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MISS BRITON'S LADY-COMPANION

NOT EVERY MAN remembers his mother with deep affection. A good many have had little cause to do so. Yet of this unfortunate minority some take one road, some another. Weaklings blame their moral lapses or their ill success in life on neglectful, selfish or tyrannical mothers. Others, the noble hearted, learn to bear them no rancour, to stand on their own feet and find love elsewhere. I remember being puzzled as a child by a verse in Hymns Ancient and Modern.

Can a woman's tender care

Cease towards the child she bare?

Yea, she may forgetful be --

Yet will I remember Thee.

The idea that any mother could possibly behave unkindly to her own child surprised me -- I was one of the luckier ones.

My respect for Winston Churchill, whom I first met in 1915 and with whom I exchanged occasional letters until the 'Forties, rose enormously after his death. I then read for the first time of the almost brutal contempt shown him, as a mentally retarded boy with a cleft palate, by his beautiful Jerome mother. And the Encyclopaedia supplied the reason both for his physical abnormality and for her unmaternal attitude. His father, Lord Randolph Churchill, had died from general paralysis of the insane. Every doctor now knows what disease causes this fearful condition, and what effect it often has on the patient's children; one can feel only the utmost sympathy with an innocent wife and mother who suffered so much. And although Winston had many faults and, when younger, often acted with great irresponsibility, who can fail to admire the strength of his resolve never to brood revengefully, always to champion the deprived and oppressed? It was not, indeed, until his middle thirties that a chance medical discovery cleared his blood of the inherited taint, and set him at last on an even keel.

One can never tell. Who has not seen splendid talented children born from base soulless stock, and splendid parents cursed with worthless and evil children? Psychologists are baffled by the paradox. In the case of evil children, they usually accuse the mothers either of weaning them too early, or of weaning them too late, or of bottle-feeding them, or of beating them for their faults, or of not beating them at all.

Or even of pre-natal misconduct. But it is never quite so simple. Heredity, which is as powerful a factor as environment, has become far too complex a subject for even a gifted psychologist to lay down the law about. I prefer to think that a child is born either with or without nobility of heart; and that although a mother may either foster or discourage this gift, she cannot be held responsible for its absence. And that goes for fathers as well. I write as a father of eight wholly dissimilar children. And as the eighth of a family of ten, also wholly dissimilar. But I give my mother full marks for nobility of heart and although, being extremely puritanical, she often disapproved deeply of my actions, I never resented her attitude in the least -- nor, for that matter, felt that I deserved it.

This is her story. In 1848, a year of revolution throughout Europe, which sent independent-minded citizens, especially Germans, flocking for refuge to the United States, my grandfather, a Bavarian medical student, was expelled from his Prussian university for protesting against the trial for high treason of a young Jewish socialist named Karl Marx who had married into the Prussian aristocracy. My grandfather thereupon left Germany and travelled all around the Mediterranean. According to my mother, he bathed on one occasion in the Dead Sea where the salty slime on his skin so disgusted him that he mounted his horse and rode fifty miles north to the Jordan valley where he washed himself clean. In Spain he was one of the first passengers in the newly-constructed railway from Madrid to Toledo; it had caused great resentment among the muleteers. Finding their livelihood threatened they would lay tree trunks across the track by night and having forced the train to stop, would rob and terrorize the passengers.

My grandfather was seated in a compartment opposite an English colonel come to visit the battlefields of the Peninsular War, throughout which he had fought as a young subaltern. Suddenly the train stopped with a bump, shots rang out, followed by curses, screams, prayers and a general hullabaloo. The colonel slowly laid down his copy of The Times, reached for his pistol, primed and cocked it and then returned impassively to his reading. My grandfather, much impressed, thought: 'What a wonderful race! I must go to England and complete my medical education there.'

This he did, I believe at St Thomas's Hospital, and presently volunteered as a surgeon for the Crimean War, where he worked for some months with Florence Nightingale in a nightmare hospital at Scutari.

Just before sailing he had married a Danish girl, the orphan daughter of Tiarks, the Greenwich astronomer, but my mother, his first child, was not born until the war had ended. They returned together to Germany, where he presently became Professor of Medicine at Munich University and, so far as I know, the first doctor in Europe to supply his hospital with tubercle-free milk; which he did by buying a farm and personally testing his herd of sixty cows. He had learned about infected food and drink at Scutari.

