



VINTAGE

REDEEMING FEATURES

NICHOLAS HASLAM

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About the Book

Nicky Haslam has always been at the centre of things wherever he is – at parties, opening nights, royal weddings – and has stories to tell of crossing paths, and more, with the cultural icons of our time: Cecil Beaton, Francis Bacon, Diana Cooper, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Andy Warhol, Jack Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe to name but a few. *Redeeming Features* is an exuberantly told and stunningly crafted memoir: a compelling and wholly singular document of our times.

About the Author

Nicholas Haslam is the author of *Sheer Opulence* and has been a contributing editor of *Vogue* and *Tatler* for many years. He also writes for *The World of Interiors* and *The Spectator*. He lives in London.

Also by Nicholas Haslam

Sheer Opulence

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FOR MY GODCHILDREN

Carina Haslam
Jessica Heathcote Amory
Louisa Fox
Violet von Westenholz
Otis Ferry
Eleanor Pilkington
Nathaniel Mason
Rex von Hofmannsthal
And, in memoriam, Jacob Zimmer

NICHOLAS HASLAM

Redeeming
Features
A Memoir

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

*Then did I dwell within a world of light,
Distinct and separate from all men's sight,
Where I did feel strange thoughts, and such things see
That were, or seemed, only revealed to me,
There I saw all the world enjoyed by one;
There I was in the world myself alone;
No business serious seemed but one; no work
But one was found, and that in me did lurk.
D'you ask me what? It was with clearer eyes
To see all creatures full of deities.*

*No ear,
But eyes themselves were all the hearers there,
And every stone and every star a tongue,
And every gale of wind a curious song.*

· ONE ·

IT IS EARLY morning. Beyond the open window of my attic room is a sky so blue it seems to throb. I feel irresistibly drawn by its radiance. Somehow I must try and reach it, touch it, must try to get there from my bed with its mattress made rigid by boards. I push away the metal-ribbed dome that prevents the covers from weighing on my legs. With hesitant steps I cross the room toward the shining square. I reach the window's embrasure, grasp the sill, and look out into the blue, blue heady as ether. And then, below the blue, in an orchard set in cobweb-spangled grass, apple trees stand layered with deep drifts of blossom, fat clusters of snow white petals smudged with crimson, bouquets like clouds gathering before sailing up into that vivid sky, leaving their black shadows to fragment on the silvery ground. I am transfixed by this sight, this new vision of remembered mornings, this vibrant spring.

I hear the door open, and Teresa's voice behind me. "Back to bed now?"

Three years earlier, at the age of seven, I had caught polio. It was Teresa who, for the thousand days the disease paralysed my body, had tended to my every need. With her patience and help I was just learning to walk again.

"In a minute," I answer.

Outside the orchard's walls the drive, along which, so long ago it seemed a London ambulance had brought me, curved gently up over a ridge, through chalky flat fields furrowed by the sharp spears of green wheat, to meet the walls enclosing the garden below. Beyond, on one side, was a barrier of tall dark trees; on the other, the rusty pink

bricks of outbuildings, stables, storerooms, granaries, and garages were dwarfed by the creosote-blackened boards of tall barns. Above them, roofs of lichen-speckled tiles lay like an undulating patchwork, gently tucking their eaves around the hay-filled darkness. Farther away, in the hazy morning distance, the fields were fringed by ragged hawthorn hedges fuzzy with garlands of old-man's beard. Irregular massive elms, coral-like against the sun, studded with the jagged islands of rooks' nests, would soon cast pools of shade splashed with the noisy pink of dog roses. All around the ridge fell gently away, folding into canopies of green woodlands, lime green beeches, yellow-green oaks, the blue-green steeples of yew. Devil's Den, Willow Copse, and Herbert's Hole, these woods were called—names as ancient as the valleys and hills in this primeval Chiltern landscape.

