

MY OWN STORY

Volume 1: A Very English Childhood (1945-1954)

by

Richard Perceval Graves

Prologue: Somewhere Out There

Nothing dies, not even the Present. Time is a tricky thing; and its sister, Space, preserves our voices and our gestures for all eternity. It is simply a matter of the point of view we take. Somewhere in space, I am still in that awkward position on the turf of a Lucknow polo-ground. Somewhere, also, the thunders of Trafalgar are echoing, and further back, the roars of a sabre-toothed tiger.

F. Yeats-Brown, Chapter XV *Bengal Lancer* 1930

Somewhere out there, according not only to the brilliant Yeats-Brown but also to many 21st century physicists, every particle of past history still exists. Indeed, if you believe in God, as I do, how could it be otherwise? So, as you read these words, please imagine that you are looking over my shoulder and observing what I observe as we travel together through the appropriate worm-hole in the space-time continuum and find ourselves looking down upon what, somewhere out there, *still exists*, and is now being always lovingly if at times painfully revisited.

In the course of this shared adventure, even if in your current world I am now dead while you must obviously still be alive, you will get to know me very well. Whether you come to think of me as a good friend, or whether you decide after a while that you can't stand being in the same room as me, I hope that I may one day know. In the meantime, it is only fair of me to warn you that you are certain to come across a great deal of poetry, and you

should definitely abandon this memoir and go elsewhere if (for example) you dislike James Elroy Flecker's *To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence*:

I who am dead a thousand years,
And wrote this sweet archaic song,
Send you my words for messengers
The way I shall not pass along.

I care not if you bridge the seas,
Or ride secure the cruel sky,
Or build consummate palaces
Of metal or of masonry.

But have you wine and music still,
And statues and a bright-eyed love,
And foolish thoughts of good and ill,
And prayers to them who sit above?

How shall we conquer? Like a wind
That falls at eve our fancies blow,
And old Mæonides the blind
Said it three thousand years ago.

O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,
Student of our sweet English tongue,
Read out my words at night, alone:

I was a poet, I was young.

Since I can never see your face,
And never shake you by the hand,
I send my soul through time and space
To greet you. You will understand.

You don't like it? Well then, no hard feelings, but it might be better for you to abandon this memoir now, because what follows almost certainly won't suit you. But do come along for the ride if you feel ready for change! You will be most welcome.

Oh, you do like it? Perhaps you already know it? That's good. I can tell you now that I have admired Flecker ever since as a schoolboy I was excited by *The War Song of the Saracens*. Then as an Oxford undergraduate I bought the Folio edition of *Hassan*, his play ending with Hassan as a pilgrim taking the Golden Road to Samarkand. There will be space enough later on for those two. But for now, before we begin to take the first steps together upon our own Golden Road, let me give you the present (or simply remind you) of one of Flecker's lesser-known poems, *Tenebris Lucentem*, or *Shining out of the Darkness*.

A linnet who had lost her way
Sang on a blackened bough in Hell,
Till all the ghosts remembered well
The trees, the wind, the golden day.

At last they knew that they had died
When they heard music in that land,

And someone there stole forth a hand
To draw a brother to his side.

And now dear reader, wherever and whenever you are: perhaps on a commuter train dashing at high speed through the London or New York or Sydney suburbs in the summer of 2030; perhaps in a space-freighter on its three-week journey home across the 600 light years from Kepler 22-b, in the year 2525 (if we are still alive); imagine that you are closing your eyes, that they are tight shut, and that by a supreme effort of will you plunge most daringly through time and space, (a little like John Carter on his fictional journeys between Earth and Mars) and open them again to find yourself looking down on a twentieth-century English landscape of fields and low hills.

Between these fields runs and bends to the left and straightens briefly and then bends again to the right one of those rolling English roads described by G.K. Chesterton:

Before the Roman came to Rye or out to Severn strode,
The rolling English drunkard made the rolling English road.
A reeling road, a rolling road, that rambles round the shire,
And after him the parson ran, the sexton and the squire;
A merry road, a mazy road, and such as we did tread
The night we went to Birmingham by way of Beachy Head.

It is the summer of 1952, and this is the main road from London to Brighton. It is a narrow road, just wide enough for one car in each direction and, as we go down further, following the road southward, we can see that the cars are almost all coloured black.

Closer still, and we are now just above the road, looking at the back of one of these black cars. There is a rack on the top of the car, covered with trunks and cases and is that a box of vegetables?

Beneath the spare tyre, safely attached to the back of the car, a number-plate reads EPB 223. It is a squarely-built two-door Ford 7Y (sometimes called a Ford 8) with running-boards and a cramped interior and a floor through which, if sitting in one of the two front seats, the road is clearly visible. Bought for £100 back in 1936 or 1937, it was laid up throughout the Second World War (1939-1945), and finds steep hills difficult, especially with its current load; but it is still doing sterling service as it voyages towards Brighton with its five occupants, four of whom are lovingly described by my father, the driver, as his 'precious cargo'.

My father! 'Daddy' as we call him. John Tiarks Ranke Graves, a good Christian gentleman of 49, is a preparatory-school Headmaster, utterly commanding, fiercely knowledgeable, deeply sensitive and perhaps a little eccentric. He drives us on this beautiful summer's day wearing a three-piece suit and a long winter overcoat and a scarf and a trilby hat.

