

Edwardian family portrait

Elinor Kapp



Theresa Kapp with Reginald Otto and Norman Kapp. Approximately 1895 (artist unknown).

This picture is of less interest in itself than the story behind it. Painted in the 1890s it is a reasonably competent example of an Edwardian family group. The colours are rather muddy and the flesh tones not particularly good. It shows an attractive woman with a boy of about ten years in a sailor suit standing beside her and a somewhat younger child in her lap.

Theresa, known as Treasy, was described by other family members who knew her as a beautiful and vain woman with seductive but shallow charm, married to a warm, kind adoring husband. Well – history they say is written by the winners! Her older son, Reggie, in adult life recalled with pain how his mother would clasp him to her with an iron arm in a pretty pose as soon as his father's key was heard in the lock. Their complex relationship required years of psychoanalysis for him to unravel. If we look at this picture as a family sculpt indicating emotional disturbances perhaps we can see something of this. Reggie stands very stiffly by his mother leaning away from her with a gap between

them. He has been supplanted even for a pretty tableau by his brother, Norman, sprawling as of right across the maternal lap. In contrast to his brother's stiffness Norman is relaxed, yielding towards her, his outstretched hand resting side by side with hers, almost touching. His rounder face and chestnut curls, set off by the sailor collar, take the centre of the picture, while Reggie's face is in the top corner.

Norman was caught in Germany at the outbreak of the First World War I and interned. He married a German girl and was completely cut off by his family as a result, dying in his 20s as a result of tuberculosis contracted in the internment camp. Treasy's husband died in the 1920s. She retired to live in Italy and became increasingly reclusive, odd and paranoid. She died shortly after the Second World War, having refused all contact for many years with her son or other family members. Reggie became a successful engineer, fought in the First World War, wrote music and books on engineering and the history and philosophy of science. In the 1930s he became increasingly aware of his psychological problems and desperate to marry and have children. He had been interested for years in the works of Freud and he opted for psychoanalysis with Dr Bryant in London, himself an analysand of Anna Freud. Among Dr Bryant's patients was a young woman doctor training in analysis. Dorothy had come to an interest in Freud's work through philosophy and this had led her into medicine and work at the Maudsley Hospital. Her generation of young men had been almost wiped out by the war, and she too longed to marry and have children before it was too late. Dr Bryant did not simply introduce them and leave it to chance; he took them on holiday to Morocco with him from where they returned engaged. It was a successful and happy marriage until their deaths, within days of each other in 1966. I would not like you to think that I am breaking a patient's confidence. Reggie and Dorothy Kapp were my parents and made no secret of how they met or their gratitude to the mentor who facilitated their marriage. On a personal note I have to admit that without Freud and the British psychoanalytic school I might not even exist.

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