

①

Part of the Reminiscences of
Byrne Sanders (1902-1981)

Weary, dishevelled, grimy, I burrowed through the cellar rooms; broken furniture to be mended one day; old lamps; discarded china; children's belongings, left for safe-keeping when they got married; cartons of odds and ends, all part of the flotsam and jetsam of any family's life. But it was my personal files and boxes which excited me. For here were hundreds of professional photographs, preserving events and people I had forgotten about; hundreds of newspaper clippings, too; my first bits and pieces, published when I was fifteen; newspaper and magazine articles I had written during the years I was on a newspaper, on Eaton's advertising staff, and as editor of *The Business Woman*. There were articles about me over the years; a huge scrap-book of my years in Ottawa faithfully kept by a secretary at MacLean-Hunter; reviews of my books; hundreds of letters I had kept for one reason or another. Finally a recent one in a Sunday magazine: "Whatever happened to Byrne Hope Sanders?"

Here she was, trying to tidy up, or discard the records of decades. I stopped to read and remember; and became excited. There had to be a story in all this represented, and now, surely, I had time. I remember Mazo de la Roche who, when she was given a dinner on winning the Atlantic Monthly Prize of \$10,000, said something I've always remembered. Tall, spare, and, I thought colourless, she asked: "Do any of you know what it's like to write a book? Like a mole burrowing its way through a mountain."

"This mess is like opening a Pandora's box on a human life," I thought. "Or like the abandoned snake's skin we saw so often in South Africa. Or an empty shell by the sea. I have emerged from it all; and surely I can put the tensions of life back into it. It's like poetry, remembered not in tranquillity, but in toil." In the cellar, and in the writing.

Earliest memories are set in the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa, where my mother and her four children were born. My father was an Englishman, youngest son in a well-to-do family living in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire, not far from London. The tragic pattern of his life began when he was eleven months old, and nearly died of poliomyelitis. The doctor came slowly down the stairs and said to Grandfather:

"I'm sorry to say, Sanders, but we can do nothing. It's hopeless. The baby won't last the night."

But Grandmother, at her son's bedside, did not hear him; nor did my grandfather tell her. She nursed her baby back to life, but at a price. The illness left him crippled down his left side. His eye was damaged, his arm partly paralysed, and he walked with a heavy limp.

He was, like my mother, an integrated part of my life until he was almost eighty, and I have often wondered whether the outer evidence of the polio's damage told the whole story, for he was to me, an incredible character. We have a photograph of him, taken about a year after the attack. He has been carefully

balanced on a cushion, his arm and leg arranged to appear normal gazing calmly at the life that awaited him. Silhouetted on a white ground, it is a poignant thing to see, knowing how full of ill-luck that life was to be - part of it happenstance, and part of it, his own doing.

His doting mother referred to him often as "Poor, dear Harry" a phrase he loathed. He was cosseted all through his youth, until he graduated, with first class Honours from Dublin University. It was a tradition in the family, that the youngest son must always join the navy, and one of his treasures was the sword carried by a great uncle at the battle of Trafalgar. This life, however was barred for him, and the question was "What now?"

A suggestion came from his sister's husband, Charles Higham, who had recently been ordained, asked Harry to accompany him on a two-year sojourn in a parish established in Port Elizabeth, as a tutor to his children. My father agreed, but when Charles and his family returned to England, remained in South Africa. He became a school teacher; liked the country and his work. He had also fallen in love with a teacher - Lucy Emma May Bing.

As so often happens, their temperaments were in strong contrast. He was often melancholy, his rages were frightening, and he seemed hostile to so many types of people. Mother was merry, tender, and humanitarian. He was tall, fair, and attractive; she was tall, but with a classic beauty, and long black hair which she wore in a coil on the back of her head. Dad was solidly English, with some German; mother was solidly Irish with an Italian mix. Her Roman nose she told us was inherited from Aunt Cassandra; my mother, my daughter and I have all inherited her Roman nose; and one of my nieces bears her name. Mother's life had been an ideal one. Her English father was an importer, specializing in Oriental trade, and some treasures in our home, are the Chinese figurines and East Indian bits and pieces he collected. Her Irish mother - an O'Byrne from Southern Ireland - was a forceful but cheery soul. Lucy grew up in a large, easy-going family, in the free and easy life of the Cape, riding her horse along the wide beaches of the Indian ocean, sailing on the Cowie river, and revelling in the flowers that embowered gardens and countryside. She played the piano well, had a charming voice, and was always part of the Gilbert and Sullivan Operettas staged by townfolk. She never had to learn housework, as there were always plenty of Kaffirs to look after it.

