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A Mansion and its Murder

ROBERT BARNARD

CHAPTER ONE

Fateful Evening

My earliest memory is of Mr Gladstone. His face has still a vivid presence in my mind: whiskery, the flesh sagging, the skin discoloured, resembling a thin, decaying sort of parchment. Above all, I remember the eyes, which contrived to be both bleared and sharp at the same time. He looked down at me and I sensed – or persuaded myself – that he was actually interested in me. Even today, fifty years after his death, I hope that I was not deceived by the simulated interest in people that is a politician's stock-in-trade.

No, I do not believe it was that. Little girls are sharp, and I was exceptionally sharp for my age.

I expect I remember Mr Gladstone rather than any other old gentleman who dined with us – and there were many, many who did – because of the excessive flurry, almost amounting to panic, that had all day taken grip of the house. My nanny at the time was one of a long succession of nannies who by then was beginning to take her approaching departure for granted. I had told my father whenever I saw him (which was not often) that I needed to be *taught* things, needed a governess (girls in my family did not go away to school). Meanwhile, my regime was one of benign (or, in the case of my mother, not particularly benign) neglect. The part of the house I haunted was below stairs, the only place where I was something of a favourite. It was below stairs where the flurry was particularly intense. The vast kitchens and the ‘usual offices’ were in a condition of stately hysteria.

‘Mr Gladstone is a great man,’ said Mr McKay, the butler, in response to my question as to who the important guest was. He regarded that as all the answer that needed be, so I had perforce to be content with it.

The hysteria was most intense around the great ovens where the meal was being prepared – everything from the splendid salmon, the

pheasants, the sirloin of beef, through the aromatic sauces prepared by our French chef (who unlike most French chefs actually came from France) down to the little almond cakes that Mr Gladstone was said particularly to like, one batch of which went slightly wrong, to my great profit and delight.

‘No more of them,’ said Mrs Needham, vast and imposing, but kindly behind the facade. ‘We can’t have you being sick if we’re going to give you a peek, can we?’

The ‘peek’ was the great treat I was looking forward to, without quite understanding why.

There can be few elderly women in this year of 1946 whose first memories are of Mr Gladstone, and I should explain that we were not in fact one of the great Liberal families who might have been expected to entertain him from time to time. In fact, he was staying in the area with one such family, the Mastersons of Hazelhurst Manor, and he would be arriving in the family carriage with Lord Masterton (there was no Lady Masterton – she had died many years before, in childbirth). It would not be true to say that we were, in modern parlance, politically uncommitted, but we were not party political. We would have entertained the Marquis of Salisbury with the same degree

of pomp as we displayed for Mr Gladstone – but with less nervousness, for no one thought the Tory leader a Great Man, as the People’s William undoubtedly was. More, he was a living legend.

We were impartial politically because we were bankers: Fearing’s Bank was one of the great financial institutions which had made the City of London the centre of the world’s business. We retained excellent relations with the leading men of both political parties. We would have lavishly feasted Beelzebub if he had happened to be either Prime Minister or Leader of the Opposition.

Much of what I think I remember about that day were things that were told to me later, I expect. Mr McKay and Mrs Needham were fixtures at Blakemere for many years after that year of 1884, and they talked of Mr Gladstone’s dinner often – it was a sort of landmark day. In fact, Blakemere, though an immense and drafty pile of echoing corridors, distant ceilings, and excessively heavy decoration, did somehow manage to retain the loyalty of its vast army of domestics, and many of the people who were rushing around frantically below stairs that day remained there until they retired or died, and were friends to me in my young womanhood and later – companionable fixtures in a changing world. Certainly I saw few

other people that day in the hours leading up to dinner: my mother was occupied with dressing herself (drearily, I have no doubt), and my father was demonstrating his independence by taking a couple of guests out shooting. My nanny was probably penning letters of application for similar positions. So I was below stairs during the presentation of other guests to the Great Man, and the mixing and mingling that preceded eating, below stairs when the guests were paired off, strictly in accordance with rank and political or local importance, and below stairs when the great silver tureens of turtle soup were taken up to commence the grand dinner.

