

EVELYN WAUGH

MY FATHER'S HOUSE¹

My father, it appeared, had been knocked down by a baker's van and had died without regaining consciousness. I was his only child and, with the exception of my uncle, his only near relative. 'All arrangements' had been made. The funeral was taking place that day. *'In spite of your father's opinions, in the absence of any formal instructions to the contrary,'* my Uncle Andrew wrote, *'your Aunt and I thought it best to have a religious ceremony of an unostentatious kind.'*

'He might have telegraphed,' I thought; and then, later, 'Why should he have?' There was no question of my having been able to see my father before he died; participation in a 'religious ceremony of an unostentatious kind' was neither in my line nor my father's; nor—to do him justice—in my Uncle Andrew's. It would satisfy the Jellabys.

With regard to the Jellabys, my father always avowed a ruthlessness which he was far from practising; he would, in fact, put himself to considerable inconvenience to accommodate them, but in principle he abhorred any suggestion of discretion or solicitude. It was his belief that no one but himself dealt properly with their servants. Two attitudes drove him to equal fury: what he called the *pas-devant* tomfoolery of his childhood—the precept that scandal and the mention of exact sums of money should be hushed in their presence—or the more recent idea that their quarters should be prettily decorated and themselves given opportunity for cultural development. 'Jellaby has been with me twenty years,' he would say, 'and is fully cognisant of the facts of life. He and Mrs. Jellaby know my income to the nearest shilling and they know the full history of everyone who comes to this house. I pay them abominably and they supplement their wages by cooking the books. Servants prefer it that way. It preserves their independence and self-respect. The Jellabys eat continually, sleep with the windows shut, go to church every Sunday morning and to chapel in the evening, and entertain surreptitiously at my

¹ See 'ABOUT THIS NUMBER', page 302

expense whenever I am out of the house. Jellaby's a teetotaler; Mrs. Jellaby takes the port.' He rang the bell whenever he wanted anything fetched from upstairs and sat as long as he wanted over his wine. 'Poor old Armstrong,' he used to say of a fellow Academician, 'lives like a Hottentot. He keeps a lot of twittering women like waitresses in a railway-station buffet. After the first glass of port they open the dining-room door and stick their heads in. After the second glass they do it again. Then instead of throwing something at them, Armstrong says, "I think they want to clear" and we have to move out.' But he had a warm affection for the Jellabys and I believe it was largely on Mrs. Jellaby's account that he allowed himself to be put down for the Academy. They, in their turn, served him faithfully. It would have been a cruel betrayal to deny them a funeral service and I am sure my father had them in mind when he omitted any provision against it in his will. He was an exact man who would not have forgotten a point of that kind. On the other hand he was a dogmatic atheist of the old-fashioned cast and would not have set anything down which might be construed as apostasy. He had left it to my Uncle Andrew's tact. No doubt, too, it was part of my uncle's tact to save me the embarrassment of being present.

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I sat on my verandah for some time, smoking and considering the situation in its various aspects. There seemed no good reason for a change of plan. My Uncle Andrew would see to everything. The Jellabys would be provided for. Apart from them my father had no obligations. His affairs were always simple and in good order. The counterfoils of his cheques and his own excellent memory were his 'only account books; he had never owned any investments except the freehold of the house in St. John's Wood which he had bought with the small capital sum left him by my mother. He lived up to his income and saved nothing. In him the parsimony which I had inherited took the form of a Gallic repugnance to paying direct taxes or, as he preferred it, to subscribing to 'the support of the politicians'. He had, moreover, the conviction that anything he put by would be filched by the Radicals. Lloyd George's ascent to power was the last contemporary event to impress him. Since then he believed, or professed to believe, that public life had become an open conspiracy for the destruction of himself and his class. This class, of

which he considered himself the sole survivor, and its ways were for him the object of romantic loyalty ; he spoke of it as a Jacobite clan proscribed and dispersed after Culloden, in a way which sometimes embarrassed those who did not know him well. 'We have been uprooted and harried,' he would say. 'There are only three classes in England now, politicians, tradesmen, and slaves.' Then he would particularize. 'Seventy years ago the politicians and the tradesmen were in alliance; they destroyed the gentry by destroying the value of land ; some of the gentry became politicians themselves, others tradesmen; out of what was left they created the new class into which I was born, the moneyless, landless, educated gentry who managed the country for them. My grandfather was a Canon of Christ Church, my father was in the Bengal Civil Service. The capital they left their sons was their education and their moral principles. Now the politicians are in alliance with the slaves to destroy the tradesmen. They don't need to bother about us. We are extinct already, I am a Dodo,' he used to say, defiantly staring at his audience. 'You, my poor son, are a petrified egg.' There is a caricature of him by Max Beerbohm, in this posture, saying these words.