My mother, born in London at the house of a Miss Briton, my grandmother's guardian, was soon the most responsible member of a huge family of boys and girls, and appointed by her father to keep them clean and in good order -- which the scared, gentle little Dane, her mother, was incapable of doing. She took the job seriously and soon earned the nickname of 'Scrubbing-brush'. My uncles and aunts all turned out good citizens but, though later expressing their gratitude to her, were not altogether sorry when she was suddenly whisked off to London. That was the year 1873.

The reason given was that Miss Briton, now decrepit and lonely, needed a cheerful lady-companion; but in effect my mother had been banished from Munich for her own good. The then Bavarian Prime Minister -- or so I later heard from an aunt -- had fallen in love with her at a ball. Though rich, handsome, noble, virtuous and popular, he had two great disadvantages: he was far too old for her, and he was a Roman Catholic. My impression is that her heart responded, but that the match could not possibly be accepted by so Protestant a family as hers. Marriage would mean Catholic grandchildren, which in turn would mean that the religious unity of the family would be broken. The Prime Minister could not very well pursue her to London; nor would Miss Briton have admitted him across her threshold had he done so.

Here the story grows rather grim. My mother knew where her duty lay and always followed it, by however thorny a path. She felt bound to obey her experienced and powerful father, and at the same time to pay the debt of love that her mother owed Miss Briton. So she became not only lady-companion but cook-housekeeper, secretary and nurse to an old recluse living in a tall, cold, inconvenient late-Georgian house in Kensington. Miss Briton, of whose family I know nothing except that they manufactured lead soldiers, suffered from a delusion of extreme poverty. My mother had to sleep on a straw mattress in an iron bed next door to her, and all other rooms but kitchen, toilet, cellar and living room were kept locked up. She was given so minute a housekeeping allowance that she always had to buy the poorest cuts of meat and the cheapest fruit and vegetables; and to practise the most rigid economy with coal. She learned never to throw away a crust, always to scrub potatoes rather than peel them, to deny herself all finery and never even indulge in scented soap. Nor had she any friends of her own age, if only because she could not offer a fair exchange of hospitality with them. Her one solace was a piano.

Her brothers and sisters in Bavaria grew up, ate well, drank well, made scores of friends, were taken on tours to the picture galleries of Italy, and to Vienna for the Opera, attended the best concerts, married, had children. But she missed everything and spent her evenings playing bezique with Miss Briton, who got so upset when she lost that my mother had to bend her conscience, just a little, by cheating herself and allowing Miss Briton the victory. Apart from reading 'improving' books from a library -- I don't think she ever read a novel in her life, except in old age to please my father -- and occasionally visiting the museums in the neighbourhood, she had no real life at all.

She soon lost all traces of her German accent, though Miss Briton, who had been born in the reign of George III taught her a very old-fashioned form of English; so that she used, I remember, to pronounce 'gas' as 'gahs' and 'soot' as 'sutt'.

If she had been sacrificed in this way at the age of twenty-five or so, when she knew more about the world, she would doubtless have taken a more independent line, asking to be relieved at her post, occasionally at least, by one of her four sisters. She would also have insisted on more help in the house and a higher standard of living. But no friend appeared to fight her battles for her, and at least she was not a nun. So she prayed, suffered, hoped and did her duty cheerfully.

One morning, many years later, in the 1880s, Miss Briton, who liked to be called 'Granny', sighed: 'Dear Amy, I fear that I may have no more money left in the bank after this grievous expense of mending the broken water-pipes. Pray, my dear, set my mind at rest! I do not, as you know, like to trouble you with money matters but today, I beg you, go to my room -- here is the key of my writing desk -- for I wish you to see what money we have left, if any. It would be a great inconvenience if we had to dismiss the scrubbing-woman.'

Half an hour later, after going through piles of quarterly and annual bank-statements, my mother came down in a daze, saying: 'Granny, only imagine! You are RICH! Read these!'

Yes, she was worth over one hundred thousand pounds, which today would have the purchasing value of perhaps five million dollars.