It was, I suppose, around eight o'clock when, on a signal from one of the footmen racing between the dining hall and kitchens, Beatrice came and put out her hand. I took hers willingly. It was the hand of all others that I was most familiar with. She was the closest thing to a mother I had for many years, until she left Blakemere for unhappy marriage and very happy motherhood. Together we toiled up the stone steps, into the main house (that word is ridiculously inadequate), then down the endless corridors of which I saw little higher than the skirting boards, until finally we came to one of

the doors to the Great Hall. Beatrice had chosen the door carefully, to give me the best possible view of our distinguished guest. She opened it a crack, then slipped me just inside it.

‘Keep very quiet,’ she admonished. ‘Don’t do any of your sillies to get noticed.’

Ha! It was precious little I was noticed in that house, sillies or no sillies.

I stood there, tiny and wide-eyed. It was not just I who was dwarfed, but everyone at table, everyone in the room. Even the great Mr McKay seemed merely a fraction of his normal self. The Great Hall was inspired by – no, modelled on – a medieval banqueting hall, as envisaged by one of the illustrators of Sir Walter Scott. It rose up still higher than most of Blakemere’s ground-floor rooms, leaving nothing above it but servants’ bedrooms, and its ceiling was raftered with great oak beams. Lower down, the nineteenth-century predominated. The long table supported like a circus strongman an endless series of tureens, sauce boats, roasting platters, epergnes, and brilliant crystal glasses and decanters. Footmen were everywhere filling glasses, whipping away plates and serving dishes as one course succeeded another, and I stood there feeling more than ever a nothing amid this endless bustle of magnificence.

As a relief from it I raised my eyes to the ceiling – miles it seemed, above me – but the great beams were so distant. And when I lowered my eyes from them, clutching Bea’s hand still more tightly, I really saw for the first time Mr Gladstone.

He was seated to the right of my grandpapa, and he was talking in a gracious, measured manner, listening now and then, and then talking again in what was virtually a monologue with interludes. I had never found my grandfather’s conversation interesting, so I understood why our honoured guest preferred to do the talking himself. No one else in his vicinity, not even my uncle Frank, seemed courageous enough to take part in the conversation. It was at some point in this stately duologue, following an interjection from my grandfather, Sir Joseph Fearing, that our distinguished guest took up his glass and, before replying, looked speculatively around.

And saw me, standing diminutive in the doorway by Beatrice’s side. He considered for a moment. Perhaps my grandfather’s remark had been difficult to reply to; perhaps it had been beneath his notice. After a moment he put down his glass, meditated, and after a glance at my grandfather, beckoned me.

Horror of horrors! I shrank back. Bea, who

was one of the senior parlourmaids, knew there could be only one response. Grasping my little paw still more firmly, she advanced, curtsayed to Grandpapa as she skirted the head of the table, then arrived by the seat of the Great Man, placed me within his view, then curtsayed and withdrew a pace.

I curtsayed, too. I had been well brought up by the servants. ‘Well, young lady, and what is your name?’ He seemed immensely grand. Too grand to talk to a little girl at all. But also whiskery, dry of skin, watery of eye.

‘Sarah Jane Fearing,’ I said, my voice shaking.

He nodded gravely. ‘And how old are you, Sarah Jane Fearing?’

‘Five years and seven months.’

‘So you’ve come to watch us feasting, have you?’ he asked, his face crumbling into a smile. ‘What do you think of it, eh?’ I considered.

‘I’ve never seen so much food,’ I said.

‘And none of it for you!’ he said roguishly. ‘That doesn’t seem fair, does it?’

I shook my head vigorously.

‘But we can soon remedy the situation,’ he assured me. ‘What would you say to one of these fine juicy apricots?’

I considered again. I thought he approved of that.

‘I should prefer, if you please, sir, three of those little almond cakes.’

The reply seemed to delight him. The bags on his face began to bob up and down, and his old eyes lost their film and seemed to sparkle as he looked first at my grandfather and then at my dear uncle Frank who was sitting opposite.

