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BRINGING HOME THE MOON



“Mission impossible!” That was my husband’s verdict. Prostrate on the hard oak boards of the dining room, it was natural he was feeling less than optimistic about any energetic plans. Richard had wrenched his back lifting a box of my ‘stuff’ out of the car the Sunday before. This was the very same car which had, this week, taken a hit from a deer and was now being straightened out in the garage. It was evident that neither he nor the car were going anywhere. Which left just me.

In 2 days I had to make a 600 mile round trip. I expect this is something you do regularly before breakfast – but remember that I am British and a 200 mile journey is normally the limit, thank you. With not much time for planning I had exceeded myself. I had overnight accommodation booked and ticket for the return leg of the journey by train. All I needed was to get to where I needed to be, but this was proving problematic: the train fares had quadrupled in the time it had taken me to lunch (this happens in the UK) and I was feeling the desperate need to be as parsimonious as possible since, I considered, one can never tell when one might have dire need of money.

So it was that I found myself in a narrow bed in a little North Yorkshire village after two train journeys, three bus rides and ten hours’ of travelling, unable to sleep. I was worrying about Richard, how events would unfold the next day, and the violent knockings in the central heating radiators. Towards morning there was the cry of a curlew to remind me, if I had forgotten, where I was, and that terrible angst one experiences when one is at one’s lowest ebb just before dawn, knowing where one is but no longer knowing what one is doing there.

Why was I doing there? Let me tell you. A small auction house in a small northern village had phoned the Bursar at Ackworth School to ask if he could authenticate a piece of embroidery dated 1791, which incorporated the name of the school. He asked for a picture of the embroidery and then emailed it to me. You are absolutely right – it was a sampler. In fact, the auction house found another lot which resembled this first lot and sent him a picture of that also. This sampler did not have the name of Ackworth, but looked like a sister sampler to the one owned by Beatrix Potter. The estimate on both items was £60 - £80, but the auctioneer thought that they could go for £150 on a good day. A Yorkshire woman

myself, I know that the county has its fair share of shrewd business people, so I was concerned and thought that the bidding shouldn’t be left to chance. I talked tactics with the Bursar. The Bursar said he could bid up to a maximum of £550 by phone. He was optimistic. I was not. Which is why, at daybreak, I was shivering with cold and nerves.

I was early along to the auction house to take a look at the samplers themselves. There are very few unframed medallion samplers, and both these samplers were unframed, and very fine. The Ackworth School sampler was stitched by S Moon who appears as Sarah Moone in the school lists. No one paid any really attention to the correct spelling of names at that time, not even registrars of births, deaths and marriages. Communication revolved more around how your name was said than written. I knew from the school records that Sarah came from Esher, which is in Surrey, and attended the school from 1789-1793. I found her sampler to be a densely packed, joyful, polychrome medallion sampler and I took courage from it. ‘I am going to take you home, Sarah Moon, where you belong,’ I whispered. I also knew that she wasn’t going home alone, the other Quaker sampler would be her companion.

I can’t say much about the auction. The pace of the auctioneer was such that he was clearing 3 lots a minute. There were three telephone bidders in addition to the people in the room. I kept my card up all the while and I remember the sound of sucked-in breath, like the tide on a pebbled shore. And then the bidding finally stopped, the telephones were put down, someone asked me to shout out my number. And that was just for the first Quaker sampler – not the Ackworth School sampler which was to be the next lot. The room was, by now, electric. People had stopped milling about. It was extraordinarily hushed. Once more the phones were picked up and bidding commenced. At one stage the bidding seemed to stop and there was a great, communal outbreath which turned to a groan, almost, of dismay as bidding resumed. Perhaps it was my groan I heard, but I kept my card up and after much longer than seemed possible, I knew for sure that Sarah was going home.

After the bidding, I left. People came up to me and asked if there was something special about these rags. ‘Yes,’ I said, and

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tried to explain. I told them about the school and about the Quaker girls who stitched there while a revolution overturned the monarchy in France, while English soldiers and sailors fought wars abroad, while food was scarce and auction prices of corn beggared communities. They asked me what I was going to do with the sampler. 'It's going back to school, where it belongs, where there is a context in which it can be studied and understood,' I explained.

This is how I brought home the Moon.

The true hero of this episode is my husband whose voice remained at the same pitch while I explained over the phone from the auctioneers that he needed to ask the bank to clear £13,000 to pay for the samplers.....

You would have thought one encounter of this kind is enough for one timid human heart in a life-time, but as a sequel to this, more samplers came up for sale at an auction. This time the sampler was a fine early text sampler from Ackworth School with a good provenance. In fact, we already knew of its existence, since the owner had contacted us when it was known we were producing a book. As luck would have it, I had booked a trip to Paris to enjoy the splendid annual needlework market *L'Aiguille en Fete*. This time it was me who would be at the end of a telephone line bidding, and again I was nervous because I had never bid over a telephone - and this time I had an auction ceiling of just £3,000 which I felt was going to be inadequate. I waited in the hotel reception, a quiet, peaceful place to order my thoughts and to hear the instructions over my mobile phone. I knew the phone could ring at any moment and I could hear my heart beating. It was just then that a large family of talkative Irish guests decided to come and keep me company and when we had run the limits of conversation, well God bless us, they started to sing to cheer me up. Had I missed the ring tone of my phone during this musical interlude and missed the auction? I had no idea. I clung to some last shreds of hope by chanting my little mantra from Julian of Norwich - 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.' Then men appeared with a huge roll of carpet, pulled out hammers and began, well, hammering exuberantly! My phone rang. I ran outside into the busy street and rain to escape the racket. With one finger in my ear I heard that the bidding stood at £2,900. My heart splashed on the pavement. The auctioneer asked me again if I wanted to bid £3,000. I said, 'Yes' - it was more of a swansong than anything else. In my mind I was already packing up my phone and my heart. But that was it. The bidding stopped there. Quite unbelievable then as it is still today - what had happened in the room up to the point and why did the bidding stop so swiftly? 'Congratulations,' said the auctioneer.

Now the number of samplers returned to Ackworth School is 5, with gifts of others promised.