'This is indeed most welcome news, Amy. If the bank has made no error, we can now retain the scrubbing-woman. And, as you know, you are my sole heiress when I come to die.'

So my mother bought herself another blanket and no longer lived wholly on porridge, parsnips and scrag-end of mutton as heretofore, and a year later Miss Briton died in her sleep. That was the year 1890, when a woman was reckoned a 'wall-flower' at the age of twenty-seven and an 'old maid' by thirty-two. Being now nearly thirty-six, my mother decided to go to India as a medical missionary. She did her training and was on the point of booking a one-way passage by the P & O when --

I should have mentioned that as inheritrix of this huge fortune my mother had decided that she might prove a better missionary if she disburdened herself a little -- like the loaded camel in the Gospel parable which could not be led through the Needle's Eye gate at Jerusalem without removal of its panniers. But she was not altogether imprudent. Though dividing her inheritance in five equal parts, one of which she gave to each of her four married sisters, she kept one for an emergency.

The emergency came almost at once. My mother's family, the von Rankes, were already connected with the Anglo-Irish Graves family. Her learned granduncle, Leopold von Ranke, since famous as the 'Father of Modern History' because the first historian to insist 'on what had actually happened, rather than what he would have liked to have happened' -- as my mother put it to me very clearly -- had to the surprise of both nations married the beautiful Clarissa Graves, a Reigning Toast of Dublin. So it was natural enough for my mother to meet Clarissa's nephew, Alfred Perceval Graves, already well known as a song writer. He had written 'Father O'Flynn', 'Trotting to the Fair', 'The Jug of Punch' and many other late Victorian favourites -- now too often regarded as folk-songs, though the copyright will remain in our family until the year 1985 -- but, being a bad business man, made no money from them. His wife had recently died and he was now a struggling Government Inspector of Schools in the West of England.

I do not know whether her family and his arranged the marriage in contemporary style, but certainly both my mother and my father agreed to its convenience. He was active, sprightly, good-looking and the son of an Irish bishop. She was tall, strong, beautiful, with an unlined face and black hair that did not turn grey for another half-century. And had a great many wifely talents. So she consulted her conscience, which told her that God had protected her against a previous unwise and irreligious marriage, and that the Indians were less deserving than this sad, charming, talented Protestant widower -- only nine years older than herself -- with five high-spirited quarrelsome children in need of a new mother's care. So the wedding took place soon afterwards.

At first, to judge from a diary which has survived, life was astonishing and difficult. Too many things happened, too many people came calling. My mother who did not expect at so advanced an age -- she was now thirty-six -- to have children, had never in her life shared a double bed with anyone or even, it seems, been taught the facts of life. The five orphans naturally resented her taking the place of their wonderful, joking Irish mother, and her German Scrubbing-brush methods were far from suitable for Irish children, two of them red-haired. Moreover my father, for all his respect and affection for my mother, was still in love with Janey Cooper, his first wife about whom he used to talk in his sleep. Which gave my mother nightmare dreams about meeting Janey in Heaven where although there is 'no marrying or giving in marriage' such encounters could not help being awkward for wives unable to forget earthly monogamic principles.

And Janey had always kept him in order by constant playful teasing, which was a technique wholly beyond my mother's knowledge or powers. She had been trained to obey the Head of the House, without question or evasion; which was not the best thing for his character. They never bickered but mainly because, though my father was a hot-tempered man, it takes two to make a quarrel and at worst she looked pained and disappointed.

For awhile she still had nothing of her own, except responsibilities and the small fortune which she now allowed him to draw on for his children's education. She soon won their gratitude by helping them with homework and inviting their friends to stay. And then at the age of thirty-seven she had a child ! A girl.

I am sorry to say that my mother did not greatly value daughters, having been one herself. Her view was: 'girl babies are quite useful to practise on' as her mother had told her. Boys were all that really counted in God's eyes -- could she hope for another child? She could. But it was another girl -- to practise on!

And then the most wonderful possible thing happened to her. She had a boy. Which incidentally was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. I unashamedly adore life. Nor was this the end of her triumphs. She seemed to get younger and younger, happier and happier, and bore my father two more sons, the last when she was forty-nine. And no more daughters, since practice had by now made her perfect.