My father seldom referred to his contemporaries without the epithet 'old'—usually as 'poor old so-and-so', unless they had prospered conspicuously, when they were 'that old humbug'. On the other hand he spoke of men a few years his junior as 'whippersnappers' and 'young puppies'. The truth was that he could not bear to think of anyone as being the same age as himself. It was all part of the aloofness that was his dominant concern in life. It was enough for him to learn that an opinion of his had popular support for him to question and abandon it. His atheism was his response to the simple piety and confused agnosticism of his family circle. He never came to hear much about Marxism; had he done so he would, I am sure, have discovered a number of proofs of the existence of God. In his later years I observed two reversions of opinion in reaction to contemporary fashion. In my boyhood, in the time of their Edwardian popularity, he denounced the Jews roundly on all occasions, and later attributed to them the vogue for Post-impressionist painting—'There was a poor booby called Cézanne, a kind of village idiot who was given a box of paints to keep him quiet. He very properly left his horrible canvases behind him in the hedges. The jews discovered him and

crept round behind him picking them up—just to get something for nothing. Then when he was safely dead and couldn't share in the profits they hired a lot of mercenary lunatics to write him up. They've made thousands out of it.' To the last he maintained that Dreyfus had been guilty, but when, in the early 'thirties, anti-Semitism showed signs of becoming a popular force, he justly pointed out in an unpublished letter to the *Times*, that the prime guilt in that matter lay with Gentile Prussians.

Similarly he was used to profess an esteem for Roman Catholics. 'Their religious opinions are preposterous,' he said. 'But so were those of the ancient Greeks. Think of Socrates spending half his last evening babbling about the topography of the nether world. Grant them their first absurdities and you will find Roman Catholics a reasonable people—and they have civilized habits.' Later, however, when he saw signs of this view gaining acceptance, he became convinced of the existence of a Jesuit conspiracy to embroil the world in war, and wrote several letters to the *Times* on the subject; they, too, were unpublished. But in neither of these periods did his opinions greatly affect his personal relations: Jews and Catholics were among his closest friends all his life.

My father dressed as he thought a painter should, in a distinct and recognizable garb which made him a familiar and, in his later years, a venerable figure as he took his exercise in the streets round his house. There was no element of ostentation in his poncho capes, check suits, sombrero hats and stock ties. It was rather that he thought it fitting for a man to proclaim unequivocally his station in life, and despised those of his colleagues who seemed to be passing themselves off as guardsmen and stockbrokers. In general he liked his fellow academicians, though I never heard him express anything but contempt for their work. He regarded the Academy as a club; he enjoyed the dinners and frequently attended the schools, where he was able to state his views on art in Johnsonian terms. He never doubted that the function of painting was representational. He criticized his colleagues for such faults as incorrect anatomy, 'triviality' and 'insincerity'. For this he was loosely spoken of as a Conservative, but that he never was where his art was concerned. He abominated the standards of his youth. He must have been an intransigent old-fashioned young man, for he was brought up in the

