

## I

# A London Romance

To begin with my father, Émile Delavenay: here he is, a slight, eager boy of fifteen from the mountains of Savoy, with thin arms, curly hair above a high brow, spectacles for his short sight, arriving at Victoria Station on a hot July day in 1921. I have a clear picture of him as he was, elated to be travelling abroad for the first time, as chaperone to his elder sister Hélène. She had just recovered from scarlet fever and been offered the trip as a treat by their parents, and they made the long train journey – from their home in Savoy, through Paris and on to London – by themselves. An exchange had been organized for them by Émile's young English teacher, and she had already fired him with a determination to seize the opportunity to make progress in the language: he had brought his dictionary with him. Soon they were standing in the Marylebone Road, opposite Madame Tussauds, looking up at the large five-storey house in which their hosts, the Macarthurs, were waiting to receive them.

They were warmly greeted and were to be generously entertained for the month of their visit. The Macarthurs were from Glasgow and spoke with a rolling *r*, and there was much invoking of the auld alliance between Scotland

and France. Mr Macarthur was a chiropodist, but no ordinary chiropodist, since he treated royal feet – the Duke of York was mentioned – and the feet of the famous, Rudyard Kipling and the polar explorer Shackleton among them. The doctors in Harley Street nearby sent him many patients. Mrs Macarthur and her sister-in-law were both chiropodists too – this was a hard-working family. Isa and John, their teenage children, sometimes helped out as well, but they were now in charge of showing Émile and Hélène the sights of London.

They made a very thorough job of it: Hampton Court and Windsor, all the South Kensington museums, Victoria & Albert, Natural History and Science; then the Tate, the Wallace Collection, the National Gallery. There were trips on the Thames, a visit to the theatre – Émile had never seen a live performance before and was entranced – and meals in restaurants. They visited Madame Tussauds across the road. English magazines and novels were on offer in the house, Anthony Hope and Conan Doyle. They were taken to church, and attended family prayers, activities entirely unknown to the unbaptized children of atheist French schoolteachers.

Émile enjoyed every moment, even being woken at dawn by the sound of hooves, as processions of great horses hauled their loaded carts to Euston and King's Cross. It was a sight and sound he never forgot. He was encouraged to explore the streets of Marylebone for himself and took pride in familiarizing himself with the district – when he was in his nineties I saw him retracing the walks he had made then with intense satisfaction, although the

Macarthurs' house and garden had long been replaced by a block of flats.

Émile had scarcely seen a large town in his life, because, although Geneva was close to home, and he had cousins there, it was cut off from Savoy throughout the First World War and until 1919. The nearest town to his native village of Ayse was Bonneville, with a population of a few thousand, and in winter he sledged down the mountain daily to the Bonneville lycée, pulling his sledge back up in the afternoon. What he saw in London – the life of a great city with a rich culture – made an overwhelming impression on him. He realized that the English language was opening a door into a world that offered possibilities he had never imagined, and he resolved to master its pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar as fast as he could. Carrying his dictionary with him wherever he went, listening and questioning, he made dramatic progress during the month of his stay. While his sister managed hardly a word of English, he could understand a good deal and talk in simple sentences by the time they went home to Savoy. They took the Macarthur children with them, and he insisted on speaking English with them throughout their stay in Savoy. He was soon able to read Dickens – his mother's old copy of *David Copperfield*, which she had studied in English at her girls' school in Grenoble – and contemporary writers. He read Henry James's *Roderick Hudson*, the story of a brilliant young American who falls in love with Europe and flies too far, too fast; and H. G. Wells's novels describing modern English life, which he found especially attractive. England became a promised land to him.

He told me once that speaking English made him feel he was a different person, and he began to prefer to be that second, alternative man. Whatever constraints and shyness he felt in France dropped away in England, and he could communicate freely and easily with people of all kinds and classes. Later, I found for myself that even having a foreign name – his name, Delavenay – gave me a special sort of freedom, because the English could not easily place me.