That excited seven-year-old boy with curly brown hair sitting on his left in the front passenger seat, wearing T-shirt and shorts and sandals and longing to be at his journey's end, that's me, that's Ricky. Behind me sits my mother, 'Mummy' to us, Mary Graves née Wickens, a beautiful woman of 35, a Graduate of the Royal College of Music, another good Christian and a fiercely loyal and protective wife and mother. She adores my father and loves us all very dearly - but sometimes displays the expression of noble suffering by which my father recognised her as his soul-mate when he first saw her at a concert at Harrow School. He commented 'Quelle triste visage', and then a moment later: 'That's the woman I'm going to marry!'

Mummy carries on her lap one-year-old Elizabeth, plump and clever and sickly survivor of twins. Next to them sits my brother Simon, within a few weeks of his fifth birthday, a formidably intelligent child with straight hair and large brown eyes who is my closest friend and constant companion. However, he combines underlying physical strength and apparent fearlessness with the delicate psychological balance of a cuckoo clock, and from the pained expression on his face you can tell how much he hates travelling.

But how exciting it is for me, driving into Brighton! At first we pass by some almost incredibly well-manicured public gardens full of blooming flowers. Daddy comments approvingly, though it is most unlike the wild beauty of our own grounds at Holme Grange, grounds which were planted towards the end of the nineteenth century with specimen trees and shrubs and with thousands upon thousands of bulbs. We travel on into the busy town centre, where at last we catch between tall buildings our first sight of the sea.

"θαλασσα!" Daddy cries out in Ancient Greek, reliving that famous moment from 401 BC when Xenophon and his exhausted 10,000 warriors, having been stranded deep in enemy territory, and having had to fight their way to freedom across desert and mountain, finally, from a mountain-top thirty miles away, catch their first sight of the Black Sea. "θαλασσα! θαλασσα! Thalassa! Thalassa! The sea! The sea!" And beneath the light blue of the sky there is that desperately exciting patch of darker, deeper blue.

We drive towards it. To the right of us appear for a while the green somewhat sinister domes of the Brighton Pavilion. Ahead of us, soon afterwards, a view of Brighton Pier, shining white and beautiful in the sunshine; and already this part of the town is full of memories of slot-machines and large round pennies and collecting my tricycle and then we sweep round to the left and begin to take the coast road for Rottingdean.

As always at this point in our journey my father, who has been keeping up his usual unvaried but always interesting running commentary, suddenly sweeps his hat from his head. This is in my honour. We are briefly close to the place where I was born, in a Brighton

nursing home on 21 December 1945, within sight and smell of the sea, within earshot of the breaking of the waves, of the crying of the gulls, and of the unforgettable and wonderfully evocative crunching noise made at each step that one takes upon that shingled shore.

Observing all this, I find myself longing to continue towards Rottingdean, towards Braemar, the tall terraced house half-way-up Steyning Road where Grandad with his flat cap and his golden watch-chain and Aunt Joan with her tremendous hug and Solomon the dachshund are all eagerly waiting for us. [Noony the cat has already sensed that we are on our way and has slunk off to hide.] But perhaps, after all, we had better begin at the beginning.

BOOK ONE: CROYDON 1945-1949

Chapter One: An Unexpected Arrival

To begin at the beginning - and immediately those words tug me sideways, not least because in due course we will be revisiting both Laugharne and *Under Milk Wood*. 'To begin at the beginning' writes Dylan Thomas,

It is spring, moonless night in the small town, starless and bible-black, the
cobblestreets silent and the hunched courtiers'-and rabbits' wood limping invisible
down to the sloeblack, slow, black, fishingboatbobbing sea.

Some of Dylan's past I know as well as my own. Fragments of his and other lives are so deeply intertwined with my own, that it is as though I am dreaming, and I see a montage of apparently random images: Dylan Thomas in the grounds of Laugharne Castle, levering open a wooden cover and stealing a bottle of Nuits St. Georges from Richard Hughes's makeshift wine-cellar, while Hughes observes from the shadows with a wry and somewhat sinister

smile; Richard Hughes again, walking along a Harlech road deep in conversation with Robert Graves, utterly betraying his friendship with my Uncle Charles; Robert, diving into the Mediterranean sea and striking out strongly for a distant rock; and then the ghost of an ancient sailing-ship at twilight rushing through deep waters with no-one immediately visible on deck.

I thought it a ship of death, but see, quite plainly
Lashed to the mast, a man who is weak and blind
Who sails over a sea of desolation,
Seeking the tideless harbours of the mind.

Whenever my birth was mentioned on those childhood journeys to Rottingdean, it brought into my mind, though I kept it to myself, and surely no-one can remember the hours immediately after their own birth, an image of white-washed walls and figures wearing white uniforms and a bed and the warmth of my mother's body and soft milky sweetness and enduring and powerful love.

Later on, I would be told that my birth in 1945 was considered by my Grandmother Amy to be a great event in the family. Amy was the saintly stepmother of five and the mother in her own right of five more by Alfred Perceval Graves, the Anglo-Irish poet and Inspector of Schools who had died in his sleep a few days after Christmas 1931.

On his 85th birthday, earlier that year, APG had been so happy to have his daughter Molly visiting that he had danced a few steps of his Irish jig and sung *Father O'Flynn*, the song for which he had become famous throughout late-Victorian Great Britain, and which begins:

Of priests we can offer a charmin' variety

Far renowned for larnin' and piety;
Still, I'd advance ye widout impropriety
 Father O'Flynn as the flower of them all.

