



THE
EDWARDIANS

V. SACKVILLE-
WEST





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1

CHEVRON

AMONG the many problems which beset the novelist, not the least weighty is the choice of the moment at which to begin his novel. It is necessary, it is indeed unavoidable, that he should intersect the lives of his dramatis personae at a given hour; all that remains is to decide which hour it shall be, and in what situation they shall be discovered. There is no more reason why they should not first be observed lying in a bassinette—having just been deposited for the first time in it—than that the reader should make their acquaintance in despairing middle age, having just been pulled out of a canal. Life, considered in this manner from the novelist's point of view, is a long stretch full of variety, in which every hour and circumstance have their peculiar merit, and might furnish a suitable spring-board for the beginning of a story. Life, moreover, as we continue to consider it from the novelist's point of view, life although varied is seen to be continuous; there is only one beginning and only one ending, no intermediate beginnings and

endings such as the poor novelist must arbitrarily impose; which perhaps explains why so many novels, shirking the disagreeable reminder of Death, end with Marriage, as the only admissible and effective crack in continuity. So much for the end; but there are obvious disadvantages to starting the hero off with his birth. For one thing, he is already surrounded by grown-ups, who by reason of his tender and inarticulate age must play some part in the novel, or at any rate in the first chapters of it, and whose lives are already complicated in such a fashion that it is no true beginning for them when they are hauled ready-made into the story. For another thing—but I need not enlarge. The arbitrariness of choice has already been made sufficiently evident, and no further justification is necessary to explain why we irrupt into the life of our hero (for so, I suppose, he must be called) at the age of nineteen, and meet him upon the roof a little after mid-day on Sunday, July the 23rd, nineteen hundred and five.

HE HAD climbed on to the roof not only because for years such exercise had been his favourite pastime but because it was now his only certain method of escape. Escape was a necessity; otherwise, his mother expected him to play the host, which meant that the men chaffed him and that the women rumbled his hair. Even at that early age, he liked his hair to be oiled and tidy. Even at that early age, he resented any intrusion, however genial, upon his privacy. So he escaped; sprang upstairs through the rich confusion of staircases and rooms; and finally reaching the

attics pushed his way out through a small door which opened on to the leads. Nimble in tennis-shoes, he went up an angle of the sloping tiles, to sit astride the peak of the roof; tore his shirt open, fanned his flushed face, and drank the air in large draughts. Arrived there, his surroundings supported him in the most approved fashion. A cloud of white pigeons wheeled above him in the blue sky. Acres of red-brown roof surrounded him, heraldic beasts carved in stone sitting at each corner of the gables. Across the great courtyard the flag floated red and blue and languid from a tower. Down in the garden, on a lawn of brilliant green, he could see the sprinkled figures of his mother's guests, some sitting under the trees, some strolling about; he could hear their laughter and the tap of the croquet mallets. Round the garden spread the park; a herd of deer stood flicking with their short tails in the shade of the beeches. All this he could see from the free height of the roof. Immediately below him—very far below, it seemed—lay a small inner court, paved, with an immense bay-tree growing against the grey wall, and as he peered down, feeling a little giddy, he saw a procession emerge from a door and take its way across to a door opposite. He grinned. Well did he know what this procession meant. It meant that at a given moment in the servants' dinner, the flock of housemaids had risen from their seats in the servants' hall, and, carrying their plates of pudding in their hands, were retiring to their own sitting-room to complete their meal. So the procession came, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, one behind the other, in print dresses and white aprons, carrying their

plates, each plate with a dab of pudding on it and a spoon laid across, as though they observed the ritual of some ancient and hierarchical etiquette.