All the same, he was French, and he had to make his way through the brutally tough stages of French education, with his parents' support, if he were to achieve his ambitions. First, he gained entry to the most prestigious school in France, the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, an intellectual forcing house with a relentless programme of work. The day's studies started at 6.30 in the morning and sometimes went on till midnight. This was pretty regularly the case for him, since he was there to prepare the entrance examination for the *École Normale Supérieure*. The *École Normale* in the rue d'Ulm is one of the pinnacles of the French educational system: a college of higher education set up by Robespierre in 1794 and refounded by Napoleon, it has maintained its excellence throughout the centuries. France is a meritocracy, and, after four years of graduate study at Normale, a *Normalien* is assured of a prestigious career. My father told me that before he took the entrance examination he had nightmares of failure, dreaming he might have to become a bus driver rather than a scholar. In fact his two years at Louis-le-Grand

culminated in a notable success, and he became the first Savoyard to go to Normale.\*

He did not forget his English persona, and had even managed to make another brief summer visit to the Macarthurs in 1924, getting to hear Sybil Thorndike play Saint Joan at the Old Vic, and working in the University College Library. And, since his chosen subject at Normale was English Literature, he was now obliged by his tutors to spend much of his time in England, studying and teaching in London and Cambridge. Meanwhile he had acquired another interest through attending summer schools on international intellectual cooperation in Geneva, where an aunt put him up, and witnessing early sessions of the Assembly of the League of Nations. He was effectively bilingual by now, but his tutor at Normale warned him that he would not be properly bilingual until nobody in England complimented him on his good English. The advice was good, and his English became so easy and natural to him that he always spoke it with his own children, and could indeed pass as an Englishman.

\* In January 1999 I was in Paris, and described in a letter to a friend how 'I walked through the Luxembourg Gardens to the Panthéon and down the rue d'Ulm and went boldly to the entrance of Normale, where I announced, "Mon père est normalien." And I was waved in with, "Entrez, madame," and a polite welcoming gesture. My father was ninety-three that year. I stood in the courtyard with its modest fountain and grey walls bearing the sculpted heads of great Frenchmen, and thought of him arriving, so young, so long ago, and blinked back a filial tear' (from my letter to Betsy Dworkin, 17 January 1999).

Normale sent him to England in October 1925. He was just twenty years old. His schoolteacher parents had brought him up with the expectation that he would live by their strict moral standards, and his brain was trained and sharpened by one of the most demanding and rigorous educational systems ever devised, but in every aspect of human feeling and behaviour he was as innocent as a child.

The pleasure of going to London was the greater when he found he could have a room at the recently established French Institute in South Kensington, near Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. He saw the grand houses of Queen's Gate as being inhabited by real-life Forsytes, perfect specimens of those depicted in Galsworthy's *Forsyte Saga*, his current reading. Reading was his chief occupation, and long days were spent in the British Museum studying modern writers, Meredith, Kipling, Barrie and Hardy, as well as the classics; and attending lectures at the London School of Economics and King's College. When he could afford to, he took himself to the Old Vic to hear Shakespeare, never failing to read the text of the play beforehand to prepare himself. At the Institute he was among contemporaries from Normale, linguists, philosophers, historians, scientists, mostly, like him, from the French provinces, and socialists too, all eager to talk about politics, women, their work and their hopes as they embarked on new experiences. Together they found cheap places to eat: ABCs, Lyonses, the Express Dairy at Marble Arch, where they teased the waitresses and speculated among themselves about their sex lives. Marcel Mathieu, an X-ray crystallographer working at the Royal Institution's Davy-Faraday

Research Laboratory, became Émile's closest friend, serving him tea made over a Bunsen burner, carrying him off to concerts – he was a passionate music lover and amateur violinist – and telling him about his love for a rich French girl, Alice, who was doing a little teaching in a private school in London. She enjoyed his attentions, he said, but had warned him that her family would never allow her to marry a poor man. Mathieu invited her to a dance to be held at the French Institute in January, and she agreed to find a partner for Émile. She chose a colleague who taught piano, harmony and counterpoint at her school, and brought her to be inspected over tea at the Institute.

The music teacher was my mother, Muriel Herbert. She was not quite five foot tall, black-haired, dark-eyed, very pretty. When Mathieu invited her to try the Institute piano, she surprised them by playing and singing her own songs. Remarkably, she was already a published composer. The friendship was made, and the date for the dance agreed.