They built a big house near London, where my father was now working, and another in North Wales where he had once taken her for a holiday by the sea. Stumbling on a peculiarly romantic spot near Harlech Castle she told my father: 'Alfred, this is beautiful beyond expression. I should like to die here.'

'Why not live here instead?' he countered impulsively in her own practical language.

So they bought the site and built a big house on it, and when my father retired, sold the London house and went to live there. It was our holiday heaven, with a sandy beach, wild hills, blackberries, raspberries, blueberries, flowers, mushrooms, adventures. For as we grew older, she allowed us more liberty, though continuing as religious as ever and pleading with us to take no risks in rock-climbing. 'I do not like broken children any more than you like broken toys.'

On a picnic one day she began singing a German song, to the effect that the person whom God wishes especially to bless He sends out into the wide, wide world. And afterwards, looking around us in pure joy, she said, 'You can't think how fortunate I feel, my darling children... There was a man once, a Frenchman, who died of grief because he could never become a mother.'

We had family prayers every morning, and as a rule went to church twice every Sunday, which was the day when we were forbidden to play cards or other games of chance. I remember persuading her to let us play charades on Sunday evenings provided that the scenes were wholly Biblical. None of us drank or smoked or had friends of the opposite sex until we were grown up. Yet somehow we never felt deprived, which is surprising when I look around me today. She trusted that eventually we should all meet together in God's glorious heaven, long after her own death. As an

equally sincere salvationist, I asked her innocently once: 'Mother, when you die, will you leave me any money?' 'Yes, of course, darling.' 'Enough to buy a bicycle?' 'Yes, I hope so, but surely you would prefer having me to having a bicycle?' 'Well, but you'll be having a marvellous time in God's glorious Heaven, and I could ride the bicycle to put flowers on your grave.'

My mother (and this is no criticism of her) did not know how to dress, having been warned as a girl never to indulge female vanity and as a young woman having been unable, under Miss Briton, to experiment in fancy clothes. I only once remember her buying herself a present, and that was when I was about twelve and she showed me an antique shop where I could spend some birthday money on coins for my coin collection. There she found a gold Irish 'Tara' brooch, which she bought 'to please your father'. It was a bargain at only a trifle more than its intrinsic value in metal, and she wore it for the rest of her life almost every day. In those years only royalty, actresses or prostitutes 'made up their faces'; 'rouge' was a dirty word; and my mother actually spoilt her complexion by constant washing with carbolic soap. She also lacked any sense of humour except the simplest and most innocuous kind; but again this is no criticism of her. True humour is based on multiple meanings, and on a recognition that often only a hair's breadth of truth separates complete opposites. To her white was white, black was black and every word, except parables and metaphors, must be taken literally. She did not understand irony, sarcasm, or jokes about other people's misfortunes.

She was, however, a heroine in times of emergency. One day when we asked her whether she had ever ridden in a railway truck, she admitted that, yes, once after a severe railway accident she had helped in the rescue work, had administered first-aid, and taken the injured to hospital in a coal-truck. But our most splendid recollection was when we were very young, in the days before domestic electric light. At supper one evening, the kerosene table-lamp suddenly flared up. The screw that worked the wick had failed and a black pillar of smoke soon clouded the room. My father and elder brothers watched aghast, but my mother rose and said simply to my half-sister Susan: 'Susan, open that door if you please, and then the door into the drawing-room, and then the drawing-room door into the garden. Make haste!' She took up the flaming lamp, protecting her hands with a table napkin, and followed Susan through the hall, through the drawing-room, and into the garden where she set the lamp down on a path. Five seconds later it exploded. Not long afterwards she went to stay with a sister at Zurich, but in fact for a newly-invented throat operation there, with old-fashioned anaesthetics, insufficient analgesics, and only one chance in four of recovery. Yet she did not allow us to guess her anguish when she cheerfully kissed us goodbye. Later we learned that she had sustained herself with the hymn:

Faint not nor fear; His arms are near,

He faileth not, and thou art dear.