Across the chalk-and-flint-strewn fields, a coppice of gnarled, mistletoe-swathed branches stood stark against the glassy sky. They marked the ley of a lane to a sandy heath. I had always known that Gypsy families drew their painted wagons into circles around fires ringed with stones, and brown-limbed, long-haired children raced whooping through the labyrinth of dark tunnels they'd formed beneath the high bracken. One heat-heavy evening three summers before, near naked myself, I had run the mile across the shardlike stubble, peered through the saplings to watch them. After a while, though I was unable to understand their strange speech, they signalled me to join them, explore their tunnels, and join the stone circle, where, feeling a kind of thrilling sensuality, I watched sinewy arms reach for soot-blackened kettles that hissed on dying embers. Smoky shadows rose and deepened. Then for a moment the setting sun infused the façade of Hundridge, distant across the fields, with a fiery gleam beckoning me back to my own world. As I ran I looked over my shoulder, wanting to return but stumbling on, my heart thumping. I

was feeling a strange new emotion, different from any I'd yet experienced: I realised I was somehow enviously attracted to those figures and faces I'd just seen. The strength of this sensation made me suddenly scared. Was it a sin to feel this way? Could I be punished for it? Breathless, I stopped, looked back—just one last glance. Now the line of elm trees stood dark against the sky, like a barrier, guardians of the secret beyond.

Other emotions crowded in, jangling, pell-mell. I felt for the first time that I was in some way two people in one, that there was a second being within me who would always look longingly at beauty, at an attractive figure, at a different life. I turned away from this disconcertingly thrilling unknown and walked toward the consolingly familiar.

GREAT HUNDRIDGE MANOR, built in 1696, was a perfect example of William and Mary provincial architecture, its absolutely symmetrical façade composed of dark pink brick. Many of these had been glazed and glittered in the sunshine, glowed at sunset. When my father found the house in the 1920s, before he married, it had languished for more than a hundred years as a ramshackle farm on the estate of the Lowndes family, the local landowners in nearby Chesham. Deeds revealed it had been, in James I's reign, the property of a family called Chase until they upped and went to America, eventually to found the Chase Manhattan Bank. Chase descendants still live in a white clapboard homestead called Little Hundridge in Deerfield, Massachusetts.

From time to time the family would write to my father, offering, to my intense terror mingled with disbelief, to buy Hundridge and ship it, brick by pink brick, to America. Twenty years later in South Carolina I saw an entire plantation house being floated down the Charleston River

on pontoons to some new destination, and I realised my fears had not been factually unfounded.

The *délabré* state of the house in no way deterred my father. Clearing the detritus of several centuries of grime, farm ordure, and broken implements revealed an untouched architectural jewel. Mercifully escaping any kind of modernisation over the centuries, its finely carved pine staircases, doorways, and architraves were intact, and all the original fire surrounds remained, except the one in the room my father had chosen as his study, which was shaped like an elaborate scallop shell and had been added in the Regency. Several of the rooms still retained the original elaborately painted panelling and were considered to be among the most interesting seventeenth-century provincial interiors in England.

He assembled a brilliant team to transform Hundridge into the ideal retreat. Additions were commissioned from the renowned Welsh architect Clough Williams-Ellis, and the creation of gardens and grounds from the landscape designer Cecil Pinsent, while the interior's decoration was entrusted to his distant cousin and close friend the author and aesthete Geoffrey Scott, with whom he travelled, shared houses, interests, and a circle of friends. For several years in the 1920s Scott lived in an elegant and simply decorated mews behind my father's London house in Hanover Terrace. Some of the furniture he chose for both these rooms, and those at Hundridge, is around me as I write.

My father's early albums contain many photographs of Scott. His tall gangling figure is always impeccably dressed in the tweed or grey flannel suits, narrow jacketed and floppy trousered, of the period, and frequently sporting the newfangled neckwear, a coloured bow tie. Scott had a slightly simian face and wore his thick, dark hair brushed back. A scholar of exceptional erudition and visual acumen, he had a passion for Italian and English art, and his first

book, *The Architecture of Humanism*, was a critically acclaimed sensation. He had hoped to follow it with an expanded history of taste, a project ideally suited to his interests and abilities, but at the time of his death a decade later, the manuscript had not progressed beyond the unpromising opening statement, "It is very difficult. ..." Perhaps he would have had empathy with the present queen, who, asked what she thought of taste, replied, "Well, I don't think it *helps*."

