Three Houses

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Part One

The Grange

I suppose every one has a mental picture of the days of the week, some seeing them as a circle, some as an endless line, and others again, for all I know, as cubes and triangles. Mine is a wavy line proceeding to infinity, dipping to Wednesday which is the colour of old silver dark with polishing and rising again to a pale gold Sunday. This day has a feeling in my picture of warmth and light breezes and sunshine and afternoons that stretch to eternity and mornings full of far-off bells. How varying are the evocations of bells. They have almost as much power to startle a memory to life as the odours which annihilate the years between us and our childhood. Wherever I am

in the world, a grey warm Sunday with the sound of bells coming damped through quiet unceasing rain will mean Oxford to me. In the underworld, twelve thousand miles away, that sound of bells in steady rain has translated me for a moment to Oxford in early summer and the scented drip from haw thorn and laburnum. And even now to hear bells in London on a June morning makes me lose the many intervening years and go back to a pale gold Sunday when the sun shone on an endless leisured day.

Long ago – say thirty-five years ago – a little girl used to wake on Sunday morning feeling that a whole life of happiness lay before her in the day. She had a low bed in her mother's room and her mother had a four-post bed with thick curtains patterned with birds. If it was not too early and her mother was awake she was allowed to get into the big bed and have conversations till the dressing gong rang and the smell of sausages began to rise from the kitchen. Sunday sausages: what a world of emotion in the words. Sacred Sunday Sausages, I had almost said. There can be no other dish which so obviously fits the day, especially with bread fried in the same pan. Some

are fat and burst in the middle; others have a little twist at the end which we called the nightcap; but all are divine.

What a pleasant leisurely meal was Sunday breakfast. There was no motor to be propitiated and all one's friends were in town and could be visited later in the day, so breakfast could go slowly from sausages to scones and butter and honey, and then to strawberries and cherries. The little girl's mother would read aloud afterwards while we all sat at the table and pushing aside cups and plates drew pictures out of whatever book was being read. During a reading of *Burnt Njal* one of the children drew an imaginary portrait of Skarphedinn and he was used to mark the places in all our Sunday morning books till 'Skarphedinn' became synonymous with 'bookmarker' in the family.

So breakfast took its leisurely course till eleven o'clock or so when we had to go upstairs and be cleaned and dressed for Sunday lunch with our grandparents. Perhaps the golden haze is needed when we come to Sunday clothes, for they were a little inhuman compared with the freedom of today. My brother may have been let off comparatively lightly with blue

blouse and knickerbockers, a holland smock, brown shoes and socks, and a sailor hat whose elastic was always too tight or too loose; but for me there was the ordeal of Starch. Buttonholes starched so stiffly together that one couldn't force the buttons into them; starched petticoats which were rather fun to put on because they crackled so as you pulled the folds apart, but had complications of starched tapes at the neck which needed Nanny's relentless fingers; white piqué frocks with full sleeves standing up like crinolines and all the hooks ironed flat so that Nanny had to lever them open with the nursery nail-scissors; white pinafores with frills round the neck; white cotton gloves, well stiffened, into which one's hot hands were with difficulty thrust; black shoes and long stockings and then the straw hat with a wreath of flowers and the inevitable elastic. How it hurt when it was half an inch too short and how inelegant it looked when Nanny had tied a knot in the middle to shorten it.

At last we were ready and set out with our father and mother for North End Lane, Fulham. All that neighbourhood is genteel now and the street is called North End Road, West Kensington, but while this

golden Sunday lasts we need not think of changes. We went up Young Street from Kensington Square, past the old shops at the corner, past John Barker's little drapery establishment, and got into a red horse bus opposite the church. Six on each side inside and fourteen outside – how small it sounds now. The table of fares, hand-painted, with its convention of a wiggly line connecting stopping-places and fares did not hold more than a dozen names. On we went, past the old brick houses standing back on both sides of the road then, past the leafage of Holland Park, past more terraces of old houses and over the railway bridge. No buses went down North End Lane and we walked along past early eighteenth-century houses, each in its own garden of elms and cedars and mulberries. The air was warm, the sun shone on the blossoming trees hanging over the brick walls, and so we came to The Grange.