[Chorus]

Here's a health to you, Father O'Flynn,
Slainté and slainté and slainté agin;
Powerfulest preacher, and
Tinderest teacher, and
 Kindliest creature in ould Donegal.

Don't talk of your Provost and Fellows of Trinity
Famous for ever at Greek and Latinity,
Faix, and the divels and all at Divinity,
 Father O'Flynn'd make hares of them all!

But so far, despite APG's being the father of ten, there had only been only two legitimate grandsons born with the surname Graves. These were David and Sam Graves, my uncle Robert's sons by the artist Nancy Nicholson. David (another poet) had died as recently as March 1943, fighting with what his commanding officer had described as 'most conspicuous gallantry' against the Japanese in the far-distant jungles of Burma. There, trying to retrieve a hopeless situation, he had single-handedly bombed his way into two enemy posts before being shot down while advancing undaunted upon the third. As for Sam: he was still unmarried.

It's true that by this time Robert had two more sons by Beryl Hodge; but unfortunately, with Nancy refusing a divorce, Robert and Beryl had been unable to marry, so Beryl was technically Robert's mistress and both six-year-old William and one-year-old Juan

were technically bastards. Legitimacy still counted for something in those days; and although Amy will have known of Shakespeare's impassioned plea: 'Now Gods stand up for bastards!' their names certainly couldn't be entered into the family Bible.

So, my birth caused great joy as well as great excitement – I was the first living Graves grandson born in wedlock since Sam back in 1924 – even if Amy was a little concerned that John had married beneath him. For Mary Wickens was a butcher's daughter; and even though Amy Graves (previously von Ranke) had met and been charmed by Mary, she had still felt it necessary to write to John warning him not to risk inviting any of his brothers or sisters to the wedding in case they were horribly shocked by the low status of their fellow-invitees.

This was purely pragmatic. Amy herself was too good a Christian to have any innate prejudice against Mary; but she could not answer for her children and step-children, and it must have been immediately clear to her that Mary came from a lower social class: not only was her father in trade, but the Wickens family tree, unlike that of the von Rankes or the Graveses, contained no very distinguished ancestors, no famous historians or Bishops or Prime Ministers or Kings and Queens or friends of the Kaiser, not a single person whose family had come over with William the Conqueror in 1066, only humble shepherds walking across the South Downs or the Isle of Wight in all weathers watching over their flocks by day and by night.

George Bernard Shaw famously wrote in *Pygmalion*: 'It is impossible for an Englishman to open his mouth, without making some other Englishman despise him'; and a few signs of social inferiority were evident in the language they used. They were never so vulgar as to call the lavatory 'the toilet'; but Mary's father, Sidney William Wickens, encouraged me and my siblings to call him not 'Grandfather', or 'Grandpapa' as he would have done in an upper-class family; but the common or garden 'Grandad'.

I was enough of a snob to flinch inwardly whenever my mother or one of her sisters referred to magazines as ‘books’; but I never minded the word Grandad (though I could tell that others did), because my Grandad was a man with the kindest heart I have ever known. I loved him when I was a young child and in many ways he seemed to me like another child, sometimes more in need of my protection than I was of his; and I love him still now that I am an old man, and in his honour I insist upon being called Grandad by my own Grandchildren. It must be at least sixty years since we were together in the same room: probably that dark front room in Chyngton with its drawn curtains, its antique brass carriage-clock ticking on the mantelpiece, and the high brass bed in which during his final illness Grandad lay unable to speak; yet the merest memory of him still brings tears flooding into my eyes and running down my cheeks.

Incidentally, if Mary had married above her, then so in a way had her father. The Wickens family business was so successful that it had expanded beyond Southsea and had an outpost in Rottingdean; and here it was that the handsome Sidney Wickens, in his spare time a dashing young subaltern in the Hampshire Yeomanry, had won the heart of Ellen Hilder. The Hilders too were in business – one of them ran a local bakery – but through her mother, Ellen was descended from a wealthy family of French Huguenots. Back in the 1690s, members of the de la Chambre family had fled to England in a desperate effort to escape from the murderous religious persecution of Louis XIV. There they had purchased lands in the Seaford area and anglicised their name from de la Chambre to Chambers.

They brought with them their aristocratic high standards, their deep and unshakeable Protestant faith, and their fierce hatred of the Roman Catholics who had driven them into exile. These high standards and religious prejudices were passed on through the female line from generation to generation; and, thanks to Ellen, Mary and her three elder sisters Betty, Ruth and Joan, despite Amy’s anxiety, were all well enough brought-up to be able to pass muster in any rank of society.

Particularly important was the fact that they all spoke the King's English flawlessly and without any regional accent, the slightest trace of which would have been fatal to their chances of being acceptable in polite society. Moreover, despite being girls, they had been given a first-class education at the Portsmouth High School under the diminutive but formidable Miss Cossey until 1932, and then under Miss Watt, with her great love of music and the arts. And as daughters of a butcher, I have no doubt that during their History lessons they will have listened with particular interest (as I would do later) when they came to the well-known story of Thomas Wolsey, notable not merely for his great loyalty back in the 1520s to his master King Henry VIII, but for having risen to the great height of being Lord Chancellor and Roman Catholic Cardinal despite his father being only an Ipswich butcher.