hey-day of Whistlerian decorative painting and his first exhibited work was of a balloon ascent in Manchester—a large canvas crowded with human drama, in the manner of Frith. His practice was chiefly in portraits—many of them posthumous—for presentation to Colleges and Guildhalls. He seldom succeeded with women, whom he endowed with a statuesque absurdity which was half deliberate, but given the robes of a Doctor of Music or a Knight of Malta and he would do something fit to hang with the best panelling in the country; given some whiskers and he was a master. 'As a young man I specialized in hair,' he would say, rather as a doctor might say he specialized in noses and throats. 'I paint it incomparably. Nowadays nobody has any to paint,' and it was this aptitude of his which led him to the long increasingly unsaleable series of historical and scriptural groups, and the scenes of domestic melodrama by which he is known—subjects which had already become slightly ludicrous when he was in his cradle, but which he continued to produce year after year, while experimental painters came and went until, right at the end of his life, he suddenly, without realizing it, found himself in the fashion. The first sign of this was in 1929 when his 'Agag before Samuel' was bought at a provincial exhibition for 750 guineas. It was a large canvas at which he had been at work intermittently since 1908. Even he spoke of it, with conscious understatement, as 'something of a white elephant'. White elephants, indeed, were almost the sole species of four-footed animals that were not, somewhere, worked into this elaborate composition. When asked why he had introduced such a variety of fauna, he replied, 'I'm sick of Samuel. I've lived with him for twenty years. Every time it comes back from an exhibition I paint out a Jew and put in an animal. If I live long enough I'll have a Noah's ark in its background.'

The purchaser of this work was Sir Lionel Sterne.

'Honest Sir Lionel,' said my father, as he saw the great canvas packed off to Kensington Palace Gardens. 'I should dearly have liked to shake his hairy paw. I can see him well—a fine, meaty fellow with a great gold watchchain across his belly, who's been decently employed boiling soap or smelting copper all his life, with no time to read Clive Bell. In every age it has been men like him who kept painting alive.'

I tried to explain that Lionel Sterne was the youthful and

elegant millionaire who for ten years had been a leader of æsthetic fashion. 'Nonsense!' said my father. 'Fellows like that collect disjointed negresses by Gauguin. Only Philistines like my work and, by God, I only like Philistines.'

There was also another, rather less reputable side to my father's business. He received a regular yearly retaining fee from Goodchild and Godley, the Duke Street dealers, for what was called 'restoration'. This sum was a very important part of his income; without it the comfortable little dinners, the trips abroad, the cabs to and fro between St. John's Wood and the Athenæum, the faithful, predatory Jellabys, the orchid in his buttonhole—all the substantial comforts and refinements which endeared the world and provided him with his air of gentlemanly ease—would have been impossible to him. The truth was that, while excelling at helix, my father could paint, very passably, in the manner of almost any of the masters of English portraiture, and the private and public collections of the New World were richly representative of his versatility. Very few of his friends knew this traffic; to those who did, he defended it with complete candour. 'Goodchild and Godley buy these pictures for what they are—my own work. They pay me no more than my dexterity merits. What they do with them afterwards is their own business. It would ill become me to go officiously about the markets identifying my own handicrafts and upsetting a number of perfectly contented people. It is a great deal better for them to look at beautiful pictures and enjoy them under a misconception about the date, than to make themselves dizzy by goggling at genuine Picassos.'

It was largely on account of his work for Goodchild and Godley that his studio was strictly reserved as a workshop. It was a separate building approached through the garden and it was excluded from general use. Once a year, when he went abroad, it was 'done out'; once a year, on the Sunday before sending-in day at the Royal Academy, it was open to his friends. He took a peculiar pleasure from the gloom of these annual tea-parties and was at the same pains to make them dismal as he was on all other occasions to enliven his entertainments. There was a species of dry, bright-yellow, caraway cake which was known to my childhood as 'Academy cake', which appeared then, and only then, from a grocer in Praed Street; there was an

enormous Worcester tea-service—a wedding present—which was known as 'Academy cups'; there were 'Academy sandwiches'—tiny, triangular and quite tasteless. All these things were part of my earliest memories. I do not know at what date these parties changed from being a rather tedious convention to what they certainly were to my father at the end of his life, a huge, grim and solitary jest. If I was in England I was required to attend and to bring a friend or two. It was difficult, until the last two years when, as I have said, my father became the object of fashionable interest, to collect guests. 'When I was a young man,' my father said, sardonically surveying the company, 'there were twenty or more of these parties in St. John's Wood alone. People of culture drove round from three in the afternoon to six, from Camden Hill to Hampstead. To-day I believe our little gathering is the sole survivor of that deleterious tradition.'

