



the **MAD BOY,
LORD BERNERS,
MY GRANDMOTHER
AND ME**

Sofka Zinovieff

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THE MAD BOY, LORD BERNERS,
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About the Book

Faringdon House in Oxfordshire was the home of Lord Berners, composer, writer, painter, friend of Stravinsky and Gertrude Stein, a man renowned for his eccentricity - masks, practical jokes, a flock of multi-coloured doves - and his homosexuality. Before the war he made Faringdon an aesthete's paradise, where exquisite food was served to many of the great minds, beauties and wits of the day.

From the early thirties his companion there was Robert Heber-Percy, twenty-eight years his junior, wildly physical, unscholarly, a hothead who rode naked through the grounds, loved cocktails and nightclubs, and was known to all as the Mad Boy. If the two men made an unlikely couple, at a time when homosexuality was illegal, the addition to the household in 1942 of a pregnant Jennifer Fry, a high society girl known to be 'fast', as Robert's wife was simply astounding.

After Victoria was born the marriage soon foundered (Jennifer later married Alan Ross). Berners died in 1950, leaving Robert in charge of Faringdon, aided by a ferocious Austrian housekeeper who strove to keep the same culinary standards in a more austere age. This was the world Sofka Zinovieff, Victoria's daughter, a typical child of the sixties, first encountered at the age of seventeen. Eight years later, to her astonishment, Robert told her he was leaving her Faringdon House.

Her book about Faringdon and its people is marvellously witty and full of insight, bringing to life a vanished world and the almost fantastical people who lived in it.

About the Author

Sofka Zinovieff was born in London in 1961. She studied social anthropology at Cambridge University, then lived in Greece and Moscow. She is the author of three previous books, *Eurydice Street: A Place in Athens*, *Red Princess: A Revolutionary Life* (both Granta) and *The House on Paradise Street*. She is married to a Greek and lives in Athens.

ALSO BY SOFKA ZINOVIEFF

Eurydice Street: A Place in Athens
Red Princess: A Revolutionary Life
The House on Paradise Street

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The drawing room at Faringdon. (© Joanna Vestey)

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Cecil Beaton's portrait of Gerald, Robert, Victoria and Jennifer. (Courtesy of Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's)

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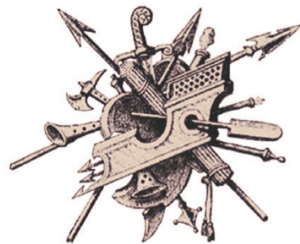
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Andy Smith digging for Gerald's ashes, helped by Jack Fox. (© author)
The author unveiling the blue plaque for Lord Berners on his Folly, 2013. (© Stephanie Jenkins, Oxfordshire Blue Plaques Board)

to Vassilis



THE MAD BOY,
LORD BERNERS,
MY GRANDMOTHER
AND ME



Sofka Zinovieff



JONATHAN CAPE

LONDON



THE DRAWING ROOM AT FARINGDON: PORTRAIT OF THE YOUNG ROBERT HEBER-PERCY BY GERALD BERNERS; PORTRAIT OF BERNERS HOLDING A LOBSTER BY GREGORIO PRIETO; JENNIFER'S FISH-SHAPED HANDBAG ON THE CHAIR, AND ONE OF THE PINK DOVES ON THE TABLE



CHAPTER ONE

A Fish-shaped Handbag



WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, my mother took me to stay with her father for the first time. I knew that she didn't really like him, that he was homosexual, and that his house was remarkable. It took less than two hours to drive to Oxfordshire from London and I was full of anticipation as we arrived in the market town of Faringdon. Heading towards the church, we passed through an old stone gateway and into a driveway that began almost sinister, darkly hedged-in like a tunnel. Then an unexpectedly dramatic vista opened up between the trees; the town was left behind and an immense stretch of green countryside was revealed. Swinging to the right, we arrived in front of the house almost before we had seen it. A four-square, grey building, it was grand but not intimidating, handsome yet playfully gracious and as enticing as a Georgian doll's house.

As we came to a halt, the gravel crunched luxuriously and I watched in wonder as a flock of doves, coloured jubilant rainbow shades of blue, green, orange, pink and mauve, fluttered up like a hallucination. They swooped a couple of showy circuits around the roof of the house before landing nearby and picking matter-of-factly at dead insects on the wheels of our car. My mother explained that these dyed birds were a tradition, started by Gerald Berners many decades before. I had gleaned a little about Lord Berners - in particular that Robert, my grandfather, had been his

boyfriend. I also knew that Berners had been an eccentric who composed music, wrote books and painted, and that he had left Faringdon House to Robert when he died. The 1930s had been their glory days together, when Gerald Berners created an aesthete's paradise at Faringdon. Exquisite food was served to many of the great minds, beauties and wits of the day. The place was awash with Mitfords, Sitwells and other visitors as diverse as Igor Stravinsky, Gertrude Stein, Salvador Dalí, H. G. Wells, Frederick Ashton and Evelyn Waugh. But my mother was not enthusiastic about the glamour or impressed by the famous old friends. She associated the place with snobbery, camp bad behaviour and a lack of love and affection. She had tried to get as far away as she could from this environment, and hadn't wanted to bring her three children into contact with it.

