

Under the Apple Tree



Keepsake

Child number 3 is going to be nine at the end of the week. She is a modest, sweet person, and when asked what she would like for her birthday, she was at a bit of a loss.

'I really can't think of anything!'

After much pondering, and in the spirit of saving the planet, I decided against more plastic toys. Was she too young for a simple piece of jewellery? When I was about her age I was given a much loved locket by my parents, which I still wear...I decided that's what we would get her, so we set off for our nearest big town, Cheltenham.

Jeweller Number 1. Shall we say, 1950s or earlier?

Did I say Cheltenham? Gorgeous, classy place, with a truly fun Lower High Street, that has its own style. We headed for the Prom. (The classy end of town.) I had set a fairly low budget so that if it got lost or broken, Child Number 3 need not worry. I knew I was in the wrong shop when the door was opened for me by a gentleman in a dark suit, pearl-grey waistcoat and silk tie.

'Madam, do come in,' he said in the most charming way.

His colleague was also dressed as if for a wedding and hastened out to give me his undivided attention.

'Gentlemen,' I said. 'I think I may be in the wrong shop.'

'What is madam looking for? Perhaps we can help.'

'A simple silver locket for a nine year old girl.'

'Ah, let me show you what we have...'

A tray of the most delectable gold and silver lockets were whisked out with a sleight of hand that would have been the envy of most magicians.

Prices began in the upper hundreds...

'Gentlemen,' I said. 'I won't waste any more of your time. These are beautiful but considerably more than I wish to pay.'

'It's been a pleasure, Madam.'

'Thank you, it's been nice to meet you both.'

It was a delightful few minutes which I thoroughly enjoyed. A glimpse into an older world where manners were charming, and made no comment.

'What now?'

'It's only four O'clock. Let's whip into Tewkesbury.'

Jeweller Number 2. Shall we say 14 something? Yes, fourteen hundreds.

Tewkesbury is an ancient town with ancient buildings and loyalties. I was once asked by a pupil, 'Which are you then, Miss? White rose or red?' I tactfully asked him where his loyalties lay, and agreed I felt the same way. He turned to his mate, saying, 'See! I told you she was one of us.'

It was one of the nicest compliments I've ever had.

This shop was six hundred years old, narrow and dark. You could feel it's age. But that came later. First you had to get through the door. I tried to enter, without realising there was an iron grille over the door and that it was just being locked in place by the shopkeeper.

He opened the door a few inches, and said, quite irritably, 'What do you want? I'm just closing.'

'Oh, sorry, I didn't realise.'

'Well, is it something quick?'

'I will be very quick. I'm a genuine customer, I promise. I'm looking for a simple, silver locket for a nine year old girl... it's her birthday tomorrow.'

Yeah, I know that was below the belt, emotional blackmail and all.

'Well, take a look in the window and I'll come out.'

There was tray of lovely silver lockets in the window. The jeweller came out, having carefully locked the door behind him. Like his shop, he had an ancient air about him, with the look of a gnome. He would not have been amiss in the world of Harry Potter. Diagon Alley was the place for him.

'What a fantastic place,' I said, and meant it.

'This shop is six hundred years old.'

I had more than a passing suspicion that he was too.

'How wonderful,' I said, and meant it.

The locket was beautifully crafted. He took out a silk cloth and lovingly polished it.

'It's perfect,' I said. 'Can you find us a chain for it?'

'This is a much nicer encounter than the customer I had this morning,' he muttered casting a wry smile at us as he rummaged for a silver chain.

'Oh?'

"Yes, chap came in here, demanding I glue a stone back in a ring.' I say, 'I can't do that!' He says, 'Well, go in the back there, and do whatever it is you do.' I say, 'I can't.' He says, 'You must, I'm a barrister!' Then I say, 'This isn't hallmarked... It's not legal. You should know that if you're a barrister! You should go back to the person who sold it to you!' 'I warn, you, you must do what I ask. I'm a barrister, and you have to do what I ask!' 'So is there one law for barristers and one for the rest of us?'"

The argument evidently went on for quite a while and eventually the 'barrister' was asked to leave, but clearly it had scarred the day for the jeweller.

So you have a nasty little row, you're on your own all day, and then someone comes to the door just as you're locking up and looking forward to getting home for a cuppa! No wonder my ancient gnome was a tad grumpy to start with, but meeting him was a memorable and rather nice experience, not to be missed. Next time he will be my first call, but perhaps not at closing time.

Child Number 3 loves her locket.

'I shall give this to my daughter one day, or my granddaughter,' she said.

I'm welling up.

It was a day of time travel, and we met some charming people. I think perhaps we all live in different worlds but it is well worth taking the trouble to make the journey between them. Child Number 3 already knows, without anyone telling her, that keepsakes like the locket are a ticket to the past... and the future. That's because they are a token of love, a priceless commodity.