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Talking to the old inhabitants of Wheathampstead in 1956

by Daphne Grierson (1909 - 1994)

Transcribed by **John Wilson**, Lamer Lodge, between 1987 and 2002

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CHAPTER 8. ANOTHER KIND OF LIFE - 1

[Mrs Gape & Mrs Lindley]

You go up the drive and it is all very tidy and well-kept. Trees and shrubs surround the House from whichever way you approach. To the left, by the bluebell wood, is the little green with its white posts, surrounded by a few cottages which Sir H.L. had rebuilt as they were in such bad condition: and, standing rather to one side, the small house which looks as though it might be the Agent's. And, close on the green with cedar trees at the door and the family vault outside, the red brick church with its tiny wooden steeple in one corner. Practically a **private chapel** for the House and cottages; about as big as the drawing-room which was always used for dancing.

How warm it is in the church, and dark after the bright morning! It is some minutes, perhaps, before you notice the two **graceful chandeliers** and wonder where they came from: and the **brass rail** for holding umbrellas - whose umbrellas? - and for how many? - and what sort of umbrellas?; and the **white marble font**, although you don't immediately recognise it as a font, consisting of a sculptured scallop shell in the arms of the kneeling figure of a little girl, with her sister standing behind. Of course they are sisters, there is a strong likeness. Funny that their hair is cut so short; it looks quite modern, and so do their white marble nightgowns.

It was Lady L. who had the sculpture done, because of the day she sent **Frances** (her unofficially adopted daughter) to visit one of the cottages where her employee's wife had a new baby. Lady L. had intended to go herself but did not feel quite well enough that afternoon, and so Frances took the soup and made the felicitations. She came back with the news that the mother had walked, carrying the baby aged only a week or ten days, all the way to St Albans and back in order to have it christened and herself churched, and Lady L. was so horrified at this that she at once commissioned **Brock** to design a font for the estate Church, containing the figures of her own two daughters who had both died very young.

Just above the font there are two marble plaques on the wall. Frances declares that she was never the slightest bit of good at drawing or painting, but Lady L., who although gentle, childlike and reserved, could show an iron determination on occasions - Lady L. persuaded her and in the end she consented to make a drawing for one of the plaques: **a heart with violets and violet leaves surrounding it**, as the memorial was to Sir H.L. himself and he had always worn violets in his buttonhole.

The L.s had had four children, a son who lived only a few hours, and three daughters; two daughters had caught scarlet fever from some children from St Albans who had come up to the House to sing May Day songs. Both little girls had been very ill and only one recovered: and then the third daughter died tragically later of diphtheria. "There was, you understand," Frances says, "no way at that time of isolating those who lived in crowded conditions". And it was, of course, in memory of their children that the **L.s had built and endowed the hospital at St Albans known as "The Sisters"**.

The remaining daughter - the eldest - **Sybil**, became Frances' best friend. She was very beautiful and had immense charm and energy; she was good at anything she cared to put her mind to, and could rise to anything expected of her. She would suddenly express a wish to have a day's hunting, and would do so, coming back deadbeat, and perhaps not do it again for two or three years. At breakfast she would say to her mother, "What are we doing today? Mother, what can we do today? Mother, you're not listening", eagerly, over and over again. She was married twice, was extremely flirtatious and had many admirers.

So, here you are, as Frances talks, taken right into the House, which is away from the Church and half-hidden behind the trees. It is a white house, most comfortable and welcoming: much built onto at different times and according to different tastes, but mainly to give more sun to the living rooms. There is no one about this morning except for two or three men making a bonfire of undergrowth. Somewhere, through there, they used to play lawn tennis; do you fancy that you catch a glimpse through the trees of white figures moving about in the summer sun and hear a voice in the distance calling out the score?

There were invariably guests at the House and people staying every weekend. Sir H.L. being a **Member of Parliament**, these house-parties were sometimes political; sometimes they were specially for people interested in **racing**, as he had a breeding stud on the estate and a **training stable at Newmarket**. He never had a Derby winner but had several good wins and he adored his horses. Frances recalls going into the Paddock with him one day when his horse had come in first; everyone was smiling happily but Sir H., looking stern, went straight up to the jockey and said to him, "You beat my horse and you shall never ride for me again." Lady L. was not at all interested in racing and had been known to sit reading a book in the stand at **Goodwood**, but she always went when there was a party to take and enjoyed the social side of it. Sometimes the weekend parties were exclusively for young people; sometimes all these elements were mixed.

