

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Lillie Langtry

Laura Beatty

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About the Author

Laura Beatty worked in the art world in London and New York. She is married with three children and now lives in Buckinghamshire. *Lillie Langtry* is her first book.

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To C.E.L.K.

Laura Beatty

LILLIE LANGTRY

Manners, Masks and Morals


V I N T A G E

We may have lost courteous manners, gentle voices and upright figures, but we have gained in luxury and freedom. The emancipation of women has saved thousands from the life of hopeless apathy which the girl of the last century had to live, tied to her parents by a foolish convention until all vestige of youth and good looks had vanished. Everything she wanted to do was vetoed as being 'fast' or 'peculiar', and it took a very strong character to strike out and make a fight for liberty.

Augusta Fane

.... it takes an exceptional woman, one gifted with an overwhelmingly strong personality, irresistible charm and astonishing brains, to 'get away' with complete originality and informality of conduct in this world. Unless you are, in effect, a sort of superwoman, you had much better stay inside the safe, though boring, boundaries of social behaviour defined by the English county families.

Claude Beddington

AN INTRODUCTION

Chapter I

Brief Lives

THIS IS THE story of a woman who sold her human nature for a legend.

It tells of a girl who looked enough like a goddess to want to be one; a girl who was born more human than most, but who found herself so susceptible to the adulation she inspired that she would go to any lengths to preserve it. London called her Venus Annodomini, and that was what she wanted to stay. Nothing was too great a sacrifice: not family, nor reputation, nor friendship, nor love. Whatever held her back or did not fit she shrugged aside. The needs and the affections, that so inconveniently accompany and define humanity, she trimmed away, burnt like offerings in the blaze of her ambition. For she was brave and not afraid of difficulty.

To be a goddess of beauty and love she would endure all hardships and endure them alone – or so she thought. But once she was set on her course of myth-making she found there was no going back. In her adopted role, she was wondered at, criticized, judged and ridiculed. Nor could she drop the mask, even for a moment, to disabuse her critics. When people were jealous or sniping there was no solace, no chance to climb down from her pedestal to explain her position, no possibility of companionship or of sympathy. She had sold her humanity and she had paid the price.

Familiar though the concept is, wholesale self-invention is rare; its demands terrible. Stepping so lightly into her role, she did not see the trap that closed about her; did not guess the toll of the discipline that her fiction would demand for its maintenance. She forgot in her haste – if she ever knew – that goddesses are inscrutable and therefore misunderstood, that they are set apart from mankind and are therefore lonely. Too late she found that the centre of her invention was ever the old self which suffered the inevitable hurt, in silence and in isolation.

Not every beautiful girl feels it incumbent upon her to become a goddess. Why Lillie Langtry did was a mixture of bad luck and bad timing. There were several factors. The first was the nature of Society when Lillie made her first appearance in its midst in 1877. The second was Oscar Wilde, who saw an opportunity in her deification and grabbed it. And the third, of course, was Lillie herself, and the way that she was at the outset. Without the first two Lillie would not have thought of making a reputation out of her looks alone. She was, in those days, not vain enough. When London first knelt at her feet, she was genuinely astounded.

It is a strange city that is so happy to be fooled. What was it like this London in which Lillie found herself, and which she grew half to love and half to despise? Since the accession of Queen Victoria¹ things had begun to change. Railways were being built, making the capital more widely accessible. There was more and cleaner popular entertainment. There were exhibitions for rich and poor alike and the first organised sports. The franchise had been widened, with the passing of the Second Parliamentary Reform Act in 1867. The Cabinet had absorbed its first radical working-man^{fn1}, and Disraeli, who was Jewish, was poised again for premiership. There was money and position to be made. So, there was a rising middle class,

but however powerful the new men were they were not acceptable at Court. London was still led, and, to a degree, the country still governed, by Society, and Society was closed. Trade, actors, Jews, the professional middle classes, all were debarred. Only the aristocracy was allowed, and yet even that suffered, in its way. Its old freedoms had no place under the sombre cloud of Prince Albert's influence. He and the Queen had set a tone of sobriety and mutual affection that the fast set, with one foot still in the Regency, found hard to accept. Adultery, bawdy conversation, immodesty of dress or behaviour were all out, and piety of all kinds was in. Among the Prince Consort's more arcane rules for conduct were the avoidance of the 'foolish vanity of dandyism' and a decorous horror of the practical joke.