The Grange stood a little back from the road behind a brick wall with an iron gate in it. A short flagged path led to the low front door. It had a glazed upper half and green silk curtains to prevent people looking in, but people of the right size could always

look through the letter-box. The low square hall must once have been a front parlour, but it had been thrown into the passage and made a pleasant room to play in, heated in winter by a large green earthenware stove called Pither. At its further end were the stairs and a long passage leading to the drawing-room and the door to the kitchen quarters.

On Sunday my grandparents kept open house. Two or three extra places were laid at lunch for any friends who might drop in, but whoever came, I sat next to my grandfather. I was allowed to blow into the froth of his beer 'to make a bird's nest', or to have all the delicious outside from the mashed potatoes when they had been browned in the oven. If, disregarding truth, I said that at home my toast was always buttered on both sides, my statement was gravely accepted and the toast buttered accordingly. There can have been few granddaughters who were so systematically spoilt as I was and it is a legend that the only serious difference of opinion which ever arose between Gladstone and Burne-Jones was as to which of them spoilt an adored grandchild the more.

After lunch my grandfather often settled down to a game of draughts, which was a good moment for my

brother and myself to escape and do a little exploring upstairs. My grandparents surprisingly clung to the Victorian convention of a drugget, and though a thick-piled Morris carpet was on the stairs I do not remember ever seeing it without its cover. At the top of the staircase was a long landing with rooms opening off it, but just in front of us three broad shallow steps went up to the studio. Their banisters curled outwards at the bottom and a child could squeeze comfortably behind them and be in a little house. At the top of these steps a window on the right looked out over the large garden next door. Here too was kept a kind of gigantic tin bath on wheels, painted red, filled with water in case of fire.

It was a lucky day if we were able to slip into the studio which was as a rule absolutely forbidden. Sinister people called 'models' lived there who had trays taken up to them at lunch and tea-time. There was a strange smell of oil and turpentine. It was very easy to lose things. My necklace or pencil, once rashly pushed through the grating in the floor where the hot-water pipes lived, was irrecoverable. Even more rashly one might push one's belongings through one of

those mysterious S-shaped holes by which the studio seats and stands were picked up and carried about. This done, they would rattle about till doomsday, like the silver eggspoon which my brother put down the hole of the rocking-horse's pommel, and nothing would get them out. Then there were gloomy corners fenced off by canvases where at any moment one might bring an easel clattering down on one's head or upset a little china pipkin full of some precious mixture. As long as I can remember there was a studio man who stoked the furnace, did odd jobs, and kept the brushes and palettes clean. The first studio man we knew was called William, because his name was so impossibly Albert. He had been in South Africa and I remember crying with rage when he confessed, under severe cross-examination, that the Kaffir children were more like my brother's shoes which were dull black than like mine which were patent leather. He was replaced in time by Pendry, a strange dwarfish creature who could play the Jew's harp with exquisite skill and imitate Punch, and convulsed the nursery by pretending to fall down with fright at the dragons on a Chinese rug.

Beyond the big studio was an inner room, down a few steps, a place of great danger to us, for here lived the lay-figure, its arms and legs at preposterous angles, its papier-mâché head perched rakishly on its long neck. By daylight we jeered at it and it was known as 'Silly', but we had some dread of its possible powers by night. From this room a door led to my grandmother's sitting-room, but it was never used. It was in this sitting-room, papered with the Pomegranate pattern on a dark blue ground, that I had my only remembered sight of William Morris of whom, although he was such an old friend and so often at the house, we children saw but little. It is entirely unworthy of notice except for the peculiar circumstances which imprinted it on my memory. I was trying to read a book which I had laid on the carpet, while my body and legs were on the sofa and my elbows on the floor. This attitude of extreme discomfort appears to have been necessary to make me notice the old man (or so I thought him), with the aggressive mop of white hair who was talking, between fits of coughing, to my grandmother.