Like Wolsey's mother Joan Daundy, Ellen Hilder had raised some remarkable children. I have always felt sad never to have met her, though I know her appearance well enough, chiefly from the locket with her picture which always stood upon my mother's dressing-table, and which I am now holding in my hand. It shows Ellen, possibly on her way to church, wearing a light brown coat fastened with an orange clasp and with a narrow fur trim at the neck. On her head is a hat of a much darker brown with a broad brim and a blue band round it just above the brim. Between the hat which comes low over her forehead and the coat which comes up to her neck, she is smiling with a conspiratorial sense of fun. With her lovely brown eyes, a good complexion and an excellent set of teeth between red lips, Ellen is a handsome woman, despite the very determined chin of her Chambers ancestry. It was partly this Chambers determination which meant that although she had married for love, Ellen retained the respect of her own kith and kin; that she successfully brought up her four daughters to be good Christian folk; and that she inspired them with such personal adoration that I never heard a single one of them refer to her (even in the most argumentatively smoky rooms) with anything but the very deepest love and affection.

However, she taught them not to be hoarders, so only one of her letters survives, a wartime letter written to ‘My darling Mary’ on 15 July 1943, when Ellen was just 60 years old. Her letter is lively and although it is mainly about her plans to visit Mary who was then a music teacher up at St. Andrews in Scotland, it is full of family news. She is anxious about Daddy, who seems to have an attack of catarrh, possibly brought on by spending too much time in the garden during rainy weather; Ruth has ‘just gone on duty’; she and Joan and her sister Effie are going to a ‘do’ at the Convent in aid of the Waifs and Strays fund: ‘I only hope’, she writes, ‘there are not too many encores’; and before she ends ‘with much love & many kisses. God bless you. Yours ever, Mummie’ she adds that:

I washed my hair yesterday, so you can imagine what it is like today to keep up. Effie had hers shampooed this morning & it is like shock-headed Peter. Our lodger got wet through this morning & he came home at 1:15 & had a bath & changed his clothes & put the others on the line to dry. We cannot find out if he is going tomorrow or not, yet. He told us last night he is in no hurry to leave, & does not care about Winchester much. I think he is getting pretty good attention here. – Still he is a nice lad.

Her comparison of Effie to a character from *Struwelpeter*, and her very slightly acid comments about both the encores and the lodger, suggest to me that she would have been excellent company; but as I said, I never met her: less than two years after writing this letter she had died of cancer.

It was because of her impending death that my parents were married on 3 February 1945 having only known each other for a few months, so that Ellen could live to see their wedding-day. This took place at Rottingdean Church; and I have a photograph taken that day of 41-year-old John and 27-year-old Mary, standing just outside the church porch. My father, tall, thin and handsome, with an authoritative but kindly face, is every inch a gentleman with his well-polished black shoes and his morning dress which is worn both elegantly and naturally, and has clearly not been hired for the day. In his right hand he carries his silk top

hat, there is a handkerchief in his breast pocket and a large carnation in his lapel, and tucked into his left arm is my mother's arm, with only her hand showing. She herself looks beautiful and happy, but (remember this was still wartime) she is dressed not in any long white creation down to her ankles, but, in a simple formal dress with a pleated skirt which comes down to just below the knees, a high neck, and an open jacket, to which, over her left breast, is pinned a spray of lilies. She wears a plain hat, the front of which is also decorated with flowers; on her feet are court shoes; and in her left hand she carries a pair of gloves.

Yes, this was still wartime, though the Nazi swastika no longer dominated Europe. Thanks largely to the military genius of General George Patton, the last major German breakout in the West has recently been defeated in the Battle of the Bulge; Auschwitz concentration camp has been liberated by Soviet troops; and, with heavy bombing over Berlin itself, Hitler and Eva Braun are already living underground in their final refuge in Berlin. But V2 rockets are still reaching England and causing immense destruction and loss of life; American troops have not yet crossed the Rhine into Germany; US Marines have not yet raised the American flag over Iwo Jima; and many fierce battles lie ahead, especially in the Far East.

John, like his journalist elder brother Charles and many others of their generation, was marked for the rest of his life by having been too young for one war, the Great War, the 1914-1918 war; but too old for the next major conflict.

Charles had joined up in 1918, but had never seen active service: exactly like his friend Richard Hughes, with whom Charles had shared a desk at Charterhouse. Charles had been 'completely flabbergasted' by the idea that he might 'go on living' and wondered uneasily for the rest of his life whether or not he would have turned out to be a coward. For Hughes also, 'the shock was stupendous. No one', as he later wrote of his fictional alter ego Augustine Penry-Jones in *The Fox in the Attic*,

No one had warned him that he might after all find himself with his life to live out: with sixty years still to spend, perhaps, instead of the bare six months he thought was all he had in his pocket. Peace was a condition unknown to him and scarcely imaginable. The whole real-seeming world in which he had grown to manhood had melted round him.

John, born in 1903, three years later than Charles, was still only fifteen when the Great War ended; and when Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, John had been a schoolmaster of 36, an age which, in a reserved occupation, meant that although he tried to enlist he was compelled to go on teaching at Malvern College: fortunately for me, because in 1942 (having already had a spell at Blenheim Palace while it was taken over by the Admiralty as a possible retreat should their London headquarters be bombed) Malvern College was compelled to move in with Harrow School while their premises were used by the Telecommunications Research Establishment: hence my father's meeting with my mother in the autumn of 1944, not long after she had begun teaching music at Harrow School.

