

PART I. TRAILING CLOUDS OF GLORY

Chapter 1. Early Days in Cheltenham

I floated in on my especial cloud of glory on a beautiful spring Saturday morning, 14 April 1906, to be exact, at a few minutes to 10am, in my parents' house in Cheltenham Spa, England. It was Easter Eve and my father was ringing the bell for 10am matins at the fashionable All Saints Church. My mother – having never seen a newborn baby before – was horrified at the quaint, wet, red, screaming bit of flesh that was me. Bald as a bat, and bald I remained until I was quite a year old. And, to Mother's disgust, I was always being mistaken for a boy. She decided that I was to be named Frances (my father's second name), and Mary (her second name). She told the nurse that I would be proud to be named after both parents. The nurse grunted.

My father was ringing the bell because he was the verger, and it was one of his many and varied jobs. A verger is not a sexton, although in some country parishes, where the church is surrounded with the churchyard, a verger may combine the two jobs. A sexton digs and attends graves only. Cheltenham, having grown into a town, had a large cemetery on the outskirts for everyone. The old Cheltenham parish church had its rector. As the town grew so other churches were built and had their vicars.

The parish of All Saints was large and rich, with three curates and two lay readers, and a mission church at the poorer end of the parish. The church itself was built the year my father was born, 1881, and was considered a beautiful modern church. It was lit by the new electric light, and the motor of the organ was worked by electricity, and it was heated in the winter by hot pipes under iron grids let into the floor of the aisles. There were quite good stained windows, an elaborate font with a wrought iron canopy, an equally elaborate carved stone pulpit, a golden spread eagle was the lectern. And a high wrought iron screen separated both the sanctuary and the dainty Lady Chapel from the rest of the church. The organ was considered one of the best in the west of England. And there was a full choir of some 50 male voices, men and boys, under the choirmaster and organist, Mr T Grange.

All his life my father had lived in the parish; as soon as he was confirmed he became a server, and soon he always led the processions with the large cross. He knew exactly how many steps would take him to the sanctuary arch, so that he would lower the cross as he stepped up into the sanctuary, without looking at his feet. He would also work out the length of time the procession would take so that the hymn would be the right length. He was a very handsome man with a happy smiling face, and a deep, large penetrating voice and small but very clear bright blue eyes, but he was tone deaf and so they couldn't use him in the choir.

Religion was well organised in the Edwardian days. Everyone fitted in to their especial box, as it were. At least this was so in the parish of All Saints, with its vicar, three curates, two lay readers, Mothers' Union, Girls' Friendly Society, Boys' Brigade and Men's Society, Sunday Schools, etc, etc. The rich of the parish paid a yearly rent for their seats in the church, either side of the central aisle. When the bell had finished ringing the seats became unreserved, and the poorer gentry and those brave enough could take them. The sides of the church could be used by anyone – at night chiefly servants, allowed out every other Sunday evening to go to church. The west end of the church was used by strangers and those too humble to go in the centre. The poor, well, they worshipped at the other end of the parish in the Mission Church Hall, where the junior or third curate officiated, assisted by one of the lay readers. This curate was also in charge of all the social activities this end of the parish.

In the church three services were held every ordinary weekday at which the curates took turns on a roster to officiate. The senior curate was known unofficially as the 'Voice'. He had to be able to chant beautifully. That was his main job. He came into his own at Choral Communion on Sunday mornings. He also helped the vicar to grace the drawing rooms, and was usually a great favourite with the many spinster ladies. The second curate took Matins on Sunday and the vicar preached, and the Voice the Choral Communion which followed. Then, when it was children's service in the afternoon, the vicar took this. The Voice took Evensong and the second curate preached. The second curate was responsible for all the smooth running of the many social sides of the parish.

It all sounds a terrible business kind of affair, but really in those days it was the best thing for the masses. Even in Cheltenham, which did boast a theatre, one picture place, new public baths and library, there was little to do but drink. These large rich parishes did a great deal of good according to their limited outlook. Their servants were helped, protected and entertained by joining the GFS (Girls' Friendly Society). They were allowed time off to attend meetings, and every other Sunday evening to go to church... Somehow, the 'lower orders' didn't need so much church-going as their superiors! Perhaps that was something to do with the rich and the 'needle's eye'!

The more privileged were do-gooders, visited the cleaner of the houses of the poor, and told them how to run their house and children. District Visiting, it was called. Really, when you come to think of it, it was rather a cheek telling them how to run their homes, when they themselves couldn't boil an egg, or even do their own hair, and probably didn't have any children of their own. Then they took parcels of tea and other goodies to the elderly, and their left-off clothing to the poor. It was really all nice and cosy and would go on for years. Or would it? Our ideas of life, its meaning and God, change continually, and every 30 years or so we do a leap forward; sometimes, as in these recent years, a very large leap. In my 70 years we have made two huge leaps. But between 1906 and 1912, it was the lull before the storm.