Looking back at what I know about only from their accounts, I see my young father advancing towards a fate that will change his prospects and character, driving him close to madness. And my mother too will be transformed, crushed and partly destroyed. Yet things began simply and happily between these two gifted and attractive creatures when they met and were drawn to one another. For both of them, reaching London was a reward won through hard work. It was the place Émile most desired to be, where he could imagine his dreams and ambitions reaching fulfilment. Muriel had also arrived from a provincial town she had no wish to return to, and was already enjoying success.

But neither was a Londoner and neither had any family or solid base in London. Each was flying alone in unknown territory.



My mother's story was this. She was born in October 1897, the youngest child and only daughter in the family after five boys. Her mother told her how, as she was born upstairs, the family doctor, a musical friend, sang Schubert downstairs, accompanying himself on the piano, to welcome her. She was named Muriel Emily Herbert and brought up in Liverpool, then a flourishing city with a powerful cultural tradition. Her mother led a church choir and was a dedicated reader, and their house was full of music and books. Her brother Percy, ten years older than her and intensely musical, encouraged her very early interest in piano, singing and making up her own songs, and they read poetry together. In 1908 he went up to Oxford to read Mathematics, spending much of his spare time making music with another undergraduate, Adrian Boulton. So far so good, but their father was now ill with diabetes and the following year he died, leaving the family impoverished. At the same time, her aunt's husband, Frank Hornby, was becoming a millionaire through marketing his invention Meccano as a children's toy. While the Hornbys grew richer, their Herbert cousins struggled. On finishing at Oxford, Percy felt he must take a job offered in the Colonial Office and served abroad, first in the West Indies, where he was for much of the First World War, and then Nigeria.



Widowhood and poverty wore their mother down. Life in Liverpool was harsh without money. They had to move into a smaller house. Muriel remembered that her bicycle was stolen and could not be replaced, and that she was not allowed to join the Girl Guides because the uniform was too expensive. The flowers she grew in their small front garden were broken or stolen, and the headmistress of her girls' school, who came from the South, told the Liverpool girls they must lose their ugly accents. Muriel needed no scolding on this account, since her mother spoke the required genteel English, as did Percy, and she naturally copied them. But she may have had two voices. Her Hornby uncle spoke Scouse and stuck to it, even when he became a Conservative MP.

Music was her refuge. A self-appointed surrogate father appeared on the scene, Hugh Farrie, a journalist and novelist with his own literary column in the *Liverpool Daily Post*, who watched over her education, found music teachers and paid for her lessons, supplied her with books and encouraged and adored her. I have a volume of poetry he gave her, inscribed 'Love Poems to a little love poem'. He was married, childless, romantic and generous. He hoped she might become a concert pianist – she played Chopin with impressive dash – but composition was her real interest. She studied harmony and began to absorb the songs of Debussy, Ravel, Fauré and Richard Strauss as well as the Schubert and Schumann of her childhood, and to write down her own songs.

The war came in 1914, taking the young men away to fight and be killed. But, with all its horrors, it meant that

women found their chances of higher education improved, and in 1917 Muriel won the Liverpool scholarship in composition to the Royal College of Music in London. Her mother, proud of her success, took her to London to settle her in the room the college gave her in Queen Alexandra's House in South Kensington, close to the College and the Albert Hall. From the start, she found friends among her fellow students, friendships that deepened and lasted, several lifelong. She was invited to visit their families, who made much of her, and of her surprising musical skills. A new life was opening. It was just as well, because before the end of the war, early in 1918, Hugh Farrie died and she lost her second father figure.

At college she was taught by Charles Villiers Stanford, the most eminent British composer of his generation. He was now in his sixties, horrified by the war, the injuries and deaths at the front of so many of his pupils, and the air raids on London. His teaching methods were described by one of his pupils as being without method or plan, his criticism mostly a matter of 'I like it, my boy' or 'It's damned ugly, my boy.' He could be bad-tempered, he was not disposed to like women students, and he gave my mother a hard time. Almost at their first encounter he challenged her to play a Beethoven symphony arranged for two pianos with him, at sight, in front of the other students; to her relief she saw that it was one she had played with Percy, and got through it well enough. In any case, she was thoroughly grounded in piano playing and musical theory and could hold her own. She was told she must learn a second instrument for her course of study, and the double bass was

suggested. A full-sized double bass was considerably larger than she was, but she saw the joke and took it on happily. In spite of the war, being in London, at college and finding herself surrounded by affectionate friends filled her with pride and happiness.