On these occasions his year's work—Goodchild and Godley's items excepted—would be ranged round the studio on mahogany easels; the most important work had a wall to itself against a background of scarlet rep. I had been present at the last of the parties the year before. The recollection was remarkable. Lionel Sterne was there, Lady Metroland and a dozen fashionable connoisseurs. My father was at first rather suspicious of his new clients and suspected an impertinent intrusion into his own private joke, a calling of his bluff of seed-cake and cress sandwiches; but their commissions reassured him. People did not carry a joke to such extravagant lengths. Mrs. Algernon Stitch paid 500 guineas for his picture of the year—a tableau of contemporary life conceived and painted with elaborate mastery. My father attached great importance to suitable titles for his work, and after toying with 'The People's Idol', 'Feet of Clay', 'Not on the First Night', 'Their Night of Triumph', 'Success and Failure', 'Not Invited', 'Also Present', he finally called this picture rather enigmatically 'The Neglected Cue'. It represented the dressing-room of a leading actress at the close of a triumphant first night. She sat at the dressing-table, her back turned on the company and her face visible in the mirror, momentarily relaxed in fatigue. Her protector, with proprietary swagger, was filling the glasses for a circle of admirers. In the background the dresser was in colloquy at the half-open door with an elderly couple of provincial appearance; it is evident from their costume that they

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have seen the piece from the cheaper seats and a commissionaire stands behind them uncertain whether he did right in admitting them. He did not do right: they are her old parents arriving most inopportunately. There was no questioning Mrs. Stitch's rapturous enjoyment of her acquisition.

I was never to know how my father would react to his vogue. He could paint in any way he chose; perhaps he would have embarked on those vague assemblages of picnic litter which used to cover the walls of the Mansard Gallery in the early 'twenties; he might have retreated to the standards of the Grosvenor Galleries in the 'nineties. He might, perhaps, have found popularity less unacceptable than he supposed, and allowed himself a luxurious and cosseted old age. He died with his 1932 picture still unfinished. I saw its early stage on my last visit to him; it represented an old shipwright pondering on the idle dockyard where lay the great skeleton of the Cunarder that was later to be known as the *Queen Mary*. It was to have been called 'Too big.' My father had given the man a grizzled beard and was revelling in it. That was the last time I saw him.

I had given up living in St. John's Wood for four or five years. There was never a definite moment when I 'left home'. For all official purposes the house remained my domicile. There was a bedroom that was known as mine; I kept several trunks full of clothes there and a shelf or two of books. I never set up for myself anywhere else, but during the last five years of my father's life I do not suppose I slept ten nights under his roof. This was not due to any estrangement. I enjoyed his company and he seemed to enjoy mine; had I settled there permanently, with a servant of my own and a separate telephone number, we might have lived together comfortably enough, but I was never in London for more than a week or two at a time and I found that as an occasional visitor I strained and upset my father's household. He and they tried to do too much, and he liked to have his plans clear for some way ahead. 'My dear boy,' he would say on my first evening, 'Please do not misunderstand me. I hope you will stay as long as you possibly can, but I do wish to know whether you will still be here on Thursday the fourteenth, and if so, whether you will be in to dinner.' So I took to staying at my club or with more casual hosts, and to visiting St. John's Wood as often as I could, but with formal prearrangement.

Nevertheless, I realized, the house had been an important part of my life. It had remained unaltered for as long as I could remember. It was a decent house, built in 1840 or thereabouts, in the contemporary Swiss mode of stucco and ornamental weatherboards, one of a street of similar, detached houses when I first saw it. By the time of my father's death the transformation of the district, though not complete, was painfully evident. The skyline of the garden was broken on three sides by blocks of flats. The first of them drove my father into a frenzy of indignation. He wrote to the *Times* about it, addressed a meeting of ratepayers and for six weeks sported a board advertising the house for sale. At the end of that time he received a liberal offer from the syndicate, who wished to extend their block over the site, and he immediately withdrew it from the market. 'I could tell they were Jews', he said, 'by the smell of their notepaper.'

