

CERTIFIED COPY of an
Pursuant to the



Register of the District of Crewe

Marriage solemnized

St Anne's Church, Peleton
in the County of Cheshire

of the Parish of St Anne's

in the County of Cheshire

on the 24th day of August 1900

between

Adeline Harris

and

John Harris

both of the Parish of St Anne's

in the County of Cheshire

and

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ADELINE HARRIS

An
Unconventional
Love

A lost little girl, a troubled life,
the friend who stood by her

As seen on BBC

BBC

MY STORY

Adeline Harris

An Unconventional Love

Аннотация

Adeline Harris grew up in surroundings steeped in religion, from the beloved ayah in India who told her stories of Jesus wrestling tigers, to the strict father in England who placed a stone under her knee when she said the Rosary. It was no wonder that she always wanted to be a nun and a saint. Brought up to respect the church's authority, the parish priest was an important early influence in her life. And when she met the new charismatic priest, Father Kelly, her interest and amazement instantly deepened. She enjoyed spending time with him and rapidly began to spend every spare moment at the church, learning much from the principled man. Following her father's death, Adeline's mother struggled to cope and Adeline was sent to live with Father Kelly. As Adeline grew up, she found herself falling in love with her guardian and hoped he might return her feelings. Then, when she was 18, she met a young man, Andrew, at a local dance. Soon she was pregnant and turned to the one person she could always rely on for help. He offered to look after Adeline and her baby, but he couldn't understand her affections for Andrew. And, as time passed, deep down she always knew it was a friendship that was destined to end in heartache.

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My Story Love

An Unconventional Love

A lost little girl, a troubled life, the friend who stood by her

Adeline Harris

harper

true

For Paul, Mary and David, also Julian

Whilst kissing away your tears, I left others of my own

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Foreword

From my perch in the apple tree, I looked down and saw our new parish priest wobbling up the road on his bicycle. He was wearing a large black hat with a brim and was dressed totally in black apart from his white collar. His fat bottom bulged over the edge of the seat as he swerved from side to side, trying to avoid the puddles. I giggled at the sight, safe in the knowledge that even if he looked up he wouldn't be able to see me through the apple blossom.

He turned the corner towards our front door and I scrambled down, getting raindrops and pink petals all over my new dress and freshly brushed hair. I had to be waiting inside when the priest was shown in. I'd been drilled endlessly over the last week about being on my best behaviour – demure and silent and respectful – while Father Kelly went through the elaborate ceremony of blessing our house.

I hurried in through the side door just in time to take my place in the semi-circle of family members who were standing in the sitting room, plenty of candles and holy water on hand. With a frown, Dad brushed the petals from my hair, grabbed my shoulder and pushed me to the front, where I'd be standing directly in front of the priest.

Father Kelly came in and I saw that he had a round, red face, wispy blonde hair and too many teeth for his mouth. This is the

man who was *in persona Christi*, in place of Christ. His visit was only marginally less important than if Jesus himself had come to call.

He smiled down at me, and then I really don't know what came over me. Maybe it was because I resented that I'd been told I wasn't allowed to talk, or maybe it was the fact that the adults were taking it all so seriously, but I crossed my eyes and pulled down the corners of my mouth and made the funniest face I could.

Surprise flickered across Father Kelly's eyes for a moment, then he looked up at the adults and launched into the long, boring ceremony.

Neither of us could have had any idea how pivotal that first meeting between a middle-aged priest and a little eight-year-old girl would prove to be. This was the man whom I would grow to adore, who would shape me into the person I am today. He would be the great love of my young life.

All that was still to come. At our first meeting, I think it's safe to say that I managed to catch his attention and start to work my way just a little into his thoughts.

Chapter One Beesakope, Assam

The first great love of my life was a big, plump Nepalese woman called Clara. She was my *ayah*, hired to look after me at the family's tea plantation in Assam, northeast India. I emerged from the womb and was instantly snuggled into her soft, sari-clad bosom and lulled to sleep by the jingling of the dozens of coloured glass and silver bangles she wore right up to the top of her arms. I viewed the world from the safety of her lap and if I wakened in the night, I could hear her breathing, because she slept in a bed at the end of my own with her hand on my feet.