Knowing all that was to come, I am haunted by the picture of their wedding - the bride surrounded by her family and friends, the groom, so alone, and so far from his natural setting. I know that mother's wreath was woven from Lilies of the Valley, picked that morning. The flower and the fragrance have become my favourites, for the bloom in May, the month in which both of us celebrate our birthdays - a day apart.

Shortly after, Dad received a small legacy. He had always hankered after the law, and the couple decided to use it while he went to Capetown to become a lawyer.

He could not be home for my birth and liked to tell the story of

his first sight of me. Mother was at the station, the baby in her arms, and rushed towards him. "Oh Harry - do you like her?"

The four of us were born within five years. All were christened in the long, lacy gown which now lies in a bottom drawer. Despite the fact that we have two children, and seven grandchildren, only Dodie has worn it since.

Within four years Dora, Jack and Wilfred, followed me. I was labelled Minnie, O'Byrne, Hope Sanders, the first two after my great-grandmother, the last after the Cape of Good Hope. When, in my teens, I started to write, I decided to drop the Minnie.

It has proved a distinctive name, but with many variations, as people find it hard to pronounce the Byrne, and write to me as Byrn, Bern, or Byron. My favourite was Bryn Hop Sanders. I try to clarify it by saying "It's what happens when you put your hand on a hot stove; you burn it."

In mid-life I had an important meeting with an officer in the Salvation Army. She looked at me with envy. "You have such a wonderful name," she said, and repeated it slowly, in her vibrant voice, bringing her outstretched hands together, rhythmically. "Boo! Boom! Boom! Just like the sound of the big drum."

* * * * *

Although we remained in South Africa less than ten years, they were enough to make a life-long impact on us; in fact many impressions of them are more vivid than those of later times. For one thing, they were in such contrast to what came after that we talked of them often, re-enforcing our recollections. In them we knew a magic and beauty, sadly lacking later on. They gave us a romantic background, and made us feel that we were something special, when we felt lonely, or faced unpopularity in Canada.

For the most part we were isolated in black communities, for my father practised law up in Rhodesia, and in the Transvaal. I can remember no white children, as there were no schools, and Mother taught us to read and write. We moved as a unit, learning friendship with each other, and becoming unusually self-contained as a family.

Memories come like snapshots on a home projector. Click! We are in Willowdale, named, surely by a homesick settler, for there was never a willow in sight. Out living room is an immense round hut, with a high pointed roof thatch, its only entrance the door. I can see the Kaffir women, cleaning the earthen floor, with pails beside them from which they scoop handfuls of a thick mixture - mainly cow dung, which dries to a hard finish, on which our straw mats are spread. Beside it is a narrow row of bedrooms, made from corrugated iron; in front a fence-enclosed tennis court. Along side it, is Dad's hut in which he meets his clients. A narrow path runs to it, and along side, sit a row of blanket-wrapped Kaffirs, legs stretched in front. When we go to see Dad, we must clamber over these legs. Chubby Will must take each leg in turn, stopping midway to peer into each dark face and murmur "Willapecoose me?"

Still further are the Kaffir quarters, and the outbuildings. We like to linger there at day's end, watching the group around the cooking fire, centred with its high black iron pot, set on a tripod. Someone starts to hum, and soon our friends are in full voice, with haunting minors of native melodies. They are particularly fond of the little boys - Jack whose yellow curls are dazzling against the black skins, and roly-poly Wilf, so likely to fall into the fire. We cannot stay long, for the dark falls swiftly with little twilight.

We take our Kaffir world for granted. They are handsome people, tall, slender, with very dark skins, and thick heads of hair. They move with dignity, aloof but kindly. Most of them wear blankets, draped over shoulders, or folded about their waists. Although we are always under the care of a native woman, I have no recollection of Ol' Black Mammy's, Southern style. I know I was fascinated - and frightened - at their stories of evil spirits and dark dangers in the wooded clefts that crossed the veldt. The women seem to do most of their chores, at home or in the fields, with babies clamped on their back, or at their hips with blankets; they carried immense bundles on their heads as well as a baby, striding swiftly with ramrod stiff backs. I remember our delight in a staging of Snow White, with complete black cast, and mother's annoyance with the missionaries, who insisted that converts wear sloppy looking Mother Hubbards, instead of the Grecian blankets.

