

Chapter IV: 1913 return to England on the 'Osterley'; Cheltenham; Bristol; Dundry

So in December 1913 we – Mother, Geoffrey and I – sailed in one of the latest Orient liners: the Osterley, due to arrive in England in January 1914. My father told my mother that he had taken a wonderful new job with the infant Wireless Station at Applecross, and that men lived in quarters there. Applecross was away out in the bush in those days and, if we went to England, he would join us in the next year. Then he explained to me that, when we were a certain distance from the coast, he would be able to send us a wireless message in morse. He even explained SOS to me.

How very different life was in the Osterley from the poor old Ajana only a short 18 months ago. This was a proper passenger boat, with first-, second-, and third-class quarters, each with their own dining rooms, state rooms and decks.

We had a pleasant airy cabin on the well deck, a two-berth cabin with a cot for Geoffrey, its own camp stool, and bathrooms and toilets quite close. There was even a shop and there was plenty of deck space for your own deckchairs. I think the only organized game was quoits, but the passengers soon had a committee. As there were no organized assisted passengers to Australia, everyone on the boat was either returning from holidays, or going on holidays, and on all the ship there were only 13 children, and that included a tiny baby and a girl of 15.

First-class were rich celebrities. Their maids, etc, went second-class. One of the celebrities was the ballerina Madam Adeline Gene returning after a world tour. Her maid was travelling second class. Hearing there were so few children on board, she visited us one day, and gave us all beautiful tins of sweets. Only they were all toffees, and I never did care for toffees. But I was very interested in Madam Gene, and couldn't quite believe that this 'old' – she was quite 30 – lady could be the fairy-like creature on the stage. Why, she looked even older than Mother! (Within less than six months, in the theatre in Bristol, I could not believe Mother when she whispered to me that the dainty, fairy-like being that seemed to float through the air with her toes hardly touching the floor, was *the* Madam Gene of the Osterley.)

Small children like Geoffrey – who seemed to spend most of his time sitting on the deck beside Mother, sewing the edge of a dear little cushion she had specially made for him to sit on the deck – did not play with the rest of us. Neither did the grown-up 15-year-old. So that left six or eight of us. At seven and a half, I was about the youngest. Hide-and seek-was one of our favourite games, but sometimes we tired of this. Once Mother, chancing to go through the card room, found four of us quietly playing whist. She said that I couldn't play, the others replied that they had taught me, and they had. A couple of years later during the war, whenever a fourth was needed I would always play, and better than a number of adults. Looking back I realize that long before I was 12 years old I played a much better game than Mother.

One day our little gang decided on a new game. What they called it I do not know, neither did I understand it very much, except that there was to be a wedding, and I was the bride and I was to marry a little Scottish boy. They probably picked on us as we were the youngest. Mother told me afterwards that some of the gang told her that we were married with a curtain ring! It was all very much above our heads, and there was a time when we were both taken to a large coil of rope and told to get in it, and that we were on our honeymoon, and then they went away and left us. We sat in the coil of rope quietly enough, and agreed that we had no idea what a honeymoon was, or how long we were supposed to stay in the coil. (According to today's standards we must have been very sexually retarded!) I don't remember his name, only that he had red hair and freckles. We talked about this and that and where he was going to in Scotland. After a while we got a bit fed up sitting there and, thinking it was nearly time for the stewards to be setting the tables for the next meal, we decided to go and see if they would let us help – they did sometimes. (Needless to say our

parents didn't know we did this or they might have objected.) So with relief we scrambled out of our 'honeymoon' coil and tore down to the dining room. We didn't hear any more about our game, and we remained firm friends until landing day. The first of many male friendships on sea trips I have made in my life as opposed to ship romances. Only one continued after landing, and he, too, was red-headed and freckly, and I married him and continued the friendship for 40 years!

For the first two or three days out Mother and I were quite ill, we always were and could hardly lift our heads up. The first meal I had was beef tea and ship's biscuits, and I thought it was grand. Two young women in neighbouring cabins took care of the robust Geoffrey, and we all became great friends and would sit together on the deck. The three young women on their deck chairs, and Geoffrey and I on our especial cushions Mother had made for us.

One of the young ladies was round-faced and jolly and Scottish and her name was Jean, the other was called Bridget and, as one guessed, she was as Irish as they come. She was black-haired, with large dark piercing eyes, almost black, and thick eyebrows meeting over her nose – giving her a really witch-like appearance. Mother sat between them, and a very striking-looking trio they must have seemed.

One of the officers had a birthday, and his mother had given him a birthday cake in a tin before they left England some months ago. The cake was not hermetically sealed, as she had made it herself, and of course there was no refrigeration; so you can guess what had happened to it. He brought it out proudly for us to have with our afternoon tea, and he would have some when he was off duty. Well, the first of us to take a bite knew that something was wrong, the question was what we were to do. We found it was mildewed right through, and so we had to tell him about it, which was difficult of course.