Geoffrey became secretary and librarian to the distinguished collector and dealer Bernard Berenson, for whom he was extending and decorating I Tatti, the Berensons' villa above Florence. He was almost simultaneously having an affair with BB's wife, Mary, and Vita Sackville-West. Cecil Pinsent had laid out the gardens there, as he was to do at Hundridge a decade later. Hundridge was thus to become an extension of the intellectual and artistic coterie from the period my father had spent in Italy. When I was fourteen, on our first journey to Italy together, my father took me to I Tatti to have tea with Berenson's amanuensis, Nicky Mariano, in one of those lofty *salones* in which the old maestro had authenticated so many dud old masters for so much gullible new money.

Geoffrey Scott took the simple yet ideal proportions of Hundridge into account when furnishing its interior. Having not been modernised since the time it was built, the house retained its late-seventeenth-century details, its beautiful wrought-iron window latches, engraved brass door plates and handles, and architecturally influenced carving of cornices and door surrounds. Bold forms and overscaling were Scott's watchwords in furniture, mixed with the purest of baroque art and objects picked up in London for a song on frequent trawls of Roman and Florentine antique dealers, or London's Caledonian Market beyond King's Cross.

In the main sitting room, always called the Long Room after Clough Williams-Ellis doubled its size, Geoffrey's never-changed scheme was of plain white walls, curtains of red glazed cotton printed with a stylised lily, and enormous sofas covered in rough white linen. A towering Dutch baroque cupboard was balanced by a huge Italian oil painting depicting shelves of vellum-covered books with exquisite calligraphy on their spines, which hung above a large mahogany *retour d'Egypte* sarcophagus, annoyingly unsittable-on during parties due to its sloping pyramid-shaped lid.

My mother's store-cupboard was off this room— forbidden territory, and smelling of candles and cloves. Here she kept her records, mainly Chopin and Bach, though those of American musicals, or “La Vie en Rose,” “Lili Marlene,” and the “Harry Lime Theme” from *The Third Man*, were almost permanently on the radiogram's turntable, ready for a quick fox-trot.

The stone-floored, pine-panelled staircase hall had a rectangular oak table, its wood faded to pewter grey, which stood on bulbous melon legs under the semicircle of a viridian silk-velvet Elizabethan cloak bordered in dull silver metallic thread. Opposite stood a pine bench concealing a radiator, considered a brilliant modern trick of Scott's, especially as the hinged seat could be lifted to dry damp picnic rugs. On the staircase hung another large painting, a European version of an Oriental landscape in a marbleised frame, and an eighteenth-century portrait of a Venetian noblewoman wearing an astonishing pair of dangling diamond earrings, feeding biscuits to a tiny dog.

A little sitting room, or parlour, on the left of the hall was done up in stuff of tobacco brown and pale gold-grey satins, and near-black fringes. It had walls that had been ingeniously decorated by some itinerant artisan-artist, the 1690s counterpart of a specialist painter. The panels of sham burr-walnut wood graining, separated by stiles and

rails of black lacquer scattered with stylised Chinoiserie scenes and figures, were contained in mouldings, cornices, and skirtings painted to resemble violet-streaked yellow marble.

Opposite, looking out on a low wall topped by simple iron railings that separated the garden from the fields beyond, was my father's study. Its irregular panelling and shutters were painted white, and the furniture covered in plain pale brown rep. This serenity was countered by the strong smell of tobacco—my father had a little serrated acorn-shaped metal tool that made a very satisfactory noise as I scraped out the bowls of his pipes—and the searing scaly stink coming from a pot of thick fish glue, sent yearly and boiled up from the detritus of the Hull fish-filleting factory he had bought on a whim. I remember titles of books on the shelves: *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*; *Cry, the Beloved Country*; *The World of Don Camillo*; *The Sea Around Us*—this last, for some reason, being the cause of a violent row between him and my mother.

