

The Treasure

By Gudrun Koch

Other children used to go to the coast with their families during their summer holidays. They would carry swimsuits and towels in their trunks and a hat against the sun on their heads, although the English summer could be windy and overcast.

Not as cloudy as the Bakewell summer though, I suppose. For my family never went to the coast. We, that is my mother, my two younger brothers and I, used to board the train to Bakewell with the Bakewell Carnival at the end of the summer, where the Bakewell aunts with the Bakewell puddings lived. Sometimes my father would join us. Never during the summer holidays, but on some weekends, because it was not only the summers we spent with the Bakewell aunts but many weekends too.

In summer my father and his friend Greig went off to Windermere, Scotland or Wales. In contrast to my friends at school they would carry ropes in the boot of Greig`s car, an old army tent and a rusty petroleum cooking stove. I had no idea of what they were doing there. Although my father would sometimes take Alec onto his lap, George wouldn't let him do that anymore since he went to secondary school, and tell us about his adventures. Tales about mountains and rocks, storms, peril and courage, tales I didn't always quite believe, for my father had a tendency to exaggerate, and I had a hard time imagining everything. Mother used to listen with a disapproving and sometimes worried expression on her otherwise so cheerful face.

The most wonderful Bakewell weekends were the ones, when father came along. He would take us out and show us the rocks of Froggatt and Stanage and tell us stories about the millstones that clattered the slope beneath the Stanage cliffs, and were left there when the French began to import much cheaper stones. On sunny days my mother and the Bakewell aunts joined us with a basket full of biscuits, sandwiches and lemonade. They would sit on a blanket and look into the valley while we children and father played hide and seek between the rocks.

One spring father announced that this year he and Greig and a few other comrades would not go to Scotland, Wales or the Lakes. That year they planned a trip to Chamomix, a town in the French Alps, as he explained. He got quite excited about the mere idea, which I could tell from the pink colour his ears adopted. Mum's face took on an even more disapproving and worried look. She didn't say much but let him rave on about mountains and the great men who had climbed them and this exceptional opportunity to climb one of these mountains too.

And it really was terrifically exciting news. Father would travel abroad, to France. He would be in another country where the people spoke another language and certainly wore different clothes and ate funny things. Our imagination soared up to the sky and we pictured the most curious and probably most unlikely wonders he would encounter.

"Do they have elephants in France?" it was little Alec asking this question, I exchanged a meaningful glance with George, of course they had no such things in France.

"Will you bring us a present from there, father?" George inquired hopefully. My father returned this question with a promising smile. Yes he would.

That night as we were lying in our beds on the first floor, I heard my parents quarrel downstairs in the kitchen. Mum's voice was furious and shrill with anger. Father sounded pressed, and I could tell that he was determined to stay calm and reasonable. I couldn't make out much of what they said, but it was plain enough, that the argument was about father's plan to go to the Alps. At one point I took my blanket and pillow and wandered over to my brothers' bedroom. I climbed into Alec's bed and he snuggled himself into the crook of my arm. With my eyes wide open I listened to my parents raging on - until quite suddenly all became quiet downstairs.

I was almost asleep when father softly stepped into the room. He stooped over George's bed first and then came to the other, where Alec and I were lying. His hand caressed Alec's short curls and then gave my shoulder a tender shake.

"It's just that your mother is very worried, because she likes me so much", he said, "but do not fret yourselves; I'll be back soon and I promise that I'll bring you all a little something from France."

He sat there for a little while, quite still. Eventually he rose, "so and now sleep" he told us and closed the door behind him.

Summer came and Mum grew restless and irritable with every week that passed and brought us closer to father's departure. The night before they left we had a big dinner with all the men that would part take in the trip and their wives. Mum prepared it with great care. She spent hours in the kitchen baking and cooking. She sent us to fetch the silver cutlery from the attic and let us polish it until there was no stain left. We swept the floor, set the table and arranged the candles. We didn't complain because of the grim expression she wore while going over the work. Over the last few days I had adopted my mother's foreboding mood. So I didn't stay downstairs with the joyful company for long. I went up into my room soon after we had eaten, and played with some of Georges lead soldiers "wild west".

