

Love of my Life

Extracts

When I first saw her on the tennis court at Balmoral in early 1939, I thought that she was about 19 years old. She was tall and elegant with a remarkable maturity of manner. She was very beautiful, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. But it was not just her beauty; I had seen many attractive women in Sydney, but they had held no interest for me. Somehow, this young woman, who I eventually came to know as Audette, was different. Whether walking, standing, or just sitting pensively, there was this perfect poise about her. She was so graceful. She didn't run around the court, she glided, and when she was chatting with her friends, she radiated a warmth that enveloped me, even in the anonymity of distance. I was mesmerised.

We didn't speak at the time, or for many years after, but I knew immediately that this was the woman with whom I wanted to spend my life. From afar, she seemed like Elizabeth in Jane Austen's, *Pride and Prejudice*. As well as a similarity to the character in demeanour, this beautiful young woman had a haunting physical likeness to Greer Garson, the actress who played the part of Elizabeth in the first film adaptation of the book. I was later to learn that her nature was warm and loving, just like that of Mrs Miniver, Greer Garson's character in the film of the same name. I didn't know at the time, but my Mrs Miniver ...



Her father, Rup Hansen, opened the door. He was handsomely attired in a three piece suit, with a gold chain across the vest. The chain was attached to a classical fob watch, tucked into a small pocket on the left hand side of the vest. He was a big man, tall, and just verging on the portly. He had a proud bald dome, which I found quite comforting, as I had lost some of my mane during the war – sheer fright I still contend. His gait was a little slow and awkward and I realised as he led me into his home that he had a physical disability related to his right leg. I was later to learn that he had contracted polio at the age of two and that this disability was its legacy. Despite this, first impressions were of a very strong, dignified, and intimidating, man.

Audette's mother Margaret, always known as Margie, (pronounced with a 'j' rather than the 'g' sound of our daughter's name) was soft and beautiful like her daughter, with a serene manner, like my mother. Audette's younger siblings, Anette and Rolf, were also present, and like the rest of the family were tall, dignified and very good looking. Audette at 5 ft 8 ins was the shortest member of the family. I was nearly 5 ft 11 ins, so felt comfortable enough with this statuesque gathering. Rup, who referred affectionately to Audette as Dawde, introduced me to each member of the family and immediately announced that they didn't believe in God in their house ...



I donned my uniform, and walked the normally short, but this day tortuous, distance to Dr Elliot-Smith's rooms on the corner of Military and Mandalong Roads in Mosman. I gave the receptionist my name, details and ailment, including the level of pain. I explained that I didn't have an appointment as the pain had appeared overnight. She told me that the doctor was with a patient and I should take a seat in the waiting room until my name was called. I waited and I waited.

New patients came in; Dr Elliot-Smith appeared and called their names. A returned soldier, in uniform, my arm still in its aeroplane sling, I waited for two hours, in agony. The pain was becoming so unbearable that I was beginning to feel nauseous. I approached the reception desk and asked when the doctor would be able to see me. The receptionist disappeared briefly. She returned to say, with neither shame nor sympathy,

'The doctor says that he does not see people without appointments. If you can wait a few moments I'll check the appointment book.'

If Dr Elliot-Smith had uttered those words himself, I fear I would have struck him. In the event ...



Although it would not have mattered to me what Audette did for a living, it was a remarkable twist of fate that by the time I returned from the war and finally had the courage to speak with her, she was a qualified physiotherapist. When my arm was saved from amputation, I was told that only time would tell if I would keep it, and that it was highly unlikely that I would ever be able to use it again. It would be there, hanging at my side, completely immobile, virtually useless. By the time I was discharged from the army I was hopeful that I would retain my wounded arm for the long haul, but I still had minimal use and the new doctors confirmed the battlefield specialist's view that it would remain largely ornamental.

Audette's response when I told her the prognosis very early in our courtship was:

'We shall see about that' ...