Then, in 1863, with Albert dead, and the Queen sunk in mourning, the Prince of Wales took a beautiful foreign wife and set up a court at Marlborough House. He was young, dissolute and full of charm, and suddenly it was not enough just to be virtuous and well-born. The Prince's restlessness, held so long under the yoke of his father's taboos, was infectious. With the first touch of this freshening breeze Society awoke, and found itself in an agony of boredom. Concessions were made. The Rothschilds, Sir Blundell Maple, the Sassoons, Sir Thomas Lipton and Colonel Astor were taken, like a tonic, and there followed a decade and a half of vain and frantic pleasure. But pleasure was not the answer. Sated, but never diverted for long, Society searched for something out of the ordinary; something that would lift it from its torpor and yet still be allowed, something that would fit within the rigid conventions and yet somehow refresh, revitalize, transcend.

When Lillie was 'discovered', Society's surprise and its adulation knew no bounds. Socially, aesthetically, carnally, she answered all its prayers. Certainly, she was beautiful. She was also poetically impoverished. Most potent of all, she was a stranger. To a world whose houses, parents,

horses and possessions were all numbered and ticketed, mystery was an intoxicating commodity. And London drank deep. For four years it gave itself up to a frenzy of devotion. Commoners, painters, aristocrats, aesthetes, all trampled each other in the scramble for the shrine, and among them happened to be Oscar Wilde.

Wilde worshipped with his eyes open and he was quick to see Lillie's potential. He drank in her unearthly beauty that was so conveniently in the Ancient Greek mould. He knew the boredom of Society, its longing for the mystery that its conventions forbade. And he saw that the suddenness of her arrival on the London scene had about it more than a touch of the godsend. There she was, as goddesses always are, with no identifiable background, without the inconvenience of parents, just in time, and quite out of the blue. But, if Society had spotted that she was a goddess, *he* could tell it which one. Mrs Langtry², he announced, 'arose from Jersey like Venus from the foam'.

In fact there was a good deal of wryness mixed with the extravagance of Wilde's claims for Lillie. In a different way, though he was only 23, he too had subjugated London. He was known to have confided in the wife of Julian Hawthorne, who confided in *Harper's Bazaar*, 'I should never have believed, had I not experienced it, how easy it is to become the most prominent figure in Society.' He knew how far Lillie had come and he probably knew too how far she had to fall.

When they became friends, in 1879, Lillie was embarking on her third season. For two years she had enjoyed an unprecedented popularity. But her star was already, though imperceptibly, on the wane. True, she was still the centre of attention, but she was hopelessly entangled both emotionally and financially. The sands were running out and she knew it. So she looked for someone who could shore up her position, for a promise that she would never be demoted - and the same luck that had

brought her to London at just the right moment now introduced her to Oscar Wilde.

Wilde, too, was treading the path from obscurity to stardom. It was he who showed Lillie how to manage and maintain her profile, he who fanned the flame when it wavered. Wilde helped her to create a persona for herself and he stripped away the last vestiges of her fear of notoriety. Most important of all, while he taught Lillie, he also taught Society at large. He showed it how to treat its divinities. His version of aesthetics – just popular enough for the uninitiated to know what they were missing, and to desire it – created the language by which Lillie was to be worshipped. Rose petals were to be strewn in her path by poets in buckskins, a single amaryllis carried to her door, armfuls of water lilies thrown into her carriage by dripping marquesses in evening dress. Meanwhile he, the acknowledged high-priest of beauty, would shout her credentials from the rooftops. He lay on her doorstep all night when composing her poem. He spent his money on flowers, which he carried in state, on foot, across London. He told the world that she was the mind of Phidias incarnate, and soon, when a lecture was given in the British Museum, it was necessary to have Lillie sitting in profile on the dais. Whatever Lillie actually was or had been was irrelevant. Wilde swathed her in his vision. By the end of the year Lillie did nothing without consulting him first – not even dress herself for a dance. He, of course, revelled in his influence, enjoying the decadent conflation of slave and master, so evident in his camp complaint to the painter Graham Robertson:

The Lily is so tiresome³ ... She *won't* do what I tell her ... I assure her that she owes it to herself and to us to drive daily through the Park dressed entirely in black in a black victoria drawn by black horses and

with 'Venus Annodomini' emblazoned on her black bonnet in dull sapphires. But she won't.