Robert was standing on the pillared porch under the crystal chandelier, a bullish boxer dog by his side. In his late sixties, my grandfather was wearing a well-cut dark blue suit and holding a drink and a lit cigarette in one hand. A wave of thick, metallic-grey hair swept off his forehead and unkempt eyebrows pitched at a rakish angle. I kissed him - he was my relation, even if I didn't know him. Nobody had told me then that his long-standing nickname was the Mad Boy, but his expression was obviously mischievous, his laugh a raucous bark. He must have been amused when Victoria, my thirty-five-year-old mother, and I introduced our boyfriends - hers much younger, mine much older; it was 1979. Robert turned our unlikely group into a joke for the next weekend's guests.

We were led through the hall filled with pictures and plants, and under a strange staircase that started double and then flew daringly overhead as a bridge to the first-floor landing. The drawing room ran the entire back length of the house, with one end pale, the other dark green. It was filled with light, as though we were very high up, and

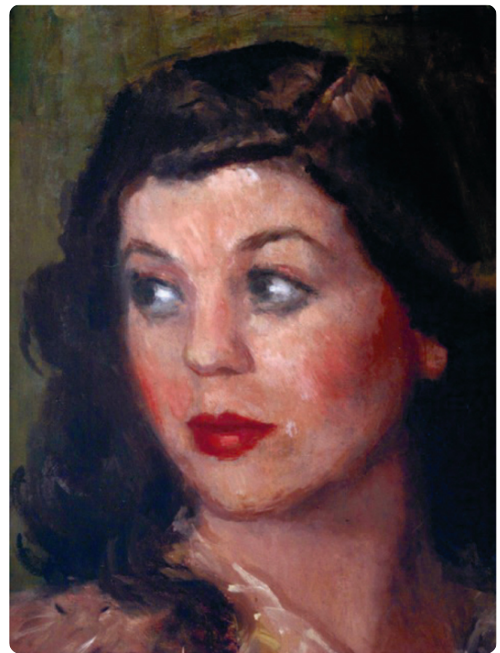
five tall windows gave on to an astounding view across the Thames Valley to the blurred horizon of the Cotswolds. To one side, a wooded valley led to a stone bridge and a lake, and to the other, cattle grazed in rough grass beyond the ha-ha.

Robert distributed champagne in pewter tankards and we took in the long room, filled with things that had mostly been there since Lord Berners's day: ornate gilt mirrors, Aubusson rugs, a painted daybed, a grand piano, antique globes, glass domes with stuffed birds and a collection of old wind-up mechanical toys. There were tall arrangements of flowers from the garden and the walls were covered with paintings - several by Corot, and some landscapes in a similarly muted style, which Robert said were by Gerald.

Lying on the seat of a gilded rococo chair was a white wicker handbag shaped like a fish and with a bamboo handle. 'That belonged to Jennifer - your grandmother,' Robert said to me, grinning. 'She forgot it when she left, and it's been there ever since.' Like so much in the house, it was hard to know whether this was a joke. A wooden sign on the front door said 'ALL HATS MUST BE REMOVED'; others in the gardens warned 'BEWARE OF THE

AGAPANTHUS' and 'ANYONE THROWING STONES AT THIS NOTICE WILL BE

PROSECUTED'. Robert also pointed out an unframed canvas propped on the top of the dado rail - an oil portrait of Jennifer by Gerald. She is gorgeous, with full red lips and brown hair swept away from rosy cheeks. Her eyes are dark and slightly protuberant, gazing inquisitively off to the side. Gerald made her pretty enough for a chocolate box,



JENNIFER PAINTED BY GERALD

but you can tell that she is not necessarily happy. Maybe she really had left in such a hurry that she forgot her bag.