The parties **began on Friday** with guests arriving as a rule after tea; probably they were met at St Albans station by the "bus" with its pair of horses driven by **Godden, the head coachman**. Godden had been guard on the old Times coach which ran between London and Brighton, and was pastmaster on the coach-horn. Guests were shown their rooms at about half-past six and did not appear again until dinner. Local guests were often asked to swell the party for the evening and then dinner took place at two round tables, Sir H. presiding at one and Lady L. at the other. As it was an occasion there was always **an entree** as well as the usual **soup, fish, joint** (or poultry or game), **savoury** and **dessert**. After dinner there would perhaps be a **little music**; Lady L., who

had a pretty voice, would be persuaded to sing. Or there would be guessing games and writing games, or often the men would go off to the **billiard room** and the ladies would talk or **play cards** - **bezique** was rather the fashion then. If it was a young party the smaller drawing room would have been used before and after dinner and the larger room prepared for **dancing**, with furniture pushed back and rugs rolled up. **Waltzes and polkas** were danced, **a pianist having been hired** for the evening. If more young folk had been asked in to swell the numbers, three instrumentalists would be provided.

Lancers and quadrilles were kept for more formal dances. And of course the **Hunt Club ball in St Albans** was the most important occasion for a young party. All the big houses in the neighbourhood took parties, Frances remembers, and often there was a private dance given on the following night in order that the same parties could meet again. And always, the weather permitting, **hounds met in St Albans market** place on the morning after. But it is difficult to realise how very precisely this particular Ball was conducted: if anyone applied for a ticket who was not known or not considered suitable they were politely told that they must obtain a voucher from a member of the Committee. The time has never been forgotten when one name was not accepted for a voucher - exactly why could only be guessed at in whispers.

The Ball was organised by a men's committee, and on the morning of the day plants and evergreens were sent in from neighbouring houses and the ladies of some of the house-parties came to help decorate the sitting-out rooms. "Just like they do today, I believe", Frances says, "and of course we would all talk about the Ball and who would be there, and perhaps we would be asked to keep dances free..."

Lady L. always engaged **two hairdressers** for the evening of the **Hunt Ball** and they would arrive from **London** soon after tea. One, **M. Dupont**, dressed the heads of the married ladies and his assistant (also French) helped the girls of the house-party. Once the assistant, waxing enthusiastic over Frances' long hair, arranged it, she says, in a peculiarly unbecoming heavy kind of Vienna roll up the back of her head. Poor Frances. Torn between the agony of having to appear looking what she describes as a perfect fright, and anxiety not to hurt the assistant's feelings, she was completely dismayed. Luckily M. Dupont, coming in to inspect, threw up his hands in horror - sweeping Frances into the chair, tearing down the Vienna roll, scattering pins, he quickly rearranged things more becomingly, while the unlucky assistant stood by, mopping his face with a silk handkerchief, "These young ladies 'airs 'ave made me quite 'ot!".

Perhaps there was no local ball, however, to entertain weekend guests, and for the evenings of an ordinary houseparty impromptu **fancy-dress** would be ordered for dinner. Someone once disguised herself as **Trilby**, in the estate fireman's tunic, with her hair made straight and tucked inside the collar. Someone else, as **Little Billee**, accompanied her entry into the drawing-room. A **Turkish lady with a yashmak and flimsy trousers** contrived out of a discarded muslin gown, was once **Sybil's** choice; the fact that the trousers were long and full did not, and was not meant to detract from the fact that a lady wearing trousers was rather **risque**.

On Saturdays everyone did what they liked. After **breakfast** - an enormous spread of every conceivable kind of dish including **filleted sole and mutton cutlets, with cold ham and pork pie** on a side-table - guests would be offered different occupations according to the time of year. Perhaps there was **shooting**, or a near **meet of the hounds**, and anyone wishing to hunt would have been provided with a horse. In summer for certain there would be tennis, with probably a

tennis tournament fixed up suddenly for the afternoon and a hurried "scoot" into St Albans for prizes.

Saturday evening was the highlight of the weekend with the greatest number for dinner. On Sunday, as the church shared a vicar with a nearby parish, there was no Service until the afternoon, so the morning was free, and it was then that everyone was more or less expected to go round the **Stud**, particularly the foals, speculating as to possible winners. All the girls of the house-party had to show their good manners by attending **Church**: "In the hall by ten minutes to three, girls" Sir H would say after luncheon; and wet or fine at ten to three the party would set off down the drive on foot, as on **no account would the carriage be taken out on Sunday**. Amidst all this social life which went on constantly, with frequent stayings away in other houses and **much of the summer spent in London**, Lady L., after hearing of some piece of scandal from a London newspaper, would look up quietly at her daughter's friend: "Fanny, dear, we're nice".

But now for a special incident. Lady L. had said, "I've a note which really must go to the Bank this morning; will you two girls take the pony-cart into St Albans for me?" So Sybil and Frances drove together and on arrival in St Albans (very near the corner of Holywell Hill and the High Street, only the Bank was **Marten Part** then instead of **Barclays**) Frances held the reins while Sybil went inside. Soon Frances was aware of a young man on horseback looking at her rather intently in passing; what is more, he made several detours on his horse in order to take closer looks. She was most embarrassed and sat up very straight and as circumspectly as possible, never raising her eyes. When Sybil emerged she said "What on earth have you been doing? I've had a dreadful time with a most impertinent young man staring at me. "What was he like? Do tell me", "I'm sure I've no idea as I only looked over in his direction".