We walk in single file through tall grasses of the veldt, so brown and dusty in the dry season, so transformed with instant beauty, in the rainy months. A small boy walks ahead of us, brandishing a stick with which he scares away the snakes. There are lots of them about, some poisonous. We become accustomed to seeing one of them, on the path ahead, stop, quiver, and shed its skin, leaving it hollow, and undulating away in fresh brilliant colours. I have often thought of them when life has pushed me into a new role, seeing my old one as an empty snake skin. In fact, I thought of it on the afternoon I walked through the Chatelaine offices for the last time, to enter a completely new world of statistics.

On these walks, we by-pass the native Kraals - a group of mud huts with the typical high-pointed roofs, set in a circle - mainly because we are afraid of the many lean and hungry dogs which prowl about them.

Click! We are frolicking in a fissure of the earth at the bottom of our land, walled with lush greenery, and hiding a waterfall in the stream below. We stand on the flat rocks under the falls which flash in front of us with iridescent reflections from the sky and the foliage. Maiden-hair ferns are massed on the sides of the declivity, and there are pale green orchids twisting on tree branches.

Now we are playing The Sleeping Beauty. It is my turn to portray her, and I am stretched on an iron cot, while the other three bring armful of the whiter-than-white Calla lilies to spread over me. Many a time, I have stood entranced before a flower

shop on Fifth Avenue, on a New York trip, almost hypnotised by the sight of half a dozen Calla lilies, enshrined in a great jar, their luscious petals and blood-red stamens, sending me back to the days when we picked them like dandelions.

Now we are in Alice, living at one end of a Monastery. We are friends with the monks; hear them chanting; watch them pacing the long paths in the garden. They smile at us, and allow us to enter an enormous aviary built from wire-netting to stare at the rainbow coloured birds, fluttering in the small trees. Or we are taking turns to ride in a small goat-cart; or pulling each other down the long grassy slopes, sitting on a sack; or paddling in the rivulets of water released from a dam, to irrigate the fields.

Every morning, the household meets at family prayers. We sing hymns, each in our own tongue. I have my own version, and repeat lustily, "De Powder and de Gory", as I am learning the Lord's Prayer. One morning a priest, walking in the garden, says to Dad, "You know, I never knew what it was to make a joyous noise unto the Lord, until I heard the Sanders at morning prayer". Our ritual continued for many years, sometimes in acute embarrassment. In Norwich, for instance, our devotions often coincided with arrival of the milk boy. He waited, politely, standing on the side porch, his nose pressed against the screen door, staring at the Sanders, up-ended in prayer, before our chairs. As Dad came to the final "And may the blessing of God the Father ..." the boy knocked, and the cat leapt to its feet, gave a loud, high-keyed "Pr-r-r-r?", and raced, tail on high, into the kitchen. He knew there was a seventh bowl for him, awaiting the breakfast porridge.

Click! And we are spending the Christmas holidays under the encircling branches of an enormous Banyan tree, at the sea's edge. The name of the place is pronounced with a native diphthong, a click at the back of the throat; I can say it, but cannot spell it. We have travelled here in a Cape Cart, much like the covered wagons of the West, drawn by oxen. We sleep in the wagon; our meals are cooked in the three-legged pot; we frolic in the warm surf and listen to the Kaffirs singing round their fire in the evening - all under the ambient African sun, or the blazing stars. I recall two incidents which mar the holiday - the one when a wild pig and her piglets, keep stealing the bread dough; the other when I knock over the pot of mealies, and get a nasty burn.

We use that same Cape Cart when we move to another village. It is a journey of several days, and this time has been fitted with a double bed spring half-way up the interior. Mother and Dad travel and sleep on the top shelf, while we children stretch out like sardines on the lower, or sit with our legs dangling over the back. There are two carts, one for us, and one for our possessions and the Kaffirs; ours is drawn by thirty oxen, yoked two-by-two, with a small boy, wearing a red shirt, walking at the head. Our big rocking-horse, a gift from English Grannie, hangs on the back. We have to cross a shallow river, and stand on a high-strung suspension bridge, woven from rope, to watch the procession pass by, far below.

We gambol through the days, like a clutch of puppies, knowing little of the troubles that beset our parents. But there is much talk of a cattle plague, which decimates not only the herds, but Dad's clients. We go to Capetown, for a few weeks during which, as I learn later, Dad tries to find a place for himself. But finds nothing; and is upset by the animosity between the Dutch settlers - the Boers - and the English.