It must, therefore, be a quarter to one. The servants' dinner began at half-past twelve, and the punctuality of the house was as reliable as the sun himself. Sebastian grinned; then he sighed. For the approach of luncheon meant that he must abandon the roof and its high freedom, with the surveying glance it gave him of house, garden, and park, and go downstairs to be engulfed once more in the bevy of his mother's guests. Week-ends were always like this, throughout the summer, though he, Sebastian, who was at Oxford, suffered from them only during his summer holidays. For his sister it was different; she was always at home, and even now probably was having her hair tweaked and frizzed, till, as her brother said, she could hardly shut her mouth. On Monday and Tuesday—unless it rained—her hair would still be curly; by Wednesday it would again be lank.

But although it was easy to get up it was not so easy, as Sebastian found, and was to find as life went on, to get down. He hung for a long time in perilous hesitation over the well of the little court. He could not make up his mind to jump. Supposing he missed his footing? shot between the battlements and crashed into the depths below? The air was good, warmed by the sun; and the ground was good, when the foot was on it; but he hung now in a false position between the two; a tentative movement made a tile slip. It slipped with a single, cautionary rattle. The heraldic leopards watched him sarcastically, holding their

shields. Overhead, the clock suddenly struck One, and the sound reverberated all round the roofs, coming to rest again in the clock-tower, after its journey of warning in that solitary punctuation of time. The pigeons rose in a scatter, only to settle once more on the gables, and there to resume their courtships. There was nothing for it but to jump. Sebastian jumped.

HE WAS late for luncheon, and his mother looked at him disapprovingly as he slipped into his place at one of the little tables. His mother was annoyed, but she idolised her son, and could not deny that he was very good-looking. His good looks were of the kind that surprised her afresh every time he came into the room. He was so sleek, so dark, and so olive-skinned. So personable. Potini, that sly, agreeable, sensuous Italian, hit the nail on the head when he murmured to her that Sebastian enjoyed all the charm of patrician adolescence. Patrician adolescence! Yes, thought his mother, who could never have found the words for herself; yes, that's Sebastian. He could be half an hour late for luncheon, and one would still forgive him.

There were thirty people to luncheon; but two places remained empty; they were destined for two people who were motoring down from London and who, naturally, had so far failed to arrive. The duchess never waited for motorists. They must take their chance. And, to-day being Sunday, they would not be able to send the usual telegram saying that they had broken down.

Conversation stopped for a moment when Sebastian

came in, and one or two people laughed. They were amused; not unkindly. Luncheon was laid in the banquet-hall at small tables of four and six, the formality of a long table being reserved for dinner. The hall was large and high, with a flagged floor; coats of arms stained the windows, and the heraldic leopards stood rampant in carved and painted wood against the panelling; antlers of stags ornamented the walls, opposite the full-length Vandycks; two Bacchanalian little vines, dwarfed but bearing bunches of grapes of natural size, stood in gold wine-coolers on either side of the door; they were a well-known speciality of Chevron. Sebastian found himself at a table with Sir Harry Tremaine, Lady Roehampton, and the old Duchess of Hull. He liked Lady Roehampton, and was faintly troubled by her presence; in her large Leghorn hat, with nestling roses and blue velvet streamers, and a muslin fichu like that of Marie Antoinette, she looked exactly like her own portrait by Sargent, which had been the sensation of that year's Academy, and it was not difficult to believe that she was popularly accepted as a professional beauty. The old Duchess of Hull he could not abide. She was heavily but badly made-up, with a triangle of red on either cheek, and, since her sense of direction was no longer very sure, she made bad shots with her fork which wiped the enamel off her face all round her mouth, and left the old yellow skin coming through. But her tongue was as sharp and witty as ever, and moreover she played an admirable hand at Bridge. No hostess could afford to omit her from a party. "Well, young man?" she barked at Sebastian; but Lady Roehampton murmured,

"Well, Sebastian?" and smiled at him as though she knew exactly what he had been doing.

Lady Roehampton, though no one seeing her would have suspected it, had a marriageable daughter.