Cheltenham Spa was a lush green pasture of respectability. It would not even allow the railway to run through the town. With its Spa, Pump Room, Rotunda, Promenade, Pittville Park, the Gentlemen's Club: it was a small, modern, genteel Bath. In the early 1900s, the population consisted mostly of retired service people from the colonies, chiefly India. Many widowers with their spinster daughters. Poor colourless creatures, only half alive. They were all of a pattern. After a spell at school in England, returning to Papa and Mama, at first full of romantic hopes. But usually Papa squashed these. The young officers were too junior, or not wealthy enough for their daughters. Every year the chances grew less, the petty domestic chores grew more. Usually Mama gave up the struggle and faded away to join the rest of her family in that wonderful heaven they all dreamed about. So the daughters retired to Cheltenham with Papa. There was nothing else they could do. So they continued to struggle with his temper, his half pay, and one maid of all work, known as the 'skivvy'. They tried to save a little, if possible, because when Papa died there was only a home for genteel ladies to look forward to in the end.

In the meantime they managed to pass the days in their little circle of respectability. How they managed to get by in the tiny villas they rented, the outside world never knew. Doing each other's hair, renovating dresses and hats, and washing out their hankies and drying them on the mirror so that they didn't need ironing... They still never carried parcels, however small. And it wasn't even the age of changing books in Boots (I do not think Mr Boot had got past his chemist's shop). Anyway, they didn't read much except aloud to Papa. In the mornings, in the Town Hall, they might 'take the waters' (which tasted like Kruschen Salts) and sit sipping on their glass while a string quartet sighed in a corner. They might whisper together of old times.

Once a week, in the afternoons, they tried to afford 1s 6d to hire an open carriage for the afternoon, and pay calls on each other. Then of course there was always church and district visiting. It is no wonder they appeared faded, and seldom managed more than a watery smile. They had never really lived.

There are many kinds of oppressed people. And from 1830 to 1914, in all strata of English society, women were certainly oppressed, even if sometimes subtly. And at the turn of the century they were certainly to be seen *en masse* in places like Bath, Cheltenham, Leamington, Worcester and most cathedral cities.

My father, Arthur Francis Waite, was born on 23 May 1881, the middle of three sons, and he had one sister. Other children died in infancy, and his father died the year I was born, so I did not know him. My grandmother favoured the eldest and youngest sons, and so my father and his sister had to get by – as it were – the best they could. Although their father was very fond of them both, he was not around very much, and he was a very quiet, gentle man, thoroughly ruled by his wife.

Arthur was born with his 'caul' still on his face. This was considered very lucky and he would never be drowned. Sailors always liked to have such a one on board, and would pay a great deal to get a caul. My grandmother would never sell it, but had it preserved on parchment. Arthur was very clever at school, particularly in maths. His headmaster realised he was a born teacher; he had the right temperament and understanding patience. Unfortunately, it was before the days of scholarships, and the working class thought it a great imposition that they were forced to send their children to school, when they could have been out at work earning money. I do not know at what age my father left school; but I do know his headmaster begged his mother to let him stay and be a pupil teacher, until he could get him into the teachers' college. Alas for him, his mother had made up her mind that he would be apprenticed to his father's trade of bricklayer, a very good trade at that time. The eldest son had not been a success and had ended up by going into the army, to his mother's sorrow, and stayed there until after the Boer War when he was invalided out.

So, my father began his trade as a bricklayer, but he continued to read everything he could lay his hands on. His Sunday School teacher helped him greatly, and the public library. He not only read textbooks and the classics, but thrillers as well. He told me how he used to be afraid to go up to bed after reading *Dracula*! He also learned to swim in the newly opened Baths, and found he was a natural. Later he took up football, first soccer and then rugby.

He didn't mind the bricklaying, but he hated the men and their dirty talking, bad language and drinking. I don't think he ever told a dirty story in his life, and when Geoffrey and I were children at home he never allowed even the word 'damn' to be used. He maintained swearing was 'the vulgar epithet of an ignorant mind!' He also joined the Territorials, but he hid his 'Red Jacket' in the loft because his mother so hated anything to do with the army.

During his boyhood he got into several physical adventures. Once playing and experimenting with fireworks, they blew up in his face. Fortunately his small but unusual blue eyes were not affected. I wonder if this accident was partly why he had such a clear and soft skin. On one of his first church outings, he got into some quicksand. He was rescued and his clothes cleaned so well that his mother knew nothing about it for some weeks. The first time he went to the sea he dived into shallow water, and knocked himself out. Fortunately he was seen and rescued, but he always warned us never to dive into strange waters. Again, he saw a boy have his eye flicked out by a wet cloth, playing – as boys will – flicking each other.

Towards the end of his apprenticeship my father became interested in electricity. When he was 24 years old he made two great changes in his life. First, he had at last persuaded my mother to

agree to marry him. Then the job of verger at All Saints fell vacant. This job would give him the real chance to break away into a new life. He would be what we now call a white-collar worker, which was a step up the social ladder anyway. He would be his own foreman, as it were, and could fit in any other jobs, and not only his sport and hobbies, but study this electricity as well.