They proceeded down St Peter's Street, not at all the noisy crowd of traffic and pedestrians that it is today, but quiet and almost deserted with beautiful irregular rows of Georgian houses on either side. Suddenly, out of a little shop called **Gooch which sold guns**, came the young man, now on foot and accompanied by a friend. Frances instantly recognises him and Sybil's eyes grow wider than ever. "Good gracious, if it isn't ---! And --- with him!" And they drive home at increased speed. Meanwhile the young man, having questioned his companion with no satisfaction, got his horse out again and rode over to the house of some friends of his who knew Sybil. There he asks one of the daughters of the family "who, can she possibly tell him, is the tall fair girl driving with Miss L. in the pony-cart?" But it might be any of three tall fair girls staying with the L.s at that moment. "Well, have some tennis, do, and ask them over". And so it turned out, and to tennis and tea went the girls from the House.

The young man was playing in a set when they arrived and Frances found herself borne off to practise **archery** with another man. "I was bored to distraction, particularly as I knew that we would be obliged to leave immediately after tea, as I had special instructions from Sir H. not to keep the carriage waiting, which was to meet him at the station after calling for us". In fact the time came to go with still no chance of the hoped-for introduction. But - as usual - Sybil was nowhere to be found and at this moment, as Frances is waiting distractedly in the carriage, the young man comes forward, noticing her dismay and pretending to arrange the dust-covers round her feet, asks if he can help. She tells him her predicament; he says, "I will find her for you", and so it was. "The first", adds Frances, "of a million kind actions my husband did for me."

And here is the photograph: two young girls - it is roughly the turn of the century - are seated on the edges of a studio-contrived flight of stone steps and leaning slightly towards one another, against a classic back-cloth of urn, blurred landscape and rather stormy sky, with a fur rug at their

feet. One is in satin, the other in something more flimsy and lace-edged. Both are **tight-waisted, low-necked, balloon-sleeved, scarved and gloved**. Their **hair is dressed high and waved** with the fashionable studied carelessness, and while one wears a **small tiara** round her bun on top, the other has a handle of hair up the back of her head and a fringe of curls. Both youthful faces have the faraway look of the obediently-held pose, but one has more purpose in its expression than the other and clearly less inclination to laugh.

"Yes, there is no doubt", Frances goes on after a pause, putting away the photo-graph again, "there was a very great gap between the sort of life we led and the lives of the people in the cottages. But, in spite of the great contrasts and the poverty, there was so much in those other lives which you don't seem to find today; I mean important things were valued more. There was home, cleanliness, simplicity, contentment." "Every night", says an old friend of Frances', now living in St Allbans - someone who knew all the hardships of the other sort of life in her youth - **"every night we were, each of us children, washed all over and made to kneel at our mother's knee to say our prayers."**

"And there was no envy. If you were in Service you were well looked after, and in return you took great pride in your employers; they became your own family. All long-standing servants were lifelong friends, without fear or favour, and yet without familiarity. "For instance, an old housemaid surprised Frances one day shortly before she retired by saying, "I hope you don't mind, Madam, but I've taken the liberty of leaving you a small legacy in my will. It would be my wish, if I may say so, that you use it to buy something to remember me by." The small legacy turned out to be £200, saved probably, bit by bit out of what seem today ridiculously low wages.

Naturally to keep an establishment like the House running smoothly as well as a house in London, a **good many servants were needed** and the L.s employed a **Housekeeper, a Cook, Kitchen-maids, five house-maids and an Odd Man, besides Nursery maids and numerous outside staff** to cope with the garden, stables, shooting and Stud; and a private laundry as well as a private forge. Some of the servants stayed permanently in the country and some lived in the cottages round the green, while others accompanied the family to and from London, where there was a resident staff.

Every year during the week following the Hunt Ball **the servants' ball** took place at the House. For this relations or old friends of the family stayed on specially to help and join in, and the dresses of the younger maids were taken great interest in by the girls of the house-party. Everybody assembled in the big drawing-room and the first dance, always a **Quadrille, was led off by Sir H. and the Housekeeper, and the Butler with Lady L.** After a few dances the family left and looked after themselves for the rest of the evening, and later the dancers all sat down to a huge supper in the servants' hall which Lady L. had taken great care to supervise beforehand.

One night, when for some reason a hired cook had had to replace the regular one, Sir H. said to Frances early in the evening, "Come and see how the supper looks", and to their horror the tables, instead of being covered with food, were ready laid with glasses, knives and forks and so on, but not a thing to eat. The cook was nowhere to be found and the kitchenmaids (in their ball dresses) were too scared when questioned to reveal that she was in her room, very drunk. There was nothing for it. **"Fred and the waggonette"** as in every domestic emergency, were called for and sent into St Albans. Meanwhile different shops were telephoned, even at that late hour, and eventually vast quantities of prepared food arrived and were set out by anyone willing to help. "I can see Sir H. now", says Frances, "standing there cutting up a huge ham in his white gloves." But all was well and the evening a greater success for its bad start.

