Aunt Teo

A Story by Alison Booth

THE only time I ever saw Aunt Teo was in 1913; I know because she died before the War. She came home by train to Ogden in the spring, and Father went up there to get her. I just have this picture of a tall elegant woman getting down from the wagon as though she was leaving such things behind; her gloved hand trailing, her head bowed under the auburn hair and gauze and feathers, not really seeing us. I nearly died: there was Father in overalls. Our wagon had no springs, wasn't even painted. Here was tragedy come home, and we had flies in our kitchen. I was twenty-two then.

Daphne was married by then, and I was going up to North Fork to work in the camp again that summer, it seemed to help my asthma, so Aunt Teo was put in our bed, wrapped in miles of lace. My sister Hilda told me years later it frightened her to death having to bring up the tray of bread and milk—you know how we broke up the bread into the glass of milk with honey—Aunt Teo said in all her life she'd never tasted anything better, and that's all she would eat by then. Hilda said she'd never seen such hair, almost purple, and she got so skinny and yellow toward the end. We were surprised that anyone from California could look like she'd lived in a hospital.

Mother was furious at the funeral—it must have been September, I was back home by then—when only five Caldwells besides us showed up. I heard from some of them afterward that they just didn't know what to make of Theodora's coming back here; by the time they got used to it, she died and it just seemed too late to make it up.

Editor's Note
This story won third place in the 1982 D.K. Brown Memorial Fiction Contest.

You see Grandfather, your great-great grandfather Caldwell, had three wives, Martha, Harriet, and Stella. Mother said you could always tell which wife a Caldwell came from, and it's true down to your generation. Martha was Mother's mother; Harriet was Teo's. Martha's children were better off in every way, but Harriet's were a lot more interesting to watch. Stella's just seemed to fade away.

Mother dates all the trouble in the family from when Harriet, Teo's mother, arrived on the scene. Grandma had got used to having her husband to herself, you see. Then one spring Grandpa came back from Conference in Salt Lake with a dozen fruit tree seedlings, five horses (he was in the livestock business), and Harriet Dinton, a young convert just in from England. She looked refreshed from her long walk across the Plains, and Grandmother used to say that should have been a warning: anyone who could thrive on that—Grandmother had been through it herself—had to be made of different stuff.

A man in Grandfather's position would have felt like a soldier who refused to fight if he didn't practice celestial marriage—as they called polygamy then. A plural wife shared and enhanced her husband's glory in heaven, however she complicated things here. Aunt Teo's mother was a catch, a devout, handsome, skillful woman, but I gather she knew how to drive everyone crazy. But this comes from Mother, who saw everything from the main house, through Grandmother's eyes.

In the photograph, Aunt Harriet looks like a queen, a little skinny by their standards, really exotic. She had been a steamstress for highborn ladies and thought a lot of herself; there was nothing she couldn't do almost better than Grandmother. She always had her way with Grandfather. But there were no fights outright; they were living in the manner of the Old Testament Patriarchs, and no one was going to be the first to complain. If Grandfather spent more time than he ought to over in Aunt Harriet's adobe cottage, I never heard about it. She had ten children—she died in childbirth when Aunt Teo was twelve—but Grandmother had nine, and Stella, before she died at thirty, had four little angels that didn't live long. Aunt Harriet made Grandfather promise all her children an education, but she didn't live to keep him to it. He wasn't mean, just that every hand was needed, and children worked from the day they could walk. Everyone said Harriet had put grand ideas in her children's heads that spoiled them for useful work. They were dreamers, really. Three of the boys ran away to the railroad.

When Harriet died, Martha set things straight again. She was the only living mother to twenty-three children, and there just wasn't enough to go around. In the main house, Martha got to the sacks of flour and beans, the year's shoes or cloth, first. Mother remembered looking out the kitchen window, seeing the chickens scatter and calling, "Here comes Teo!" the way they used to call, "Here come the Indians!" It got to be a joke, Teo storming up for an equal share of goods. She just didn't have her mother's icy way of getting things.

It must have been awful, a little girl trying to take care of five little children—the four others were old enough to do for themselves. She just decided early on that everyone was against her. Once, Mother said, a neighbor who was none too good a housekeeper herself saw Teo's baby sister and said, "Oh, you poor little thing, you wouldn't look like that if your mother was alive." Teo took it all very much to heart. She never got over when Grandfather sent Mother to the Academy and wouldn't send her. He didn't like her temper. Anyone so fast off the handle wasn't suited to teach, he said, and I have to agree; you need the patience of Job, which was always my trouble in the classroom.

Later she seemed to settle down a bit; she stopped throwing tantrums. She had a way of dressing herself like a fashionplate, her corsets tight and her hair curled, that was a torment to Grandfather. He made her go back and straighten up before she went out. Supposedly she was plain, but she never stood out a dance, and Mother said she kept her beaux as busy with each other as with her. Grandfather once stepped into the dancefloor and took her out for forgetting herself. She stormed out of the hall and couldn't be found when the family went home. In the morning she walked home still in her spotless frilled dress. No one could get out of her where she had been all night, but Grandfather confined her to her house for a week.

