

CHAPTER IX

AN EDWARDIAN CHILDHOOD

Although Samuel was born 135 years ago, generations are deceptive and his eldest son lived until twenty years ago when he died aged 85. Many of the family have been long-lived, and Samuel's wife, the Lizzie Russell to whom he was married in July 1863, survived her husband by thirty years. She died on 16th October, 1923, aged 84.

One of her seven children, however, Frank, had died in 1911, less than nine years after marrying and within two years of his wife's untimely death in August 1909. Their two children thus became the proteges of their grandmother, the forceful Elizabeth Maria Russell, and of Samuel's eldest son and third daughter. Although, in terms of time these events are quite recent, the speed and style of life was that of a different age, an age which might be separated from the present by a century. The following account of it has been kindly written by Frank's daughter Elma.

When my brother Jack and I were respectively eight and two years old both our parents had lately died. While Jack was sent as a boarder to a prep. school I stayed in my parents house at Chalfont St. Peter, Bucks, in the charge of a succession of governesses, except for occasional weekend visits by one of our three unmarried aunts whose home was in London with our widowed grandmother. However this rather odd method of upbringing (deeply criticised by my mother's family) included holidays with our always kind but somewhat matriarchal grandmother and the 'Aunts'. At Christmas we had a month in London, and in the summer nearly two months, a marvellous time, in large country houses which our grandmother

rented to entertain her two remaining sons and their families, our first cousins, as well as a number of other relations.

The London house was 7 De Vere Gardens, Kensington. From its imposing pillared portico one could look a hundred yards up the street to the tempting green of Kensington Gardens, but indoors its four storeys and basement were darkened by equally tall houses opposite, and at the back there was a dreary outlook of grimy brick. I remember most about this house when I was from about five to twelve years old.

Our eldest aunt, the eldest of our grandparents' family of seven, was Aunt May. While keeping a firm hand on the reins of all aspects of running the house, she had a very busy life of her own. At home her steady output of biographies took up much time, as did the rehearsing of speeches, (I remember hearing one of these being loudly declaimed from the bathroom of sea-side lodgings). She was in demand as a speaker, first on food rationing during the 1914-18 War, and later in support of various Conservative parliamentary candidates, and travelled all over the country. She was perhaps a rather overwhelming personality, but could be very patient with the aggravating young. Eight years younger, the next to youngest sister Aunt Alys was one of our two official guardians and always exceptionally kind and good to me. She was extremely pretty and charming and had had innumerable proposals of marriage but when quite young had got privately engaged to her first cousin, a faux-pas which when discovered was immediately sat upon by all who could. Very much later I think she thought of marrying a dashing distant cousin, but nothing came of it. The youngest of the family Aunt Dorothy had been born with a slightly paralysed hand and foot. She had never been able to dance, or play games to any extent. Although shy,

she was a much stronger character than Aunt Alys, and held a good voluntary job with the S.S.H.S. both during and after the 1914-18 war. Her disabilities made her a very sympathetic person, but also sometimes led to a bit of a 'chip-on-the-shoulder' attitude, and, (I was afterwards told) she resented Aunt May's easy social success and monopoly of visitors over her shyer sisters. This, and other difficulties, led to a good deal of bickering and bitterness between them, with Aunt Alys the unwilling buffer.

The family was attended by nine servants. A cook, kitchen-maid, butler, footman (whose tailed coat sported a double row of Sandars crested silver buttons), head housemaid, under-housemaid, two ladies maids, and an odd-job man. I think the last named carried up coal and cleaned shoes, he wore a green baize apron and was hardly ever seen. In a nearby mews there was also Rodway the coachman, and his son Henry the groom, who looked after three carriage horses. The number indoors was hardly excessive as there were seven long wide flights of stairs from basement to maids rooms (even my heart used to thump madly after trotting up four of them in my favourite occupation - pretending to be a horse) and there was nothing to save labour in those days. One flight below our grandmother's bedroom and the spare-room, and two below the Aunt's rooms, was a small furniture-filled bathroom with a terrifying three-foot square scenic engraving of the Crucifixion - immediately opposite the bath. All washing water had to be carried from here, and, apart from visitors who were sufficiently mobile, only Aunts Alys and Dorothy descended to the bathroom. Enormous brown cans of hot water had to be carried up from it by house-maids for hip-baths in the other rooms. The stairs were brushed by the housemaids, who first sprinkled wet tea leaves on the carpet to help collect dust.

There was a service lift from the basement to the back of the hall for bringing meals to the ground-floor dining room, but afternoon tea - a considerable weight of silver and food - had to be carried up two flights by the footman, who also replenished the drawing-room first when necessary.