She made music with violinist friends and learnt to write for the violin: two of her short pieces for piano and violin were included in one of Barbirolli's concerts, and published. When she showed Stanford a first attempt at a violin sonata, he grumbled, 'Ever heard of Elgar?', whom he disliked; still the sonata was performed in 1922 by her friend Gertrude Newsham. Stanford should probably have pushed her towards orchestral writing, but she went no further than a few orchestral accompaniments for her songs. She was happiest with the simple voice and piano, and here she was doing well, with settings of Housman, Bridges, Alice Meynell and a 'Cradle Song' by Swinburne.

Among her new London musical friends were the Hess sisters, Dorothy the pianist, Stefany the violinist, Alice the music teacher; and the Hess family, entertaining in their large flat in Earls Court, introduced her to Roger Quilter, at the height of his renown as a song writer. He offered to look at her work and thought her songs good enough to recommend to Augener's, prestigious music publishers. He then escorted her to their offices to introduce her, and finally witnessed the contract they drew up to publish five songs. It was a strikingly generous act by an established composer to an unknown young woman. He was good-looking and kind, with perfect manners, and he believed in her talent. In November 1922 she wrote to her mother to

tell her, 'Mr Quilter is allowing me to dedicate some of my songs to him! I asked him to choose which he would like and he asked for Renouncement, the Cradle Song and When Death to Either.' 'Renouncement', a striking setting of Alice Meynell's passionate sonnet about renouncing an impossible love but living it in her dreams at night, was a surprisingly apposite choice, because Muriel fell in love with Quilter, in her innocence not understanding that he was a homosexual. When he realized the situation, he was aghast and backed away sharply from any further friendship. She did not see him again, and carried a wound, never forgetting him or the pain of the experience.

Another surprising friendship had been formed when Maud, Marchioness of Douro, asked the College to recommend someone who might help her to develop her interest in music. They sent Muriel. Maud was the beautiful daughter of Lord Glentanar, a multimillionaire whose money came from cotton. She moved in high society, was painted by Sargent and married in 1909 a man of ferociously right-wing views, more interested in military matters than in music or books; whereas she had a real interest in both. It seems likely that he married her chiefly for her money and she took him chiefly to become Duchess of Wellington when he should succeed to the title. He fought in the war; they had a son who was not clever enough to get into Eton, and a delicate daughter. Maud was lonely. Ten years older than Muriel, she warmed to her at once and was soon treating her like a younger sister. If Muriel was at first dazzled by being taken up by the aristocracy, she responded to Maud's affection and gave many hours to working on

music with her. It became a true friendship, important to both of them.

She was often invited to stay at Stratfield Saye, the Wellingtons' country house in Hampshire. This continued after she was married, and even when she had children. I can just remember being handed over to a Stratfield Saye nanny and taken upstairs to the nursery. Maud was generous in practical ways, passing on silk and satin evening gowns to Muriel (she kept them, and I was able to wear two of them twenty-five years later). She had Muriel photographed by a professional. She sent her to her own nursing home to have her first child. She gave her books, and discussed private problems with her.

Early in their friendship, Maud introduced Muriel to her brother Tom Glentanar, also a music lover, who gave Christmas house parties on his estate in Scotland, putting on operas – Mozart one year, Gilbert and Sullivan another – with a mixture of professional and amateur singers and players. For several years Muriel took the lead soprano parts and joined in the weeks of luxury, hard work and fun while they rehearsed, sang and acted, dancing in the evening, taking country walks when they could, and enjoying the good food and comfortable life of the very rich. When Émile appeared on the scene, he was invited too. The last time they went was in 1931, married and with a child. The Glentanars remained such good friends that they offered to send Muriel's children to Canada with their own daughter when war came, to escape bombing or invasion. My mother was grateful, but decided it would be better for us all to stay together.

