

Eat your Heart out Miss Havisham

The wedding dress still looked as wonderful as it did sixty years ago. Under the layers of tissue paper, yellow with age, the sheen of white silk was as pure as it was in 1944.

Of course, that was during the war and there weren't yards of anything to go round, let alone silk; so the dress was nothing fancy. Straighter skirts were fashionable, anyway, and Edna was lucky to have it; she'd heard of girls getting married in dresses made of old parachutes.

But Edna worked for a lady, at a great house in the country, and even the war couldn't touch her trinket box full of beautiful glass beads with which the dress was decorated.

"A token of my appreciation for all you do," Lady Miles had said, tipping the glittering collection into Edna's lap as she sat mending a blackout blind from the ballroom; and the little maid had sewn a thousand delicate sparkles onto the wedding dress by hand.

They were not all intact; over the years Edna had snipped off a few here (for a niece's fancy dress costume) and a few there (to decorate the Christmas tree when times were hard) but there were still hundreds of beads encrusting the bodice and trailing down the skirt, like the tendrils of ivy that crept over the walls of the big house.

Bert had been a gardener for Lord and Lady Miles before the war broke out. He was called up straight away, to dig trenches instead of flowerbeds, and dodge bullets instead of bees.

He'd asked Edna to marry him the night before he left and she'd agreed. But waving him off at the station in the rain, it felt like she'd never see him again. He'd been her best friend since she arrived at the house, a nervous child in service, terrified of dropping a tray of china.

Though Bert was the same age, he'd been working there even longer; rescued by Lord Miles from a nearby farmhouse full of children with not enough food to go round. They went home to visit their folks one Sunday a month, but both knew where the family feeling lay.

"Some day," Bert used to say, "you'll have a tea-set of your own. You'll be at one end of table and I'll be at the other." He grinned at her behind the

potting shed, where they'd whisper in secret among the broken hoes and rusty shovels. "You'll say 'more tea dear' and I'll say 'not half!'"

"And the children will sing and get jam on the table cloth from their sticky fingers," cried Edna, joyfully.

But they never did have those children. And the wedding dress that she'd laboured over so lovingly all the long dark nights of the war, came out of its wrapper untouched by any sticky fingerprints at all.

It had been a heck of a job to get it out of the trunk. Edna was eighty now, and climbing up a step-ladder to the attic was difficult. Her ankles were swollen and her hips were stiff, but for all that, she was as slim as she had ever been; and she managed to squeeze through the trap door into the dusty darkness.

A shaft of light made the dust sparkle and dance like the lords and ladies in the old days, but Eddie's mind was fixed on one particular memory. Turning the key in a rusty lock, she lifted the lid of the trunk, and found the dress waiting there like a ghost of the pale, pretty girl she'd been sixty years ago today.

Hauling it back to the trap door she thought, as she often did, of the strapping lads Bert's sons would have been; how they would have grown up big and strong and helpful, and had children of their own by now.

But Edna wasn't short of people who loved her, and the happy moments she shared with nieces and great-nephews were as many as the glass beads that fell off the dress as she dragged it down from the attic, and left a trail across the landing to her bedroom.

She sat at the dressing table and looked at herself in the mirror. Her wrinkled skin was paper thin, her hair yellow with age and so fine that she could almost count the separate strands. Her collarbone and shoulder blades stood out starkly, as if the skeleton she would eventually become was showing itself already. And when she lifted her hands to her face, they were mottled with liver spots and knotted up.

Only her eyes were as bright and beady as they had always been; reflecting the brilliance of the glass beads sewn onto her wedding dress. The flesh may have sagged and shrivelled, but the silk was still holding firm.

Edna got to her feet, and started the slow procession downstairs. A trail of dropped beads followed her as she went, one for every year of the sixty; each a little sparkle in all the struggles.

It was growing dark by the time she got to the dining room, and she had to look hard to see him, sitting in his wheelchair at one end of the table.

Bert had come back from the war without his legs - but he had come back from the war. Edna knew so many girls that didn't see their heroes again, or wear their wedding dresses, that she welcomed back half her man with her whole heart.

Bert could never be a father, but that hadn't ever stopped Edna being motherly; and their mantelpiece was lined with Golden Wedding Anniversary cards from the many family and friends whose lives they had lit up.

Edna sat down at the other end of the table and picked up her china teapot.

"More tea, dear?" she asked her husband.

"Not half, my love," he replied. "Not half."

By Alison Habens