A Victorian music box in the hall tinkled a song to summon us for lunch and we were placed, slightly formally, at the round table in the dining room. I was introduced to Rosa, the Austrian housekeeper who had lived there for many years and was rumoured to celebrate Hitler's birthday. With dark grey hair pulled into a tight bun, and high-boned, florid cheeks, she seemed a bit flustered, though I quickly saw that the house was her realm almost as much as Robert's. Unmarried and utterly dedicated to her work, Rosa was last to bed, shutting up the wooden shutters in the drawing room after guests had retired, and first up, picking mushrooms at dawn, laying fires (lit at the slightest hint of summer chill) and preparing substantial breakfasts. Her hands were swollen and red, but they were capable of fine work and had produced an astonishingly elegant meal for us.

My memory of that first warm July day is of cold poached fillets of sole in a horseradish-and-cream sauce and tiny vegetables from the garden that could have fitted on dolls' plates - buttery new potatoes the size of quails' eggs and green-topped carrots no larger than babies' fingers. Afterwards, there was a dark crimson summer pudding, its fruity entrails swirling into the cream on our plates. Robert was master of ceremonies, pressing an electric bell under the table to summon the next course, and requesting that the ladies get up in order of seniority and serve themselves from the sideboard, followed, when they had returned, by the men. There was some sweetish white wine and Robert smoked between courses, filling his glass ashtray, carved with racing dogs, one of which was set at each place. My new-found grandfather was full of risqué humour and provocative remarks, but he evidently liked proper etiquette as a bedrock. I assumed it had always been like that; these manners felt long-established.

In the afternoon we walked in the gardens. The eighteenth-century orangery was filled with mirrors and large oil paintings – ‘Gerald’s ancestors,’ said Robert, explaining that Lord Berners had not wanted too many of his haughty forebears in the house and had banished a number to the stables, from where some had ended up in here. There was mildew creeping up the crinoline of one of these unwanted ladies, but the general effect was so pretty it didn’t seem wrong. The place was inundated with the intoxicating scent of pale Datura flowers – the angel trumpets that have long been used for hallucinogenic love potions and poisonous witches’ brews. Outside, a small lily pond contained the bust of a whiskered Victorian gentleman submerged at the centre, ‘As if he is the captain of a ship that has sunk in the pond, and he is alone on deck, at attention for ever, with the water up to his chin.’¹ ‘General Havelock,’ explained Robert, gesturing to the humiliated military man. A pattern was already emerging: the joy of pricking pomposity, of laying traps to surprise or delight.

Robert also took us to see the Folly in his Range Rover. He drove incredibly badly, taking no notice of other drivers, then careering off the road and onto a muddy track, banging carelessly over holes while smoking and talking. We arrived at the top of a hill and slithered to a halt in front of some surprised dog-walkers. Robert pointed through the clump of pine trees to a looming brick tower. ‘Gerald built it for my twenty-first birthday,’ he announced. ‘I told him I’d have preferred a horse.’ Robert produced a key and we ascended the rickety wooden steps to a small windowed room and then through a trap-door onto the crenellated observation platform. The 360-degree view above the treetops was astonishing. We gazed out over several counties, from the Cotswolds in the north to the Berkshire Downs in the south, where the chalky outline of a vast

prehistoric creature is visible galloping across the green hills – the White Horse of Uffington.

In the early evening, we all changed for dinner. The unmarried couples were given separate quarters and I was put in the Crystal Room, which had a four-poster with glass columns and was hung with crystals and creamy chiffon. I lay on the velvet counterpane, taking in the strangeness of occupying a bed that had probably had people like Igor Stravinsky or Nancy Mitford sleeping in it. Mitford adored Gerald Berners and Faringdon, and fictionalised them in *The Pursuit of Love* as Lord Merlin and Merlinford. ‘It was a house to live in,’ she wrote, ‘not to rush out from all day to kill enemies and animals. It was suitable for a bachelor, or a married couple with one, or at most two, beautiful, clever, delicate children.’ My room was at the front of the house, looking onto swathes of green lawn, mown in perfect stripes, leading to the church. Rooks cawed from the spindly Scots pines as the light softened into evening. I had my own tiny bathroom covered in Rousseau-like murals and containing a pink bath and basin. When I lay in the scented bathwater, I seemed to be inside a bamboo hut, looking out at a jungle fantasy of tropical flowers and birds, with a friendly black face peering in and a nineteenth-century lady-explorer making her way through the foliage.