Émile was treated to the political opinions of the Duke over port in the evening. He had succeeded to the title in 1934, and become strongly pro-German, and personally friendly with Ribbentrop. When, after Pétain's submission to the Nazis, Émile thought briefly of applying for British nationality, he wrote to the Duke asking if he would consider sponsoring him. The Duke replied that there were enough socialists in England already and he should not count on him to increase their number. Émile was advised by wiser friends that he could do more for France by remaining French. In 1941 the Duke died. His son was already serving in the army when he became Duke, and in 1943 he was killed fighting in Italy. I remember how upset my mother was when the grieving Duchess wrote asking her opinion of a design for a memorial. She died in 1946: more sorrow.



When I think about my mother's life in these early years, I wonder how she managed at all. She had no family in London, and once she had finished at college she needed to earn her own living. Music was at the centre always, and composition requires time and quiet. She visited her mother regularly in Liverpool but had no wish to return to live in the North. Her young Hornby cousin, only daughter of her aunt and uncle, died suddenly in her teens, and they offered in their grief to adopt Muriel, making it a condition that she should give up her music and share their life. She refused their offer unhesitatingly. They dropped her

for a time, then decided to forgive the slight. Her aunt presented her with a fur coat, and she was invited to dine with them when they were in London. She did not enjoy dancing with her uncle ('pressed to his fat stomach', she said with a shudder) or their games of bridge.

She found teaching work and was invited to share a flat in Maida Vale with a pianist friend, Jessie Cormack, and her husband Kenneth Wright, a Vickers engineer who was involved in setting up something new, the first broadcasting at Savoy Hill, off the Strand. He had to plan programmes of live music and Muriel became an occasional broadcaster of her own work: she had her voice trained and performed well. All her life she sat at the piano as though this was the most natural place for her to be, with perfect command when she played and sang.

Émile was made welcome at the Wrights' weekend parties in their Maida Vale flat, where there was much impromptu music-making. These evenings were a revelation to him and greatly enjoyable. He saw them as representing a true *vie de bohème*, centred on artistic aspiration and achievement, and far removed from conventional bourgeois life. He was captivated by Muriel: they went dancing together, they walked in Kew Gardens and at Hampton Court, and attended many concerts. They gave each other volumes of poetry: I have the neat edition of the *Oxford Book of English Verse* she gave him in May 1926, and a Rupert Brooke in October that year. Walter de la Mare's volume *The Listeners* was inscribed by him to her 'Euston Station, Nov. 1926!', the exclamation mark because she had told him that her first idea for a setting of Yeats's 'Lake Isle

of Innisfree' came to her while waiting at Euston Station. He wondered at her musical gifts, admired her independence and was irresistibly drawn by her physical beauty – soft skin and shape, dark eyes now welcoming, now sad. She told me that he had once said to her that if he ever left her he would always see her reproachful eyes looking at him.

For the moment they were equals, both poor, both ambitious, neither with any definite idea of the future. He knew he would be returning to Paris for further study and examinations. She must have hoped to build on her small but significant success with her song writing. But teaching took time and energy, and when Jessie and Kenneth Wright's marriage broke down and they left their flat she had to find lodgings by herself. She chose a boarding house in North London where she would have meals provided, to keep time free for composing.

She and Émile were both feeling their way. Neither of them had support or advice at hand. They wrote home, but Muriel's mother was in decline, her brother Percy was now in Nigeria, administering education for the Colonial Office, and her college friends were embarking on adult lives as she was, getting married, or returning to their families far from London. Émile too was a long way from his austere and high-principled parents in Savoy, who valued scholarship and the intellect alongside socialist ideas – his father was invited to stand as a Deputy but declined – and expected their son to build great things on his brilliant studies, after he had finished them.

His scholarship money was meagre but he earned something by giving conversation classes at King's and the



London School of Economics, where many of his students were training to become journalists. They studied in the evening and worked in the City by day, and he found the best way of getting them to talk was to discuss politics. In May 1926 the failure of the General Strike, called to back the miners, whose pay was being cut to starvation level, filled the students with anger. Émile sympathized – he had been reading a history of the miners – but he could not help being impressed by the calm of the English when he found there were no barricades and no violence – and that the miners gave way.