Whether or not she always obliged him, Wilde's myth of Lillie was potent. The world believed it and Lillie herself, though too sensible to believe, saw its value. After two years as Society's darling Lillie found she could not go back. She needed the adulation and the flattery. She needed the luxuries that the Court circle took so easily for granted. She was used to idleness and pleasure and vapid exchange, and she had forgotten that there was ever anything else. Venus Annodomini was born, but her birth, though it had been so easy and so unconscious, had stifled the old self from which she had sprung. For Lillie, unlike real goddesses, did have a background.

Lillie was born on the island of Jersey, in October 1853, during an autumn of freak storms. She was christened Emilie Charlotte Le Breton, but called 'Lillie' from childhood, and she was the last but one in a family of six boys. Home life, on which the foundations of all character are laid, was for her particularly happy and affectionate. The Le Bretons were close and self-sufficient. She had a liberal and educated father, and a mother who, we are told, was adoring, though semi-invisible. Liberality and invisibility resulted in a childhood that for Victorian times was remarkably free from parental control. Running with the boys in all their games, their escapades a constant test, Lillie strove to match them in endurance, in independence and in daring. Pleading weakness was never an option, and she would not be left behind. The effort of living up to her brothers left an abiding legacy. For the rest of her life she kept up, whatever the conditions and whatever the cost to herself or to others.

The idyll of her childhood was sacred to Lillie but it was soon over. By the time she was twenty-six, five of the Le

Breton boys had died. An influence that had been, as that of siblings always is, unconscious and mercurial was at once embalmed, and her childhood enshrined with their memory. Even in the disaffected twentieth century the dead are perfect. How much more so must they have been in an age when death was fashionable. After the Prince Consort's death, Queen Victoria, with a little help from Dickens, had endowed her nation with a whole aesthetics of mourning and enshrining. There were hierarchies of death in which the mother, the innocent and the serviceman came out on top. Four of the Le Breton boys had died heroes' deaths in foreign countries. They were preserved for ever in their promise, perpetually free from the wrack of failure or disillusion. This, when Lillie looked back from the emotional shipwrecks that constituted her adult life, gave her childhood a double potency. These memories belonged not just to another country but to other, and lost, lives.

We are now culturally in revolt against sentimentality and the soldier's sacrifice, but it is clear that Lillie did not have to be particularly sentimental to regard her childish happiness as talismanic. In fact she warred all her life with sentiment. Her catchphrase 'Don't let us fuss, please', delivered in 'a soft, plaintive voice', was a danger signal, not just to those around her, but also to herself. If she was to survive the slings and arrows – and she was a survivor – she must stifle her own Victorian tendencies. But memory is the most intractable of opponents and the brothers' influence lived on. In all the adult world Lillie either could not, or would not, find anyone as big as her brothers had been.

This, then, is the case from the outside, and it resulted, between the years 1879 and 1882, in a form of nervous crisis. No one could have protected Lillie against her collapse but Wilde could and did teach her the rudiments of

self-invention. When Lillie rose, like a phoenix, from the ashes of her failure, it was in Wilde's plumage.

This time Lillie made sure that she was invulnerable. She discarded her old, softer self, and all dependence on others. She pieced together all that she had learnt since her arrival in London, and she forged herself a new identity. Hardier than her mentor, she was quick to learn his lessons. Though it was at first unwelcome, she got used to the blaze of publicity that illuminated her every move. If the public saw her in a certain way she played on it, blinding them with the mirror-dazzle of the star they had imagined. She learnt that she could hide her real self behind it like an eclipse. She learnt to talk to her public while withholding what was private or precious. She learnt that charm equals power and she denied no one. She welcomed into home and hotel room the fox-faced newspapermen. She gave them champagne and cigars and her marvellous smile. She coaxed them, confided in them, and still sent them away at the end with nothing. Wilde had taught her all too well.

