



A TRIO OF GENTLE WOMEN

by Margaret Crompton

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Three Readings by female actors are linked by a Narrator (male or female).

All or any of the Readings may also be performed as free-standing solos.

This material provides opportunities for fine reading, characterisation and narrative skill and is suitable for actors of any age.

This is a *Script in Hand* presentation, designed for reading, rather than remembering.

It is suitable for Radio-style performance, or with minimal set-dressing and movement.

## *CHARACTER/S*

Narrator: female or male; any age.

Readers: 'Daisy,' 'Emily,' 'Katy': 1, 2 or 3 females; any age

## *SYNOPSIS*

The Narrator has been invited to contribute to an evening [*afternoon*] with the Society for the Preservation of Precious Family Archives, and introduces 1, 2 or 3 precious documents. This device provides a frame for the presentation, and enables Narrator to be male or female (whereas Readers are all female).

### *1. Daisy Petherton's Perfect Day*

A prize-winning essay written by the revered, but long dead, Aunt Daisy, which had been published in a magazine in 1970. The essay is about a family of amateur musicians living in Somerset, who were visited by a folk song collector. The writer presents the life of her family, (including the impact of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War), and unconsciously reveals her unassuming personality through description of the special event which constituted *Daisy Petherton's Perfect Day*.

This story is based on a real family. The folk song collector and arranger Cecil Sharp visited singers in Somerset several times from 1904, (and collected two songs from one of my own forebears). Although the characters and action of the play are imaginary, this is a tribute to my own 'Aunt Daisy' and 'Fred'.

## *2. Emily's Letter Of Love*

An unsent letter written by Emily Petherton when she was living in what used to be called an Asylum, (later a Psychiatric Hospital). The letter is addressed to her grand-daughter, as a substitute for conversations which never took place. Emily records the history of her family – husband Fred, sister in law Daisy, and her four children, including Georgie who had been killed during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. This and other experiences of grief and loss had led Emily into deep depression, and to the hospital where she found a peaceful asylum, and the healing power of music. A fellow patient, 'Willim,' is based on the composer Ivor Gurney. Emily's son Alan is the father of the third writer, Katy.

## *3. Katy's War*

Katy is Emily and Fred Petherton's grand-daughter. Her whole life has been influenced by events during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, when she was a baby and small child. This reading is a booklet made for Katy's grand-daughter, Kathy-Lou

### *STAGING, PROPS*

As the setting is a meeting where speakers are invited to read or talk about precious archives and events in their families' lives, little set-dressing is needed. The audience takes part as members of the Society for the Preservation of Precious Family Archives.

Stage area needs chairs for speakers, table with glasses, water jug and usual paraphernalia of a meeting in a hired hall.

Scripts may be presented in folders, to suggest that they are the documents they represent (eg. archive magazine article, letter, journal).

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## *1. DAISY PETHERTON'S PERFECT DAY*

Narrator

Good evening [*afternoon*]. I'm honoured to be addressing the Society for the Preservation of Precious Family Archives. Thank you for the invitation. The family archives I've brought to share with you are very precious and rather fragile. And I'm doing my best to preserve them. So I've typed them out like a script.

The original of the first piece is *The West-Country Life Magazine* from Spring 1970. It's been in my family for years and we've always treasured it. Partly because it was written by a lady who's always referred to as 'Aunt Daisy,' although she died years ago. Her memory is deeply respected and her story is kept alive in every generation.

The paper was discovered after Aunt Daisy's death, tucked into her bookshelf. It had been kept clean and uncrumpled because it was carefully placed between two large books of songs. But time has taken its toll and the paper is yellow and keeps shedding tiny pieces. We're lucky still to have it, like keeping Aunt Daisy's voice. If only we could hear that voice. But I mustn't get ahead of myself.

Although Aunt Daisy thought of herself as just an ordinary person, an unexpected event when she was young revealed that she was far from 'ordinary.' My family treasures this paper, too, because in it, Aunt Daisy takes us back into the early days of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century in her little town in Somerset, and invites us into her home where we always love that feeling of meeting our ancestors.

I told you Aunt Daisy was modest. So I always enjoy thinking how surprised and delighted she must have been to win an essay competition and be published in the paper. The competition was called SOMERSET SENIORS REMEMBER: number 21. The winning essay is headed, *'My perfect day'* by Miss Daisy Petherton. Here it is.

Reader: Daisy All my happiest memories are about music. Mother sang lullabies to us two babies. Violet came too soon after me. She was always fragile. She'd often whimper until Mother's soft voice soothed her. Father would scrub off paint and plaster dust, quickly eat a hearty meal, then play his 'cello in the parlour or scurry off to orchestra rehearsal.

Iris begged to learn the piano. Grandfather said he was glad to find his precious Collard a better home than the little house across Mendip Street. He could always tickle his old ivories for an hour in our parlour. The piano had a pretty rosewood fret in front of faded crimson silk and a curly pair of brass candle-holders. Iris would climb onto the rubbed plush-topped stool and make love to the keys. She'd stroke and tap to set free the voice behind the silk while she 'la-la'd.' A big volume of "Celestial Melodies" had to be propped on the narrow music holder. Every so often she'd grip her tongue between her teeth, carefully turn a page, and sigh. I could just reach the keys myself if I stood on tiptoe and stretched up my arms. Until Iris ordered me away!