He first saw her when he was sitting a row or two behind her at a school concert. She turned her head to look around, and he was instantly smitten. "That's the girl I'm going to marry!" he told the member-of-staff sitting next to him. And within a few weeks he had found out who she was, secured an introduction, and swept her off her feet.

The prospect of marriage made my father think seriously about his financial future, and he acted rapidly and decisively. By the time of his wedding, he had thrown up his teaching career and taken a much better-paid job as Assistant Editor of the Times Educational Supplement; and before long he and my mother had moved into a small terraced house at 3 Moreton Road, Croydon, from where John could commute daily to his London office. And when the job at the TES began to seem less interesting than he had hoped, John continued to commute, having metamorphosed into a senior official within the Ministry of Education, at that time facing the formidable task of implementing the Butler Education Act of 1944.

It was not long before I was conceived; and during my mother's pregnancy, the most momentous events were happening in the outside world. On 30 April 1945, Hitler and Eva Braun committed suicide; on 7 May, Germany surrendered unconditionally and on 14 August, only a few days after the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Emperor Hirohito announced the surrender of Japan. These events, which seemed so utterly remote to me as a child, such very ancient history, would nevertheless cast their shadow forward across at least the first twenty years of my life.

I arrived several weeks before I was expected, and Mummy and Daddy often told me that this was because I was so keen to see what was going on in the outside world. I might also point out that by appearing as early as 21 December I had narrowly avoided being born under the reliable but somewhat stodgy Earth sign of Capricorn. Instead, I am proud to be a Sagittarian; and my son Philip, an expert in astrological matters, assures me that I have all the traditional virtues and vices of this creative but somewhat volatile Fire sign.

As for my being born in Brighton, so far away from my parents' Croydon home, this came about because in the run-up to their first Christmas together, they were faced with the usual dilemma of young married couples with two sets of relatives, both of whom hope and expect that they will be the ones to be favoured with a visit on Christmas Day. Many and various were the solutions which I would employ when I myself was a young married man: not one of them was ever wholly satisfactory, and they mostly involved hellish journeys from one household to another on Boxing Day.

However, Harlech in North Wales is very far from Croydon, and still further from Rottingdean, and in those pre-motorway days it was too long and exhausting a journey for a woman in a late stage of pregnancy, especially with such a formidable mother-in-law at the end of it. So, it was decided that John would travel alone all the way up to North Wales to visit his 88-year-old mother Amy at Erinfa, her large rambling house looking out over the Irish Sea; while Mary would spend Christmas in Rottingdean with her beloved sisters and

their 69-year-old father Sidney at Braemar, the narrow, terraced house they owned half-way up Steyning Road. Hence my birth in a Brighton nursing-home within the sound of the sea breaking on that inimitable shingle shore.

Chapter Two: Early Days in Croydon

A telegram was sent to my father, who hurried southward as fast as the railways would allow; and since he found that there were no buses running over Christmas between Rottingdean and Brighton, he walked the four miles in and out each day to visit his wife and to visit me, his first-born child.

Soon I had been named: *Richard*, after my half-uncle Dick Graves, Graves Supérieur, a senior official in the Consular Service; *Perceval* because it had become a family tradition since my great-grandfather's day to give the eldest son of the family Perceval as his middle name out of regard for our great-great-grandmother Helena Perceval, the Dublin beauty who could trace her lineage back to an ancestor of William the Conqueror; and the combination *Richard Perceval* possibly because that was the name of one of Helena's ancestors who was famous for having deciphered secret Spanish documents and had therefore been able back in 1588 to give Queen Elizabeth I 'the first certain intelligence' about the impending arrival of the Spanish Armada.

Before long I had also received an envelope addressed to :

Mr. Richard Graves

“Braemar”

Steyning Road

Rottingdean

It had been stamped with a blue 2 ½d stamp bearing a portrait of King George VI; and inside was my very first letter, from a family friend called Alfred Vines, who wrote to welcome me to Rottingdean and to tell me that: ‘I wish you very many happy years - - and only give you one bit of advice - - “be kind to your Mother”.’

As soon as possible, I was brought home to 3 Moreton Road, South Croydon; where the joyful day of arrival was soon followed by months of anxiety as I steadfastly refused to put on weight. At one time I was so sickly that I was hardly expected to live, and so on 3 March 1946 I was removed for observation to the Children’s Hospital in Great Ormonde Street.

My problem was that I had great difficulty in keeping down the milk that I swallowed – a difficulty with unmixed milk that has plagued me ever since. Shredded Wheat with milk – yes! Chocolate-flavoured milk – yes! But how I hated free school milk, which pursued me implacably through my childhood until, when a milk monitor myself at Charterhouse, and in charge of those vile third-of-a-pint bottles which clanged and rattled in their crates with loathsome cheerfulness, I devised a scheme which I will tell you about later, and which meant that I never had to drink a single drop of the wretched stuff myself.

Fortunately for me, an eminently practical doctor at Great Ormonde Street, to whom I undoubtedly owe my life, had the excellent idea of thickening my feed, after which I began to prosper; and by 13 April I was well enough to be carried to the local St. Peter’s Church in South Croydon to be baptized: not by the local vicar, but by the distinguished Reverend F.W. Dillistone, who happened to be visiting England from the USA, where he was currently the Professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Always known as ‘Dilly’ by my mother, who adored him, Frederick Dillistone had become a family friend after his ordination back in 1928, when he had begun his glittering career as a humble curate at St. Jude’s in Southsea; and now it was he who presided over my baptism. So far as all present were concerned, this was a critically important ceremony since,

in the opening words of the service, ‘all men are conceived and born in sin, and none can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost’.