Upstairs my parents slept in their respective four-post beds. My father's was a very elaborate affair that Geoffrey had had made, inspired by Saint Ursula's in Carpaccio's mystical painting of her vision which hangs in the Accademia in Venice. This bed was among the few things my father left me when he died. As I have always liked to live in the intimacy of small rooms, while hoping others will have vast ones needing much furniture and materials, I sold this stately and somewhat unwieldy memento to the Victoria and Albert Museum, which displays it in their English furniture department to this day. The room itself had astonishing panelling swirled with paint in the strange *grotesque* style, so called because of its almost surreal, rocklike forms. The panel over the fireplace alone devolved into a barely discernible landscape, a rock-teetering, towered castle. This fanciful conceit had been carried out

in imitation *scagliola*, in itself a faux finish made by pulverising and colouring stone fixed in gesso.

When Hundridge was photographed for *Country Life* in 1942, a revered architectural historian wrote: "This painted imitation of a synthetic substance counterfeiting paint is a *tour de force*. Representation cubed, pastiche to the third degree." The glowing dark red in this triple *fauxness* was obtained from dried bulls' blood, which, mixed with powdered chalk from the Roman quarry in the woods below the house, made the almost transparent brownish pigment that the painter had used to give these walls their startling chiaroscuro. For my mother's bedroom, which was painted the pale blue-grey of her eyes, Geoffrey had arranged a simpler bed—slim dark posts surmounted by a barrelled white canopy outlined in grey baroque gadrooning. High and narrow, as was then the fashion, the bed was quite an effort to climb up into in the morning, to snuggle up to Mum as she lay listening to the latest songs on the wireless—Nat Gonella singing "The Isle of Capri" is the first tune I remember. The bed seemed hardly wide enough for both of us, but it never occurred to me that there was certainly no room for my father. Perhaps people didn't sleep all night together in those days, or maybe double beds were new and considered common.

Above a Queen Anne chest of drawers, and another in whitened oak, hung Gaudier-Brzeska drawings and a charming oil-sketch head by the fashionable portrait painter of the time, Robin Guthrie, of the ballerina Moira Shearer, whom my mother greatly admired. Over the dressing table was a painting of roses by a family friend, which my mother regularly refreshed with her latest lipstick. A door led to a balcony, built over the Long Room. On summer evenings we gathered there at sundown as my mother, looking so lovely with her arms folded behind her blonde head, warmed by the last rays of heat from the tiles

of the roof that sloped up behind the parapet on which she lay.

Opposite these rooms, in the south and east corners of the square that formed the footprint of the house, were guest bedrooms. The first, somewhat arbitrarily, as it was painted blue, was always called the Pink Room. It contained a pretty little Regency faux-bamboo tester bed of even more astonishing narrowness. So it seems most odd that this was the one chosen by the royal gynaecologist, E. Lane-Roberts—who had played a key role in the birth of both the queen and Princess Margaret—for my own birth, at eight in the evening, in September 1939. It was about the second week of the “phoney war.” It’s always rather irked me that I can’t claim to having been born prewar. Nevertheless, in labour, my mother heard a pain-piercing ringing of alarmlike bells in the room below.

“Do go and find out what on earth’s that ghastly racket,” she said to Nurse Blackie, the midwife. The din continued. Blackie bustled back.

“It’s just Mr. Haslam, mum, ringing for another helping of Queen’s pudding.” There could have been no question of my father witnessing the birth of any of his sons: Not only was it not the custom of the time, but he was distinctly squeamish. Being so, he wasn’t much help when, a few weeks later, I nearly bled to death at the circumcision he insisted on, an operation that has subconsciously made me extremely wary of anyone touching that part of my anatomy.

The room that completed this floor, with gilt-edged, brown-black lacquer panels and umber faux marble wainscot, was called, with the same arbitrariness, the Blue Room, and it was there that I was to spend the years of polio. It was connected to the Pink Room by a tiny cabinet with a marble washbasin, just as my parents’ bedrooms were joined by a secret dressing room. I loved these cubbyholes, warm and dark, so different from the long cold

corridor to the nursery wing. I truly dreaded that passage, which was hung with black-framed engravings of my mother's more illustrious forebears carrying out their country's duty—Lord Cornwallis “receiving” the pathetic, cringing, turbaned children of Tippoo Sahib at Seringapatam, for instance, or Lord Raglan charging with the Light Brigade—terrified that, while gingerly navigating its icy length, I should be set upon by, of all unlikely things, packs of howling wolves.