Fred followed Father into the kingdom of strings. One day he wrestled open the 'cello case and pulled out the bow. Mother found him reverently caressing the smooth spine made of red wood. It seemed to glow from years of respectful handling. Father borrowed an old violin from a friend in the orchestra. On the day Fred's wrists protruded far enough beyond his cuffs, he proudly wielded his bow for the first time.

Violet crooned to herself and banged wooden bricks together. I just sang quietly. I was happy that my gentle voice was drowned by the family band.

When the second son was born, bonny and brash and leaching Mother of energy, I took over caring for Violet. Baby was christened Benjamin, perhaps as a hint that the family was complete. Five healthy children with never a death or a miscarriage between live births seemed enough of a miracle. Then two short pregnancies produced only blood, pain and, I think, relief. Mother relied on me even more.

When Iris's feet reached the floor as she sat on the green plush stool, Grandfather showed her how printed notes were transformed into music through the piano keys. Then a musician friend of Father's offered lessons. Iris easily mastered a bookfull of simple pieces. She could soon play well enough to accompany Father and Fred. When the teacher retired, Iris took on her pupils. She put up her hair and Father proudly painted a neat sign above his own advertisement beside our door: *Miss Petherton: Professional Piano Instruction: Enquire Within*. Converting music into money left no time for her to help with young brothers and sisters. I should add

that Ben had, after some years, been followed by Samuel and Lily.

Fred longed to be a musician too, but he had to spend his days in the Town Clerk's Office and reserve music for evenings. Like Iris and Father, he knew that music represented not leisure but real life. I knew it too. But my hands were too busy to play anything. I had to earn my keep and help out.

It isn't surprising that Mother was weak and often ill, after nine pregnancies. She'd been over forty when the last baby, Lily, was born. We had a maid for heavy work and Mother usually cooked. But in those days, you had to pay the doctor and children are heavy on furniture and shoes. And how those boys could eat!

Mother taught me to sew and I could pay my way as a dressmaker. I enjoyed visiting other houses in the town and became quite popular. Violet was slow but she helped me by threading needles, smoothing materials, and keeping my precious silks tidy. She loved to arrange colours in rainbows.

And we'd sing, Mother and Violet and me, in the quiet house, when the others were at work or school and the babies were asleep or playing.

One day, I remember, Lily shook her rattle in time with our singing. It had been our Grandmother's, silver with tiny bells and an ivory handle.

Grandfather was always welcome. His rheumatism stopped him playing the piano but he could still sing. He'd always been a member of the church choir, from schoolboy treble to his fine bass. No-one minded that his voice sometimes cracked, and his solos in 'Messiah' were still admired. After Grandmother died, he spent

most of his time with us. Yes, there was extra work but that didn't add much to the enormous daily washing and cooking for our large family. We loved him.

Fred moved across the road into Grandfather's small second bedroom but he still ate with us and of course he expected his clothes to be laundered and mended. Ben and Sam were growing fast and needed more bedroom space in our house. Mother was glad of Fred's weekly board money. Iris and I gave what we could, and I made clothes for us, even shirts for the boys.

Father always had a good income. He worked hard and was never short of orders for painting and decorating and minor repairs. Then that awful December, he caught a bad cold. Instead of staying at home, he was determined to finish work in an unheated house so that the owners could enjoy Christmas in their freshly painted parlour. He came home dripping with fever.

Despite Mother's pleas, he stubbornly went out to orchestra rehearsal. He insisted that he couldn't let everyone down at Christmas. On Christmas Day, he was too dizzy and sweating to get up. How did we keep up with washing and drying sheets? The house was soggy with steam. At last Fred took charge and went for the doctor. The crisis passed but Father was too weak to work all winter.

For the first time in his life, Father had no money. Then when the spring came, he had no waiting list of customers. After much heart-searching, he took Ben out of school to learn the trade. At ten, he was legally just old enough to leave school. Ben was pleased as

Punch and sure that his attainments in reading, writing and arithmetic more than fulfilled the requirements of formal education. Before long, Father was glad too, because Ben was sturdy and reliable.

Our life settled into a routine. Father not strong but working again, Mother never well but overseeing the household. Both worried about the debts built up during Father's illness but careful not to burden us.

Fred trapped in tedious clerking while his soul longed for music. Iris building her clientele of little girls endlessly invoking Merry Peasants and Dreamy Days. Ben wallowing blissfully in plaster and paint. Sam and Lily safely cocooned in childhood. Violet pretty and protected, happy if she had her own way, content to play with the materials which were my work. And me, plain Daisy, in the middle.

I longed for something, but I didn't know what. One day, I supposed, I'd have children of my own. But how would that be different from the home I already had? I was useful and safe, always being thoughtful for someone else because my wishes could never be important. I dreamed of an adventure, one chance to be the interesting sister, the family star.

I was happiest at home, when we were peacefully working together, Mother, Violet and me. The little ones would be playing. Grandfather liked to perch on the piano stool and pick out a melody. Then he'd turn to me and begin to sing. His head was full of songs from his boyhood in the village. I learnt them all from him and I'd sing as I sewed. Sometimes a song needed two voices as the characters spoke to, or about, each other.