My three Godparents, chosen very properly for the strength of their religious convictions, were Cyril Lace and Nigel Pickstone, respectively a fellow-teacher and an ex-pupil from my father’s days at Malvern College; and Nancy Biddle, who had studied alongside my mother at the Royal College of Music; and it was these three of whom Dillistone demanded:

DOST thou, in the name of this Child, renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, so that thou wilt not follow nor be led by them?

A little later, having received satisfactory replies to these and other questions, Dillistone took me in his arms and baptized me on the forehead with water taken from the Font in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, before declaring:

‘WE receive this Child into the Congregation of Christ's flock, and do sign him with the sign of the Cross, in token that hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and manfully to fight under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil, and to continue Christ's faithful soldier and servant unto his life's end.’

My new Godfathers and Godmother were then solemnly enjoined to teach me ‘what a solemn vow, promise and profession he hath here made by you’, to call upon me to hear sermons, and in due course ‘to take care that this child be brought to the Bishop to be confirmed by him, so soon as he can say the Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten

Commandments in the vulgar tongue, and be further instructed in the Church Catechism set forth for that purpose.’

With both my immortal soul and my perishable body in safe hands, my father was able to turn more of his attention to the wider world, where for a while imperial and family difficulties ran alongside each other in distant Palestine.

Those Imperial difficulties were everywhere evident. Although we had finally won the War just a few months before I was born, it had seriously weakened us. We could justifiably pride ourselves on having fought on to victory, but despite our glorious single-handed successes in the Battle of Britain and at El Alamein, that victory had ultimately been possible only with American help. This unpalatable fact plummeted deep down into the British psyche where it festered horribly – no-one likes to be helped too much - and was responsible for generations of anti-American sentiment.

Worse still, the calamitous and disgraceful fall of Singapore had permanently damaged our credibility. The days were now over when a single British officer, like some Roman centurion, could stand up and by his mere presence quell a thousand rioters single-handed, representing as he did the might of a vast and unassailable Empire. We had not only lost face but we were also impoverished and heavily in debt. And alongside food rationing and hard winters and power-cuts and shortages of coal, we retained Imperial responsibilities, especially in India, which it began to seem impossible for us to sustain.

For the Graveses, Palestine was a particular concern. On 24 July 1946, just over three months after my christening, it was the centenary of my grandfather’s birth. His widow Amy placed flowers on his Harlech grave, and my Aunt Susan and a group of their friends had supper at Erinfa where they listened to a wireless recital of APG’s poems and songs. But these centenary celebrations had already been overshadowed by events far away.

Two days previously, my Uncle Dick Graves, then Director of the Labour Department in Palestine, had arranged to meet my Aunt Clarissa at the King David Hotel in Jerusalem for

a slightly early APG centenary lunch. They were both on the way there when by chance they met in the street about half a block away, and stopped to talk. As anyone who knows us will tell you, we Graveses are fond of talking; and a few minutes later, still too engrossed in conversation to have resumed their walk towards the King David Hotel, they were shocked to hear the loud roar of a huge explosion as the hotel was blown up by Jewish terrorists. It was a successful attack, with 91 killed and 49 injured; and had they not met and stopped to talk, Dick and Clarissa would almost certainly have been among the dead.

It was then only three months since Clarissa, thanks to my Uncle Robert paying for her air fare, had been able to return to Palestine after a year-long visit to her mother. This visit had not been a great success, because Amy enjoyed her independence and found Clarissa's efforts to look after her 'very kind, but trying'. Clarissa herself had been delighted to have been able to escape from Harlech and to resume the somewhat eccentric life she lived in 'By a Fig Tree', her little house in the Arab Quarter of Jerusalem, the place where she hoped to spend the rest of her days. She had even become a Palestinian citizen in order to confirm that this was now her real home; and she seemed sublimely unaware of the danger she was in as a close relative of one of the senior members of the colonial administration.

Only seven months later, on 2 February 1947, the situation in Palestine had deteriorated to such an extent that Clarissa was forcibly included among the British women and children who were suddenly given 48 hours' notice to leave Palestine, and told that they could take only two suitcases and £20 for the journey home. It was a journey which broke Clarissa's already fractured heart.

This remarkable but highly sensitive creature, now remembered in the family chiefly for the eccentricities of her old age, was a woman of great spiritual insight, one of the very few people upon whose poetic judgment her brother Robert felt that he could rely, and the author herself of a fine collection of poems, *Seven Days*. In her youth she had studied as an artist, before suffering a complete nervous breakdown, brought on by the discovery that the

Professor at the Slade with whom she had held hands in Lyons Corner Houses was already married, and intended her to be not his wife but his mistress. On her recovery, she had led a curious but reasonably independent life. At one time she had become Secretary to a leading Christian Scientist, whose beliefs she had wholeheartedly embraced; and before the War she had risen to be head of Children's Broadcasting in Palestine; but the shock of losing her home in Jerusalem was extreme.