Geoffrey was a real little boy of three years old, but well behaved and very popular with everyone, and anyone would take him off for an hour or so, so Mother had a very relaxing and amusing time, and did not miss my father too much.

At Columbo we went ashore in little boats. I wanted very badly to go for a ride in a rickshaw, but, as we all three could not go in one, Mother was too terrified to let me go in one alone in case I was stolen! So we walked round the town and its beautiful gardens with their sweet-smelling blooms and quaint palms. In the little boat, coming back to the ship, we had blackmail trouble with the boatman: he pretended he did not know which was our ship, until we gave him more money!

It was great sailing through the Suez Canal in the daytime. I was disappointed with the Red Sea because it wasn't red enough for me! But in the Suez Canal you felt you were in Bible country. There were camels, and donkeys, and Arabs, and strange voices echoing across the water, and there were palm trees ever and anon sprinkled among the desert. I loved the unhurried tempo of life. Then at Port Said the boys diving for pennies, like the ducks used to dive for crumbs in the lakes and rivers of England.

It was dusk soon after we reached Port Said – so mysteriously daring, romantic and maybe evil it seemed. Mother didn't say anything to anyone, we just went ashore. As soon as we landed we were surrounded by a hoard of shouting, gesticulating bodies. Mother clutched us to her, and at once found a boat to take us back to the Osterley. Other passengers would hardly believe that she, a woman, had gone ashore *alone at night* in Port Said. The very last ship to pull in there, a girl with her brother and fiancé had gone ashore and she had disappeared.

It was Christmas Eve as we neared Naples. Excitement was great. Father Christmas came on board and presented children with a number of presents and a bright sixpenny piece. Geoffrey at once threw his overboard and liking the hole it made, asked for another! The boat pulled alongside the harbour, so that we could just walk ashore. Mother asked our guide to take us to church. As it was a Catholic church, all the service was in Latin which interested me. Mother was a bit disgusted as the guide made Mother pay for us to sit down!

We went back to the Osterley for Christmas dinner. Everone was in a party mood, and the Christmas pudding was brought to the table with brandy on fire around it.

Now each steward had 12 people to serve at each meal. They were very clever and could balance those 12 plates on two hands. We could never quite understand how they did it. Some of the burning brandy spilled on the steward's hands and made him drop a number of plates. The people on his table sent the hat round to collect enough to cover his damages.

During the meal we discovered that, as soon as our meal was over, the stewards were going to the second-class dining room to have their Christmas dinner, all together.

Some bright person full of goodwill and Christmas spirit suggested that we all go together and wash up all our dishes, etc, so that when they came back tired and well fed they would find their work done and have a real break. In 1913 this was thought quite a revolutionary idea. No one thought of servants, or of giving them breaks, etc. Nearly everyone thought it was a very good idea, only a handful of snobs turned their backs. People like Mother, who couldn't stand about much, sat and wiped the silver and cutlery. We, the children, put things away; after all, we knew where quite a lot of these things lived anyway. We all had great fun, and the job was done in no time and we all went ashore to continue our sightseeing. In the evening the Chief Steward himself came to thank us all for the very thoughtful and kindly act, and to tell us how touched the men were to find all their work done.

The only people who went ashore at Toulon were those who were leaving the boat to go across France by train and so save a few days' travelling time. This was often done right up to the 1930s.

We passed close to Gibraltar, but did not stop, and this was the first time I had seen the fascinating Rock.

Early in January we landed in Plymouth and took the train to Cheltenham to Granny Waite, Great Auntie and Uncle Maisey, Auntie Lena, Uncle Will and little cousin Dorothy.

As soon as we got to Cheltenham I was sort of ill. I just lay on a couch. I did not want to eat or raise my head, or do anything. When the doctor came and Mother told him we had just landed from Australia, he told her that I was 'land' sick. He explained that I had got so used to the motion of the ship, that now I was not used to the land, and that in a few days I would be all right. Which was true.

Lots of things were the same, the lamplighters, and the barrel organs, or 'hurdey-gurdies' as we called them. But taxis were beginning to take the place of cabs, especially in London and Bristol. The first thing Mother did was to take me to see my first pantomime, 'Cinderella'. I thought it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, especially the coach which seemed to be made of diamonds, and the fairy floating on the end of her toes. I did not like the comedians. During the interval, someone came in saying it was snowing outside. I could only vaguely remember snow, as it didn't often snow at Christmas, so I was pleased about this too.