So, after being married on 3 June 1905, my parents set up house on 25s a week (quite a princely sum in those days). Before I was a year old they had moved to a bigger house in All Saints Road, so that was the first one I can remember. Soon after he became verger my father let it be known that he would do any number of jobs that would not interfere with his work as verger. Two outstanding ones were helping undertakers with funerals and taking people out in Bath chairs. Bath chairs were very much a feature of life in Cheltenham at that time. There were elaborate dainty ones that invalid and elderly ladies rode in. There were ordinary basket kind of affairs that people hired. Lastly there was 'the fleet', if that is the word for the string of Bath chairs always outside the Gentlemen's Club.

I suppose Bath had them, but there were no others like them in Cheltenham. These chairs were made of shiny black wood. They had a large folding hood like a baby's pram would have. This and the leg-covering were made of some strong black waterproof material. Then a firm wood-framed window would be fixed in front so that the passenger had neither wind nor rain in his face. How he breathed was another matter. The very respectable, bent, elderly gentlemen's gentlemen that pushed or pulled these chairs looked as though they should have been in the chairs themselves. Even by the late 1920s there was still a handful of these chairs outside the Club.

My mother, whose parents were pure Irish Protestants, was born Alice Mary Powell on 11 November 1882, in the village of Cleeve in Somersetshire not far from Bristol. She was very beautiful, with thick, wavy black hair, clear but sallow skin, and the largest, sauciest deep blue eyes you can imagine. Full of mischief, unruly, unpredictable, and quite illogical. She had no idea of the value of money, good hearted, often in the wrong way. She always lived on her emotions – all of them – love, hate, sex, motherlove, sentiment, the lot. All her geese were swans. People were either her friends, or she just could not stand them. There were no in-betweens. My husband used to say she lived in the wrong period – she would have been a wonderful courtesan. In repose her face was almost sulky, not that it was often in repose. But when she smiled, especially at a male, no one could refuse her.

She was the younger of two daughters, and the youngest but one of six surviving children of Margaret and Jo Powell. Margaret was born a Dennis McCarthy, and died in childbirth when Alice was less than four years old. Margaret's mother must have been an exceptional woman; she was determined that one of her three daughters would have some education, and sent Margaret away to school for a short spell. This would have been in about the mid-1800s. After Margaret's death, Jo, still a young man with six small children, had several housekeepers, and then he married one, Mary Ann Brown, who was of Welsh descent. They had two boys and two girls.

After three years in the village school, my mother, who was big for her age, was sent as nursery maid when she was only eleven years old. No older than the children she helped to take care of, she taught herself to read from their books, and was writing poetry by the time she was about 17 years old. She married at 22, and how she survived all those years without being seduced is really a miracle. Perhaps it was the very fact that she was so full of fun and so interested in life that she was never still enough for sex to 'rear its ugly head'.

One could write a book on all her adventures and jobs before her marriage. Enough to say that she managed to escape from domestic service after a few years; first as a waitress in a Bristol hotel, and then as an assistant in a barber's shop, where they sold cigarettes and souvenirs as well.

It is interesting to note that she used to tell me that a packet of Woodbines (five in a packet for one penny) could be split and two sold for a halfpenny. Needless to say, if she liked a boy she gave him the extra cigarette!

While there she became engaged to a sailor who took her home to meet his family. His mother must have been rather a wonderful woman. She realised the almost impossible task this young girl was having trying to keep herself, so she suggested that Alice lodged with the family. Mother told me she taught her a number of really good things about running a house as well as personal things. Mother was very happy there, but in due time her sailor went back to sea, telling one of his brothers to take care of her. Alas, he did this so well he fell in love with her. Mother was very upset, as she was really still heart-free. She told his mother, and said she thought it would be better if she went right away. And so she went up to see her Aunt Maisey in Cheltenham to sort things out.

From her aunt's house in All Saints Road she took a job with Mrs Grange, the wife of the organist at All Saints Church. And so it was only a matter of time before these two charming, strong-willed, totally unsuited people would meet. On the eve of All Saints' Day there was always a special service, preceded by a parish party and dance for the young people. Mother was allowed to go, chaperoned by one of the curates. As soon as my father saw her he knew there was no other in his life for him. And that was so; he was one of those really rare men - a one-woman man.

Women always liked him – he was handsome and kindly, and listened to them and would always help them if he could – but Alice was his wife and she always came first. Often he did not understand her, but he would never let anyone say anything against her. We knew she never loved him as he did her, but it made no difference. When I arrived, he knew he was no longer first in her life and by the time the others had arrived he was a poor fifth, but it did not matter to him or decrease his love for Alice. He was in some ways a lonely man. During his last years, although very crippled, he struggled to make a home and garden for Alice and then, when he threatened to become bed-ridden, rather than have his Alice spend her life nursing him, he just bowed out of life.

My parents were married on 3 June 1905. I was an eight-months baby and my mother used to remark that it was a good thing they were married nine months before I was born. She was told she would never rear an eight-months baby, but, except that I was never very interested in food, I gave her no trouble.