I went everywhere with *Clara-ayah*: as a baby I was tucked in the back of her sari as she walked along the dusty road to the bazaar, and as I got older she'd take me for a stroll round the fields of the plantation, which stretched into the distance like a sea of green. I'd play in the gardens outside the house with Clara's two children, a boy called Tumbi and a girl called Arico, who were both a few years older than me. But most of all we did a lot of sitting around, because Clara wasn't a very mobile woman. I curled up in the folds of her flesh, or in her sari, or in her vast arms, and she'd cover my face in kisses while telling me endless stories—stories about the past, and in particular about Jesus.

Clara had been brought up a Buddhist but after sitting in on the weekly mass that was held in our house, she decided to convert to Catholicism. Her religion was largely self-taught so,

according to her, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, near India; he was dark-skinned, not white; and his miracles were performed not only in the Holy Land but also in India during his many visits there. Before every meal, she would thank Jesus for the food he'd sent, and she'd thank him for India. Our nighttime prayers were endless. With the zeal of the convert, she insisted we stayed on our knees till we had asked for blessings to be bestowed on everyone we knew and countless people we hadn't even met: all the animals and trees and children everywhere, as well as the tiger under the bed, which, according to her stories, Jesus had tamed. I drank it in through my pores. Clara was the be-all and end-all, the centre of my universe.

I only saw my mother for an hour every day. At four o'clock on the dot I would be taken, freshly washed and brushed and straightened out, for an hour in her presence. She had trained as a Montessori teacher and would test the techniques on me. She drew red, blue, green and yellow balloons to try and teach me the English words for those colours, since as a toddler I spoke only Hindi. She'd play counting games, or ask me to do drawings or make towers of coloured blocks.

I was slightly in awe of this beautiful, elegantly dressed woman, with her strings of pearls and immaculately curled hair, and would always strive to please but I never felt any warmth from her. I always got the sense that I was merely tolerated, as she tolerated the heat or the smell of elephant dung. At five o'clock she would glance at Clara, who would scoop me up into her arms

and take me back to the nursery for tea. There were no kisses and hugs from Mother, but Clara smothered me in so much love that I never felt I was going short.

My father was an even more distant figure, often out playing polo or riding around the plantation supervising the workers, either on his bicycle or on horseback. I barely knew him as a toddler, but there's one clear memory that sticks in my mind from those days. It must have been June, because the heat was overpowering, the air felt electric with pressure and we could see huge blue-grey monsoon rain clouds bulging on the horizon. Small boys chanted a song to make the rain come: '*Jhuma, jhuma, rusta bhurra cadah.*' I repeated it after them: '*Jhuma, jhuma, rusta bhurra cadah,*' and Clara chuckled at my childish pronunciation of the Hindi words. Their incantations worked, though, because as we walked back from the bazaar that morning, the skies broke open with a loud cracking sound and huge drops of rain began to plop onto our bare arms. It was the kind of rain that soaks you in an instant. Droplets fell from my fringe onto my nose, and the hems of my dungarees soaked up water from the muddy puddles underfoot.

'Ay, ay, ay,' Clara shrieked. 'Hurry up, Adeline-baba. *Juldee, juldee.*' I was fascinated by the rivulets of water turning into gushing streams in the road and wanted to stand watching, but Clara shooed me along.

All of a sudden, we heard the sound of horse's hooves clattering behind us and there was my stern, handsome father

twinkling down at me.

'I'll give her a ride home,' he told Clara. She lifted me up so that he could catch me in his arms and sit me on the saddle in front of him and then, with a flick of the reins and a click of his heels, we were cantering off down the road. I peered under his arm at the fast-disappearing figure of my lovely *ayah*, her wet sari clinging to her curves, and I quietly asked Jesus to protect her from the great white streaks of lightning and cracks of thunder in the distance. I didn't like being separated from her. It felt safer when she was around.