CECIL BEATON'S PORTRAIT OF GERALD, ROBERT, VICTORIA AND JENNIFER, IN THE DRAWING ROOM AT FARINGDON, 1943

At some point over that first weekend I saw the large photograph album that contained pictures from the 1930s and '40s stuck in somewhat haphazardly and without explanations or names. I didn't recognise most of the faces that stared out, though there were clearly many celebrities and beauties among them, some in bathing costumes on Italian beaches, others in evening dress at Faringdon, still

more posed whimsically up ladders or behind plants. It was obvious that they were having an exceptionally good time. It was another photograph, however - one that wasn't in the album - that really struck me. By Cecil Beaton, a regular visitor, the black-and-white picture is a formal family portrait taken at the green end of the drawing room. Jennifer is moodily glamorous in a fitted summer dress, something like Ava Gardner, with dark, styled hair and painted lips. Robert is gazing past the photographer, casually handsome in sweater and gumboots, as though just in from the stables. He is holding a small lace-clad baby. A wedding ring shows on his finger. Over to one side in the shadows is a rounded, grandfatherly figure with a gnomonic profile. Wearing a skullcap, suit and slippers, he sits on a sofa, apparently absorbed in a book. The impression is of a privileged family portrait: cut flowers, a portrait of Henry VIII, gilt-framed mirrors on dark walls, and a golden cockerel artfully placed in the foreground like a symbol of flamboyance, arrogance or perhaps infidelity.

It is a truism that photographs lie, but the extent to which this picture is misleading is staggering. It is 1943, though you wouldn't guess that it was wartime and that the house was occupied by the US Army. The 'grandfather' is Lord Berners and the father is the Mad Boy who had already been his lover for over ten years. Their differences were flagrant. Gerald was a stout, sensitive, intellectual older man with a monocle and spats, born in Victorian times. You can see he'd be at home in embassies, society salons and the creative world of theatre and ballet. Robert, on the other hand, was a wildly physical, unscholarly young hothead who was known to gallop about on his horse naked, and who preferred cocktails and nightclubs to cerebral activities. If the two men made an unlikely couple at a time when homosexuality was illegal, the addition to the household in 1942 of a pregnant Jennifer Fry was even more astounding. One of the high society *belles de nuit*

who frequented Soho's Gargoyle Club, she was known for her style and charm. David Niven said he never saw a better pair of legs among Hollywood's stars. I'd heard that once, when leaving the Ritz, her knicker elastic snapped and she simply stepped out of the underwear and left the silken scrap on the pavement. Like Robert, Jennifer was reckless and fond of sexual adventures. Even so, what could have brought her to marry a man who was wary of close relationships and evidently preferred men to women? What could it have been like to go to live in a *ménage à trois* with him and Gerald at Faringdon? In later years, Jennifer preferred not to speak about her short marriage or her time at Faringdon, though she said that Gerald was 'very kind'.

While I remember how dazzled I was by entering the strange and sparkling world my long-lost grandfather lived in, I now wonder what Robert made of me. Dressed in quirky vintage dresses and plimsolls, with waist-length hair, it must have been immediately obvious that I was from a very different background to him. After my parents' divorce when I was eleven, I lived with my father, who created the first British electronic music studio in our family house in Putney. I would get back from school to find famous pop groups of the 1970s or avant-garde composers from around Europe in our kitchen finishing a long lunch, or making their way to the basement studio. Amplified squawks and wailing sounds would emerge from computers the size of small cars and prototype synthesisers with hundreds of knobs and wires. All my childhood holidays, winter and summer, were spent on a remote Hebridean island in a house without electricity or telephone, where we read a lot, went on long walks, looked for fossils (my father had once been a geologist), and went camping on deserted islands. I was a funny mix – the kind of girl who got into trouble for being 'naughty' at school, who smoked behind the bike sheds and wore safety pins as earrings, but who also played

Schubert on the piano, read Dostoevsky and could knock out any number of pies from my Russian grandmother's cookery book.

I had no experience of country estates or of Robert's life of horses, hunting and shooting. Nor was I impressed by the fact that my grandfather was rich and privileged, the Lord of the Manor with all the obscure rights and duties that went with that position. Nevertheless, I was deeply intrigued. Entering the gates at Faringdon took me into an unfamiliar yet hugely seductive realm. It was a version of passing through the fur-coat-filled wardrobe into Narnia; there were strange creatures and outlandish delights and preoccupations. At the end of my first stay, I signed my name in the visitors' book with no idea whether I would ever visit the place again. It would have been almost impossible to imagine that within eight years Robert would be dead and I would inherit his estate.