Having succeeded in visiting the studio unseen, it was just as well to slip away again before our absence

was noticed, so we decided to give the kitchen the pleasure of our company and ran downstairs and along the back part of the hall. Here under the stairs lived another red fire-bath – I really don't know what else to call it – and yards of neatly coiled canvas hose which I am sure no one would have known how to use if there had been any danger. On the other side of the hall was the service hatch to the kitchen, but looking through it we found that the inhabitants were still sitting at dinner, so we judged it better to keep away for the present. At this point there was a choice of pleasures. We could go into the drawing-room and so through the French windows to the garden, or take the long passage with the skylight. This route had the advantage of avoiding the grown-ups who would probably want to stop one doing what one wanted, or make one do something one didn't want to do, so we went quickly down the passage past the filter. The long narrow store-cupboard on the left was unfortunately kept locked, or we might have put in some good work among the currants and lump sugar. The garden, full of sunshine, gleamed alluringly through the open door at the end of the passage, and out we ran.

As soon as we were out of the house we might have been in the country. Gardens surrounded us on all sides and only a few years earlier there had been fields behind the little orchard which bounded the further end. Ugly brick houses had been built since then, but they were hidden by the long white rough-cast studio which stood between the orchard and the road. It was called the Garden Studio, and here my grandfather worked on his larger canvases. It was a little alarming to us: the red-tiled entrance and steps which led down to the furnace-room where we were never allowed to go and anything, one felt, might live; the iron grills in the floor to let in the warm air for winter days; the tall narrow slit in the outer wall through which finished pictures were passed. Sometimes these pictures went to exhibitions, but more often straight to the friend or patron (in the very best sense of the word) who had commissioned them and was content to wait for years if need be for the perfect expression of the artist's mind. In this studio there was a very high set of steps with a higher and lower platform on which the artist worked at the upper portions of his picture. I remember sitting on

these steps, my head wrapped in a many-coloured piece of silk and bound with a coronet, while my grandfather made studies of crown and drapery for one of the mourning queens in the great unfinished picture of Arthur in Avalon which is now in the Tate Gallery. Here too he was working at the time of his death on the picture – also unfinished – of the Car of Love, now at South Kensington, where Love, standing in a great brazen chariot, is drawn through the thundering streets of some imagined city by a throng of his worshippers, some happy, some stabbed with pain, but all his slaves.

Because there is a certain likeness between the little girl who wore the coronet and some of her grandfather's pictures, she has often been asked whether she sat for him. As far as I remember he never used me as a model except on that one occasion when I wore the crown and veil. Nor in any case could he have drawn me often, as I was not yet eight years old when he died. Neither did my mother who was pure 'Burne-Jones type' sit for him much. The curious thing is – and it ought to open a fresh field of enquiry into heredity – that the type which my

grandfather evolved for himself was transmitted to some of his descendants. In his earlier pictures there is a reflection of my grandmother in large-eyed women of normal, or almost low stature, as against the excessively long-limbed women of his later style. But the hair of these early women is not hers, it is the hair of Rossetti's women, the masses of thick wavy hair which we knew in 'Aunt Janey', the beautiful Mrs William Morris. When I remember her, Aunt Janey's hair was nearly white, but there were still the same masses of it, waving from head to tip. To any one who knew her, Rossetti's pictures – with the exception of his later exaggerated types – were absolutely true. The large deep-set eyes, the full lips, the curved throat, the overshadowing hair, were all there. Even in her old age she looked like a queen as she moved about the house in long white draperies, her hands in a white muff, crowned by her glorious hair.

But when my grandfather began to develop in a different direction from his master Gabriel he saw in his mind a type of woman who was to him the ultimate expression of beauty. Whenever he saw a

woman who approached his vision he used her, whether model or friend. Some of my grandparents' lasting friendships were begun in chance encounters with a 'Burne-Jones face' which my grandfather had to find a way of knowing. As my mother grew up she was the offspring of her father's vision and the imprint of this vision has lasted to a later generation. I do not know of another case in which the artist's ideal has taken such visible shape as in my mother. If the inheritance were more common one would have to be far more careful in choosing one's artist forbears. El Greco, for instance, or Rowlandson, would be responsible for such disastrous progeny from the point of view of looks.