Our house was a massive bungalow set on stilts in the heart of the tea gardens, and from an early age I knew the land was full of danger. Earthquakes rocked the building some nights and big chunks of plaster would fall out of the corners of the room. Clara would grab me and rush out of the shaking house and we'd have to make up our beds on the ground outside till the tremors subsided. I hardly slept a wink on those nights, terrified by the sounds of all the animals roaming around the fields. There were tigers and jackals and hyenas out there, and the hyenas were the worst because of the eerie howling sound they made, which echoed through the black skies. Even safely wrapped up in my own bed indoors, I'd shiver at the unearthly noise and I used to dread the coming of night when they emerged from their dens to hunt.

Darkness fell quickly in India. There was no in-between, no dusk or twilight. The sun disappeared as if God had turned off a

light switch and from broad daylight it became hauntingly dark night-time. If Clara hadn't been at the end of my bed, I don't know what I'd have done. But she was. She was always there.

Daytime was frightening as well, with the overhanging trees and dense tea bushes and the big shadows underneath our house where snakes could lurk. We children who lived on the plantation were all tutored in what to do if we saw a snake: back away from it slowly then fetch a grown-up. Half a dozen men would come running, armed with sticks and spades, and what a kerfuffle there would be as they jabbed at it, then leapt back yelling as it hissed and coiled and sprang at them, flicking its tongue in the air, until finally it was dispatched, headless.

I was also scared of the big lizards that scurried up the walls of the house and onto the ceiling. They'd sit there silently, their eyes winking, and then the suction under their feet would give way and they'd fall to the floor beside me with a loud plop that made me jump and scream. Clara told me they wouldn't hurt me, that they were more scared of me than I was of them, but I worried about them getting tangled in my hair, or running up my trouser leg, and I found them terrifying as they sped around on their oversized, long-toed feet.

I was also warned to stay away from the elephants that worked on the plantation, driven by *mahouts* who sat on their heads and kicked their heels to get them moving. They were sad-eyed creatures, those elephants, plodding wearily along with the baskets of tea leaves fastened to their backs, as if there was no

joy in their day, only duty. I would have liked to pat their trunks and gaze into their sad eyes, but Clara had told me about people being killed when elephants stampeded, or even just stepped backwards suddenly, so I gave them a wide berth.

The animals that were most often found near the house were cows, the holy creatures that couldn't be shooed away for religious reasons. Even though we weren't Hindu, lots of the servants were so we had to respect their beliefs. The cows used to shelter in the shade beneath the house and use our patio as a lavatory, and the awful smell of dung permeated up to the house and in through the windows, more pungent in the heat, until one of the sweepers was sent outside to the unenviable task of cleaning it up.

I was curious about the peddlers and beggars and itinerant poor who kept arriving at our kitchen door begging for scraps or trying to sell their gaudy wares, and I liked to peer out and watch them. I especially liked the snake charmers with their pipes and baskets, but if my father was there he would always tell them 'No, not today, thank you very much' and send them on their way. I was warned to be careful after one man stretched his hand through the window while I was eating breakfast and stole a box of Rice Krispies from right under my nose. He had a very long beard, wore a dirty topee on his head and smelled like old vegetables. I watched him running off with the box of cereal dangling between his legs in his *dhoti* before I yelled for Clara.

'You must always tell somebody if you see that one hanging

around,’ she said, shaking her fist at his disappearing shape. ‘He’s no good.’

From then on I kept a close eye out for this Gunga Din. I didn’t know how to tell the good people from the bad ones, though, and I used to like watching when my mother went out to give handfuls of cornflakes and Rice Krispies to the young boys who sat at the bungalow gates. She kept them specially for poor children because they were nutritious, didn’t need cooking and were easy to divide into portions.

I was surrounded by danger on all sides, but in fact it was some bracelets that caused the first real injury of my young life. I loved Clara’s clinking glass bracelets, which were called *chewrees*, and was always pestering her to let me try them on. She’d slip a few over my hand and up my arm, but they were too big and just slid off again. One day, when we were at the bazaar, I saw a stall selling children’s *chewrees* and begged Clara to be allowed to have some for myself. I don’t think they were expensive so she agreed, and I picked out all the colours I liked—pink, purple, turquoise, silvery blue, yellow and lime green—and slipped them onto my wrist, where they jangled together in a satisfying way, stretching right up to my elbow.