WHEN ROBERT DIED, Faringdon seemed a place almost overwhelmed by the spirits of its past inhabitants; Gerald was its self-evident *genius loci*, but I was drawn to the mystery of what had happened to bring Robert and Jennifer together under his roof. And whether I like it or not, I have become part of their history. It has taken twenty-five years to reach the point where I wanted to tell this story, to get beyond the fish bag and the old photos. Gerald, Robert and Jennifer were all rebels of a sort, eager to escape and dismiss the old codes and expectations of their parents. None had a conventional education, but all were clever in different, sometimes surprising ways. Nevertheless, all three are in danger of being seen as caricatures. Playful and self-indulgent in ways that are no longer possible, it

would be easy to dismiss them from our more egalitarian vantage point. Like the brittle Bright Young Things of the 1920s, the Faringdon crowd could be seen as deservedly extinct - irrelevant to today's preoccupations and values. Lord Berners is easily reduced by his tag as the wealthy dilettante, an eccentric in masks, a witty host surrounded by artifice, frivolity and famous friends. Yet he was also a sensitive, introverted, hard-working artist who was prone to depression, and a former diplomat who, at a time when it was illegal, chose as his life-companion a madly sexy, disastrously unreliable man less than half his age.

Robert is in even more danger of being seen as a clown. He had no obvious achievements to his name and was never a part of Gerald's cultivated, artistic milieu. On closer examination, however, Robert was steadfastly dedicated to the estate he inherited and deeply serious about preserving and improving Gerald Berners's extraordinary legacy. Jennifer is easiest to dismiss as the glamorous party girl who was only 'passing through' during her short time at Faringdon. But in reality, she was an intelligent, captivating woman. She brought a feminine (and family) element to a male-dominated world, and by producing a daughter and acquiring a granddaughter, she allowed this change to continue down the generations.

The crazy, pleasure-seeking world of Faringdon House in the middle part of the twentieth century sometimes looks like a wild, even farcical comedy. But somebody said that comedy is usually tragedy viewed at a distance, and the triangle my grandparents formed with Gerald Berners can be seen from either end of the telescope. Whichever way it goes, passing through the gates to Faringdon is still like stepping through the looking glass - the entry point to an extraordinary world where the unexpected is as fundamental as its beauty.



CHAPTER TWO

Behind the Rocking Horse



ERALD BERNERS met Robert Heber-Percy at a house party in 1931 or '32; nobody seems quite sure. At forty-eight, Gerald was already a well-established aesthete, known in high society for his witty charm, wide-ranging intelligence and his intriguing music. He was short and solidly built, his hair only barely there, and he sported a well-clipped moustache over a sensualist's lips. A monocle, a raised eyebrow and what he claimed were 'kind eyes'. His quietly observant gaze was contrasted with a mildly flustered fluttering of the hands that reminded one friend of Lewis Carroll's White Rabbit.² Robert was twenty and was only known for behaving badly. Slim and of medium height, his muscular grace was that of an athletic risk-taker. He had a long-jawed but handsome face, dark hair and eyes, and the unrestrained appeal of a gypsy, albeit with a public-school accent. He gave the impression that anything might happen. In an era where unusual pets were fashionable - lemurs or lions that might bite you or shred your curtains, but which were 'entertaining' - Robert had the allure and potential danger of a young leopard. Gerald liked to be amused, and this mad boy was irresistible.

The two men, so different in age, appearance and interests, were both staying with Sir Michael Duff in North Wales. Aged twenty-four, Michael had known Robert since childhood and, like him, was to marry twice, although he

was believed to favour relationships with men.

Unconventional, lanky and a stammerer, Michael was the owner of the huge Vaynol estate, which, despite its remoteness, was famous for its luxury and its outrageous parties. In the rhododendron-filled park, a collection of exotic animals, including a giraffe and a rhinoceros, gathered at the lake, miserable in the damp, Welsh cold. The house was decorated in eau de Nil, white, gold and pink by the fashionable Syrie Maugham, and the bedrooms, which slept thirty guests, all had the unusually lavish addition of their own bathroom.³ Gerald had long been a friend of Lady Juliet Duff, Michael's tall, somewhat cold mother, and as a consequence Michael knew many of the younger men who formed part of Gerald's circle, such as Cecil Beaton and Peter Watson. A lifelong worshipper of the royal family, Michael's party piece was cross-dressing as Queen Mary, encouraging his butler to play along and address him as 'your Majesty'.

What passed between Gerald and Robert that first time at Vaynol is unknown. Robert somehow mistook the older man for a South African gold magnate. 'Then people told me he knew about art.'⁴ Almost certainly he would have made him laugh with his knowing jokes and ruthless gossip. Though Gerald was a wonderful friend to many people, men and women, he had never been known to have an intimate relationship with anyone. He may, of course, have been skilful in his secrecy; certainly it would seem unlikely for an emotional, passionate man to have reached his age without a love affair of some sort. Robert, on the other hand, was highly sexual, and, though he preferred men, also had periodic involvements with women. Though there is no record of how the two men reacted to one another, it was clearly a catalytic point in both their lives. Those who knew Gerald described it as a *coup de foudre*. Not long after their meeting, they started living together.