From the Garden Studio we might have been tempted to make a forbidden excursion into the street, but the outer door was locked so back we ran into the little orchard. Small enough it was, but large enough to a child, with space to sling a hammock from pear-tree to apple-tree and a green bench for grown-ups and a bank to roll down. In those days soot had not choked the blossom and there were plenty of windfalls in autumn for us to eat when Nanny's eye was not on us.

On the other side of the orchard was a little shrubbery where the gardener kept his tools and had a huge rubbish heap and grew a few pot-herbs. The place was memorable to me because I once in a fit of unwonted zeal weeded up a whole bed of spring onions. The gardener did not approve of our presence here, so we went round by the great flowering elder-tree and came back on to the lawn behind the house. Here, against the south wall, was an immemorial mulberry-tree, its spreading boughs supported by posts and the cracks in its ancient bark plastered with cement. After the fashion of mulberry-trees it was good to climb and good to stain one's pinafore. Near it, also against the wall, was a little grassy mound known as Pillicock Hill. You will remember Edgar's song in King Lear, 'Pillicock sat on Pillicock-hill', and there was a nursery rhyme,

Pillicock sat on Pillicock's hill.
If he's not gone he lives there still.

Sometimes on my brother's birthday my grandmother had a Punch and Judy show on the lawn, as much

for our grandfather's pleasure as for ours. He had the highest admiration for Punch and said of him: 'I really do think Punch is the noblest play in the whole world. He's such a fine character, so cheerful, he's such a poet, he chirrups and sings whole operas that are not yet written down, till the world bursts in upon him in the shape of domestic life and the neighbours.' There was also a legend that my grandmother had once given a garden party with the Blue Hungarian band, but that was so unlike all we knew of our grandparents that we accepted the tale with utmost caution. The only circumstance that we knew in any way paralleling it was when some ladies and gentlemen came on a winter afternoon to see pictures and we were sent for to the drawing-room after tea. The big room was dimly lit, its Dürers and Mantegnas barely visible, and seeing strangers I felt it incumbent on me as hostess to welcome them by flinging my arms round their necks. One of the ladies knelt down and let me hug her properly, but the tall gentleman was very stiff and though I tugged at his hand he wouldn't bend. It wasn't till much later that our scandalised Nanny informed us that the kneeling

lady was called Alexandra and was a princess. The tall stiff gentleman was Prince Charles of Denmark then, the King of Norway now.

On the grass, among the pear-trees and apple-trees, we played for endless hours while people came and went with jingling and clip-clopping of hansoms between The Grange and other hospitable houses. The men played bowls on the lawn and smoked and talked and the women paced the gravel walk by the long flower-bed or joined them under the trees. Though we had been at The Grange for immemorial space, there was always time for further pleasures in those days when it was always afternoon. We might be put into a hansom and taken to other gardens with studios in them where our parents would talk and pace the paths and we would play among rose-trees and apple-trees and the very sooty creeping ivy peculiar to London gardens. All through the long afternoons the gardens waited for us. Draycott Lodge, where the Holman Hunts lived, Beavor Lodge and the Richmonds, The Vale, home of the De Morgans – all bricks and mortar now. Melbury Road, even then only a ghost of its old self where the Prinseps used to have their friends in a yet more golden

age and where Watts still lived. Grove End Road, with Tadema's stories which were so difficult to understand until his own infectious laugh warned you that he had reached the point, the agate window and the brazen stairs. Hampstead, Chelsea, Hammersmith, gardens were waiting for us everywhere and people who made noble pictures and were constant friends.

At last the long afternoon came to an end. A final visit to the kitchen regions to talk to Robert the parrot and examine the hatch for the hundredth time and the hansom was at the door. Then a drive home in the cool of the day and the little girl was allowed to sit up to supper in her dressing-gown and have baked potato with a great deal of butter till she was half asleep and was carried upstairs in her father's arms while he sang – very slowly, so that the nursery should not be reached before the song was ended:

My grandfather died, I cannot tell you how,
He left me six horses to gang with the plough . . .

One more long happy Sunday had joined the pale golden Sundays that are gone. Better – to us at any

rate – than Sundays now. Though these latter-day Sundays may be real enough, to us they are but the illusion and the bygone days the reality. There is always in our minds the hope that we may find again those golden unhastening days and wake up and dream.