When Wilde's star burnt out, Lillie's genius, which was that of survival, blazed on. But survival in the public eye is a question of manipulation, and what had started as a means of defending her own privacy soon seduced her and became fascinating in its own right. Controlling the public's perceptions became her obsession, the perpetuation and perfection of Wilde's myth her driving concern.

By the time she came to compose her memoirs she had learnt that everything could be rewritten. Whatever had been sad, unworthy or unscrupulous was transformed at the touch of a pen. She could produce something that was elegant, and gracious and consistent, and the world would believe her. The myth became at once her carapace and her monument. Under it she buried every trace of character, origin, attachment or trauma that did not fit. Her errors were erased, her demons of conscience silenced. In her

determination she left us an upended Dorian Gray, the breathing woman stamped out by a painted picture.

There were only a few who saw something different. When she died, among the many obituaries written of her was one by an MP called O'Connor, which is worth quoting at length, if only because it is alone in attempting to penetrate Lillie's version of herself.

If poets read into her face⁴ visions of a soul that was in the skies, the material for these impressions was in their imagination and not in either the face or the soul of Mrs Langtry. If time and some hard experiences gave an impression of calculation to the face, it was certainly not its original suggestion when I saw her. I should say that she looked simple, frank, even business-like ... just the kind of woman who would give birth to a family of robust, courageous, eager young Britons, who would either make fortunes in the city or be pioneers of new worlds.

It is a common-sense account that has the ring of truth to it. Lillie did not have an artistic or even a particularly sensitive temperament. Like her brothers she was robust in attitude, impatient of small dignity and enjoyed the ridiculous. Perhaps, too, she would have been the mother of Empire builders had she not arrived in London when she did. She was dazzled both by the attention she was given and by the grace and breeding of its donors, but she was quick to see through it. She saw, but still she could not resist.

What is interesting about a life is the choices it makes, or has forced upon it, the combination and conflict of individual character with the constrictions of social conditions. Whatever Lillie was, and whatever she became, was informed by three things. The first was a lunatic public following. The second, a childhood memory of happiness,

which was geographically and temporally out of reach. And the last, her own ambitions which Wilde allowed her to realize but which warred with her sacred past. The choices she made as a result of these forces have been castigated by posterity. It is assumed that she was the person she pretended to be – cold, amoral, opportunistic. In truth, she dealt with her demons with gusto and originality. Her place in Society was bought, not with her body, but with the long hours and extreme pressures of life on the stage. She flouted petty conventions. She suffered loneliness, hurt and disillusionment. She knew that she had sold her soul, but she never complained, never blamed anyone else, never repined.

The road from innate character to invented self is not simple. In the case of Lillie Langtry there were many stops along the way. She was several different people before she found the one that she could sustain. The result is not a life so much as a series of lives, tried for a while and then put off, like a hat – each one distinct from the next, their demarcations highlighted by the wilful severing of previous ties or by dramatic emotional and psychological upheaval. As a whole it falls naturally into four periods. The first is her childhood on Jersey, the second her London seasons and her years of collapse. The third is her successful stage career, her racing career and the building of her fortune. The fourth is old age, vaudeville, her exile and her final, crushing, loneliness. The first is the life Lillie threw away, not because she disliked it, but because she was practical and it was over. The second is the life she dreamed of, tasted and found rank; the third the life she chose and lived successfully until age caught up with her; and the fourth is the end that she thought she could avoid, the reassertion of her humanity, in which ugliness and unhappiness and vulnerability stifled the goddess and left her empty.

