

Bittersweet

Mary climbed the step ladder and carefully eased open the hatch cover to the loft. She had a small torch in her pocket, but it was a bright day and the skylight in the roof let in some welcome sunshine. She was in her late grandmother's house. She had inherited it a few weeks ago and although she was familiar with the house, she had never been up in the loft.

She could see cardboard boxes stacked along one side, and at the end of them, half hidden by a larger one, was a hat box. The faded lettering on the side told her that it had come from a rather grand department store – now long gone – in the town centre. She had heard her mother describe it as “the Harrods of the North”. Picking her way gingerly across the creaking, dusty floor, Mary reached the hat box.

She lifted the cover of the box to find a wadge of yellowing tissue paper. Underneath it was a wide brimmed hat of fine cream coloured straw. The crown was decorated with large silk roses in several shades of pink. It was beautiful and Mary could imagine it worn with a long light summer dress in white or cream. She decided to take the hat in its box, to show it to her mother and sister.

As she made her way downstairs to the lounge, it seemed to Mary that there was something familiar about the hat. A collection of framed black and white photographs stood on the sideboard. In the middle of them was a wedding group with her grandparents centre stage. Grandma, whose name was Jane, looked so young and happy and she was wearing the hat! Beside her stood Mary's grandfather –

Henry – who was much taller and looking very handsome in his army uniform.

He had come home to marry Jane during his leave. They didn't have very long together before he had to go back to the front. Jane didn't see him again as he lost his life a few weeks later during the Battle of the Somme.

Eventually Jane realised that she was pregnant and in the Spring of the following year Mary's father was born. It was of some comfort to her grandmother that, as he grew up, he looked very like his father.

Mary could understand why grandma had kept the hat. It reminded her of a beautiful summer's day and her short lived happiness with her husband.