Clarissa arrived back in England to find us all suffering from the bitterly cold winter of 1947, of which my mother's diary gives a vivid impression. It had begun innocuously enough, and she describes very lovingly how I woke up from my morning sleep on 6 January that year, was 'much fascinated' to discover that the world outside had turned white, and made 'funny clucking noises' of appreciation. It was less amusing when it continued to snow for much of January and February, the cold became intense, it was occasionally impossible to get out of the house, there were electricity cuts, my father went down with acute bronchitis (his chest was always his weak point), and the pipes in the house froze more than once.

Dick also returned to England for an operation and some leave – but it was not a long leave. 'Graves Supérieur' as he was known in the family because of a taste for good living which meant that he wore unusually good suits and drank unusually good wine, had been asked to become the Mayor of Jerusalem. As it turned out, he would be the last British Mayor, and he filled his new position with great courage, travelling about Jerusalem with an armed bodyguard in a car whose windscreen was shattered at least once by a would-be assassin's bullet.

And then in August 1947 came the final days of the British Raj. George VI remained by the Grace of God King of England, Northern Ireland, and the Territories beyond the seas; but he was no longer Emperor of India. That vast subcontinent had been violently partitioned into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India, at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dead, most of them massacred by men who not so long ago had been their fellow-subjects. It was a brutal

end to 89 years of a largely benevolent imperial rule which had for the most part kept India peaceful and had given her, among other things, her common language, her civil service, her railways and the rule of law.

I was completely unaware of these events, though they would cast their own particular shadows across my early life; and it is from about this time, in the summer of 1947, when I was one-and-a-half years old, that I can date my own first memories. These are fragmentary, but each fragment is exceptionally clear.

Chapter Three: Waving to the Crowds

The even tenor of our life may have been disturbed from time to time by these darker currents from the outside world, but on the whole everything was very secure and predictable. 3, Moreton Road (we never gave it a name) is a semi-detached three-storey red-brick Victorian property on a steeply sloping road in a quiet part of South Croydon. There was at first more room than was needed for our small family, EPB 223 had its own garage just to one side, and there was a delightful garden at the back with well-tended flower-beds, a thriving vegetable-garden and a lawn on which Mummy and Daddy would sit in deck-chairs while I played happily at their feet. It was only a few minutes' walk away from St. Peter's church where I was christened, from Lloyd Park where I was often taken to play, from the shops to which Mummy pushed me in my perambulator, and from the railway station where Daddy caught a train into London every weekday, including Saturdays.

But although Daddy is away a great deal, Mummy is rarely lonely. Through the Young Wives Group at St. Peter's, she has soon befriended other young mothers in the area, including a couple in Moreton Road itself; a cleaner arrives most mornings, sturdy and cheerful and often seen by me with a mop in one hand and a bucket in the other and a

cigarette between her lips; tradesmen regularly come to the door to ask for orders; and before long there will be a succession of mostly foreign girls who come as au pairs to help out for a few months at a time.

By now, in this very hot summer of 1947, I am not yet talking myself, but I understand most of what other people are saying: though my parents have the irritating habit of breaking into French if they want to say something private, just as the Welsh villagers of my father's youth would break into Welsh whenever they wanted to say something uncomplimentary about their English overlords.

In any case, I feel safest and happiest as an observer, and there seems to be no pressing need to for me to speak. If I want something, I simply point at it while making a noise: "Errhh" This is mild enough when the need is not urgent, but if I want something badly then the noise becomes louder and more violent: "EEEEERRRRRRGH!" I find this most effective. Perhaps I sense that once I begin speaking, I will be opening myself up to a more coercive pattern of parental control. More important, I am very much afraid of making a fool of myself by trying to speak and getting something wrong. In this situation speech may be silver, but 'Silentium est aureum': silence, as the ancient Romans wisely observe, is golden.

During this observational phase of my life, there is a handful of incidents that swim sharply into focus. The first of these occurs during an afternoon when Mummy is planning to take me out to a children's party. Having washed and dressed me, she sits me down in my playpen in the drawing-room and then, after telling me very firmly to sit still until she returns, she goes off to change into her own party finery.

I don't mind being put in my playpen: in fact it is one of my favourite places. Let me explain why. Never having seen anyone else crawl, I have never wanted to crawl myself. My aim is to be like Mummy and Daddy, whom I love so dearly. I never see Mummy crawling around the kitchen. Daddy doesn't crawl into the house when he returns from the office. No,

they walk, and I am determined to walk just like them. And being put in my playpen enables me to do some serious training in this respect.

Normally, I would think: ‘watch me!’ as I haul myself up on the inside of the playpen, clutching onto the wooden bars; and then, when I am standing up, ‘continue watching me!’ as I begin to move sideways, hand by hand, bar by bar, step by step, doing the closest thing to walking that I can manage. You will see that I only stop for a few minutes when I come to the place where set into the upright bars is a special oblong section. Into this have been placed, one above the other, two metal bars along which two rows of six coloured wooden balls can be slid: three yellow, three red, three blue and three green. Moving these as far as possible in one direction, and then back again in the other, I find a strangely absorbing pursuit.

But on this occasion, I have been explicitly commanded to sit still; and you can tell that I must be an obedient child, because for a while I do remain sitting still, looking at the door through which Mummy has gone, shutting it behind her; and wondering how long it will be before her return. After waiting for ages and ages (perhaps as much as a minute) I look away from the door and through the bars to my right. There, very close to my playpen, sitting like me on the carpet, is a shining brass scuttle brimming over with large black objects. These are extraordinarily interesting to me. I have seen them before, but I have never been able to study them at close quarters. They are clearly made of the same material, yet they are all different shapes and sizes, with some smooth and some jagged or serrated edges. After a while, I realize that I can learn nothing more by observation alone and so, putting my hands through the bars, I reach out towards them.