‘*Chewrees boht sundar hai* [bangles very beautiful],’ I sang as I ran up the road, thinking about how I would show them to Mother at four o’clock and tell her what all the colours were. I kept shaking my hand to make that jangly sound, and watching the way the iridescent glass sparkled in the sunlight. I was paying

too much attention to them and too little to the road, because suddenly, I tripped over. As luck or unluck would have it, we were on the only stretch of concrete along the whole route, the rest being dirt track, and when I fell I heard my glass bangles breaking before I felt the sharp pain in my arm.

Clara rushed to pick me up. ‘Ay, ay, ay. *Om mane padme hum.*’ (This was a Buddhist chant she often used.) When I looked down, every single *chewree* had shattered into tiny pieces, and most of those were embedded in my arm. Blood was oozing from the wounds. I cried huge tears, not because it hurt but because of the loss of my beautiful jewellery.

That afternoon, the doctor came up to the house and sat patiently extracting the tiny splinters of glass from my wounds with a pair of tweezers, while I sobbed without let-up. I think Mother was pleased the *chewrees* were broken because I heard her telling Clara they were ‘too Indian’.

I must have been accident-prone at that age because not long after, I swallowed a prune complete with stone and it stuck in my throat. Clara’s thumping and banging on my back had no effect. I was coughing and choking and gasping for breath and finally she had to call for a car and take me to the local hospital, where a doctor reached into my mouth with long forceps and extracted the stone. Poor old *Clara-ayah!* I certainly kept her on her toes.

She may have had her hands full with me, constantly chattering by her side, but there was usually extra help on hand because we had lots of servants at the house: a *khansamah*

and *masalchi* to make the meals and bearers to bring them to the table, *dhobees* to wash the clothes and sweepers to dust the rooms. When my father went out riding, a *syce* brought his horse, ready groomed and saddled, and when he brought it back, caked in dust and sweat, someone else brushed it down, fed and watered it. There were cars and chauffeurs, gardeners and a night watchman. When my parents had a dinner party, all Mother had to do was tell the servants what menu she wanted and write the invitations. I would creep out of the playroom and peer round a corner at all the glamorous women in their jewels and bright colours, accompanied by their smart-suited husbands, but they spoke English so I had no idea what they were saying. Life was one long holiday for that ex-pat set in mid-1940s India. They only had to clap their hands and yell '*Pannee wallah!*' and within seconds a jug of sparkling, ice-cold water would be brought on a silver tray.

It was a strange life for a child, though. I had a whole suite of rooms to myself: a bedroom, a bathroom and a playroom, complete with paper and pencils and books and coloured wooden blocks. I didn't have many toys, but I played imagination games with Tumbi and Arico. We would imitate mummies and daddies, doctors and nurses, even cowboys and Indians (the other kind of Indians, the ones who wore feathered headdresses). They liked my books. I liked the mud hut where they lived at the bottom of the garden. Sometimes I would slip away to the servants' huts for a taste of their sweet *chai* made with condensed milk.

I especially liked my bird book, with pictures of the local birds. Clara would point to the pictures and say ‘This is Polly Parrot, this is Jack Daw, this is a...this one is a yellow bird.’ She couldn’t read the English words, but that never stopped her hazarding her own identifications. There was a beautifully illustrated flower book as well, and I’d make her go through it telling me the names over and over again, and not caring if she said ‘That’s the pointy red flower,’ instead of its proper name.

When I was three my brother Harold was born, and right from the start he was treated like a precious creature. I must have been jealous of him with his kitten-like crying and pink screwed-up face, because the day after his birth, I went to Mother and said, ‘Horrible little thing he is, and I’m going to poke his eyes out.’

‘You will grow to love him,’ she told me sternly, and I did—eventually.

He had his own *ayah*, a woman called Gracie whom I didn’t like, and his own suite of rooms. Clara and I didn’t have anything to do with him when he was tiny, and that suited me just fine.

I was constantly being told by my mother and father that I was ‘a most troublesome child’. Once I stole an apple from a fruit bowl that was sitting on the dining-room table. It was filled to the brim with grapes and oranges and bananas and apples and I didn’t think one would be missed, but I was spotted and all hell broke loose. Dad was the disciplinarian, very formal, very strict, and for him right was right and wrong was wrong, with no grey areas in between.