Between the ages of two and a half and three years I remember certain events. After three, particularly my third Christmas, life took on a correct and continuous pattern. Two particular events I remember when I really couldn't talk much... One is Mother carrying me out of the children's service because she thought I was disturbing the service. As we reached the heavy west door I waved my hands, and piped at the top of my voice 'Ta-ta!'. The other happened at about the same time. One afternoon I was put to sleep in a large, old, wheel-less pram in the garden. Mother's sailor brother, Uncle Ernie, peered in at me and when he saw I was awake he put his finger to his lips to make me understand that I must not make a sound. In later years I told her about this and she said it couldn't be true, I was too young to remember when he was on leave that time. It was over 30 years before the matter was finally cleared up, one day when the three of us were together, and he remembered doing just that. Also, before I was three years old, Mother would take me to matinees at the theatre. The first show that I remember was 'Pinkie and the Fairies' – I think my love of ballet and fairies came from that time.

My first friend was a 12-year-old boy called Harold. I think he was dying, only neither of us knew it. He would sit on the doorstep with his dear little puppy called Tiny and talk and play gentle games with me. There was a wonderful subconscious love and understanding between us. Then

one day there was no more Harold or Tiny. Mother somehow made me understand that he was very tired and ill, and had gone to sleep and died, and that he wouldn't be tired or ill any more. At least, that was how I understood her explanations, and that it was something to do with the Gentle Jesus prayer. I comforted myself by playing with an imaginary Tiny. Mother was taking me out in my pushchair, and I was leading Tiny by his lead. When Mother stepped too far to one side, I told her, to her surprise, that she was walking on my Tiny!.

I became interested in Father Christmas on this third Christmas. I was taken to see him in a shop. I was not impressed. In fact, I did not like him at all, although he gave me a silver slipper full of sweets. And I *knew* he wasn't *real*. I don't believe you really do fool children, though they sometimes let you think you have. Later in the spring a gallant white-haired gentleman rode by on his horse. He smiled down and saluted Mother and me with his crop. I didn't ask Mother, I told her he was Father Christmas, only, of course, he wasn't wearing his red cloak because it wasn't Christmas. Mother smiled and said he could be. That settled the matter as far as I was concerned.

On my third birthday, Mother's eldest brother, Uncle Harry, who always tried to take care of his two sisters, and also had 'got on in the world', sent me a boy doll, and also the latest toy just made that year, 1909 – a teddy bear (some sort of compliment to King Teddy).

My Teddy had shiny, creamy, gold, silky fur, with padded hands and feet. Standing, which he could do when perfectly balanced, he was 18ins high. His ears and nose were delightful, and his eyes kindly and gentle. All his limbs moved, and for the first few years he squeaked when you squeezed his tummy. He was big enough, and small enough, to be cuddly and to cuddle you. Teddy bears are so wonderfully sexless and accommodating in the roles they can play. I gave Teddy my heart, and we knew each other's secrets. He went everywhere with me. When I was four years old I had enough dolls to sit side by side the length of my bed, but I cared little for them. I would much rather look at books, or build houses with my bricks, or play with Teddy.

Years later, when I was married and living in the northern wheatbelt of Western Australia, my husband found me talking to the elderly Teddy on my lap. I was saying to him, 'We've had our ups and downs, Teddy, haven't we?' Years later – Christmas 1940 – in England, my husband remembered my Teddy when, suddenly, in a shop, he saw a perfect teddy bear, which he was sure was exactly like the one I had had in 1909. It was quite expensive, and we were rather broke, but on Christmas morning he produced it from under the bed, together with this rhyme on a card.

THE REBIRTH OF TEDDY

He came to you when you were small
Little wife o' mine
And his body was lost in a fiery pall,
Little wife o' mine
But his soul went marching on and on
Until with the lapse of years
He came again in body new
And dried up all the tears.

Today he sits in my bedroom, with a couple of my husband's ties round his neck.

I have said that we moved to a house in All Saints Road. From time to time my parents then took in lodgers – usually the junior curates – if they were unmarried. Once Mother had a jockey for a few weeks, but she fed him too well. The last lodgers she had, and the ones I can remember, were three artists.

It was decided that the sanctuary ceiling of All Saints Church should be painted by three artists from East Anglia. They were a Mr Head, his son Mark – whom we all called Marcus – and another man whose name I cannot remember (and there is no one alive to ask). Marcus was the ringleader in everything, especially mischief. Even his father followed, and my father had the time of his life.

I was still young enough to sit in a high chair at the table, and often went out in a pushchair. I would be delightedly shocked by the thunder Marcus made for me with a tray. One day we all went for a picnic on Cleeve Hill. Marcus decided to take his paints, so Mother put them in the pushchair with the picnic stuff, and I walked. He painted a small picture of the view with a tree. His father tore strips off him for putting the tree too near the middle of the picture, so he gave it to Mother. I have it now.

In the church, a large piece or pieces of canvas were hung under the scaffolding to protect the floor, and so that the artists could work all weekdays without interrupting services or being interrupted by them. They were very entertained by the choir practices. So, one practising time, they all three – in quick succession – slid down the sides of the ladder. And then they came home and made a delightful cartoon of the whole choir with the different expressions on all their faces. One of the curates pinched that!