Sometime later, the door opens and Mummy reappears. As I watch her, I am struck for a moment by how very beautiful she looks in her party best. But then, a fraction of a second later, a look of shock and horror appears on her face. “Ooooh Richie!” is all she can manage to say at first. So thorough have been my investigations that I am covered from head to toe in black smears of coal. “Ooooh Richie!” But then an understanding, I might almost

say a *conspiratorial* smile crosses her face and uncomplainingly she picks me up and washes and dresses me all over again, and off we go to the party.

Apart from the playpen, by the way, my favourite article of furniture is my high-chair. As with all high-chairs, its primary function is to contain and control a small child at the table. I can easily be lifted up into it, have a bib tied round my neck, and have food put on the wooden tray in front of me in a round china bowl whose interior and tall sides are covered with characters from the tales of Beatrix Potter. But although my high-chair is an absolutely standard item of wooden Utility wartime construction, it has been beautifully designed and is quite magical in its operation. So cleverly is it hooked and hinged and jointed and wheeled that by unhooking it and swinging it open, its two connected parts can be brought back together in such a way that it is completely transformed. What had been a high-chair on four firm wooden legs becomes a low-chair running on wheels with a wooden tray in front of it on which toys can be pushed around or small jigsaws made.

One more incident, this time a dangerous one. Those playpen exercises resulting from my determination to walk have borne fruit and, since mid-May 1947, very pleased with myself according to my mother's diary, I have been 'walking everywhere and not liking to be confined to one room – He likes all the doors open so that he can wander!' And now, on the morning of Sunday 10 August, Mummy is doing something extremely boring in the kitchen, and Daddy is somewhere upstairs and since he is not often at home I have decided that I will go and find him. I therefore make my way out of the kitchen into the deserted hallway and begin climbing up the stairs.

This is an entirely new experience and, as climbs go, it is an epic of heroism, of endurance, and of blind determination to win through. Each huge step looks to me as I approach it like the side of a cliff. Each huge step, carpeted in the fashion of the day down the middle, but not at the sides, and held in place by stair-rods at the back of each step, involves an entirely separate struggle. First, I have to get myself into position, standing upright and

leaning against the step; then, with my hands on top of it, I have to begin scrabbling with my arms and legs until I am safely over the edge and lying down on the rough carpet and can begin getting myself into position ready for my assault on the next step. Up and up, step after step, up and up until I have reached the landing at the top of the first very long flight of steps. Filled with pride, I turn to look back at what I have achieved.

“Amazing!” I think to myself. “All that way!” Wishing to savour my triumph to the full, I lean over so that I can see more clearly the distance that I have come. “Who would have believed it!” I think to myself; and then I lean over just a little more, and suddenly I have lost my footing and I am turning over and over as I hurtle downwards until I have landed on my head at the very foot of the stairs with a terrible thud. I suppose the sound of my fall must have been heard throughout the house, because as I look up from my prone position, not yet feeling any pain but quite annoyed at my wasted effort, I can see Daddy leaning over the upstairs banisters and staring down at me with a look of horror on his face. This was exactly matched by the look of horror on the face of Mummy, who has simultaneously rushed out from the kitchen to find me lying on my back at the foot of that steep flight of stairs.

Fortunately, the Graveses have good thick skulls: any small weakness and I would have died there and then. The doctor who came out to the house to examine me could find nothing wrong with the rest of me – no broken bones at any rate, it was my skull which had taken the full force of that tremendous fall. He left with various vague warnings and in the short term the only major difference was that, as if some wizard had waved a magic wand, the next time that I stepped into the hallway wooden gates had suddenly appeared at both the foot and the head of the staircase.

At the time, I was chiefly impressed by how kindly my parents had treated me after an incident that was, after all, entirely my own fault. In later life, however, I have often wondered whether that severe shock might not have caused permanent damage. Because

although there are some areas in which I believe that I am in the first rank, from time to time throughout my life I have been horribly aware of odd and inexplicable gaps in my intellectual armoury.

Almost as soon as the doctor had left, Daddy drove Mummy and me down to Rottingdean. On the way, while we were driving rather slowly through the outskirts of Brighton, my parents were surprised to find that everyone was waving to us. When they glanced over their shoulders they could see why. I was kneeling on the back seat looking out through the window and waving to the crowds of passers-by in a splendidly regal manner, and they were waving back. To me, this seemed perfectly natural as well as highly enjoyable, but it seemed to give Mummy in particular a rather unpleasant shock.

On our arrival at Braemar, where Daddy had lunch with us before driving back to Croydon, Mummy was so anxious both about my odd behaviour in waving to the crowds and about the large soft area that had now appeared on my skull, that over the next ten days she took me twice to visit a Rottingdean GP. Much to her annoyance, however, he had ‘No helpful advice at all’.

By now, in any case, Mummy was once again heavily pregnant and, as she records in her diary, was feeling so ‘very lifeless’ that I spent a good deal of our holiday being looked after by my Aunts Ruth and Joan. With the two of them I made numerous visits to the beach and the village duck-pond, went blackberrying up Whiteway, and was enjoying myself so much that my happiness bubbled over and apparently my ‘latest trick’ was to begin dancing, which I did for the sheer pleasure of being alive.