‘Now why, Sarah Jane Fearing, do you specify *three* of the little almond cakes?’

‘Because the cakes are very small and the apricots are a good size,’ I replied, gaining confidence.

That delighted him still more.

‘A very good answer! The girl is a mathematician. She should be a credit to Fearing’s Bank when she grows up. The future is with the ladies, you know.’

And he counted out, one by one, three of the little almond cakes from one old hand to the other, put them into my outstretched mitt with another crumbly smile, then turned back to the company with a gesture of dismissal. Beatrice curtseyed, I curtseyed, and we made our way quietly and swiftly out of the Hall.

As I sit here writing and thinking in the tiny

parlour of the gatehouse, looking over the mile and a half of intervening grounds to where Blakemere rears its ridiculous bulk in the distance, I remember those two minutes that sealed my destiny as vividly as if it were yesterday.

Sealed my destiny. An absurd phrase? Ridiculous? The foolish jumping to conclusions of the childish mind? I used to think so. But when in 1934 I decided to open Blakemere to the public on Saturdays and Sundays in the summer months, I had the librarian prepare a little leaflet about the house and its history. Even in a long line of splendid entertainments for people of importance, the grand dinner for Mr Gladstone warranted a mention. He had been feasted at Blakemere on September the tenth, 1884. The new will made by my grandfather which left the house, bank, and practically everything else to his elder son Claudius and his heirs male, failing that to his son Francis and his heirs male, and failing that to the female heirs of his elder son, was made, signed, and witnessed on September the twenty-first of the same year.

The document that sealed my fate.

Last Saturday, having begged a couple of gallons of petrol, I took the two dogs over to Wybush

Common. A ridiculous waste, you might say, in a time of great scarcity of petrol and of everything else: the dogs have mile upon mile of the Blakemere estates to run around in.

But dogs like change as much as humans do. I sometimes get as oppressed by the vastness of the grounds around the great house as I used to get by the vastness of the interior of the place when I lived in it. The dogs appreciated the gesture: they ran around in delighted surprise when I let them out of the car, and Lizzie straightaway went and did her business in the little front garden of a cottage on the Common's edge.

'Here, look what your filthy bitch has done!' came a strident voice.

I groaned internally. One of those. I felt like shouting, in the words of Tess of the D'Urberville's mother, 'Tis nater, and what do please God!' Instead, I just whistled the animals and set off toward the Common. But a hard-faced harridan had appeared at the little wicket gate.

'It's people like you that give dog-owners a bad name!' she shrieked. I turned.

'It's people like you give people a bad name,' I bellowed.

I set off again, rather pleased with myself.

Worthing a fishwife shouldn't have given me satisfaction, but it did. When I analysed my feelings, I realised it was because we had traded insults on a level footing. She had not had the faintest idea who I was. Twenty years ago, I would have been known by everybody here – by everybody within a much wider radius of Blakemere. Fifty years ago, they would have known the whole family – my grandparents, my parents, my uncle Francis, my spinster aunts, even my aunt Clare who had married beneath her and moved away.

Now I could be shouted at by a shrew who had not a notion who I was. And perhaps she would have shouted even if she had known. The war has changed everything. Firmly rooted families have moved away, the men to join up, the women to work in munitions factories and food factories. War widows and solitary service wives have moved into cottages to take advantage of the cheapness of the country. They have no knowledge of the customs and traditions of the place, nor of the great families who ruled the area by virtue of offering opportunities of employment.

As I turned at the brow of Wybush Common, I saw the woman, hovering near her gate, waiting

for a second round. I reflected that if she had a husband who had come through the war, he would do well to refuse to be demobbed.

But I am light of heart. Where once Blakemere was known throughout Buckinghamshire, now we – I – am nothing.

That suits me very well. I have had a lifetime of my family. I have made something of my life, but it has been, until the last few years, in their sphere, on their terms, lumbered with their appalling mansion. I have had more than enough of my family. Of its magnificence. Of its guilt.