Putting off bedtime till the last possible moment, I would hang about the kitchen or the servants' hall next door while our beloved cook, Sersee, would sing along to hymns on the wireless, or shush me if I interrupted Sandy MacPherson at his Theatre Organ. A great joy was to be taken into her larder to look at the eggs suspended in water glass that she “put down” each week, preserving Biddy and the other hens' output in a strange glutinous liquid, or to help rummage in a sack filled with straw for potatoes with the fewest eyes and to turn the ripening tomatoes on the windowsill. Then there would be a thick chunk of toast spread with beef dripping before “Now off with you,” and the dreaded corridor.

The nursery end of the corridor, past the wolves, had been built into one part of a huge barn. Soon after I was born, the upstairs rooms—where my two older brothers had slept—were given over to my father's secretary and her family, safely removed from air raids in London. But the ground floor was still, for my earliest years, Nanny Baker's domain. On the right a playroom, with a curved window of special glass that magnified the sun's heat, had been built for my brother John, who had been born with seriously turned-backward feet. As a child he'd had to wear corrective leg braces, and in early childhood could play only, while supervised, either here or in the sandpit outside.

The playroom seemed rather forlorn in my later childhood, with cupboards full of Michael and John's

outgrown toys: headless lead soldiers, bent feathers from forgotten Red Indian headdresses, their prep school cricket gear with strange hard white triangles sprouting straps they referred to, unhelpfully, as boxes, and mangled tracks for Hornby 00 model electric trains.

Behind this was a gloomy “day” nursery, as cold as the playroom was hot, and by now containing only a Ping-Pong table that, each December, would be heaped with holly boughs. My father would dragoon everybody into stripping off the leaves, which, with an outsize needle, he threaded onto wires, making the prickly dark green chains he considered the only acceptable form of Christmas decoration.

Beside this room were the “night” nursery and two bedrooms, mine a peculiar pointed shape, sandwiched into an odd corner between the old barn and the stairs. One of my earliest memories is of Nanny Baker nightly tucking yards of thick black cloth over my nursery window. Because of the blackout I had a luminous Scottie dog lamp, its strange lemony glow lasting only a few minutes—enough to keep the wolves at bay—after which it would be dark until morning, when Nanny came to remove the carefully placed material. Then I could see Butter—the fat little cob that had gently borne John around in a sort of basketwork howdah, and eventually would become my pony—manoeuvring his white-maned neck over his stall door opposite, while Nanny made endless cuppas in which to dunk rationed Rich Tea biscuits, and jeered at the ranting voice of Lord Haw-Haw, the Nazis’ pet English propagandist, coming through from Berlin on her shortwave wireless. I slept in this room until Nanny retired, when I moved over to the attic floor above my parents’ bedrooms; Teresa was in the room next door, with her sewing room at the top of the stairs and, opposite, a bedroom reserved for Nanny’s visits. In the middle of the landing, under a central skylight stood a pale wood chest of drawers with a Greuze engraving above it, both relics of my

grandfather's house in the North of England, as indeed were the contents of some cupboards; his tall hats, frock coats, and trousers pressed with perfect creases from seam to seam in the late Victorian style.

Behind the 1696 main house stood a medieval chapel, with a fine Perpendicular east window, dated 1199 and dedicated to Edward II, the "king and martyr." It had been converted successively into a vast-ovened kitchen, and then into a brewhouse, with the furnace and copper vat still intact. Early Georgian owners added a cider press. I made a den, one of many, in the round receptacle for fruit at the press's top, and filled it with fossils and arrowheads found in the Roman flint quarry in the woods. Tacked on to the west end was a lath-and-plaster cottage, with the curious words "Seldom Sene" crudely inscribed in the lintel of its low doorway, its windows originally looking into a walled nut orchard, in which my father installed one of the earliest outdoor swimming pools in England. Its amusing primitive lavatory, with two adult seats side by side and a smaller child's version with a step next to them, became the changing room. Less funny was the day my brother Michael said, "Come on, jump in the pool, I'll catch you." I did, he didn't. I sank like a brick and saw green bubbles streaming out of my mouth as I sank. Suddenly there was a *whooshing* push from below. My mother, realising what had happened, dived to my rescue fully clothed. As I was backslapped into coughing, I saw her tobacco brown suede loafers, filled with water, at the pool's edge.