The climax of their stay was the hoax that didn't come off. Uncle Ernie was on one of his brief stays at the time. My father was kindred spirit to Marcus and co, and the amount of mischief those men could get up to without hurting anyone, or breaking the law, or even getting drunk (I don't think any of them drank), was truly amazing. So, when my father decided to enter a competition open to the World to swim through London, they were ready to pull someone's leg. It had been arranged that my father would send a telegram when the race was over. Marcus and co, in the mean time, were preparing a hero's welcome, on the style of the old Greek Games. They had a laurel wreath and everything. Then they began to get tired of waiting and, while Mother was out, they got a telegram form and envelope and faked a message. Uncle Ernie saw the telegram on the hall stand and went out again. Presently Mother came home and began to go upstairs to take off her hat. They called after her, asking if she wasn't going to open the telegram. Laughing down at them, she told them they were an hour too soon. It appeared that she and my father had worked out the earliest time she would have a wire. At that moment my uncle came in and grasped what had happened. He, too, was always ready for a leg pull. So he, with a real poker face, remarked that he had just returned from telling the local press about the wire and, if they didn't want to get into trouble, they had better get to the office before the evening paper went to press! Off they shot, leaving Mother and my uncle laughing at their expense. I understand that the local editor also pulled their leg a bit, too. But my father got his wonderful reception when he did arrive. Someone got me out of bed to see it all. I think he came in fifth.

Life seemed dull for a while after the Marcus Gang left. But, soon after, I was taken to the seaside for the first time. This was before I was 3 years old, as I did not have my Teddy. We went to stay with my 'little' uncle, really my great uncle as he was a brother of Jo Powell. He, his wife, and grown-up son, lived in Penrhyn, North Wales. The train ran along beside the sea for some miles, and I was enchanted with it all. The house seemed to have sand all around it, and at the back the garden seemed to slope uphill towards the Great Orme.

Little Uncle, like all the Powells, was good with children and he would take me out for walks most mornings. One day he took me around the Great Orme, only of course I didn't know it at the time. There was a fairly narrow ledge-like path with a sheer drop hundreds of feet below to the ocean pounding on the rocks. Uncle suggested I walk behind him and keep close to the inside wall; it was easier walking, he said. Never for a moment did he give me any impression of possible

danger. So I trotted along quite happily. At lunchtime I chatted about a certain unusual train I had seen. The others became suspicious about where we had been. And then the womenfolk tore strips off poor Little Uncle for taking me around Great Orme, and he had to promise never to take me there again, or they would stop our walks.

Mother's two half-sisters, Ivy and Winnie (both teenagers then) were staying there too. And their cousin used to take us all around the base of the cliffs when the tide was out. There were delightful little sandy bays where we could romp and paddle. We had to watch the tide, it could creep in and trap anyone in the little bays. Of course this happened to us, and the cousin had to carry me through the water to safety.

It was while I was at Penrhyn Bay I first used a proper knife at mealtimes. There were no special small knives for children in those days. But Auntie had a special short-bladed knife she used for vegetables that she put for me to use. It had a mark on the handle. I was very proud of the way I could use it. So Auntie decided to give it to me. First she cleaned the mark off the handle and I hardly knew it. When she gave it to me to take home I was very thrilled and used it for many years. When I grew too big for it I still kept it. It was stolen from me some 20 years later, but it will always have a special place in my memory cupboard.

Opposite our house in All Saints Road lived Grampy Maisey and his second wife, and a large white cocky which they called Polly. I found her rather frightening as she was so noisy. Grampy, too, could be rather off-putting when he got excited. But he liked children, especially little girls who just looked and listened. All his life Grampy had been a colourful character who needed an audience to live. And when I came into his life he had few audiences. His second wife worked hard to keep their home together, and all he could do all day was sit and hope that someone would pop in for a few minutes with a bottle of something for him!

Grampy Maisey was a showman. When and where he was born I do not know. I do know that when he was a young man in the mid-1800s he was a 'high step dancer'. He wore very long-footed boots, the toes were over two feet long. The high step dancer balanced as well as danced on those toes. I suppose they were made of very stiff leather or thin wood. When he was married, and had several sons and one daughter, he used to run shows in the old Cheltenham Theatre that stood where the Ladies' College is now. His youngest son Charles – or Charlie as they usually called him – was my great uncle by marriage, as we will soon discover. He told me that, when they were children, Grampy would line them up to sit on the weights to help keep the curtain up!

When the sons were old enough, Grampy formed a Nigger [sorry] Minstrel Show. Charlie didn't play an instrument, but I think he used to act as 'feed' to Grampy. The other sons were quite talented. Another singer married Grampy's only daughter. But all of them took other jobs so that, when Grampy and the theatre folded up, they went their ways. Except that the family has always had a dance band. After the death of his wife and the closing down of the theatre, Grampy was on hard times. His sons managed to keep him; Charlie, the only unmarried one, lived at home with him.

About 15 years before I was born, Grampy met a young woman about 30 years of age, I would think, who had just been left a few hundred pounds. She was Ellen Dennis McCarthy, sister of my mother's mother, Margaret Dennis McCarthy. She was a quiet, unworldly Victorian female. Very different from her sister, I would think. Grampy, the charming schemer, thinking how he could get hold of some of her money, suggested to the equally shy, unworldly Charlie that Ellen would make him a good wife. Grampy arranged their wedding, and sent them off on a honeymoon, saying he would furnish their house for them while they were away. Ellen handed over her money like a lamb. When they returned from their honeymoon they found their house was barely furnished and all the money gone!