His own life was suddenly in turmoil. In May 1926 he and Muriel became engaged. By his own account this allowed them to exchange their first passionate kiss, an overwhelming experience for them both. You can judge what puritans they were, how much they had suppressed, how much they longed to make love and how sternly they denied themselves before marriage. He was twenty, she twenty-eight. She had taken a year off her age, and when he discovered this by looking at her passport, she at once offered to release him from their engagement. Naturally he refused. He wanted to be married. By French law he could not marry without the consent of his parents before the age of twenty-five. They responded discouragingly to the news of his engagement, as he might have expected, given his age and the fact that he had more years of study to get through. He became all the more determined to show his independence. For the next two years he divided his time between Geneva, Paris, London and Cambridge, where Caius College offered him two years' teaching. Muriel



Émile Delavenay

Muriel Herbert

visited him chastely in Geneva, Paris and Cambridge, and slowly his parents came round. She learnt to speak reasonably good French, and they became fond of her. The wedding was set for June 1928. They were married in St Mary's, Kilburn. The church wedding was at her mother's and Aunt Hornby's insistence, and against his wishes. None of his family came to London for the occasion, but they prepared to receive the new couple on their honeymoon.

Émile was of course much too young to marry, as well as being still in the middle of his studies. Muriel, by marrying a Frenchman, forfeited her British nationality automatically. They left for France at once. On 14 June they were in Paris and he inscribed her new married name, Muriel Delavenay, in a volume of James Joyce poems he

bought for her, *Chamber Music*. Then on to Geneva, and on 12 July she was setting Joyce's poem 'I hear an army charging' to music – the date is pencilled in her copy of *Chamber Music*. The poem is troubled, and her setting, strikingly beautiful as it is, is tempestuous as well as sad – not what you might expect from a young woman on her wedding journey. She set several more of Joyce's poems, and later on their honeymoon they visited Joyce in his flat in Paris, introduced by an Irish friend of Émile, Thomas MacGreevy, a poet who taught at Normale. Joyce listened carefully to her playing and singing her settings, asked her to repeat them, said how much he liked them and gave her permission to publish. Tea was served, Joyce's woman doctor arrived and asked him to remove his shirt at the tea table so that she could listen to his chest. My mother was taken aback by such informality, but charmed by Joyce, who gave her signed copies of his *Pomes Penyeach* and *Chamber Music*, and told her that her music was better than his words. She misunderstood, thinking he'd said the opposite, and agreed, then realized her mistake and everyone laughed to cover her embarrassment. They parted good friends and Joyce wrote later to give her permission to broadcast her settings. MacGreevy had also written to Yeats, telling him he must give Muriel permission to publish her setting of 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree'. Yeats obliged, and it was immediately and lastingly successful.

All this made for a thrilling honeymoon. There was the matter of sex too, and they had taken precautions – the same sort of barrier contraceptive, known as a Dutch cap, I would use a generation later. She told me how they

laughed at her difficulty in inserting it, so they must have had some fun; but for her sex was a disappointment. And soon, in spite of their precautions, she was pregnant. Émile faced a demanding year ahead, with examinations to be sat in Paris in April, the month the baby was due. Lady Douro sent Muriel to her obstetrician, who presided over his patients in a smart nursing home. It worked out badly. Muriel wanted to be conscious for the birth, but the doctor ignored her wishes and anaesthetized her over her protest. This increased the dislike and distrust of the medical profession she had already begun to feel under the influence of Dorothy Hess, who was a Christian Scientist. To make things worse, Émile had to leave for Paris two days after the birth of their daughter Marguerite, to sit for those important examinations, and, although he achieved the necessary results, he did less well than had been hoped.

The expected course for him now would be to take a teaching post in France, arranged through Normale, and start work on a thesis. Instead he resolved to stay in England and find teaching in London. It was a step so crucial that it suggests he now felt more at home in England than in France. Times were hard everywhere with the worldwide depression, but at least in England the election of 1929 brought in a coalition headed by a Labour prime minister, Ramsay MacDonald. It was the first election to give young women the vote, but ironically Muriel had lost hers along with her British nationality. Another of Émile's reasons for choosing England was that her musical contacts were all there, and he felt he should not take her away from them; she earned little, but her earnings made a significant contribution.