Nearer the main building had stood a wooden wellhouse, the brick-lined shaft of the well descending hundreds of feet through the Chiltern flint to a just-visible glitter of dark water. My father decided to incorporate this well into a new south wing, and our Christmas tradition was to unbolt the stout wooden cover and drop lighted paper flares weighted with stones, counting the many seconds till a distant plop and dim fizz. Opposite lay an

irregular complex of stables and farm buildings, tall brick barns, tractor sheds, and apple storage rooms.

Cecil Pinsent had kept his garden design for Hundridge appropriately simple. Around the house there were those apple trees standing in square beds, some big lawns, and long herbaceous borders against the old brick walls, into which, at one corner, a pretty white trellised summerhouse had been built by some carefree Georgian. There were the usual attempts at a cutting garden, and rows of vegetables near some not very spruce greenhouses. These beds were edged in thick wood beams. Naturally I used to walk on them, rather than the path. One day my father saw me and became suddenly and inexplicably angry: the "If I ever catch you doing that again" routine. It was the only time he ever threatened to hit me.

My father had a strange love-hate relationship with woods in general. Though the house was surrounded by them, they were kept severely at bay. The woodsman, aptly named Mr. Wood, was constantly cutting down and sawing up enormous trees into logs to be dragged up to the house by his huge grey horse. And when my father, in very old age, came to visit my house, the Hunting Lodge in Hampshire, he ran from it within half an hour, pleading arboreal claustrophobia.

IN 1946 I WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD. For all but one those had been war years, and Hundridge, a mere forty miles outside London, was on the flight path back to base for the Luftwaffe bombers. Having dropped some of their deadly load on the capital, they would lighten their return journey by dumping the metallic leftovers on our chalky Chiltern valleys and hills as they lumbered to Peenemünde to stock up for the next raid. Thus not a chink of light could glow from our windows after dark. I can picture helping Mary, the housekeeper, at her evening routine of "shutting up" the main house, where the recessed shutters in their

panelled embrasures still folded out to fit across the panes with seventeenth-century precision, and heavy curtains were pulled across with that satisfying rasp of metal runners on their tracks as we tugged on the bronze acorns dangling on the beeswax-rubbed white cords, leaving my hands smelling faintly of honey.

I rather loved the inky seclusion of the blackout, and maybe it contributed to my lasting lack of fear of the dark. In the brightness of daylight it was a routine to find out from Mr. Wood whether a bomb had actually landed anywhere nearby. Occasionally there were thumps and bangs in the night, and a few bombs did fall in the woods, but there was never a near-hit. I remember standing at the edge of quite big craters, the freshly thrown-up earth looking like huge molehills, and the exposed jigsaw of tree roots. I can see my father asking for the operator on the big Bakelite telephone in an alcove in the kitchen corridor, and telling the Home Guard of suspected unexploded shells, or being called to go and help with a defusion nearby. Sometimes the less destructive incendiary bombs fell in the woods, and my parents would rush out with their dinner guests to see how pretty the trees looked all lit up, especially with the long strands of silvery metal—was it called flak?—that the air force would drop to baffle German radar, dripping like tinsel from the branches. My mother would curse like a fiend when brambles snagged her precious nylons, which all too rarely—stockings being a government-forbidden luxury—were smuggled in by the fairly constant flow of American big brass, both army and navy, who frequently came to stay at Hundridge.

Looking back, it seems extraordinary how little these nocturnal activities of the Germans disrupted the daily regularity of our lives. Perhaps by now the writing was on the bunker wall, and Hitler's mad plans were being redirected eastward; or perhaps because I'd known nothing else, those wartime years seemed positively rosy. The

postman delivered like clockwork, often twice a day. My father went by train to his office in London, where he was a company director. People came to stay almost every weekend. It was a great treat to be allowed to meet them when they changed trains at Chalfont station, riding there and back on the branch line to Chesham in the open engine cab of the driver, Mr. Popplesthwaite, whose whistling bright pink lips gleamed in his goggled, coal-dust-encrusted face.