This was in his anti-Semitic period; it was also the period of his lowest professional fortunes, when his subject pictures remained unsold, the market for dubious old masters was dropping, and public bodies were beginning to look for something 'modern' in their memorial portraits; the period, moreover, when I had finished with the University and was still dependent on my father for pocket money. It was a very unsatisfactory time in his life. I had not then learned to appreciate the massive defences of what people call the 'border line of sanity' and I was at moments genuinely afraid that my father was going out of his mind; there had always seemed an element of persecution mania about his foibles which might, at a time of great strain, go beyond his control. He used to stand on the opposite pavement watching the new building rise, a conspicuous figure muttering objurgations. I used to imagine scenes in which a policeman would ask him to move on and be met with a wild outburst. I imagined these scenes vividly—my father in swirling cape being hustled off, waving his umbrella. Nothing of the kind occurred. My father, for all his oddity, was a man of indestructible sanity, and in his later years he found a keen pleasure in contemplating the rapid deterioration of the hated buildings. 'Very good news of Hill Crest Court,' he announced one day, 'Typhoid and rats.' And on another occasion, 'Jellaby reports the presence of tarts at St. Eustace's. They'll have a suicide there soon, you'll see.' There was a suicide, and for two rapturous days my father watched the

coming and going of police and journalists. After that fewer chintz curtains were visible in the windows, rents began to fall and the lift-man smoked on duty. My father observed and gleefully noted all these signs. Hill Crest Court changed hands; decorator's, plumber's and electrician's boards appeared all round it; a commissionaire with a new uniform stood at the doors. On the last evening I dined with my father he told me about a visit he had made there, posing as a potential tenant. 'The place is a deserted slum,' he said. 'A miserable, down-at-heel kind of secretary took me round flat after flat—all empty. There were great cracks in the concrete stuffed up with putty. The hot pipes were cold. The doors jammed. He started asking £300 a year for the best of them and dropped to £175 before I saw the kitchen. Then he made it £150. In the end he proposed what he called a "special form of tenancy for people of good social position"—offered to let me live there for a pound a week on condition I turned out if he found someone who was willing to pay the real rent. "Strictly between ourselves," he said, "I can promise you will not be disturbed." Poor beast, I nearly took his flat, he was so paintable.'

Now, I suppose, the house would be sold; another speculator would pull it to pieces; another great, uninhabitable barrack would appear, like a refugee ship in harbour; it would be filled, sold, emptied, resold, refilled, re-emptied, while the concrete got discoloured and the green wood shrank, and the rats crept up in their thousands out of the Metropolitan Railway tunnel; and the trees and gardens all round it disappeared one by one until the place became a working-class district and at last took on a gaiety and life of some sort; until it was condemned by government inspectors and its inhabitants driven further into the country and the process began all over again.

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Uncle Andrew gave me the keys of my father's house. I went straight there from lunching with him. The shutters were up and the curtains drawn; the water and electric light were already cut off; all this my uncle had accomplished in a few days. I stumbled among sheeted furniture to the windows and let in the daylight. I went from room to room in this way. The place still retained its own smell—an agreeable, rather stuffy atmosphere of

cigar smoke and cantaloup; a masculine smell—women had always seemed a little out of place there, as in a London Club on Coronation Day.

The house was sombre but never positively shabby, so that, I suppose, various imperceptible renovations and replacements must have occurred from time to time. It looked what it was, the house of an unfashionable artist of the 1880's. The curtains and chair-covers were of indestructible Morris tapestry; there were Dutch tiles round the fireplaces; Levantine rugs on the floors; on the walls, Arundel prints, photographs from the old masters, and majolica dishes. The furniture, now shrouded, had the inimitable air of having been in the same place for a generation; it was a harmonious, unobtrusive jumble of inherited rosewood and mahogany, and of inexpensive collected pieces of carved German oak, Spanish walnut, English chests and dressers, copper ewers and brass candlesticks. Every object was familiar and yet so much a part of its surroundings that later, when they came to be moved, I found a number of things which I barely recognized. Books, of an antiquated sort, were all over the house in a variety of hanging, standing and revolving shelves.

I opened the French windows in my father's study and stepped down into the garden. There was little of Spring to be seen here. The two plane trees were bare; under the sooty laurels last year's leaves lay rotting. It was never a garden of any character. Once, before the flats came, we used to dine there sometimes, in extreme discomfort under the catalpa tree; for years now it had been a no-man's-land isolating the studio at the further end; on one side, behind a trellis, were some neglected frames and beds where my father had once tried to raise French vegetables. The mottled concrete of the flats, with its soil pipes and fire escapes and its rash of iron-framed casement windows, shut off half the sky. The tenants of these flats were forbidden, in their leases, to do their laundry, but the owners had long since despaired of a genteel appearance, and you could tell which of the rooms were occupied by the stockings hanging to dry along the window-sills.