Next Grampy fell in with another apparently wealthy female. This time she was nearer his age. He spent his last few pounds on a good honeymoon, and, when they came back, both discovered they were broke. She thought he had money, and he thought she did. They were not bitter, having the same kind of humour, they just laughed at the situation. The second Mrs Maisey realised she had better set to work to keep them, as by now Grampy was incapable of doing anything. And that was the situation when I came on the scene.

Great Uncle and Aunt Maisey had one child, Charlie junior, a thoroughly spoilt child. When I first remember them, Charlie – that is, Cousin Charlie – was in his early twenties and had just left Banks, the bookshop in the Prom, and gone to work in the City Bookshop, Guildford, where (except for the First War years) he worked all his life. His Maisey side came out in his hobby, acting; he was extremely good, too. Especially in sinister and dramatic parts... As Shylock, he was halfway there, with his lean body, long thin face, straight jet-black hair, and protuding adam's apple. His hands seemed all fingers. He was so utterly selfish and unlike his parents in every way...

Every Christmas and summer holidays he came to Cheltenham. He always gave his young cousins (that was Auntie Lena's and Mother's children) beautiful books for Christmas. He really did know his job – text books, school books and all children's books. Because he was so much older than us, and our first cousin once removed, we all always called him Cousin Charlie, all in one word as it were.

Great Auntie and Uncle lived a little farther down the road on the same side as Grampy. It was the quaintest house I have ever seen, and the garden most unusual and very beautiful. Harmon Villa had been built before All Saints Road was made, and so it turned its back on it and faced a road that was never made. So the only access to this villa, in its high-walled square garden, was along a narrow brick and walled alley, partly roofed in, from All Saints Road. A high wrought-iron gate led into a small, dark court and the back door. Beyond was a glimpse of a charming garden path of rose-covered arches hung with hundreds of crystals which seemed endless. Really, there was a landscape garden painted on the far wall.

Passing the back door (which led to the scullery) you entered the garden and at once, on turning left of the house, there was a goldfish glass aquarium, high, about eye-level, on a stand covered in decorated bark, with the little green creeper known as 'Mind Your Own Business' stealing in and out among the bark. (Incidentally, all this really covered up the drains.) Passing the scullery window you came to a verandah full of pot plants, and a door into the living room, and its window. Pressing on, you came to the parlour window and, at last, the front door, which obviously was not used, as it led only into the minute hall and staircase to two bedrooms. As this was the end of the house, there was an eight-foot wall. This wall surrounded the large, almost square, garden. It was impossible for anyone to see over it. Opposite the front door was a small greenhouse Uncle had made. He had to dig down three feet because he was not allowed to build higher than the wall.

First, the house. The two bedroom windows had been sealed so that they could never be opened. Auntie was terrified of night air. The fireplaces had also been blocked up and curtains draped over them. As there was a door at the bottom of the stairs, little fresh air came to the first floor from one year to the next.

Cousin Charlie's bedroom had a decorated frieze over the picture rail and paintings on the door. Although Uncle was a very good interior painter and decorator, he was not very good at painting pictures, and his ships were a bit like Grandma Moses'. There was also a single four-poster bed with pretty blue and silver curtains at the head, canopy and round the sides.

Coming in from the front door, if you turned left you were in a truly Victorian parlour which is almost impossible to describe. It had such a different atmosphere and, too, a scent of its own. To me, all rooms give off their own particular odour, as it were, as well as atmosphere.

In this Maisey parlour the panels on the doors were pictures, the marble-like stands held aspidistras. The mantelpiece was covered with one of those velvet mantelcloths edged with little bobbly balls. There was the usual elaborate overmantel, with little shelves and mirrors all over it, covered with knick-knacks. All kinds of ornaments covered the mantel itself. Pride of place, in the centre, was taken by one of three French clocks in the room. All three were in glass domes. This one on the mantelpiece was the only one which worked, and all its insides were exposed, so that you could see it working. On the wall to the right of the mantel, facing the window, was constructed a special half-oval marble shelf, which took up nearly the whole of the wall. On this stood a large statue of a chariot and prancing horses and draped figures, all in gilt and very impressive. A small clock was let into the body of the chariot, and the whole was contained in a huge glass case.

To the left of the fireplace was a glass case-table in which there was every kind of pipe you could think of, from all over the world. We loved it when Uncle would tell us about them, where they came from and how they worked. Next to this table was an oblong glass case, inside which was a Swiss mountain scene with a farmhouse in the front and snowy mountains in the distance. There was a farmhouse, sheds, animals and fowls, a girl on a swing, a milkmaid and a man leaning on the half-door of a shed, smoking a pipe. In the hillside was set a small clock. On the outside of the case, at the bottom right-hand corner, was a button on a piece of string. No one but Uncle was allowed to touch the button. When he pulled the button, about 20 inches of string would come out. He then let go, the case would eat the string back and, while it did this, all kinds of wonderful things happened. First, there was soft, tinkling music. Then the girl on the swing would begin to swing backwards and forwards, and all the fowls started to peck their food, and the dairymaid began to milk the cow, and the man smoking his pipe would gently nod his head at the scene. When all the string was swallowed up, the music stopped and everyone froze until next time.