My parents, somewhat surprisingly, given—or perhaps because of—their Victorian upbringings, encouraged their children to interact with their friends. “Children should be obscene but not absurd,” my father would say. My eldest brother, Michael, my tousle-headed, daring older god, remembers playing a game of Grandmother’s Footsteps with H. G. Wells as he sat hidden by the high back of a chair in the parlour. When braveheart eventually dared to tag him, Wells shot from his seat onto all fours and barked like a rabid dog, sending Michael howling for Nanny. HG would usually bring one of the loves of his life, the enormous Russian countess Moura Budberg, who towered over him. Moura was often said to be a spy, a theory given a certain credence by her diplomat husband having been shot by Bolshevik assassins before her eyes at their Estonian estate, though this didn’t impede her long affair with Maxim Gorky, both in and out of Russia. Wells would spend hours begging my mother to persuade Moura to marry him, but to no avail. She preferred to retain her amatory freedom for lovers like Bruce Lockhart, author of *Comes the Reckoning*, and, by the time I remember her, her role as fixer to the film mogul Alexander Korda. She and my father played endless games of tennis, very badly, bundled up whatever the weather in vast prickly Fair Isle sweaters, so stiff they could hardly put their arms to their sides (not unlike Randolph Hearst, who at San Simeon would have a racquet tied to each outstretched arm and two men to push

him, twirling, toward the ball). I remember playing one summer wearing a rare and proudly displayed present, a Hawaiian shirt. "Aren't you hot?" my father sneeringly inquired from his woolly carapace.

The portrait painter Simon Elwes would come with his wife Golly, sister of my godfather Francis Rennell, and their sons, the most enchanting of whom was the youngest, Dominic. He was sent for safety to America during the war (a strategy my mother thought a bit common) and came back to live for a few months at Hundridge, a gum-chewing, chino-wearing, crew-cut, pink-skinned, softly accented vision. I knew he was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen, and I was smitten by male beauty, not for the first time. It was a love that increased as I grew up with admiration for Dominic's hilarious wit, uncanny mimicry, and his physical and sartorial perfection. All too tragically to end with his suicide. My mother was regrettably never painted by Simon Elwes in his just-not-toosugary chocolate-box style, though later she did sit for her portrait, wearing an elaborate Aage Thaarup hat, by his less famous rival, Robin Guthrie. The picture was shown that year at the Royal Academy.

A good friend of my mother's was Mel Russell-Cooke, to me morbidly fascinating, as her father had been captain of the *Titanic*. Other guests were Golly's brother Peter Rodd, married at the time to Nancy Mitford, from whom my mother got the feeling that Buckinghamshire was on a par, county-wise, with stockbroker Surrey. The willowy young Randlord Alfred Beit, who was married to Nancy's cousin Clementine, and the composer A. P. Herbert and his wife, Gwen, to whose house in Hammersmith Terrace we would make an annual journey for their party to watch the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, were more particularly friends of my father's, as was Maynard Keynes, who came with various boyfriends, among them Duncan Grant. My father's diplomatic-world contemporary, Gladwyn Jebb (later, as

Lord Gladwyn, to be ambassador in Paris), brought his tiny, charmingly overdressed wife, Cynthia, who was the great-granddaughter of Isambard Kingdom Brunel. My father had quite a “yen,” as the word was, for Bin, the nickname we all called her. Into his old age he would send her scatologically obscene rhymes and tidbits, which must at least have relieved the tedium of Gladwyn’s company.

IN SOME WAYS, as the youngest by many years, I felt almost like an only child. Anne, my mother’s daughter by her first marriage, seemed impossibly remote since she lived with her father in New York; my brother Michael was ten years older than me, and the middle son, John, six. I remember their being away far more than I remember them being at home. There had been a third, who died in infancy, but I never heard my parents refer to his life or death. Being older, my brothers were away at school: Michael at Kirkby Lonsdale in distant Cumberland, John much nearer at Lockers Park in Berkhamsted. Even during the holidays I saw very little of them: They would be in another part of the house while I would stay upstairs with Teresa. Of the two, Michael was the more conventionally beautiful, tall and dark with thick brown hair on a beautifully shaped head, while John, due to the misfortune of his turned-back feet, was shorter and with a muscular torso because his legs never grew to their full length. He, too, had a beautiful face, almost angelic with bright blue eyes, white-blonde hair, and perfect lips, and of the two the sunnier disposition. Michael was rather poetically withdrawn. Neither, unsurprisingly, was particularly interested in me.