The summer she was eighteen she just took off for Salt Lake City. That was a great distance then, though it was only sixty miles, for a girl to travel alone. She sent a postcard saying she had work in the Z.C.M.I. and was rooming with Aunt Martha's second cousin. She told Mother after Grandfather had gone and got her home that she had also been a waitress in the Coffee Shop of Hotel Utah, but she didn't want to tell her father that. Other girls at the time might have done what Teo did and no one would mind, but Grandfather had some notions about what was right for his girls; shop work was too common. Besides, it was really a battle by then, her defying him.

That fall he brought a young man to stay with them, a returned missionary named Hollis Granger. He was to teach the younger children for his keep, though it was obvious to everyone but Teo that he was really there to marry her. Fortunately for Grandfather's scheme, Granger was a smooth man. He had been to Europe, spoke a kind of French, dressed better than any man Teo had seen. He lent her books, danced with her, complimented her taste in hats, but didn't gape or mewl over her. In fact, Mother said he hardly seemed

interested, he spent so much time talking Church business with Grandfather. It was too much for Teo; she fell madly in love.

Mother said it was a terrible marriage right from the start. After the wedding night in Logan—they had to go up there to the Temple, that was before the one in Salt Lake was finished—she came sulking home alone. Brother Granger had only told her then that he'd been called by the Church to Washington, couldn't even see her home. Once again she wasn't getting her share, she thought. And living at home again, she was just impossible.

Eventually Granger put her in a house of her own down in Provo, and Mother lost sight of her for a while. Then suddenly she turned up on Mother's doorstep with a baby—Camille—and a trunk of her fine things; Mother had married by then and was living here in Delphi. Teo refused to speak of her husband, but when women showed up on doorsteps back then—it was during all the persecution for polygamy—no one pried. Then she took off again with her baby, leaving her pretty linens and trinkets, and they're still in our family. She had cousins in Idaho, an aunt in Alberta; once Mother got a letter from Butte announcing a son, Roland. Granger paid her visits when their travels crossed. So long as everyone kept moving, there was hope of keeping out of the federal agent's hands.

The next thing anyone heard, Teo was in Salt Lake City and Granger was serving a sentence for cohabitation. That was five years after she married. He had five wives, it turned out—probably as much news to Teo as to anyone else. Toward the end, the wives were kept secret from each other so that they couldn't testify against their husbands. There was no shame in going to jail for that; I've seen framed pictures of men in prison stripes displayed on people's pianos. But I'm not sure that man wasn't better off in jail; there was something about Church money. Mother said she never did trust him, and she had pretty harsh words for a man who didn't look after his wives.

Grandfather drove to Salt Lake after Teo again, but came back with Camille and Roland instead. Everyone thought he was sorry for Granger, he was so downcast, but then Mother saw his copy of the Salt Lake Tribune, the Gentile paper, and that was how they found out that Teo had turned her husband in.

That took a lot of thinking and praying. Mother dreamed that Teo lost the war in heaven and cast herself down on burning wings. She was quoted in the papers saying some awful things about the Church, saying her father had sold her off and her husband had left her to work for her bread and then taken money from her when he came to enjoy his conjugal rights. She said women were no better than slaves in Mormondom, that the Church Fathers used tithings for their own benefit.

The family thought she must have fallen in with bad company, or someone had forced her to say such things. Gossip made the rounds that a Fed had seduced her—or she had flung herself at him, depending on who told it. No Caldwell allowed that, until Aunt Maggie said she had seen Teo alone on the train with a man in a mustache and gaiters. Mother's heart sank, figuring Teo had found a man fancier than Granger and could not resist.

Aunt Teo didn't have to be told to keep away. She never saw Grandfather again, and he would have refused to see her. He kept her children from her, and Aunt Elysia raised them as her own. Teo tried to make a legal objection to that, but she'd lost her credibility in the Gentile courts, too.

I don't think anyone in our family, except maybe Teo, felt worse after the Manifesto in 1890. Mother said when the Church gave in to the Supreme Court and banned polygamy everyone sighed, as though we could finally admit this is the earth and not heaven after all. But there were a lot of widows overnight, and after seven years of living hand to mouth and pillar to post, Teo must have felt cheated of a cause. Her marriage had been annulled two years by then, and she had been busy living as free as she could. In the nineties, the early days of Deseret must have seemed long gone. Salt Lake was a city, Gentiles were everywhere, the railroads and the mines had made everything racier, and the Church was in a bad way since the U.S. Government had tried to take it apart. About this time the Church invested in a salt factory out by the lakeshore and a big resort concern called Saltair. By the time I saw it, it was past its glory, but it still looked like a mirage, peaks and columns and grilles plunked down at the edge of that lifeless stretch of water. There were hundreds of private bathhouses, you were supposed to swim, but you know how it stings, all that salt, and won't wash off. I suppose the ladies liked it because you can float sitting without wetting your hair, if you can beat off the flies.

