

The Past is a Different Country

By Lyn Jones

Miranda was allergic to Modernity. She hated modern music where young women shouted discordantly and men with reedy voices whined their miserable lyrics; she hated modern art with its confrontational subject matter and its dark and jarring colours and shapes; she hated modern architecture, the sterile angular shapes and soulless anonymity. She hated modern manners, the fact that kids didn't stand up for older people on buses, people pushed in front of you in queues, and service in shops was non-existent. She hated the demise of dating rituals where women were no longer courted but just hooked up with, in bars or on the internet. In short she was out of love with modern life and in love with the past.

She remembered when she was a child and went to museums, marvelling at the old clothes and artefacts, imagining what it would have been like to live in those days. Her favourite period in History was the Edwardian Age, the halcyon time before the First World War, when life seemed more innocent and secure and people still had integrity and morality, where life was gracious with afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches, and the clothes were graceful and tasteful. She had a high necked white blouse and a cameo brooch which she wore often as she enjoyed the feeling of dressing in a more elegant way than the revealing and unflattering modern fashions.

One day she visited an Edwardian house that had been furnished in the style of the early 1900's. She glanced admiringly around at the beautiful polished floors with the Persian rug, the light floral wallpaper, the chintz covered wing chairs, the pretty silver photograph frames and graceful Art Nouveau figurines. There was even an early gramophone with conical shells. The fireplace was a typical Edwardian one, made of cast iron with splayed sides surrounded by patterned tiles, a marble mantel glinting in the afternoon sun.

As she stood by the old fireplace, absentmindedly stroking her cameo brooch as she often did, she felt a strange sensation in her head. She felt dizzy, the room shook, she felt a whizzing sensation and it took her a few minutes to get her equilibrium. She looked around the room, yes it was the same room, but there were some subtle differences, the floor was more brightly polished, the paint on the pictures more vivid, the keys of the pianoforte were not yellow or stained. The hearth of the fireplace was gleaming black. She glanced down at her clothes and saw to her surprise that she was dressed in a plainly made cotton gown with a large white apron with bib and shoulder straps. She had on a cap made in the form of a coronet with a small black bow of narrow velvet. Where was the flowing skirt made of soft fabric, the ruffles and lace, the

elegant lace up boots made of the finest sealskin leather, the wide brimmed feathered hat?

Suddenly she heard an impatient voice shouting at her from elsewhere in the house. "Miranda, haven't you finished cleaning the fireplace yet?" She realised that she was holding a box with black lead brushes and other utensils for cleaning the grate, and next to her there was a cinder pail and a coal scuttle. This wasn't supposed to happen! She was supposed to be the Lady of the House, not the house maid!!

The next two weeks were a blur of hard work and aching muscles, a non-stop round of drudgery. Her hands were rough and sore and her muscles ached with the unaccustomed hard physical labour, dusting and polishing, sweeping, making beds, emptying slop pails, polishing furniture, cleaning grates, candlesticks, blinds, ornaments, trimming lamps, airing beds, even needlework and darning had to be done.

The one bright spot in her life was Edward, the master's valet. He was young and dashing and all the maids had a bit of a crush on him, he however seemed to be drawn to her, and in the few hours spare in the evening he would regale her with tales of the gentry and Above Stairs. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn't place him. In any case there was little time for frivolity and flirting was not allowed. The hours were long and she fell asleep each night exhausted in her little attic bedroom shared by two other servants. They were friendly and helpful but she was so tired and busy that there was little time for chit chat. She wondered how much longer she could take it.

In despair she rubbed her cameo brooch again and again and with a whizz she was back in the present, sadly leaving her dreams of a romantic past behind her. There she was in her normal modern clothes, still wearing her high necked blouse and cameo brooch. She walked unsteadily down the road, grabbed a McDonald's coffee, trying to come to terms with her experience. As the weeks went by the memories of her life as a maid receded, she couldn't tell anyone, she hardly believed it herself. But one memory lingered, that of Edward, the butler, she remembered his cheeky grin, his engaging chatter, his charming smile. After some weeks of thinking about her experience, she began to realise that her obsession with the past had stopped her from experiencing the joys and potential of modern life. Maybe her experience was part of her subconscious trying to tell her to live in the moment, seize the day, get out and about, be involved. She picked up her mobile phone and called John, the guy from the office who had asked her out many times but she had been too caught up in her fantasies of the past, "Would you like to meet for coffee?" she asked.