Oddly, my dreading feeling that had grown ever stronger during the last few days before father's departure almost evaporated once he was gone. My brothers and I seemed to have come to the unspoken agreement, that none of us would mention father's adventure in front of our mother. It was not difficult to stick to this agreement faithfully for none of us felt like speaking of it anyway. We went to Bakewell as we did every summer. It was a brilliant, sunny one. And we had two or three wonderful picnics on the gentle hills of the Peak District. Mum seemed to relax too. Father had sent a second telegram, telling that they were all well and in best health. So little by little we relaxed and began to speculate about all the wonderful presents father would bring from the continent.

Three days before father's supposed return we bade good-bye to the Bakewell aunts and got on the train for home.

Of course he came home safely. And he seemed all healthy and cheerful although a bit skinny. His face was deeply tanned and worn from the weather, except from around his eyes where the sunshades had covered the skin. Mother almost cried when he gathered her in a tight embrace. After dinner that night father took little Alec's hand and pulled him onto his lap. And then he began to tell us about the Alps and the glaciers of Mont Blanc. His eyes were bright, full of an odd, wistful glow while he spoke. It gave his tale a life like none of his other stories ever had had.

I had forgotten about the promised gifts when he finally grasped a little bag, which he had placed on the floor just next to his armchair. He extracted a soft red scarf with delicate blue stitching along its border and placed it tenderly around mother's shoulders. Then he came up with one funny felt fed hat for each, George and Alec and accompanied the two pieces with a great story about the English hero George Mallory, who climbed Mont Blanc in 1911 wearing just exactly the same hat as he did so. The twinkle in his eyes let me doubt his knowing about Mr Mallory's hat preferences, but George and Alec were delighted.

Eventually his hand extracted one last piece from the bag. This was to be mine. I had been sitting on my chair fidgeting about for a while already and by now almost burst for curiosity. Carefully he took the thing and with a smile put it down on the table.

It was a stone, a grey stone. I felt how my face went slack and my arms fell down at my sides. My father nodded understanding and with an encouraging smile he said: "It is a snake-stone. Come here and see!"

Hesitating I moved over to his side of the table and looked at the stone. There was an exquisite impression of a spiral shell chiselled on the topside of the rock lump. It was pretty, no question. But still it was nothing like whatever I had hoped for. And somehow I felt not able to overcome my initial disappointment.

"Thank you, father" I pressed out between clenched teeth, gave him a short kiss took the stone and then hurried out of the dining room, up the stairs and into my bed room, where I flung myself on the bed and began to stare at the wall, the grey stone still clasped between my fingers.

Later that evening father knocked at my bedroom door and entered without waiting for an answer. He sat down next to me on the edge of my bed. "You are disappointed, hmm?" he observed. I kept silent and waited.

"I want to tell you about that stone." He said after a little while and when he continued he spoke very slowly and softly, "I wanted to tell you this story downstairs, but maybe it is just as well if we two are alone for it, because it is a very special story. And to be quite honest, I wouldn't be able to

tell you the whole story in a life time. So it will be only a little bit... bits and pieces. And you will have to fill it yourself eventually..."

And so he began to tell me the story of my stone. He told me a story that began three billion years ago, when the earth began to cool down gradually. He told me about a little ammonite in a spiral shell that lived in an ocean so vast and deep that it drowned all mountains. And when it died, covered by mud and silt, it was carried up with the mountains that began to push their way through a blanket of water high up into the sky. He told me about storms and ice ages, dinosaurs and mammoths, which were walking the land regardless of my little ammonite. He told me about another million of years wearing off layers of earth and bursting solid rocks and of the first men venturing the ancient ocean ground that was now as close to the sky as it was millennia's of years before to the bottom of the earth. And he told me about a tired, exhausted man who stumbled over this little stone, that hadn't been touched by a human hand since humanity existed and that had been there bearing the impression of a life that was amongst the very first creatures of our earth. And this stone the man picked up and he thought of his little daughter to whom he would carry it home. And so the stone began another journey, which brought it to England, to the little town and the house where this man's daughter lived. It travelled there to tell the girl the story of the earth.

I don't know when I went off to sleep or if I listened to the story awake or already in the world of my dreams. Some time my father must have finished his tale, switched off the light and, so I imagine, gave me a tender kiss before he left my room.

The next morning though, I woke up, I held pressed to my chest the stone. It felt warm from the heat of my own body. The stone, which as I knew held the unspeakable treasure of the earth's memory and the source of all my possible imagination in itself. And I knew, a lifetime wouldn't be enough to imagine the whole wonderful story of this stone's journey.