He could not find a full-time teaching post and had to accept more part-time teaching, hard work and poorly paid. Things improved slightly when in 1930 he was taken on by Frederick Attenborough, principal of the Borough Road Training College in Isleworth, but still for only three mornings a week. Better still, he also now agreed with Normale on a subject for his thesis: it was to be on D. H. Lawrence, who had just died of tuberculosis in the South of France. A senior colleague suggested the idea, Émile sat down to read *Sons and Lovers*, saw its greatness at once, went on to the stories and more of the novels, and made his decision. He knew it would be the work of many years.

Their income at this time was about £400 a year, of which a quarter came from Muriel's earnings. This gave them enough to employ a maid, and to move to St Peter's Square in Hammersmith, where the houses were handsome and the rents low, attracting artists, poets, intellectuals, journalists and writers. With this congenial touch of *Bohème*, it was also close to the Thames – no motorway then – and laid out around a garden where children could play. Muriel and Émile shared Number 27 with two women: the artist Gertrude Hermes, separated from her husband and with a son and a daughter, and Barbara Weekley, a name my father responded to with interest, knowing her to be the daughter of D. H. Lawrence's widow by her first husband. Gertrude and Muriel agreed to share some of the childcare.

It seemed as though they were entering into a productive and happy time. Their daughter Marguerite, a bright and active child, was a joy to them both, and they soon took

her proudly to meet her French grandparents, who were now entirely won over by Muriel. Yet Émile was already repenting his marriage. Muriel's distrust of medicine and interest in Christian Science infuriated him. She was irrational, he decided, and at the same time too respectful of convention. She had mood swings that were difficult to deal with. They quarrelled fiercely. Her friends loved her, and many of them were interesting to Émile, but there were days when he found himself disliking her. Feeling his dislike was terrible to Muriel, worse than a lovers' quarrel because it led to a cold and disdainful withdrawal. She became jealous. Their love-making gave her little pleasure and, I suppose, not much more than temporary relief to him. So they grew angry and ashamed, each ready to blame the other for their failure.

While he agonized about how he could escape from what he had desired for so long, she also formed a wish, to have another child. If she mentioned it to him he did not respond. Long after I was grown up and my mother was dead, my father wrote a memoir in which he described how, in September 1932, on holiday in Cornwall with her and walking in silence on a high cliff path, he felt such hatred for her that he thought seriously of killing her. He reasoned that if he pushed her over the cliff edge no one would ever know it was not an accident. It was the only time in his life he had a murderous intention, he wrote, but he never forgot it.

He did not act on it. Instead, that night, still without exchanging a word, she set out to end their estrangement and I was conceived. It was her will that brought this about,

using his reluctant submission to sexual need, not only without love but with the gritted teeth of murderous loathing. I learnt about this in 1991, when he showed me the text of his autobiography. It is such an upsetting story that I ask myself why he chose to write it down and publish it for me to read. Did he think I ought to know? Did he feel some obligation to make all things clear to me, perhaps to explain why he had been so hostile to me when I was a small child? Was he ridding himself of the guilt of having had a murderous thought by making this secular confession?

At least my mother was spared the knowledge. And I never asked him about it: why not? He must have been confident that our relationship was good enough to bear the revelation. It was. But it was not deep enough for me to question him. I did not complain. I was in my late fifties by then, preoccupied with my own life, my children and a grandchild, and busy writing. Still, it puzzles me. I knew he had concealed other things in his memoir – adulterous love-affairs that would have upset his second wife – so why not this? Over the years since, I have thought about this odd beginning of my existence a good deal. While the conception of a child is often a random event, mine seems to have been very much against the odds, my mother's strong intention pitted against my father's hatred. Do I feel differently about myself? Perhaps I have developed a stronger sense of the randomness of things.

From my mother I always heard a different and happy story of my birth as a much desired child, arriving on the exact day I was expected, and born, as she wished, at home, with minimum fuss. There was only a monthly nurse in

attendance, and I made my appearance before the doctor arrived. Gertrude Hermes came to sculpt the newborn baby, my mother breastfed me happily. The person who suffered most was my four-year-old sister Marguerite, who had been invited to stay with friends, the kindly Attenboroughs, whose sons Richard, David and John were a little older than her. She hated being sent away, and returning to find a supplanter in her mother's arms. Our relationship started badly.