‘That was stealing, Adeline,’ he told me. ‘Stealing is always wrong. You must understand that. Come here.’ He pulled me towards him, bent me over his knee and spanked me hard until I was screaming and crying—more in chagrin than in pain, it has to be said. From then on, whenever I’d done anything wrong, I’d be sent to my bed to wait for him. I’d hear the footsteps coming down the corridor and I’d lie there knowing I was about to get spanked. Sure enough, he’d come in and put me over his knee and give me a good wallop. When I was three, he’d just come back from fighting in the war against the Japanese and he believed in a rigid, army-style discipline in the household. He was a no-nonsense parent.

Dad was also responsible for teaching me the Rosary, and he drummed it into me till I could have repeated it backwards if necessary. He would start—‘Hail Mary, Full of Grace’ or ‘Our Father Who Art in Heaven’—and I would have to carry on from wherever he left off. There were three parts—the Joyful, the Sorrowful and the Glorious Mysteries—and I had to learn the prayers in Latin, a gabbled set of sounds that I spouted parrot-fashion without understanding any of it. By the age of four, I was word-perfect and proud. I liked the grandeur of the words. They made me feel clever and important.

I didn’t understand much when I went to mass, because the service was all in Latin. The sermon was in English and I didn’t understand that either. My understanding of religion at that stage came mainly from Clara’s stories of Jesus, and from Dad’s stories

about the saints and their good works. My favourite saint was Simeon Stylites, who lived for thirty-seven years on top of a pillar. He started off by building himself a platform on stilts, just as our bungalow was on stilts, but much higher. People used to send food and water up to him, but after a while he decided he wasn't quite high enough and he asked his followers to build him an even higher perch. The people built one so high that they could hardly see the top; they couldn't make out the shape of Simeon, sitting on the tiny platform, but they kept sending up his food and water on ropes and he lived there for years and years, close to God.

I used to fantasise about living like that from a very young age. Clara could send up my food, and I would send down my wee-wee in a little bucket. I had it all planned. There would be no scary wild animals up there, but birds would hop onto my platform to visit and angels would take care of me and I could sit in peace and talk to Jesus. It would be calm and happy, and that's the life I wanted. Long before the Family Miracle, which happened when I was five, I had made up my mind to be a saint.

Chapter Two The Family Miracle

I was named Adeline after my Viennese grand-mother, Countess Adeline Antonie Bohuslaw. She left Austria in 1895 and came to Suffolk as a refugee, where she met my grandfather, the Reverend Harold Augustus Harris, who was rector of Thorndon parish church. They married in Diss, in Norfolk, and their only child, my father, was born in 1900 and named Percy.

By all accounts, my grandfather was a stern man, the kind of rector who carried a shotgun round with him ready to shoot at small boys who were stealing apples from his orchard. Percy certainly had a strict upbringing, making his way through Woodbridge public school, then studying engineering at Cambridge before deciding to become a tea planter in India—a respectable and lucrative occupation at the time. The plantation he established in Beesakope sold tea to Brooke Bond and his prospects were very good. When the Second World War broke out, he signed up and, because of his education, went straight into the British army at officer level.

So far, so traditional in his life choices, but my father was soon to make a decision that would rip his family in two. He met my mother, Emily Watscoe-Pyne, when his regiment was invited to a party at Vice-Regal Lodge in Simla, where she lived in its grand confines with her uncle Sir Cyril Martin, a High Court judge. Dark of hair but pale of skin, she was the daughter of a Danish

father and an Armenian mother, and had been born and brought up in India.

At the time Percy and Emily met, my mother was thirty years old and for the last seven years had been engaged to a man who owned cotton factories in Lancashire. She saw him when he came out to India on business and for some reason accepted his promises that he would marry her as soon as the time was right. What they were waiting for, I have no idea! However, when she met my father the attraction was instant and they were married within seven weeks, in 1941, the year before I was born. Engaged for seven years, then married in seven weeks. Just imagine!

