Number 4 Park Avenue

A Short Story and a Speculation

By Maryanne Peters

I was called in to Number 4 Park Avenue to look at what they had found - to assess it for an intrinsic value. It seemed strange that somebody who worked in wardrobe in various theaters on Broadway should be called into a construction site, but that just piqued my curiosity. I have a taste for the strange, and I was also a renowned expert of turn of the century garments, which is what won me the invitation.

It was June 1966. It was the third month of “The Sip In”, which will probably mean nothing to anybody who was not gay in the 60’s. It was all about the homosexuals of America becoming activists. The challenge was for people (mainly men) to walk into a bar and order a drink adding the words “I am gay” or anything similar. Plenty were thrown out on the spot, but places that served were noted and got more custom, with tips. It seemed that it did not apply to me, but I was supportive.

So, I caught a cab down to Number 4. The smog was very bad that year – possibly the worst it had ever been. You could not wear a white blouse, and if you blew your nose often your hanky would soon be black. You certainly could not walk, even though it was only 3 blocks from Herald Square.

Number 4 Park Avenue was the old Vanderbilt Hotel, and it was being refurbished that year. The biggest change was to the top two floors and the ornate rooftop. Those floors had been built to accommodate the family of the builder Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Senior. It was his private elevator that we took up to the top, although it was shrouded in heavy cloth thick with concrete dust.

I was greeted with a polite “This way, please Miss,” by the man in what remained of the glorious Vanderbilt family lobby. It always pleases me to be called “Miss”, especially any time in years after when I was much older than I was in 1966.

Towards the middle of the floor and behind the elevator I was shown a wall of bricks that had been torn down. I am no expert but it looked to me that a door had been replaced by a wall, because the surround was still visible, with a line of broken bricks up one side only. I could walk in but before I did a workman was replacing an old Edison lightbulb with a modern one.

The light then came on, and I could see a the hidden room light up in a blaze of color that drew me through the portal in wonderment. The room was full of the most wonderful clothes, hanging in racks. There were shelved for shoes on the face wall, with plenty of pairs on display, in styles from the early part of the century – up to about the beginning of WW1 would be my guess, as fashions became more austere from then on until the 1920s. I just too a moment to stroll through, then I came upon a trunk in the corner, and I lifted the lid. Suddenly I understood what I was looking at.

“What should we do with this?” the man asked me.

“This has heritage value,” I told him curtly. “It needs to be carefully boxed and taken somewhere secure. I have access to wardrobe storage. I will take an inventory and give it to you.”

“Can it all be gone by the time we start work tomorrow?” he said. It was clear that he would not be offering me any assistance, but with access and a few volunteers after the shows were over that night could get this done, so I agreed on the condition that I had use of the site and the elevator for the next 14 hours.

As we were leaving my attention was then drawn by a number of sculptures. As it was explained to me, these were the 36 sculpted terracotta heads, each measuring 5 feet high and weighing 500 pounds which had adorned the roof edge. As far as I could see about have were a leering, bearded depiction of Bacchus, the classical god of pleasure, and the other appeared to be the heavy face of a woman, with long braided hair.

“We are hoping to sell these too,” the man in charge of the demolition said.

“I might be interested in one of these ladies,” I said. “You know how to contact me.”

But from that moment on my concern was to get the clothes out of there, and also the trunk as its contents were of particular interest. There was dust inside indicating that it had been opened and roughly rifled for something of value, but clearly any workman would just have assumed the items to be women’s undergarments, and of no value. That was partly true.

What I recognized in that trunk I was uniquely qualified to do. The corsets and the padding might apply to many women, but not the restraining – a device to make a penis disappear. I knew what it was because I was wearing one at the time and had done so for many years.

It did not take much guesswork to consider who the transgender person might be. I was told on that first visit to the building that the hidden room was not on any of the plans. That is the story that appeared in the press simply as an inexplicable curiosity: “During the renovation, workers also discovered a room with women's clothes and shoes, which had been sealed off with brick and was not in the building's blueprints”. What I was also told was that the room did have a functioning but probably concealed door right up until 1915 when it was sealed off with bricks made early that year.

So, what kind of a man was Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Senior to have been possibly not a man at all – or not on the inside anyway. He seemed the very opposite of feminine. He was a sportsman and an outdoors type, with a string of women. He may have married his first wife Ellen “Elsie” Tuck French (from two wealthy families) at the behest of his parents, but she divorced him for adultery. Tragically the woman he had an affair with, one Agnes O'Brien Ruíz, the wife of the Cuban attaché in Washington, could not bear the shame and she committed suicide. But within a couple of years AG Vanderbilt had married another heiress – this time Margaret May Emerson whose father had made a fortune from his invented drug “Bromo-Seltzer”.