It was quite an excursion back then, the train from Salt Lake City, and a stroll on the boardwalk while the band played. Mother said the only thing to beat it was the steamboat to Antelope Island on Utah Lake, or possibly coasting down American Fork Canyon on the caboose. Father took her there for their anniversary—they'd never managed a honeymoon, and he felt rich, having just sold the farm. She said she just got Father to sit at one of the tables when who should wait on them but Aunt Teo in a red dress that showed her ankles and bright useless shoes. Mother blushed, and Teo dropped a menu and spent a long time looking for it under the cloth. Father said something about how hard it was to find work; he hoped they treated her decently. "Don't worry if it's decent," Teo said. They ordered lemonade but while they waited—she was gone so long she might never have come back—Father noticed the rows of

colored bottles on a mirrored shelf in the next room, and they weren't doctor's remedies either. For once Mother wanted to overlook it, and even fought her way to the kitchen to look for Teo, but Father wasn't staying another minute. He thought he saw fancy men and women playing cards in the smoke in the other room.

Father and Mother had to stand out in the sun by the tracks, as far away from Saltair as possible, to wait for the next train. The whole time Mother kept hoping Aunt Teo would come running out after them. For years she reproached herself as though she could have just reached down and helped her half-sister out of the quicksand.

After that Mother had her hands full with us, and with Father's doing so poorly with the sheep she had to take in boarders much of the time. She said she couldn't have been more surprised when Aunt Teo's letter came from San Francisco saying she was engaged to a Mr. Manuel, a wealthy cattleman from Argentina; would Mother come to the wedding?

Mother thought if she was ever going to set foot outside Utah, this was it. Father's mother was living close by, and I was old enough to take care of things for a while—as old as Teo was when *her* mother died—and Mother had saved a little from what Grandpa had left her. I really think that was the big event of Mother's life, her trip to California. The train was the best part, she said: a perfect little Pullman sleeper, a shining black man to tuck her into it, the red carnations bobbing in the silver vases while dinner came to her and the mountains rumbled by. The Eastern ladies bustled around in more silk for one dress than all of Brigham's wives saw in their lives; their hats were like birds that had died and gone to heaven.

Mr. Manuel's carriage met her at the station in San Francisco and drove up streets so steep she thought they'd fall over backwards. She came to a huge Spanish-style mansion with long verandas and a walled-in garden. Servants settled her in a room full of heavy Spanish furniture and then brought her to see her sister.

Teo wore a gown of smoke-grey silk, her hair the color of dried roses, a diamond on her finger. She was Mrs. Manuel already, she announced. She welcomed Mother as though she couldn't remember begging her to come but wouldn't mind if she stayed. Mother felt the whole house was in a trance. Teo moved slowly, her spine so straight she might have been suspended from the ceiling by invisible wires. She said she had wanted to see someone of the family before she left on their world tour. She led her in to a candlelit dinner where Mr. Manuel, very tan with a sharp little beard, ate two or three bites from thirty dishes—he was too far away for Mother to see just what the delicacies were—and sipped liquors the colors of jewels from a series of crystal stemglasses. Sometimes he spoke to Aunt Teo in Spanish, and she nodded without passing it along to Mother. There was some relief when he left the table, but Teo refused to talk. She played the piano—where she had learned how, Mother wondered—and described the places they would go on their tour, but she was stony about the past. Mother said this would be a fairy palace for children to grow up in, and Aunt Teo gave her an awful look. For more than a week Mother kept watch for an opening, a chance to help, but Aunt Teo didn't want help, she wanted to show her.

On the train home, Mother was sitting in the observation car, and there across the bone-meal desert saw the mountains above Salt Lake. She had a fit, laughed and laughed hysterically, so that they had to pound her back and lay her out on a seat. After she calmed down, she said, it was like returning from a drowning. She had her breath back.

No one knew if Teo got her world tour. Mr. Manuel died in 1905, but it wasn't until 1913 that anyone saw Teo again.

She told Mother, while I was away that summer, Granger had been married the whole time to a woman who lived just around the corner from the Caldwell's place; he had a wife and four kids right there under everyone's nose. When the agent came and told her Granger had married four more times, she just broke. "I couldn't go on having nightmares about my children starving while theirs ran around in new shoes," she told Mother.

After she made it to San Francisco, Mr. Manuel spotted her in a saloon and said she looked like Cleopatra. He treated her like his wife; he was married to someone he would never see again, in Argentina. Teo knew he had other women, he never lied to her. He took perfect care of her, he cultivated her tastes, and when he was with her his attention was devoted. But he made her promise first, never to present him with a child and second, never to entangle him with her family. Mother's visit had been his one concession, and Teo would not tell how or why she had won it from him any more than she would say what she was dying of. Or maybe Mother wouldn't tell me, I don't know. She was only forty-nine. She was buried Theodora Caldwell, as though she had been a spinster.

I saw one of Camille's grandchildren the other day; she said she had framed a sampler of the Articles of Faith which her great grandmother Teo had sewn as a girl. According to her, when Aunt Teo came to the "Man will be punished for his own sins and not for Adam's transgressions," she left out the "not"—but I find that hard to believe.

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