The drawing-room, and curtained back-drawing-room, were not lightened by a dark red wall-paper, this being considered the correct background for our grandfather's quite notable collection of paintings. In the drawing-room these more or less covered the high walls, including the huge Murillo for which it was said Rothschild had offered our grandfather a blank cheque. It took its turn with other pictures in being lent by request for exhibitions. It was unfortunate that he refused the offer, as fifty years later when it came to be sold experts considered parts of it had been done by Murillo's pupils, and it only fetched £100. Among other famous painters represented were Rubens, Cuyp, Watteau, Morland and Van der Veldt. There were also many valuable leather-bound books, and a great number of bronze groups, figures and animals - more than twenty of these were set out on a wide table. Large pieces of china ornamented the mirrored overmantel over the marble fireplace, and one shudders to think of the dusting involved.

A typical day in this house as I remember it would begin with prayers at 8.45 a.m. in the electric-lighted dining-room, conducted by Aunt May. The servants filed in and sat down opposite us in order of precedence and sex, cook, lady's maids, head housemaid, under-housemaid, kitchen-maid, and finally butler and footman. A Lesson was read, everyone knelt down facing the wall (except Aunt May and me) while prayers were said, and then in silence all filed out again. I wonder now whether rank was reformed in the

hall. Breakfast followed, with several silver containers of hot food to choose from, and then Aunt May would see the butler, Aunt Alys the head housemaid, and Aunt Dorothy the cook, who were their special charges. I would pay a brief visit to our grandmother, who breakfasted in bed. The Aunts then wrote letters in the small ground-floor library, before perhaps taking Jack and me to the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens where he joined many boys sailing model boats, or to feed the water fowl on the Serpentine with bits of bread.

At lunch dishes were handed in turn to everyone by the butler and footman, who then stood by the side-board throughout the meal. If those present wished to say anything these two should not hear they spoke in French. Later when I had learnt a smattering of French and I was to be excluded too they would say a sentence or two in German. After lunch our grandmother went up one flight of stairs to her gloomy little 'boudoir' for a rest, and to change her dress. About three o'clock she emerged dressed in a black lace bonnet which usually had a mauve or red rose at one side, and a shoe length black silk coat and, accompanied by one of the Aunts and followed by me, descended to the hall. The butler held the front door open, and there was the carriage (very soon replaced by a Daimler car) with a pair of beautifully turned-out horses (strung up with bearing-reins - anathema to those who knew their 'Black Beauty'!) - Rodway in top hat on the box, Henry (more silver buttons) at the horses heads. The footman, rug in hand, held the carriage door open and we climbed in. Elders sitting on the back seat and I facing them and having to screw round for a glimpse of the horses heads and ears. Besides the rug tucked in by the footman we could all put our feet on an outsize hot water-filled foot-warmer. Our grandmother was going to

"pay calls". At two or three houses she and whichever Aunt it was got out and disappeared to talk and "leave cards". Presumably, though I don't remember it, someone else stayed in the carriage to keep me in order.

Sometimes after tea the Aunts would work hard to amuse us with games like back-gammon, bezique, chess or even 'coon-can', or, with grandmotherly adjurations to "Sit up straight Elma and let the lamp shine on your book." I would read till bedtime, with one ear open, while they knitted and gossiped.

At 7.15 p.m. a great booming ascended from the hall below, the "dressing-gong", and grandmother, Aunts and visitors if any, hurried upstairs to change. There would be a few minutes of complete silence, then doors opened and the most extraordinary noises began. These were the summoning of the lady's maids from their light airy living/sewing/bedroom where the beds shut up into the wall by day. Our grandmother sounded a strange note from a brown china quail, Aunt May blew a shrill cab-whistle, Aunt Alys rang a brass bell twice, Aunt Dorothy a tinkly one, once. How the rival claims for fastening dresses and doing hair ever got sorted out in half-an-hour goodness knows, but at 7.45 p.m. there was again the gong's crescendo - dinner was ready and those who hadn't already made it hurried down the first stage to the drawing room, for they were late. One night when Uncle George (our other guardian) was staying in the house the gong went unheeded, for after all persuasion and threats from Aunts had failed to make me swallow a horrid little black pill, he was called in as the ultimate reinforcement. It is really shaming to have to say that he had no more luck than his sisters. It would have been a terrible thing for dinner to be late, and everyone

must have been justly cross.

At Christmas when there was a large family dinner - party I was able, I think by courtesy of the ladies maids, to crane over the banisters in my dressing-gown and look down two flights to see the full evening-dressed relations coming out of the drawing-room in pairs arm-in-arm, and going down to the dining room. Then it was bed in the spare-room fourposter. An engraving of 'Francis Russell, Sheriff of Limerick 1777' on my right, another of Queen Victoria as a girl, in Grecian draperies, on the left and a small photograph of Kings Edward VII and George V in morning coats, straight opposite the bed. These were the only pictures to cheer a darkish room which looked out on to the high, drab backs of other houses.