

Ethel Binnie-Clark (1880-1955)

Character in the Sherborne Pageant:

Lady episode 3

Episode 3: In this episode six women take part in the role of 'Lady' - five are in the photograph. It may be that one of the characters is out of the shot or perhaps not appearing in this particular performance. It is very possible that Ethel is in this photo.

Ethel Binnie-Clark was the youngest of seven children and aged 25 when she appeared in the Pageant of 1905. She was born in the Digby Hotel in Sherborne where her father was the manager and later the proprietor. What happened to Ethel later that year turns out to be very surprising indeed. She appears to have been working at



the Digby Hotel and is very domesticated and capable as later evidence of her abilities to cook and sew together with her revelations of having 'cleaned hundreds of brass taps' come to light. She has also undertaken nine months training as a nurse at sometime. Being the youngest daughter, unmarried and living and working at home, it is very likely that she would take care of her parents in their old age, much as the custom of the day. This was not, however, to be her destiny as, together with her elder sister Georgina, she was dispatched by their father to Canada to check on the progress of her brother Louis who was homesteading in a remote area in Saskatchewan. Sister Georgina was a journalist who had published articles in the past and the fascinating chronicles of this intrepid journey, for two young, single women, travelling alone by steamer, rail, horse and wagon via Montreal and Winnipeg can be found in Georgina's book *A Summer on the Canadian Prairie* (now out of print but available to read via Google books at archive.org). The book is a mixture of fact, fiction, autobiography, travel log, comment and much besides and makes for a very interesting read. When the sisters met with Louis in Winnipeg he supposedly begged them not to go on to the homestead in Saskatchewan as he had spent two years there 'roasted, frozen and starved by turn'. He and his partner had to resort to drain digging and pot washing to make ends meet and he did not see this as being any sort of a life for his sisters and so he proposed staying in Winnipeg and opening a dairy. He argued that here Ethel's nursing training would come in useful in the sterilizing and cleaning of the equipment and a better living might be made from supplying dairy products than continuing to break in the homestead. He also considered his two sisters would find living in a town preferable. However, they were not to be deterred and the journey continued by rail and horse and wagon finally arriving at the homestead near Fort Qu'Appelle. The rudimentary cabin was in a terrible state with gaps in the roof and the walls. The two women slept on a couple of old stretchers leaving Louis to sleep in a tent pitched outside. There was very little furniture and no stove although a new one was expected, having been ordered on the way. This is when Ethel's domesticity begins to come to the fore as she takes on the cooking and cleaning and Georgina takes on looking after the one and only horse and much else besides. Georgina went on to write a further book on their experiences called *Wheat and Woman**. Georgina uses both books to observe and comment on the role of women. She names her sister as 'Hilaria' in the books and uses her to put forward how she despises the drudgery and lack of opportunity for women. Louis or Lal is portrayed as a lazy bachelor who wants to desert the homestead but this is a device engineered by Georgina as he actually had a wife and not a 'ne'er do well' bachelor partner. There has been much academic study on early women settlers in Canada and it has been suggested that some of the characteristics displayed by Ethel and Louis very likely did not exist but were tools used by Georgina to put forward ideas, arguments, opposing opinions and views. She attempts to apply for a homestead herself but discovers this route is only open to men and eventually she takes out a mortgage on a small area of good, already 'worked' farmland with a modest cabin that is a great improvement on the one occupied by Louis, and sets about, together with Ethel the task of running the farm by hiring others to help with skilled tasks and heavy work when necessary. This meant, of course, that they would have to undertake traditional female roles of feeding the men and doing their washing and cleaning which Georgina, in particular, railed against. At some point they start a school for 'young ladies' teaching them how to run their own farms and some rather surprising photographs of Roedean girls working out in the fields appear in *Wheat and Woman*. There were many more single women than available men and certainly fewer openings for employment for women in the workplace. Those not destined for marriage or a traditional role in nursing or teaching were being urged to go out to Canada and to try farming. Although Georgina states that they travelled to Canada to check up on Louis I believe they travelled there to help make a go of it themselves and that it was not just a visit, financed by their father for a bit of an adventure, but a serious endeavour with a very small amount of capital. It is not clear how long Georgina remained in Canada and she died in London in 1947. Ethel, on the other hand, became a much more permanent resident from the early 1920s until her death in 1955. The two sisters eventually had 275 acres in wheat production. In 1908 Louis returned to England and a career in brewing but another brother, Arthur was also on the farm from before WW1 until he died in 1921. Ethel and Arthur are buried in Fort Qu'Appelle cemetery.

(**Wheat and Woman* with introduction by Sarah Carter republished in 2014. See also *Imperial Plots* by Sarah Carter published in 2016)