He struck me as the typical youngest child – charming and outgoing but manipulative, self-centered and constantly seeking attention. But was he carrying a secret?

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| It was the terracotta sculpture that I bought that convinced me. Who was the woman with the braids wearing the coronet who was mounted beside Bacchus on alternate parapets around the rooftop? She has a strong chin and nose, and that wry smile. It reminded me of a photograph of the younger A. G. Vanderbilt. What do you think? | Mr. Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt - The Lusitania Resource | Antique Architectural Terracotta Sculpture | Artefact Design & Salvage |

A.G.Vanderbilt married Margaret in 1911 and his youngest son George Washington Vanderbilt III was born on September 23, 1914. Eight months later Vanderbilt was no more. He was aboard the ill-fated liner *Lusitania* that was sunk by a German U-Boat in the early stages of WW1 – on 7 May 1915. It seemed that Vanderbilt himself had sealed up the room in anticipation of his own death.

And why did he cross the Atlantic at that time leaving his wife and baby behind travelling with just his valet, Ronald Denyer? The official reason is that he was to attend a meeting of the International Horse Breeders’ Association, but the war had forced the cancellation of the 1914 meeting and there is no record of a meeting in 1915 either.

By all accounts Vanderbilt died with true honor. The official account reads: “When Lusitania was torpedoed, Vanderbilt and Denyer assisted many others, especially children, to safety. Vanderbilt made no attempt to save himself, and was last seen giving his lifebelt to second cabin passenger Alice Middleton. Vanderbilt was lost in the sinking and his body was never recovered.” It seemed strangely out of character for a man who loved life and had, until that moment anyway, a scant regard for others.

It left me wondering about Alice Middleton. There are records of her as the wife of George McDougall born 1917 yet is said that she was 24 when *Lusitania* was sunk, although her date of birth appears uncertain. Was that the same person? Did she marry a man half her age many years after she survived the sinking?

Unfortunately Alice Middleton is a common name, and there is no date or place of birth to work on. My search ended not for want of my efforts.

I had other things to do. I bought the contents of the hidden room from the developers and I used some of the garments for wardrobe tasks. Quality period costumes are always in demand and I did well from rentals and a few sales. I bought other garments and collected them so that my wardrobe business flourished. I even built up custom across the States and into Europe. I dabbled in production, and I did quite well there too. I never married but I had dalliances with men.

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| I bought a house on Long Island and had the sculpture installed in the garden. It was a constant reminder to me of the secret room at Number 4 Park Avenue, its contents so relevant to my own experience, and the mystery that it represented.  But the mystery did not end there. By chance I was in London only a few a few years back and somehow the subject of the sinking of *Lusitania* came up. A young man mentioned that there had been other survivors who had been assumed dead.  “It was a time of dislocation, as I understand it,” he explained. “Some people who came ashore in Ireland wanted to disappear. My great grandfather lived in the town of Clonakilty at the time and he helped two people who wanted just that.”  I must confess that I got quite excited. I had to ask him – “Do you know their names?”  “I think that he said that their names were Ronald and Mary,” he said. “I think that they may have taken an Irish name for themselves from a local churchyard. But he said that they were rich, or at least the lady was. A large woman, as my great pappy told my father. A bit high and mighty, but with plenty of cash.” | antique-architectural-terracotta-bacchus-sculpture |

I even went to that little town in Ireland and walked through the churchyard, in some vague hope that I might find an answer, but the trail was cold. If Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Senior had given up wealth, or a good part of it, to become a humble Irish “Mary” then I would never know what became of her.

Or perhaps Alfred Gwynne Vanderbilt Senior did go down with the ship, having acted with honor and selflessness in his final moments? We will never know.

The End

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Author’s Note:

This story was inspired by a challenge by Penny Lane on her Big Closet blog: “There must be a story in this! I noticed in the "Did you know" section of the Wikipedia home page this morning. … that during a renovation of 4 Park Avenue workers found a sealed room with women's clothes and shoes that was not in the building's blueprints? This is asking for a story to be written but I have no time to do it. Any takers out there? This is a building in Manhattan that was constructed for Alfred Vanderbilt in 1912 …”.