Countess Adeline had died in 1938, but the Reverend Harris's reaction to the marriage was sheer outrage. He and the rest of the Harris family would not accept that Percy had married an 'Anglo-Indian', who they assumed would be dark-skinned and would produce brown children. They wanted nothing to do with it. To add insult to injury, my mother was a Catholic and before the wedding it was agreed that my father would convert to Catholicism. It wasn't such a huge step in ideological terms from High Anglican to Catholic, and at the age of forty-one, he was ready to settle down. While Mother was drafting a 'Dear John' letter to her cotton factory fiancé, Dad was busy learning the catechism, and the wedding took place after a whirlwind courtship. It was a war wedding, while Dad was on a week's leave from his posting, so there were no frills, nothing elaborate, but they were a handsome couple and happiness radiates out from

the wedding photographs.

The effect was an instantaneous rift in the Harris family. Percy had sullied the family's reputation. The Reverend Harris refused to meet his bride or send any wedding presents or congratulations. He felt bitterly let down by his only son, in whom he had placed all his hopes. Percy might have liked to bring his bride home and introduce her to his family but it was made clear that they wouldn't be welcome. It didn't matter especially at the time, because neither Mother nor Dad had any intention of leaving India and coming back to England.

'I will never go to England,' Mother told him repeatedly during the seven-week courtship. 'You will never get me to England. You can marry me and we can have children but we stay here in India and the children grow up here. This is my land, my country, my home.'

That suited Dad just fine. He thought India the most beautiful, wonderful land and he promised her that he wanted to stay there too. They set up home on his plantation in Beesakope and there was just time for Mother to get pregnant with me before Dad went back to the fighting. He fought in the crucial battles of Kohima and Imphal, at which the Japanese offensive into India was halted, and was promoted to the rank of major before the war's end. While he was a captain he wore three pips on his shoulder, but once he became a major those pips were replaced by a crown. As a toddler, this made a big impression on me. When he lifted me up, I'd always fiddle with that crown, trying

to pull it off.

In 1945, Dad came back to Assam to give his wife her second child. Mother was never a maternal person, but out of duty she produced a boy and a girl for him. One of each. It's what you did in those days.

The cornerstone of Mother's life was her religion. As a girl, she had attended the Loreto Convent in Darjeeling, where Mother Teresa was a novice. She could have opted for convent life but instead she segued into teacher training, encouraged by the nuns. She and her sister Muriel and their cousin, a priest called Father Lawrence Picachy, remained friendly with Mother Teresa, partly because they had Armenian connections who were close to her Armenian family, and partly because Father Picachy acted as one of Mother Teresa's spiritual guides.

I never met Mother Teresa, but I remember Father Picachy coming to visit us, wearing long white robes with a big sash round the middle. He was a large man, much darker-skinned than my mother, and there was a holy air about him, a kind of untouchability. In 1969 he would become Archbishop of Calcutta, then in 1976 he was made a Cardinal, but back when I knew him as a recently ordained priest, he already had something of the aura of religious greatness.

When he came to visit, my brother Harold and I would be dressed in our best clothes and told to stand in the hall with our hands behind our backs as this stern, bespectacled man glanced in our direction, nodded, and walked past. I think once or twice

he patted me on the head, but that was it. He'd disappear into the drawing room with Mother and Dad, while we were led back to the nursery. We didn't eat meals with the grown-ups. They were in the dining room, while we had our tea in the nursery. We had to knock and wait for permission before entering a room, and many times that permission wasn't granted. I would have liked to chat to him—I already had a well-deserved reputation as a chatterbox—but Mother had made it clear that that would be frowned upon. 'Seen but not heard,' she urged, putting a finger to her lips.

I was always being silenced as a child. My instinct was to chat to everyone who came to the house—the doctor, the priest, the beggars, or Mother and Dad's British friends. 'I've got new shoes,' I'd tell them in Hindi, or, 'I drew a picture of an elephant'; anything that was on my mind, I'd say.

Dad was a poetry fan with a quote for every occasion and he'd often recite: 'I chatter, chatter as I flow to join the brimming river; for men may come and men may go but Adeline goes on for ever.'

Banned from chatting, I started making faces to attract attention. I pulled down the corners of my mouth like a turtle, or stretched my lips wide with my eyes narrowed to slits, and I was very talented at crossing my eyes. Some guests would laugh, others would gasp, and Mother would be cross but at least it always got a reaction.