I was born because my mother was determined to have a second child. She was my friend, and she loved both me and my sister, but as soon as I was aware of anything I knew my father disliked me. He did his best to make my sister his ally against me. We became a divided family, although his anger was sometimes directed against Marguerite too: when he saw she had put up a copy of the Lord's Prayer on the wall of her bedroom he became enraged and tore it down.

My mother's unconditional love gave me confidence, and was stronger than my father's unkindness. In 1937 he proposed to my mother that they should formally separate, he taking Marguerite, she keeping me. She turned down this plan. By his own account the marriage was dead for him, but even then his feelings were not entirely fixed, because in that same year he gave her for her fortieth birthday a book, Helen Waddell's *Mediaeval Latin Lyrics*, three of which she set to music memorably. He wanted her to compose, and he still occasionally hoped to please her. Precise as he always was, he inscribed the book 'with love'.



When he did finally leave her, four years later, he asked the family doctor if he should be worried about my future, and she assured him there was no need to worry because I was an intelligent child, at which point he began to revise his view of me. Later in life, when my stepmother Kath became my friend, we were on much better terms, and he was proud of my scholastic achievements. But he kept some element of doubt about me: when my husband Nick walked out on me, my father wrote to him saying he had not been able to live with my mother and so understood why Nick could not live with me. It may have been meant as a piece of male solidarity but it was not the act of an affectionate father.

As I look back, it seems to me that the failure of the marriage drove him to the brink of madness, and something similar happened to her. He records a moment when she reproached him for turning her from a gentle and lovable creature into a hellcat, as she knew she had become, unable to deal sensibly or calmly with the misery and rage his coldness and disdain provoked. She was uncontrollably jealous of contacts he had with other friends, especially women, that excluded her. She made scenes, embarrassed him in front of other people, threw things at him, threatened suicide. The onset of the war, the invasion of France, the bombing of London and the threat of worse put them both under enormous extra strain. Yet, as soon as they were separated, she pulled herself together and behaved with admirable courage and good sense, setting up a new life, helped by friends, and finding herself a routine office job at which she worked steadily, uncongenial as it was. As long

as they were together they poisoned one another; apart, they were restored to sanity.



This is to run ahead. In 1934, as the world was moving towards another war, Émile accepted an invitation to join Havas, the French news agency, in their London office. It meant setting aside his thesis for the moment. He found he enjoyed journalism and was good at it, and it was well paid. During the five years he was with Havas we left St Peter's Square for flats closer to Kensington, ending in Stanhope Gardens, at the top of one of the large houses there. Our French grandmother came to London to see the coronation in 1937, for which the Duchess gave Muriel some good seats, and I was taken out by our maid against strict orders, to be lifted on to the shoulders of a friendly policeman. I don't remember much, but I formed a favourable impression of the police.

A memory of 1938: my parents are disagreeing about Munich. My father holds up a glass and says, 'Down with Chamberlain!' My mother answers, 'Oh poor man, he is only trying to do his best . . .' Also in 1938 my mother published a set of children's songs, wistful and light-hearted, which I learnt to sing with her. In July 1939 my father joined the BBC, where he worked throughout the war, in charge of programmes relating to France, among them *Les Français parlent aux Français*, with its famous 'V for Victory' Morse Code sound signal: dot-dot-dot-dash. The war meant we children were sent out of London. In October

1941 our parents separated. Nothing was left but exasperation, jealousy and wretchedness. Émile abandoned their flat and started divorce proceedings, alleging that Muriel was of unsound mind. She, supported by friends, steadied her nerve, moved out of London and found office work to prove that she was sane and could cope. She succeeded admirably. Her jealousy was not all fantasy, because Émile had found a soul-mate in Katharine, his Oxford-educated secretary at the BBC. I understood nothing of what was happening, but our parents never spoke to one another again. He moved back into the Stanhope Gardens flat with Katharine once they were married. Our family life, such as it was, was over.