Then, on a sudden, we are on a white ship, sailing away from the silhouette of Table Mountain, headed for England. The four of us are in a tiny, four-berthed cabin in the steerage. Mother and Dad have closed the door on us, and their own, next-door. We hear a strange and terrible sound; mother is crying with gasping sobs; Dad's voice is droning on and on. We are frightened, and stare at each other with mounting fear. We dare not go to them, or leave the cabin.

This is the moment when I first become aware of maturity and its responsibilities. Something has to be done, and, as the oldest, it's up to me. I remember a bag of coloured sweets, given us on the dock.

"Let's divide our fruit drops evenly between us. We'll pick in turn."

I dump the bag on the bunk; it takes a long time, as both colour and taste have to be carefully considered. When the exercise is over, I tear the bag into four pieces, in which we wrap our loot, and we sit, sucking pleasantly. Our fears have dwindled, and so has the sound of sobbing.

We are going to England to see if Dad can find work there, and are to stay with Uncle Charlie and his family, until he does. It was not until middle-age that I learned that the first news the Higham's had of our arrival was given in a cable Dad sent when we were half-way across the seas.

* * * * *

Small wonder my mother cried so hard. When we were older she told us that she knew she would never see her homeland again; she had said goodbye to the family forever, and to the way of life she had enjoyed so much. At twenty-nine she was sailing into the Unknown, on the other side of the world, with an out-of-work husband, four children and little money. Down in the hold was a packing case, carrying a few precious possessions. As a matter of fact, she was to return, just once. In 1935 a letter from her sister Rhoda arrived. She had just received a small inheritance - some money and personal effects etc. That "etc" she wrote, meant that there was enough to pay mother's travel expenses. Mother took passage on a freighter, and returned in six months - deeply disturbed at the changes in South Africa - changes which were the fore-runner of the current struggles with Apartheid.

We arrived in Liverpool a few days after the cable. If it had been a shock, Uncle Charlie and Aunt Emily gave no sign of it in their cheery welcome of poor, dear Harry, his wife and their

matched set of children.

They lived in the ivy-covered, red-brick Parsonage, on grounds of the Seaman's Orphanage, where our Uncle was the Vicar. It was a full house already, for the family included English Grannie, five children, older than we were, together with Annie the cook, and Isabel the housemaid. Strachan, the oldest was at Cambridge, where Frances soon joined him, one of the first women to be admitted. Winifred was studying Art; Maude and Tony still at school.

Somehow we were all bedded down, and absorbed into their family life for over a year. They shared everything they had with us. It was not until middle life that I learned something of the sacrifices our presence meant to them, in terms of stricter economies, cancelled holidays, fewer clothes and less pleasures, let alone the hub-bub we caused in their well-ordered lives.

The circumstance did not seem to bother Dad very much, but although Mother tried hard to accept them, she was distressed, as she felt that we were living on charity, however lovingly it was given; but we children settled in with high spirits. We knew nothing of dad's frustrations in his search for work, and his despair in finding that there was no place for a lawyer from South Africa with a family to support. He tried other avenues of work, but with no luck. He was greeted politely but advised "If I were you I'd go to Australia or Canada. There are lots of opportunities there." After some weeks of this, it was agreed that he and mother would go to Canada to make a home for us.

Our short interlude in England was the last of my care-free childhood. We were very happy, not only with the Highams, but with the new pleasures we found. While the grime and dinginess of Liverpool was startling to me, in contrast to the beauty we had known, we were fortunate in our setting. Across the road from the orphanage was Newsham Park, with its lovely trees and flowers. We bowled our hoops on the curving paths and under the flowering hawthorns. Our garden was large, and we built our toy villages along herbaceous borders, or learned to play croquet.

Best of all was the nursery. Ali Baba's cave could not have been more sensational to us. Up to now, we had known practically no toys, except for the stuffed dolls and animals mother made us. But now, all of a sudden, we were shown the treasures belonging to our cousins. It was a large room, with eager tendrils of ivy trying to creep across the casement windows. Hundreds of books lined one wall; on shelves across the room, were stashed a fantasy of toys such as we had never seen, nor imagined. It contained an enormous doll's house, completely furnished and with a family of tiny dolls in residence. Before the fireplace was a big table where we read, played, and had our evening meal. Best of all, perhaps were the high-piled boxes of tin soldiers, regiments of every kind, all in their colour and glory. The magic doors of this treasury were open to us and we flung ourselves into its enjoyments.