Then there were occasional tables with thick cloths edged with bobbly balls, and lace tablecloths over them, holding photograph albums with large gilt clasps keeping them shut, and little china ornaments with 'A present from Weymouth' or 'Clacton', or some such on them. There would be a box of those lens affairs, in which you put cards, peered at them through the lens and they became three-dimensional; and those glass balls in which, when you gently shook them, there was snow falling. There was a card table the men used at Christmas time. When it was opened up into a square the top, except for about four inches around the edge, was covered with baize to protect the cards. Each corner had a carved circle to hold a glass. Along each side was a long, shallow drawer to hold cards and counters. At Christmas time, when the parlour came alive for two days, Uncle's roaring 'sit-back' fires cuddled the whole room and the sideboard was weighed down with fruit, nuts, sweets and bonbons. Uncle would get down some of the many games they had bought Cousin Charlie when he was a boy. Then there was a musical box, with its fair-like music, and a cylindrical gramophone with funny voices. Uncle also had a 'modern' gramophone. This had a huge trumpet horn. From the parlour led a long, dark passage into the living room. Auntie never seemed to have a name for this room, perhaps because they lived in it most of the time. She only talked of the parlour and the scullery. This living room had a large coal oven, always shiny and black – you could almost see your face in it. Over it was a high, long mantelpiece, every inch of which was just crowded with brass articles and ornaments of every description. There was a couch and cupboards, and the walls were covered with pictures, swords and curios of all kinds. Up on a shelf was a ship in a bottle, and a large coloured box you could open, and keep finding other little boxes inside. Then there was a small side cupboard with coloured glass doors, and little blue glass knobs for handles. Every child knew these cupboard doors, for, just before every child left, Auntie would open the glass door and take out a jar of sweets and give each child two. They were always

pretty boiled sweets. The window ran nearly the length of the scullery. Under it was a long, shallow, yellow sink with draining boards either side. A copper stood in one corner. In much later years this had a gas ring on it so that a kettle could be boiled in the summer without lighting the fire, but that wasn't until the late 1920s. Opposite the sink and window, on the far wall, were two thick curtains from floor to ceiling, with a blank wall between them. Behind the right-hand curtain were all the rest of the household tools, such as brooms and buckets, and shelves of heavy, large saucepans. Behind the other curtain was something Auntie *never* mentioned by name. She would, at times, whisper to ask if you 'wanted to go behind the curtain' – for it covered the *toilet*!

As the years slipped by Auntie, not having any daughters and never going out except to shop for food, was left behind in her knowledge of female habits and clothes. In August 1928 she came to tea with us specially to see my trousseau which I was taking back to Western Australia with me. She was most disgusted that there was no lace (lace was very old hat at that time) and she thought my pyjamas were those long drawers the girls used to wear in mid-Victorian times. During tea she told my mother that she was not the only one in the family to write poetry, and that my grandmother had written a poem when their only brother died. She began to recite it very slowly. After tea I asked her to repeat it and wrote it down. Within two weeks she had died in her sleep, and so we very nearly missed this quaint little poem.

'My Brother' written on the death of a dear and only brother, by his sister, Margaret.

Forgotten? Ah, No, No!
Nor ever will be.
No earthly words can tell
How dear he was to me.

But it pleased God to call him,
While yet in early youth,
And then he did prepare him
For the voice of his Lord.

He died upon my arm,
E'er yet 'twas light of day.
'Pray for me, sister dear!'
Last words I heard him say.
We are lonely now without him,
For his voice we hear no more.
But this we know to cheer us,
Not lost but gone before.

And we shall meet again,
In that bright world of love;
While there's no grief, no pain,
But all is peace and love.

Margaret Dennis McCarthy

This is an essay written at school in May 1922 in the style of Lamb's essay on his relations. (Auntie Maisey was my model.)

'My Aunt Eleanor'

For a kind heart, a pleasant smile and a loving word, my Aunt Eleanor is known. Eleanor Dennis McCarthy Maisey is her full name. She has her superstitions, like most Irish women, it must be allowed. If, on a Friday when returning from her weekly shopping, she sees the smallest piece of coal, she bends her stately figure to pick it up. However full her basket, the piece of coal must go in as well. 'Just for luck', she will say.

Aunt Eleanor, although she is a great aunt, likes little children, and any one of them, on visiting her, will always find that in her tall cupboard with stained glass doors and shiny blue knobs, she keeps a bottle of sweets. Although, like most people, she spring-cleans her house every year, the furniture is always in the same place, and every ornament just where it has been since I can remember. If Aunt hears of someone being ill, she takes them old-fashioned broth, milk puddings, fruit and eggs; it doesn't matter how far away they live.