Lillie's legend has been considered before, but always from its outward trappings, from the scandal and the luxury and the gossip that surrounded her. If we are to understand why she needed a myth, to look clearly at the different lives she tried and see why each was cast aside, if we are to find the woman she was, and the woman she became, and the woman who, in the end, survived, we must lift the masks that Oscar Wilde taught her to wear. We must be able to see the difference between the mask and its wearer, and understand the relationship between the two. We must assess the costs of successful self-invention, and notice their effect. To that end, this book will be the life of her mind and the story of its choices, not the historical account of her actions and activities. For the mind keeps separate time from the body. Three years of happiness can seem three days; a month of sadness an eternity. To follow her mind through its mazes of determination we must travel at its pace. We must exchange the measured chronological procession of events for the imbalance of her four lives – a leisurely childhood; a momentary glitter of social activity; a limbo of choice; and then a lifetime of consolidation, of carrying out a decision and living with its penalties.

Motivation is the key to character, and Lillie's reasons, for doing the things she did, range through panic and muddle to greed and plain wrong-thinking. She was after all seduced, and it will not be possible to exonerate her from the ultimate charges of corruption and betrayal of self. Her life is, in the richest sense, a sort of rake's progress. But it was a strange and deluded path she chose, and she was hounded all along it by the furies of her conscience, which took a deal of strangling. The genius is the only type of human whose agenda is pure enough for his motives to be incontrovertible. Lillie was not a genius. She was an ordinary woman subjected to extraordinary conditions of public acclaim and attention. In defence of what I am about to write I would argue that the electric

equilibrium of an ordinary person is something that the biographer, with his crude and inappropriate armoury of definition, is particularly unsuited to prise apart. It will be enough if, in these pages, Lillie breathes again, to be reappraised by a generation gentler than her own.

A word about sources.

Although there is no shortage of letters from the last, public part of her life, from the late 1880s on, these are mostly administrative. They concern plays she is about to perform, costumes, tour arrangements, the general management of her affairs; or they are letters to playwrights about work she has commissioned. They are gracious, professional and manipulative. They give us few insights into what was going on, if anything, behind the masks.

For the early years, the sources are scarce. There are her memoirs, which are interesting for what they obscure and distort, the few letters she did not destroy, and the few clues that are let slip by friends in their own letters or recollections. But Lillie was a master at covering her tracks. Like all of her generation who availed themselves of the *fin de siècle* loosening of morals, she was fanatically discreet. Important people like the Prince of Wales and the Marquess of Hartington had private secretaries who were responsible for their good character. Lord Esher, whose fingers were constantly occupied in the pies of others, made a positive bonfire of Society's intrigues; every personal letter or diary entry that was compromising was destroyed. Lillie did not have the services of an Esher, so she did it for herself. She made sure, having rebuilt herself, that there would be no weaknesses, nothing by which her careful invention might be unravelled.

However, two rich sources did escape loss or destruction. These are Lillie's love letters to Arthur Jones, kept in the green case she bought for him, hidden in an

attic in Jersey, and her revealing correspondence with her older confidant, Lord Wharncliffe.

[fn1](#) John Bright was the son of a Rochdale mill-worker.

LILLIE 1853-1877

Chapter II

Family and Childhood

BY THE TIME Lillie came to write her memoirs, in the 1920s, she had learnt the lessons of notoriety. The long years of mauling by socialites, pressmen and reviewers had made her wary. Generous with her time and attention, she was constantly in the newspapers, her slightest movement lit by a blaze of publicity. Even so, she had many secrets. She had found she could stand in the glare of the limelight and still shield what was private, behind her in the dark. As it was in life, so it was in her writing. In her memoirs, lovers, family, hurt and disappointment, anything that had been precious or painful, are either dressed in sunny platitudes or simply left out. But, between the lines, had she known it, she left the negative of her real self. Her careful obfuscations are an index of those things she held dear enough to protect, chief among which is her family.

