

From SHERYL FIERRO

Mamma Nelly and I
by Louise Fanshawe Gregory

1908

THIS PERCEPTIVE AND BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED BOOK about a thinking doll (the “I” of the title) is one of the first books I remember reading on my own. Over and over and over again. One day when I was perhaps ten or eleven, my mom mentioned that it was the first book she had ever received and told me how she had come to have it.

My grandmother, the daughter of Danish immigrants, used to scrub floors at a hospital in Kansas City, Kansas. It was the 1920s and times were difficult; her hard-earned wages put food on the table for her three young children, including my mother, who would often accompany her to the hospital. My grandmother befriended many of the patients there and was especially attentive to the children. There was one little girl of about six – just my mother’s age – of whom she grew particularly fond.

This little girl’s mother visited her daughter constantly, bringing from home all manner of toys and delicacies and, most especially, books. The woman was always handsomely turned out, apparently, and in the eyes of my mother and grandmother, she seemed a very grand lady indeed. The two mothers often conversed, and whenever my grandmother had a bit of a break she would sit with the young patient and comfort her as much as possible. But one day, quite suddenly, the child died. Together, the two women grieved.

Some time later, the child’s mother returned to the hospital carrying a large box of children’s books, which she handed to my grandmother, saying, “These are from my little girl to yours.” This unexpected gift seemed like vast riches to my mother, who had never before owned a book. And of all these books, many of which I still have, *Mamma Nelly and I*, sentimental and funny and wise, would become my mother’s treasured favorite. As, three decades later, it would become mine.

On my wedding day, my mother (who was an indefatigable reader) gave me *Mamma Nelly and I* as my “something old.” And, she added, “To remember where you come from.” I used to wonder what that meant, exactly. From people who had had to clean floors to scrape by? From people who were kind to children? Who loved to read? My mother is gone and I can’t ask her for an answer anymore. But it doesn’t matter. I know that she meant all of these.