Great Aunt Eleanor has an invaluable memory. She can remember Grandmother; she can tell you about events that caused her death; how my grandfather, when a young man, rode 20 miles for a doctor who came too late; how my eldest uncle looked when he had his first velvet suit, with lace collar and cuffs. Aunt Eleanor takes Grandmother's place and, as she tells us more and more of her younger sister, and how lovingly she cared for her six children, we long to know her – the grandmother we never saw.

All his working life Great Uncle Maisey never had one day's *paid* holiday. When the law was passed saying everyone must have a holiday on Christmas Day, Boxing Day, Good Friday, Easter Monday, August Bank Holiday and Whit Monday, it was *not* made law that they were *paid* holidays, and quite a number of tradesmen were not paid. Painters were only paid for the hours they *worked*. If they were working out of doors and it rained, and there was no indoor work for them to do, they had no pay. There was no unemployment money before the 1914 war. The men used to pay a little into a fund in the summer to give them a few shillings during the lean winter weeks, but it usually took them all summer to get out of debt, and put a bit aside for the Christmas fund. His pipe was Uncle's only luxury. He was a real craftsman; with a feather he could imitate the grain of any kind of wood, and do fantastic things with papier mâché. A china or glass bowl, some corrugated cardboard and a wooden base, he could turn into a marble pedestal. Until, of course, you touched it.

But the garden was Uncle's life. He had an allotment somewhere where he grew potatoes, and other large vegetables he wouldn't have room for in the garden, so that they never had to buy any. But, for over 30 years, this garden at Harmon Villa was a unique garden of beauty, perfume, colour and a sort of loving peacefulness. He cared for, and loved, every plant, and so, to walk round it, you were at peace with the world and all your troubles slid away.

Some people create a garden for their own glory, or they fill it with statues and shells or odd bits of china or pebbles and people come to look and admire, and sometimes they pay to do so. But Uncle's garden was not like that. He made you feel he was proud of his children, his plants. As he walked round his garden with you he listened to your troubles and experiences, however young you were. If you paused to admire some special thing of beauty he didn't, like so many gardeners, say, 'You should have seen it last week' or 'You should see it next week'. If you were a female, however small, you would find at the end of the tour you were by his greenhouse and he was cutting a piece of twine to bind together a rosebud, perhaps a sprig of scented verbena, or fern, to present a nosegay to you as though you were a princess. Years afterwards my cousins and I have found bits of scented verbena in our Bibles or prayerbooks, still with the faint perfume of Uncle's garden.

Where can I begin to describe this garden? We will go back to the entrance with the goldfish and the side of the house on our left. We will continue straight up the path under the arches, with the fruit-covered wall on our right, behind a narrow herbaceous border. There were redcurrants, whitecurrants and raspberries on the wall. Bordering all the paths were little flowers like button daisies, sweet alyssum, pansies, violets, polyanthus and such others. These were backed by almost all the flowers you can think of, with wallflowers, stocks, columbines, calceolaria, cup and saucer Canterbury bells (where the fairies sit), sweet williams, hollyhocks, and many others bringing up the rear.

When you reached the end by the landscape painting, you turned left along the wall and found a water-wheel and a mill backed by scenery. Uncle would duck through a door in this scenery (behind which also lived his compost heap and marrows), pour a bucket of water somewhere, the water-wheel would begin to work and water would run down a little river, taking a small boat with it.

Turning left away from the water-wheel tableau, back down a path parallel to the one you came up, you now have the square garden in the centre, on your left, with all the beautiful flowers and a few small apple trees in the very centre. In the oblong garden on your right, behind the flowers, were gooseberries, blackcurrants, and, in season, lettuces, radishes and spring onions. In the summer he had tomatoes in his greenhouse, but in the winter all his treasured geraniums, fuschias and freesias were cuddled up in the warmth. In the summer these plants were massed in coloured steps opposite the verandah, so that you could sit and bask in perfume and colour.

Uncle Maisey (we always called him that, never Great Uncle Charlie) was truly nature's gentleman in every sense of the word. Some people called him soft, because he never 'got on', as people called it. He never thought of working for himself, or cheating the boss in time, labour or goods, and he did not spend his time or money in pubs or on gambling. But he loved his garden, and people from all walks of life would come and walk round it, and talk to him of their life, and then they would tell their friends. This quiet, kindly man with the twinkly eyes, sucking at his pipe and really listening to what people had to say, somehow made everyone happier for a visit to his garden.

I like to remember him on a spring or summer Sunday afternoon, his black hair plastered down, wearing his striped waistcoat and silver watch chain with its little compass that he would show you how to work. Sitting down, he would take his round metal pouch from his pocket, squeeze it to make the lid pop open and carefully fill his pipe. Lighting it with a waxed match, he would puff and suck and press the tobacco down with the matchbox, until it would draw properly, then sit back and relax. Some adult might discuss a topical matter and expect an answer, but, 'Well, it was ever thus my lass' or 'my lad' would be his ambiguous reply.

Some men have statues put up to them and years later people wonder what they did. Others make millions of dollars and build great houses or factories. But men like Charlie Maisey, who just lived their life to their best, who do not try to change people or things, but just went on doing their best to make life a little more beautiful, and who listened to people, really are the salt of the earth.