After that, all went well with her and us until, soon after my nineteenth birthday, the First World War broke out. The news dismayed my mother. She could not at first believe that the Germans could really have invaded Belgium in breach of a sacred treaty. 'My people must have gone mad,' she cried. I had just left school and would have gone on to Oxford University that autumn, but instead volunteered for the Royal Welch Fusiliers, our local regiment. Within a few months I found myself a young officer in trenches that faced Bavarian troops; Were my uncles and cousins among them? This fratricidal situation was so horrible that for a while my mother broke down and lost her faith in God. How could He allow her to suffer so? For which, a year later, her punishment was a letter from my Colonel, after our battalion had lost over two-thirds of its strength at High Wood, to the effect that I had fought very gallantly but had died of wounds, and that the doctor believed me to have suffered very little pain.

So she opened her heart to God with the Biblical: 'The Lord hath given, the Lord hath taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.' And the next thing was a letter from my Aunt Susan -- Janey's sister, who lived in France and had noticed my name on a list pinned to a hospital ward door; she was visiting her son who had lost a leg in the same battle. I had been left for dead and escaped burial only because everyone was too busy fighting, or looking after the wounded, to spare the time. My mother's faith returned, and after another spell in the trenches, I got pneumonia, was forbidden further active service, married and had a child -- 'a daughter to practise on' as she told my wife. Eventually the war ended and all again was well. But my mother's four sisters, with whom she had shared her inheritance, had been ruined by patriotically investing it in German Defence Bonds. So of course she helped them as far as she could, all but one of her own brood being by now more or less independent. And when my father died at eighty-six, she became the most respected woman at Harlech, with nobody to obey except God: meaning her noble conscience. At the age of eighty-eight she was found to have cancer, but since at that age it is seldom fatal, she continued unperturbed to practise her good works, which were many.

Her death was sad. One of her many descendants -- though married at thirty-six, she was already a great-grandmother -- got involved in a libel action which threatened crippling damages, and came to her for help. The worry caused a nervous breakdown, the local doctor could not deal with the case, and my once 'practised-on' elder sister, who had become a very good doctor, happened to be holidaying in Austria and got back too late to save her life.

What lessons I learned from my mother can be told in very few words. She taught me to despise fame and riches, not to be deceived by appearances, to tell the truth on all possible occasions -- I regret having taken her too literally at times -- and to keep my head in time of danger. I have inherited her conscience, her disinterest in sartorial fashions, her joy in making marmalades and jams, and her frugality (I hate throwing

away crusts) though it often conflicts with a spendthrift extravagance learned from my father. I have not inherited her dogma, which was the cause of her sadly cutting me from her will when my wife and I separated -- but she remembered the children instead, and eventually welcomed my remarriage. One word of wisdom, which she whispered to me when I was seven years old, has always stuck in my mind, and I pass it on to my children and grandchildren -- by the way I became a great-grandparent last year.

'Robert,' she said, 'this is a great secret, never forget it! Work is far more interesting than play.'

Hence my obsession with work, which is also my play.

After her death I was sent that gold Tara brooch, which arrived in the mail with its pin missing. I took it to a Spanish jeweller to have a new gold pin fitted, but he assured me that a gold one would be unnecessary, since the brooch itself was not gold but pinchbeck. That surprised me. My mother had always worn it for gold, we had always accepted it as gold, and so gold it had remained until her death. It would have distressed her to know that she had not merely been cheated by the dealer but made party to a fraud on the public... Or would she have taken this as an instance of God's just punishment on her for indulging female vanity?

There are, I find, variant traditions in our large family about my mother's life with Miss Briton. Some say that the old lady got justly scared about money when defrauded of £5,000 by a wicked solicitor, but that life with her was by no means so dreary as in my account. There is even talk of musical evenings: my mother, at the piano, delighting a wide circle of friends with her powerful contralto singing. It is said, too, that my mother cancelled her voyage to India not for my father's sake, but because of a peremptory letter from my grandfather at Munich: 'If you take this foolish step, my dear Amalia, we, your loving family, are resolved to forget you.' And that Miss Briton herself, though perhaps at my mother's insistence, divided her inheritance among all five sisters. They even give the house a different address and disregarding the evidence of a photograph dated 1857, which shows her at the age of two, knock a couple of years off her age.

Let them say what they like! She was my mother as well as theirs, and every legend of this sort has many variants.