In his death my father's privacy was still respected and no one had laid dustsheets in the studio. '*Too Big?*' stood as he had left it on the easel. More than half was finished. My father made copious and elaborate studies for his pictures and worked quickly when he came to their final stage, painting over a monochrome

sketch, methodically, in fine detail, left to right across the canvas as though he were lifting the backing of a child's 'transfer'. 'Do your thinking *first*,' he used to tell the Academy students. 'Don't muddle it out on the canvas. Have the whole composition clear in your head before you start,' and if anyone objected that this was seldom the method of the greatest masters, he would say, 'You're here to become Royal Academicians, not great masters. This was the way Ford Madox Brown worked and it will be a great day for English art when one of you is half as good as he was. If you want to write books on Art, trot round Europe studying the Rubenses, If you want to learn to paint, watch me.' The four or five square feet of finished painting were a monument of my father's art. There had been a time when I had scant respect for it. Lately I had come to see that it was more than a mere matter of dexterity and resolution. He had an historic position, for he completed a period of English painting that through other circumstances had never, until him, come to maturity. Phrases, as though for an obituary article, came to my mind—' . . . fulfilling the broken promise of the young Millais . . . Winterhalter suffused with the spirit of Dickens . . . English painting as it might have been, had there not been any Æsthetic Movement . . . the age of the Prince Consort in contrast to the age of Victoria . . . ' and with the phrases my esteem for my father took form and my sense of loss became tangible and permanent.

No good comes of this dependence on verbal forms. It saves nothing in the end. Suffering is none the less acute and much more lasting when it is put into words. In the house my memories had been all of myself—of the countless homecomings and departures of thirty-three years, of adolescence like a stained tablecloth—but in the studio my thoughts were of my father, and grief, nearly a week delayed, overtook and overwhelmed me. It had been delayed somewhat by the strangeness of my surroundings and the business of travel, but most by this literary habit; it had lacked words. Now the words came; I began, in my mind, to lament my father with prose cadences and classical allusions, addressing, as it were, a funeral oration to my own literary memories, and sorrow, dammed and canalized, flowed fast.

For the civilized man there are none of those swift transitions of joy and pain which possess the savage; words form slowly like pus about his hurts; there are no clean wounds for him; first a

numbness, then a long festering, then a scar ever ready to reopen. Not until they have assumed the livery of the defence can his emotions pass through the lines; sometimes they come massed in a wooden horse, sometimes as single spies, but there is always a Fifth Column among the garrison ready to receive them. Sabotage behind the lines, a blind raised and lowered at a lighted window, a wire cut, a bolt loosened, a file disordered—that is how the civilized man is undone.

I returned to the house and darkened the rooms once more, relaid the dust-sheets I had lifted and left everything as it had been.

LETTER FROM FRANCE—II

(JULY)

DEAREST COMRADE, I had meant to write to you again sooner and had hoped to reach you through a better and safer channel. But this failed, so I am trying the ordinary post again. It seems practicable.

Well, things have indeed happened since my last letter, which is now pretty much out of date. It is difficult to tell which sort of things you are better and which sort less well informed about than we are, as far as French affairs are concerned. No doubt you have much more serious information than we have about many things, still even our wilder gossip and rumours may give you an impression of the general atmosphere; so here is a rather random account of things as I see them now. First and foremost as to general public opinion. My last letter was written when opinion was crystallizing after the first stunning effects of the catastrophe. Now, in spite of wild fluctuations of hope and fear there can no longer be any doubt that 80 per cent of the population in the unoccupied zone (even according—I have this on the best authority—to official Vichy police reports) and by unanimous consent 99 per cent in the occupied zone are anti-German and pro-British. Hope reached its height at the moment of the Yugoslav *coup d'état*, when there was a real wave of enthusiasm throughout the country. The demonstrations at Marseilles were very violent. Then depression supervened again at the German successes in the Balkans. Now this is passing away again, especially