Lillie's father, William Corbet Le Breton, was the Dean of Jersey. Though he was a Jerseyman himself, he had been educated in England, first at Winchester, which was then a week away by boat, and, after Winchester, at Oxford, where he had gone as a scholar to Pembroke and finished as a fellow of Exeter. The queens of the Edwardian stage¹, among whom Lillie was later to count herself, always had fathers who were the handsomest men in the world and Lillie is no exception. The Dean was vigorous and six foot tall. His bearing was said to be majestic. He had a luxuriant

head of hair, though by the time Lillie was able to remember him it was prematurely white. His complexion was ruddy, and his calf shapely. His eyes, as Lillie recalled, were blue and 'looked one through and through' (a trick he had developed for the most beautiful members of his congregation, and passed on to his daughter). Striding about his island parish in ecclesiastical gaiters and glowing health, he must have cut a picturesque figure. More importantly for his family, he was kind. Lillie quoted with evident pride that 'he was widely adored for his geniality and charm of disposition'. Certainly at Oxford he had been popular, his worst recorded excesses being a propensity for uncontrollable laughter. His friend Pyecroft remembered him, in his book *Oxford Memories*, as 'a man with the least possible command of countenance, so keen was his sense of the ridiculous'. His family hoped he might become an academic but he grew out of Oxford, and matured, after ordination, into 'an eloquent preacher, a good speaker, and with a marked talent for recitations'. Lillie always maintained that he would have made a fine actor. His susceptibility to the ridiculous never left him. Genetically tenacious, it resurfaced in his children, all seven of whom were spirited arch-debunkers.

After Oxford, William went to St Olave's in Southwark as curate. It was an unfashionable and impoverished parish. The devastation of railway construction had left hundreds of families crammed into rickety tenements. Unambitious and unworldly, William drew no social distinctions. He had no horror of the slums among which he found himself. Harnessing his energies to a youthful idealism, he worked and preached and visited, doing what little he could to relieve his parishioners in their foetid and grinding poverty. He grew happy and radical. Watching his progress from Oxford and Jersey, the old Le Bretons began to be uneasy. Though shorn of much of their former glory, they still considered themselves one of the senior families of Jersey.

An eccentric or iconoclastic descendant would not enhance their standing.

In fact it was snobbish of the Le Bretons to be so jealous of what little position they held on the island. They were never particularly distinguished. In the dim and distant past they had been seigneurs of Noirmont, one of the prettier Jersey manors, but one or two profligates had disposed of the fortune and left their descendants to depend on the Church. After that, there were bishops and judges, with one crazy aberration. This was Raoul, the Channel Island Pirate, Lillie's favourite, who took it into his head to capture Paris for himself. With five hundred retainers, he fought his way up the Seine to the gates of the city, where, unsurprisingly, the Parisians were prepared for his arrival and sent him home again. Soon after his defeat he hung up his cutlass and retired to respectability. Vaunting ambition aside, he was chiefly remembered on the island for a splendid service of communion-plate, probably stolen, which he gave to St Brelade's church in atonement. Closer in time, and of more consequence to William, was Thomas Le Breton, a distinguished scholar and fellow of Pembroke, who was bailiff of Jersey. He was William's great-uncle. Based in Oxford he was naturally in an ideal position to oversee his nephew's university career and was no doubt pleased with his ability. It was he who in the 1840s was keeping such a stern eye on the future Dean, grooming him, no doubt, for some august island position. But William resisted grooming. Later, when he compounded his faults by deciding to marry a portionless English girl, the family's unease turned into outright disapproval. William was admonished by his elders and when he failed to respond, they boycotted his wedding.

Emilie Martin, William's choice, lived with her widowed mother in Chelsea, in what the Le Bretons saw as inconveniently straitened circumstances. William, however, was not looking at her purse so much as her face. A match

for her dashing young curate, she was 'petite and lovely, with blue eyes, a perfect skin and complexion, regular features, curling auburn hair and the most fascinating smile'. Charles Kingsley, who lived next door, brought her poetry and remembered her as 'the most bewitchingly beautiful creature' he had ever seen. Both the Kingsley boys were very taken with her and there was much coming and going between the Martins' small cottage and the Kingsleys at the rectory. Charles's younger brother Henry even nursed hopes of marriage. But it was William Le Breton who, in 1842, led Emilie down the aisle of St Luke's in Chelsea. In due course the couple went back to Southwark, settled down and, within a year, their first son, Francis, was born. At about this time the position of Dean of Jersey fell vacant and William was offered the post. From his teeming London parish it must have seemed something of a sinecure and, on his father's advice, he turned it down. A radical Dean would not have been smiled on in Jersey and old Le Breton must have hoped that time and the pressures of fatherhood would bring his son round. So William pleaded youth and stayed in Southwark. His father was right. Four boys down the line, William was beginning to look for somewhere better than the smoke-bound city to bring up his boisterous children. The family welcomed the prodigal back into the fold. The parish of St Saviours was found for him and this time he accepted.