When I was five years old, there was an incident that would

change our family and the way we lived our lives for ever, and Father Picachy was part of it. It began when my father was bitten by a rabid dog. The doctor had to cycle over every day to give him anti-rabies injections in his stomach. I didn't see this, of course, but I remember watching the doctor coming up the path and screwing up my nose to think of how painful an injection in the stomach must be.

Whether it was the injections or something else altogether, I don't know, but one day my father collapsed, showing all the signs of a stroke. First he felt numbness in his legs, then Mother and Father Picachy realised that the left side of his face had collapsed and he couldn't speak or move his left arm. There was no telephone on the plantation so a servant boy was dispatched to fetch the doctor. Father Picachy sat comforting him but Mother was distraught and couldn't contain herself. She told us later that she ran out into the tea gardens to watch anxiously for the doctor.

Suddenly, there was a piercing light and one of the tea bushes in her path burst into flames. She stopped in fright, and as she stood there she heard a voice speaking to her. 'I will take you out of India,' it said. 'Go back now. He is cured.'

The voice was so calm and sure that she turned and hurried back to the house. When she got there she found her husband sitting up and talking to Father Picachy. His face had returned to its normal configuration, and he could move his left arm again.

'I saw a burning bush!' she cried. 'I saw the flames and I stood thinking of Moses, and a voice told me he would be cured.'

Father Picachy had his own extraordinary story to tell. ‘Just after you left, I placed a crucifix in Percy’s hand and instantly he seemed to recover.’

They realised these occurrences—the bush, the crucifix and Dad’s recovery—must have been simultaneous, and knelt to pray and give thanks. The doctor arrived and expressed his astonishment at the patient’s rapid recovery from such ominous symptoms. He said it sounded as though Dad had had a stroke and was lucky to have come through it so well, but still he referred him to hospital for further tests.

Once he’d finished his examination, Mother led the doctor and Father Picachy out into the garden to show them the bush that had been on fire, but to her astonishment she couldn’t find any sign of it. There wasn’t so much as a cinder on the ground or a singed leaf in sight.

‘I’m sure it was right here,’ she gestured. ‘I’m not a psychiatric case. I definitely saw a burning bush. The flames shot out and there was a very bright light and then I heard the voice.’

Everyone believed her and it became part of family lore that God had saved Dad from a stroke. It was proclaimed as a miracle. Father Picachy spread the word and soon the house was full of Jesuit priests, coming and going in their white robes, saying mass and being fed in the big dining room. The crucifix Dad had been holding was kissed and venerated, and placed on display in the hall with candles lit on either side of it.

Clara became even more pious and told me ever more

ridiculous stories about Jesus taming lions so they would lie down with lambs, and saving newborn babies from tigers and snakes. I was given a children's bible and several religious story books with pictures of Daniel in the lion's den and David and Goliath and the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. My whole life was centred around religion. It took over the family from that point on.

I had to kneel down every night to recite the Rosary before bedtime, which took fifteen whole minutes. My parents would recite one part, then I had to give the response and so it went on. Every Sunday Harold and I had to sit quietly through mass. We said grace before meals and prayers before bed, and the only stories we were told were religious ones. We were taught to offer everything we had and did to God, and to talk to God all the time. I didn't rebel against this because I wanted to be good, I desperately wanted my parents to be pleased with me.

Both Mother and Dad were overwhelmed by the experience with the burning bush, our very own Family Miracle, and felt they had a debt to God that must be repaid. What better way than to offer Him their children?

My father said, 'It's not enough to be good, Adeline. I don't want a good girl; I want a saint. You have to be perfect.' That was fine, because I fully intended to be a saint and live on top of a pillar like Simeon Stylites.

Mother wanted me to be a nun. 'Only good girls become nuns,' she said. 'You have to be especially good.' So that's what I'd do; I'd become a nun. She wanted Harold to become a priest as well.

I wondered if I could be a nun and a saint at the same time, and Mother said yes, I could, so that was fine.

I wanted what they wanted. I was determined to become a nun and a saint, no matter what sacrifices I'd have to make, no matter how hard it was or how long it took. I decided then and there that's what I was going to do with my life.

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