The strictures of war made overt spoiling of any of us fairly impossible. I had known only a world of rationing in which everyone was issued with little buff-coloured paper books of blotchily printed coupons; milk was a luxury, cream unheard of, and butter had been replaced by a repulsive whale-fat slime called Snoek. We dined on Pom—

powdered potatoes—and dried eggs, which fleshed out the supply from the hens that strutted and scratched in their run below the kitchen door. Sugar was scarce, there were no sweets (sweet rationing was still in force when I went to Eton several years later), and imported fruit was a treat. I remember, as do many people born around the same time as I was, my first banana, and someone coming from London cradling two avocado pears as if they were the Holy Grail. Each week my mother would collect two tiny screw-top blue glass medicine bottles of what was called orange juice—though I believe now it was in fact dyed turnip or swede—from, of all unlikely places, the post office in Chesham. There appeared to be no shortage of spirits for grown-ups to add to this concoction. There was mainly gin—vodka being unheard of, while whisky and brandy had medicinal overtones—and, less frequently, sherry, which stood for months souring in an opened bottle and was drunk disgustingly but fashionably warm. Wine was rare; some venerable bottles mouldered in the cellar, to be produced at grander weekends. Michael drank cider, and for special occasions he and John made a very basic wine cup. Not greedy, and certainly not gourmets, my parents ate perfectly well off the land during the war. Neither of them shot, so game, rabbit, and even squirrel—pronounced delicious—were bagged by Rumens, a sort of keeper-cum-chauffeur, who lived in a hideous cottage, designed by Clough Williams-Ellis, which loomed among beech and oak trees beside the drive. By the time I became conscious of food as different things for different meals, meat was obtainable, though I imagine scrupulously rationed. Fresh fish was a rarity, since there were few nearby rivers in those chalky hills so distant from any coast. But gold-glinting fat kippers were sent down from the fish-filleting business in Hull in rough pine crates, packed between layers of thick yellow waxy paper; and I can still recall the wet flat wooden boxes filled with bladderwrack-buried

oysters, my mother's favourite food, that periodically arrived from an admirer living near Colchester.

I saw little of my father during the week, as he came back from his London office after my bedtime, though he sometimes climbed up to my room to say goodnight. His arrival was announced by a farting noise he could make with his palms, which I hated. My mother hardly ever came to my attic floor, but I could hear her running her bath and changing after her day doing diverse local war work; at one point she drove a horse-and-cart milk round, though sadly I was too young to witness this hilariously incongruous sight. I did frequently go with her to Chesham in a tiny tinny Ford—her imported American Buick had long since been put up on blocks in a barn—to wheedle a forbidden half gallon of gas (as she called it, having learned to drive in New York) out of Mrs. Ratcliffe, who manned the pumps, or cajole some lard from Mr. Kingham, the butcher.

Knowing how well the colour suited her, my mother almost always wore her red square-shouldered wool coat to facilitate the wheedling. In Kingham's we sometimes met our glamorous and deflatingly funny neighbour Lady Ranfurly. "Di, darling!" Hermione once said. "That coat! Too heavenly! You *must* lend it to me next time I'm pregnant."

From as early as I can remember until I was ten and able to go away to school, my world was the staff. They were my only friends. Teresa, Sersee (a contraction in my baby talk of Miss Hersee), who ruled the kitchen and the roosters in her hen yard, and Mary Walkling, the housekeeper, all became, for all of my youth, my closest, most beloved companions. My mother's loving nature, trusting and flirtatious, enabled her to engage staff who, by turning a deaf ear to the not infrequent tension between her and my father, remained at Hundridge for decades. They had for the most part been the staff at 8 Hanover Terrace, my parents' London home in Regent's Park, where