In 1859 Francis, William, Trevor and Maurice Le Breton were bundled up, with their few possessions, and Lillie's parents returned to Jersey. Here, in the rambling deanery, they were comfortable; but for Emilie, used to London, island life proved provincial and inhibiting. Their position meant they were expected to take part in the rather constricted social circuit of the Jersey élite. On Emilie, who missed the conversation and, no doubt, the attentions, of people like the Kingsleys, it quickly palled. Her parish duties were probably rather more genteel than they had

been in London but they would not at any rate have been pressing. The main change to her life would have been in her surroundings, and the leisure to enjoy them. She could ride out about the island and, like Voltaire, she could, and did, cultivate her garden. This had always been an interest. Now it became both a passion and an escape. She was losing, it seemed, not just her former involvement in her husband's affairs but sadly also his attention. This was largely because there was little of substance for the Dean to do. The agricultural labourers and peasants, to whom he might naturally have devoted his energies, though poor, were less clamorous and less questioning than their London counterparts. Time hung heavier and heavier on his hands until, in the end, this new-found ease took its toll. William tried to combat his growing restlessness by devoting himself to his books. He sat in his new study and took to learning reams of poetry. Each day he set himself lengthy targets, both English and Latin verses. To no one's surprise, poetry did little to soak up the tide of his energies. Then came the arrival of their fifth son, Clement, in 1851, and poor Emilie's charms were finally mired in motherhood. She grew dumpy and abstracted. She lost the glow that had captivated the Kingsleys, and William, casting around for occupation, compounded her aesthetic collapse by a growing compulsion for philandering. The Jersey ladies were particularly susceptible, it seems, to zeal and a stockinged leg.

There is no shortage of accounts, some more slapstick than others, of the Dean's amorous escapades. Most of them are probably false, and all are exaggerated. On one occasion, no doubt a typical Sunday, emerging from church with a beauty on each arm, he was ambushed as he reached the lych-gate. The beauties' husbands, who had presumably skipped the service in the interests of vengeance, leapt out on him, tossing their cuckold's horns and brandishing walking sticks. The Dean, unruffled

through long custom, sidestepped the blows to leave Colonel Knatchbull and Admiral de Saumarez belabouring each other, too blinded by jealousy to recognize their mistake. It is a good story. What it does reveal is that the Dean was interesting enough to be talked about. There is about most of the Le Breton family, and Lillie in particular, the feeling that to the islanders they were in some sense different and larger than life. They were, as a breed, intolerant of the island's proprieties and quick to ridicule self-importance or affectation. In return, the islanders surrounded them with an aura of technicolour apocrypha. They saw the Dean as someone who strode about in gaiters, fathering illegitimate children, and preaching vehement and disturbing sermons. They felt challenged when he imperilled his dignity by giving local crones a lift up St Saviour's hill in his carriage. Unable to see his vitality in the round, informing as it did his intellect, his liberality, his impatience of pointless decorum and his appetites, they saw only a lustful and incomprehensible eccentric. Lillie, who had her father's energy, suffered much the same fate. Later, when she was famous, they were greedy to claim her for their own but in her youth they clicked their tongues. Like her father she was first misunderstood and then mythologized, marked out as something between a witch and a hoyden. The boys were dreaded for the wildness of their escapades, for the range and daring of their practical jokes. Worst of all, the tragic death, in 1876, of Reggie, the youngest and most uncompromising of the Le Bretons, was muddled by whispers of instability and incest.

The only person who escaped the rumour-mongers was the true foreigner among them, Lillie's mother. But then Emilie was elusive. Even in her daughter's memoirs she is a shadowy figure. Perhaps, being a stranger to the island, she lacked her family's recklessness of its customs and opinions. Certainly she took a back seat, not just in the parish and the island's social round, but in her home too.