

Some Thoughts on “Fire”

From the Book of Genesis to the Book of Revelation – the beginning to the end of the Bible – fire is mentioned as an awesome and terrible force. It consumes all in its path with a fierce heat, and in most cases we consider it a destructive thing. It is only when we need its glow to keep us warm or cook our food; or if we are heating elements in a crucible to bring forth substances cleansed of impurity, that we choose to harness its awesome power. But we are wary, and rightly so, of this extraordinary phenomenon. Like Moses in the wilderness, when he beheld the angel in the burning bush, there is an awareness of GOD in fire. And we, like Moses, cannot approach too close; we will be singed.

I am always amazed at the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego; as they refused the king's command to bow down before him knowing what would be their fate, and thus were thrown into the fiery furnace. Who was the other man the king saw, walking with them through the flames??? Untouched, unscorched and totally unharmed by the fire? I believe it was JESUS – who promised that HE would be with us, would never leave us or forsake us, when we put our trust in HIM!! HE was there, as the Angel of the LORD, as real in the Old Testament as in the New; and just as real today. HE certainly has preserved me through several experiences of fiery trials – and some of them were literally, really, fires!!

Let me tell you about them...

On the sixth of January 1977, Chloe and I, accompanied by our two Shih-Tzus, Happy and Lady, set out for a trip to London to visit my parents. The reason I am so precise as to the date (remarkable for me!), is that it was the occasion of Chloe's 6th birthday, and we were going to celebrate the occasion with her Granny and Grandad at their home in North London. The happy home of my childhood, and the place where Chloe had found security and refuge for the few months when I was considered incapable of caring for her properly. Home, then. And her dad was coming to join us, we hoped, for the party – though we never quite knew whether Mick would come or not – his ability to bail out of, or even simply forget his promises was legendary. Not only to myself, but frankly that had ceased to really bother me; but his unreliability towards his daughter saddened and exasperated me, big style. Still, we lived in hope.

Well, he did arrive; and we spent a remarkably happy day together. My parents were kindness itself; Mick had always enjoyed talking to my father, and the evening wore on with Mick and I round the piano, him playing, and both of us singing. I wished the evening could go on and on; that he would not have to go back to Valerie, but would stay with us – I was still in love with him, and would have taken him back in an instant. It was not to be, however.

Just before midnight I think it was, the phone rang, and the person asked for me.. It was Vicky, my housekeeper in the country. Hello, I said, what's up?

“Brace yourself, Rose”, came the brusque reply, “The Thatched Cottage has burned to the ground”. I was absolutely stunned; as I turned to relay the news to Mick and my family; I so desperately needed his support at that moment. He made his excuses and

ran away, leaving me and Chloe to face this disaster alone. But were we? I felt strangely calm, and contacted my Swiss friend Charlie (more of her anon); told her the news, and arranged to pick her up in Central London in the morning. Together we would travel down to Northiam to see what had happened to the home we three were sharing.

The next day, Mick rang. He was probably feeling guilty for doing a runner the night before; and said he had arranged for a car to take us home – or what was left of it. In due course, a stretch limousine arrived at my parent's door. I felt somehow uncomfortable at the ludicrous ostentation of the car, but we picked up Charlie and set out for Sussex. We got a few miles, and then the engine of the Mercedes limo caught fire!! I was beginning to feel a bit uneasy then; but we continued our journey in a less showy style, eventually, when the limo company sent another (smaller) posh car. We collected my little Mini at Etchingham Station, and did the last lap of the journey in a very subdued mood, I recall.

As we drove up the lane, before we had caught sight of the cottage, I felt completely calm; and as we saw the ruined roof spars starkly silhouetted against the sky, and what was left of the burned out shell of the walls, I heard a Voice quietly saying to me, "Turn the page, it's a new chapter".

I believe GOD strengthened me at that moment, and all through the three years it took to rebuild the Thatched Cottage. We lived like nomads, from house to house; first for a week in the cottage of a neighbour who we had never met before, and after that to Great Dixter, a gorgeous house with a glorious garden; where we had an uneasy lodging with the Head Gardener in his cottage. His kindness and hospitality were only surpassed by his drunkenness (sorry, mate – you know it's true). After that, the Insurance Companies finally decided I hadn't set fire to the place myself, (interestingly, the cottage had acquired two new policies very shortly before the fire) and we moved into rented houses for the rest of the time it took to re-instate the cottage completely, something the Policy insisted on. This was fortunate for Chloe and me, as her dad was desperate for funds at that time, and would have dearly loved to get his hands on the principal. He tried, that's how I can say this now. But three years later, we moved back into this strange combination of a new/old house – and somehow, it never quite felt like "HOME" to me.

Incidentally, there were a few mysterious and some miraculous things about this fire.. There were rumours of comets that had been seen plummeting towards the cottage....one of the more unfortunate real facts about that date in January was that there was a Fireman's strike on.; this meant that the Force who arrived in the Army Green Goddess tenders to put out the flames had no idea where to get the water from to douse the fire burning the thatched roof so fiercely – the neighbours had stood by helplessly as the fire spread from the oil tank and the barn, leaping across the yard and kindling the straw of the roof. They finally decided to run the hoses from the pond at Great Dixter, but by then it was too late to save anything much. Our brave neighbour ran in and pulled a few bits of furniture out of the dining room before it got too hot, but I'm afraid our chickens were lost in the barn fire. The ponies, thank GOD, had been moved out of the stable (another odd fact, I'm afraid, but we were very glad, too). Various people HAD come and gone that fateful day, to do various things...you know who you are... but Chloe and I had our alibis, thank GOD!! I am so glad I

wasn't around that night, I'd have probably burned to death trying to save our things. How foolish we are about THINGS...we are so attached to objects, somehow! I will never forget what Mick asked about when we spoke on the phone for the first time after the fire. "What about my records, my 45's?", he said !!!! I told him they were probably the mound of smouldering black vinyl I could see in the back garden - and put down the phone in disgust. Chloe and I had lost almost all we possessed in the fire; though strangely, and quite miraculously, it seemed to us, all Charlie's things, which were in the little room downstairs that she had as her own when she stayed with us, were completely undamaged! We all knew it was a miracle, anyway. Why should she suffer the evil intention that was directed at me? For that is what I believe happened that night; it was an act of destruction that GOD protected us from, and ultimately turned to our good. As is HIS wont. HE kept us safe. And will continue to do so. And had done before, remarkably, when another attempt had been made to burn the house I was living in. Only difference was, I was in it at the time.....