "Do you a world of good."

"Yes, yes," murmured the old woman; "an' the Queen?"

"Oh, she's coming," returned the "Bobby," looking about him in various directions; "we expect her every minute."

"The fact is," he added, in an aside to Betty, "I can't rightly tell which gate of the Palace Her Majesty will enter by. You see, both are guarded; the crowd keeps to this one principally, just about where we are, so I suppose it will be this one, but I couldn't say for certain. It is generally this one."

"Is it?" said Betty, her heart sinking a little. "Shall granny be placed here then?"

"Yes, you can wheel her as far as here," and he designated the situation. "If the Queen drives in by this gate, she will pass quite close; if she goes by the other, well—it can't be helped."

"Oh, surely she won't!" exclaimed the sensitive Betty. "It would be such a disappointment."

"Well, you see, Her Majesty doesn't know that—" began the constable, with an indulgent smile.

"But the crowd is here—outside this gate," persisted Betty.

"That's just why she may go in at the other," said the guardian of the peace, thoughtfully. "You see, the Queen can't abear a crowd."

"Not of 'er own subjects?" asked Betty; "when they love 'er so?"

"Bobby" discreetly made no answer. He was busy instructing the man who wheeled the bath-chair to place it in a position where there would be no chance of its being ordered out of the way. Once installed near the Palace gates, the "old bundle" perked her wizened head briskly out of her wrappings, and gazed about her with the most lively interest. Her aged eyes sparkled; her poor wrinkled face had a tinge of colour in it, and something like an air of juvenility pervaded her aspect. She was perfectly delighted with all her surroundings, and the subdued murmur of the patiently waiting crowd was music to her ears.

"Ain't it a lovely day, Betty?" she said, in her piping, tremulous voice. "And, ain't there a lot of nice good-looking people about?"

Betty nodded. There was no denying the fact. There were "nice good-looking" people about—an English crowd respectfully waiting to see their Sovereign is mostly composed of such. Honest hard-workers are among them, men of toil, women of patience; and all loyal to the backbone—loyal, loving, and large-hearted, and wishful to see their Queen and Empress, and cheer her with all the might of wholesome English lungs as she passes them by.

"It's lucky it's a fine day," said a man standing close to Betty, "else we shouldn't see the Queen at all—she'd be in a close carriage."

"She won't be in one to-day," said Betty confidently.

"I don't think so. She may. Let's hope not!" Again Betty's faithful heart felt an anxious thrill, and she glanced nervously at her "old bundle." That venerable

personage was sitting up quite erectly for her, and seemed to have got some of her youth back again in the sheer excitement of hope and expectation. Presently there was a stir among the people, and the sound of horses' hoofs approaching at a rapid trot.

"Here she comes!" exclaimed the bath-chair attendant, somewhat excitedly, and Betty sprang to her grandmother's side.

"Here she comes, granny! Here comes the Queen!"

With an access of superhuman energy the old woman lifted herself in the chair, and her eyes glittered out of her head with a falcon-like eagerness. Nearer and nearer came the measured trot of the horses, a murmur of cheering rose from the outskirts of the crowd. Betty strained her eyes anxiously to catch the first glimpse of the royal equipage, then—she shut them again with a dizzy sense of utter desolation—it was a closed vehicle, and not the smallest glimpse could be obtained of England's Majesty. The Queen, no doubt fatigued, sat far back in the carriage, and never once looked out. The horses turned in at the very gate near which the "old bundle" waited, alert—and in an almost breathless suspense—trotted past and were gone.

"We must go now, granny," said Betty, the tears rising in her throat. "It's all over."

The old woman turned upon her fiercely.

"What's all over?" she demanded quaveringly. "Ain't I come here to see the Queen?"

"Well, you've seen 'er," answered Betty, with an accent of bitterness which she could not help, poor soul. "You've seen all anybody has seen. That was 'er in that carriage."

Granny stared in vague perplexity.

"In the carriage?" she faltered. "That was 'er? Who? Who? Where? There worn't nothin' to see—nobody—"

"Get home, mother; you'll get mixed up in the crowd if you don't. We'll be having all the carriages along for the Drawing-room presently," said the friendly constable kindly. "The Queen's in the palace by now."

At this, the poor old dame stretched out her trembling hands towards the palace walls.

"Shut up again!" she wailed. "Poor dear—poor dear! Lord help ye in your greatness, my lovey! God bless ye! I'd a' given the world to see your face just once—just once—eh, dearie, dearie, dearie me! It's a cruel day, an' I'm very cold—very cold—I shall never see—the Queen, now!"

The constable gave a startled glance at Betty, and sprang to the side of the bath-chair.

"What, what, mother! Hold up a bit!" he said. "Here, Betty—I say—be quick!"

Two or three bystanders clustered hurriedly round, while Betty caught the drooping venerable head, and, laying it against her bosom, burst out crying.

"Oh, granny, granny dear!"

But "Granny" was dead. Betty's "old bundle" had been suddenly moved out of her way, leaving empty desolation behind, and an empty corner never to be filled. Some of the crowd, hearing what had chanced, whispered one to another—

“Poor old soul! She wanted to see the Queen just once before she died. She’d never seen her, they say. Ah, well, the Queen has a rare kind heart—she’d be sorry if she knew.”

And there was many a wistful, upward glance at the windows of the palace, as the “old bundle” was reverently covered and borne home, giving place to the daintier burdens of rich-robed beauty and jewels brought freely to “see the Queen” on Drawing-room day.