Years later, in the 1960s, we thought we would go to a first-class pantomime in London. Then of course with revolving stage, plastics and nylons and the latest in lighting, it was quite something, and again it was Cinderella. Tommy Steele was Buttons, as he had learnt ballet so that he could dance with the toys! The Teddy Bear was the most cuddly and dainty creature and in the Finale, as the revolving stage carried the coach around, there sat the Teddy Bear waving to us. So my first and last pantomimes were both of them sheer romance and magic for both my ages!

For a few weeks we stayed with Granny, and I went to All Saints School for Girls. It was there I had my first medical – and the doctor was one of the new lady doctors and she came from Australia.

But soon we went to Bristol to stay with Mother's father, Grandad (Jo Powell), his second wife and all the half-brothers and sisters. Edward, the eldest, didn't live at home. He had been invalided out of the army and was a butcher. Fred, the youngest of the four, was a hairdresser and lived in the flat at the top of the five-storey house in Hampton Court Road (one of the roads off Whiteladies Road leading up to the Downs) and Ivy, the eldest of the two girls, was now married to Uncle Gordon and had two little girls, Tuzzy (really called Pauline) and Joan. Ivy and Winnie ran a small but élite dress-making affair. Ladies came to the house with their materials and were fitted in private. They worked – the sisters – in two light, airy rooms in the basement. The house was on a slope, so only the front part had the basement, the back led out into the garden.

Hampton Court Road was a fine, wide road of five-storey houses set back in their own grounds. Each floor in the front had large bay windows. Several wide steps led up to the front door. The ground floor was taken up by a smallish front room, and a very large room at the back running the entire width of the house with large windows overlooking the garden. It made a very beautiful drawing room. The first floor had three rooms, one of the two toilets, and a proper bathroom – which Uncle Gordon used as a darkroom, as he was nearly as good a photographer as Uncle Harry. The second floor had two enormous bedrooms with walk-in dressing rooms which could be used as little kitchens. Auntie Winnie had one of these and, while we stayed there, we had the other. The top floor Grandad and Mary Ann and Uncle Fred lived in. Years later, when they got too old and Auntie Ivy had given up dressmaking, the basement turned into a flat for them so that they had no stairs. There was in the basement a kitchen, toilet and laundry too.

While we were in Bristol I went to a very well run private school belonging to two sisters, the Misses Louthers. On wet days, instead of playing in the garden, we played in the cloakroom where box stools held our outdoor shoes. (That was quite new in those days. Now I understand most schools have them.)

It was the period of good private schools, especially for girls and prep-age boys. There were as yet few scholarships. There were about 30 of us all told I would think. There was one boy, not the eldest by any means, with such a strong personality, and a born leader as well as brainy. I wish I had remembered his name, I'm sure he must have been an asset to the world. Thank goodness he was too young to be killed in the First World War.

On wet days he would organize games for the whole school. I was one of the youngest, so mostly our age group were spectators. Once he was re-enacting some bit of ancient history; he was seated on a throne made of shoe boxes, and a certain boy was a special kind of slave and had to lie in front of him. He was told that he was to pretend that his tummy had been cut open so that the King could put his feet inside to warm them! Another day even we, the young ones, were dragged into his spectacular games. We were martyrs and we were to be persecuted by being cut into tiny pieces. For years, whenever I saw a sign 'Trespassers will be prosecuted', I thought it meant persecuted and I would be terrified!

Like a number of 'high class' private schools, we had an afternoon off in the week and went to school on Saturday mornings. My eighth birthday – in 1914 - fell on a Saturday, and it was one of my special days for several reasons. First, this boy decided on a fairy story this particular day, and he chose me to be his princess! When I got home from school I found Auntie Lena, Uncle Will and little Dorothy had come from Cheltenham for the day, and we had a big family gathering. Uncle Gordon decided to take a family photo of us all. All the women thought it would be fun to nurse babies and little girls who were not their own. Geoffrey sat in front, and I sat on Uncle Edward's large sheepdog.

From my father Mother had bought me a little silver clock, with a perpetual calendar set in its base. Auntie Ivy had made and iced a special birthday cake. There were lots of coloured Easter eggs around the top and, when you bit the icing eggs, they were coloured like the inside of a proper egg.

While we were staying in Bristol, there was one little experience I had. I don't know how it began, but several Sunday afternoons an elderly couple, a lady and gentleman, had permission from Mother to take me for their afternoon drives around the Downs and riverside drives. I loved this, and I'm sure they enjoyed my chatter!