There was, however, one strict rule. Everything had to be tidied up and put away in its proper place by five o'clock, when Isabel

arrived with our tea things. It was a magic hour, for the lamp-lighters were trudging down the curved road, lifting their wands to set a glow atop each post. Often Maude came, too, to bring some of the dolls to the table's end, and make them perform with so much fun that, as mother said, "The house is filled with laughter when it's tea-time in the nursery".

Sundays, of course, were very special. For one thing we could not play with our nursery toys, because, said Grannie:

For this, it is the Sabbath day,
And we must nether work nor play,
Because it is the Sabbath day.

What then were we to do? Grannie had a solution, and brought some sacrosanct toys from the top of her wardrobe.

In the morning, we paraded into the Orphanage chapel, to sit in the front row, while hundreds of orphans filed in to fill the other seats. Uncle Charlie looked like an apostle with his clear, gentle eyes, his dark curly hair and his full beard. I fell in love with the third choir boy on the left, although I was in love with Tony, too. Most of the time during the sermon I was piously studying my prayer book, reading the Tables of Consanguinity in front, which listed the people one could, or could not marry. Was Tony's cousinship a bar to our marriage? Some time in the future, Dora and Tony were to be engaged; but that is another story.

On warm Sunday evenings we had tea at the top of the garden on a little patio, with a busy railway line on the other side of the hedge. Isobel accompanied us in her white starched cap and apron, and her blue-striped dress, bringing special sandwiches, and a cake Annie had made just for us. When we had gobbled everything in sight, Isobel led us in hymn-singing, just at the time the chapel bells were sounding for Evensong. We ate, and sang, and listened with the soot from passing engines drifting over us. Dora and I had our first smattering of formal education and went to a church school in the depths of the city. All I remember is the dark hall in which we marched endlessly, to a tinkly melody on a piano which I can still hum; the strong smell of disinfectant; and the skill with which a teacher showed us how to clean our nails, by scraping the grubbiness out of one hand, with the thumb-nail of the other. One other memory remains - the explosion at home when we came home with lice in our hair.

Two incidents were to have an enduring impact on my attitudes. One occurred on the island of Anglesea, where the Highams shared their holidays with us. We had many picnics on the beach, but wood was scarce. My sophisticated cousins, realizing an early flaw in my character, lolled about the fire, and said to me: "Minnie, you are so good at getting firewood, will you get us some? We can't find it nearly as well as you do." inspired by their flattery I climbed the cliffs, scoured the sands and the shrubbery to bring back armsful for my grinning cousins. I have fallen victim to such blandishments all my life; "You are so good at it" sends me charging off to do all manner of things; only recently have I recognised what a ploy it is.

The other was not amusing but dynamic. One afternoon, Aunt Emily called me, and said:

"I want you to go into the drawing room and meet a friend of Grannie's. She is very old, and not very strong so just stay a moment."

The room was brilliant with chintz, and bowls of sweet peas or roses. In a high wing-chair before the fire sat my Grannie, plump, pink-cheeked, smiling. Across from her in another colourful chair was a tiny, shrunken creature, older than anyone I had ever seen. She was all in black and looked to me like a broken sparrow. As I stood before her, she reached forward and clasping my hands, peered up at me. "Oh child," she murmured, "How young you are... and your life is all before you. Don't waste it. Mine is nearly gone... I've wasted it... wasted it." She gestured me to go. That brief moment set alight my love of life; and helped me try to live it to the full, taking nothing for granted, holding every day as a gift. Nobody had to teach me the adage of living every day as if it were one's last; she did it, with what was, literally, a cry of pain.

* * * * *

One day there was a two-word cable from Canada - "Come home". Luckily a friend was already sailing and it was arranged for us to travel under her care. At the last moment she fell ill, but suggested that a couple she knew was also on the boat, and would keep an eye on us. They were in the first-class, and we saw little of them; but every evening they came to our second-class cabin, to count us, and leave four chocolates on the wash basin.

At nine, I was weighted down with warnings and instructions. "You are such a little mother" said my anxious aunt, "that I know you will take the greatest care of each one of them, at all times." I did my best, herding them into the dining room for our sittings; tying bibs; watching that the food ordered was correct; climbing endless stairs in search of Wilf, who, I feared, might so easily fall off the boat. Some years after, I met the couple again. The wife said, "You always had such a worried look."

Dad was at the dock in Montreal to meet us, and mother at the station in Toronto.