At first on Sunday mornings Grandad, encouraged by the womenfolk, began taking me for walks over the Downs, and we had great fun. The idea was that he would not be able to go into some pub for a mid-morning drink! He played ball for a couple of weeks, and then he thought of a way round it. He took me away over on the other side of the Downs, to a little pub he knew. Of course I didn't know what a pub was. I only knew he took me into a dear little house, and a lady showed me into a parlour full, just full, of interesting things to look at. She and Grandad told me to sit on a certain chair until they came back. I was quite happy to do this. I remember the lady taking a couple of peeps at me, and being surprised to find me still sitting. Presently they both came back, and, after praising me for being so good, we went home. During lunch someone smelt that Grandad had been drinking, and then they began to ask questions, and then did he get into trouble! He could explain as much as he liked, but he was never allowed to take me out again,

It was in Bristol we went in our first motor taxi cab. A few days after my birthday party, we moved into a dear little cottage in the village of Dundry. Dundry is really a lone hill, about 1000 feet up (I would think) on the south-west tip of the Mendips, about four miles east of the Bedminster end of Bristol. That was if you walked up through the fields, but the road went around some miles, and in 1914 few cars ventured up the long, steep hill road.

Mother thought she would like to get a little home together for when my father came back. She bought quite a few good pieces of furniture from a second-hand dealer near the Christmas steps, a fascinating part of Bristol which no longer exists.

So in the spring of 1914 we awoke on our first morning in the cottage to the sound of the church bells ringing for the service. Mother chanted to us what the bells said: 'Little children come to church!' It was such a beautiful spot, to me it was just like fairyland, and I asked Mother if the cottage could be renamed Fairyland. It was called Yew Tree Cottage, because of the most wonderful, wide-spreading yew tree with a large, fixed garden seat under it, where you could sit and look over all Bristol and the Avon, with the Welsh mountains in the distance. In the evening all the lights twinkled like earth-bound stars.

From the white wicket gate I would skip down the little stone steps and the little path flanked by rose trees to the cottage. I would let my skipping rope float out behind me, pretending it was wings. The cottage was two two-roomed cottages made into one, so that the front door and the

back door were side by side. Ladders had taken one up to the bedrooms. One of these had been taken away, and the downstairs room had been turned into a sitting room. Then doors had been made in the walls joining the two cottages. The downstairs room with the ladder was a kind of kitchen. It had no sink or anything. Mother bought a 'modern' oil stove for cooking. The sitting room had a large open fireplace. Oil lamps and candles were the lighting.

Outside on the right was the earth toilet and a fowl pen. On the left was our only supply of water. It was what was known as a 'spring'. I have never seen one since. It was a 'copper-shaped' pottery basin let into the soil. It was *always* full of clean, clear water. It wouldn't matter how much water you ladled out, it would fill up at once. It filled from the bottom somehow.

[In 1991 Frances stuck in the following paragraph.] I have just discovered that my 'spring' was what is known as a 'dew pond', I found a note to the effect that in the village of Basing (Basingstoke) about 350 years ago was a notice that the Smith Bros. were Dew Pond and Lake makers. £100! The dew ponds were made, it stated, from a mixture of lime, straw, and clay, and never failed, and were not fed from a spring!

The half-acre garden was full of fruit of every kind, as well as a small apple tree and a large Victoria plum. As soon as the gooseberries, red, white and black currants, and raspberries became ripe, Mother began making jam for when my father would come back.

Once a month, when the cheque came from my father, we would walk down the four miles to Bedminster to the trams and catch a tram to Bristol, spend the day there, and back to Bedminster terminus, and up the four steep miles home. Geoffrey, not yet four years old, never seemed to mind the walk.

The village of Dundry was centred around the church and school. The church tower was the same height as the beacon on the Downs on the other side of the school. This beacon which, when lit – as it was on any important occasion throughout the history of Britain – could be seen for many miles. There was an inn, and an all-purpose shop, but no post office or bakery. They were in a more modern village called East Dundry, but this had no 'soul-saving' church. A few cottages huddled round the village centre and that was all.

For our butter we would go across the Downs to a 'modern' farm run by a widow and her son. They had one of those new machines called a separator, and a butter churn you turned by hand. The widow made buttercup-yellow butter in pretty round moulds. In the two-lidded wicker basket Mother would bring, the widow would place large, freshly washed dock leaves, and then the butter, with another leaf on top, and so, when we reached home, the butter was just as fresh and cool, with drops of water still clinging to it, as when it had been lying in the tub of water waiting for us to pick it up. How different from the butter of today. It was *delicious* butter, yellow from the food the cows ate, and not colouring, and tasty for the same reason. And, what is more, it was made *that day* and not several months before.

So, in this beautiful spot surrounded by nature, discovering all the wild flowers, animals, little creatures and birds, fairy rings and grottos, and the cuckoo's call and the lark's song, and pussy willows, catkins and tisty tosty balls of cowslips, as we waited for my father to come home – *but* 4 August 1914 came first.