AND now the rest of the day must be got through somehow, but the members of the house-party, though surely spoilt by the surfeits of entertainment that life had always offered them, showed no disposition to be bored by each other's familiar company, and no inclination to vary the programme which they must have followed on innumerable Sunday afternoons since they first emerged from the narrowness of school or schoolroom, to take their place in a world where pleasure fell like a ripened peach for the outstretching of a hand. Leonard Anquetil, watching them from outside, marvelled to see them so easily pleased. Here are a score or more of people, he thought, who by virtue of their position are accustomed to the intimate society of princes, politicians, financiers, wits, beauties, and other makers of history, yet are apparently content with desultory chatter and make-believe occupation throughout the long hours of an idle day. Nor could he pretend to himself that on other days they diverted themselves differently, or that their week-end provided a deserved relaxation from a fuller and more ardent life. All their days were the same; had been the same for an eternity of years; not only for themselves, thought Anquetil, but for a long dwindling procession of their ancestors. By God, thought Anquetil, waking up to a truth that

hitherto had not occurred to him, Society has always existed. Strange hocus-pocus, that juggles certain figures into prominence, so that their aspect is familiar to the wife of the bank-clerk, and their doings a source of envy to the daughter of the chemist in South Kensington! With what glamour this scheme is invested, insolent imposture! and upon what does it base its pretensions? for Anquetil, for the life of him, could not see that these people were in any way remarkable, nor that their conversation was in any way worthy of exciting the interest of an eager man. He listened carefully, tabulating their topics. They were more interested, he observed, in facts than in ideas. A large proportion of their conversation seemed to consist in asking one another what they had thought of such-and-such an entertainment, and whether they were going to such-and-such an other. "What was Miriam's party like, Lucy? sticky, as usual?" "No," said Lucy, "quite a good party for once, but of course nothing will ever make poor Miriam into a good hostess." "Millions don't make a salon." "Are you lunching with Celia to-morrow, Lucy?" "Yes,—are you? What fun. Who else is going, do you know?" "Tommy, you're going, aren't you? How too deevy. We'll all be able to laugh at Celia in a corner. And let me see—to-morrow evening is Stafford House, isn't it? Deevy parties at Stafford House, always. And Millie looking like a goddess, with a golden train half-way down the stairs. The charm of that woman! Everybody will be there." "Violet really ought to be stopped from giving parties. There ought to be an Act of Parliament about it. Friday was ghastly." "Ghastly! Horribilino! And the

filthiest food." "Where are you going to stay for Ascot?" . . . Anquetil nearly got up and wandered off, but he was fascinated and amused. These parties of theirs, he thought, were like chain-smoking: each cigarette was lighted in the hope that it might be more satisfactory than the last. Then investments bulked heavy in their talk, and other people's incomes, and the merits of various stocks and shares; also the financial shrewdness of Mrs. Cheyne, a lady unknown to Anquetil, save by repute, but who cropped up constantly in the conversation; Romola Cheyne, it appeared, had made a big scoop in rubber last week—but some veiled sneers accompanied this subject, for how could Romola fail, it was asked, with such sources of information at her disposal? Dear Romola: what a clever woman. And never malicious, said someone. No, said someone else; too clever to be malicious. Then they passed on to other house-parties, and Anquetil learnt how poor Constance had made the *gaffe* of her life, by inviting Sophie and Verena together; but who Sophie and Verena were, or why they should not be invited together, Anquetil did not discover. And would Constance's girl marry young Ambermere? she would be a fool if she refused him, for when his father died he would come into thirty thousand a year—incomes again, thought Anquetil, who happened to know young Ambermere and had once had the pleasure of telling him exactly what he thought of him. He felt sorry for Constance's girl. Then for a space it seemed good to them to play at being serious. Politics flitted across the conversation, and these ladies and gentlemen spoke with a proprietary and casual familiarity, somewhat as though

politics were children that they entrusted to the care of nurses and tutors, remembering their existence from time to time, principally in order to complain of the inefficient way the nurses and tutors carried out their duties; but although they were careful to give an impression of being behind the scenes, like parents who go up to the nursery once a day, their acquaintance remained oddly remote and no more convincing than an admirably skilful bluff. It was founded, Anquetil discovered, on personal contact with politicians; "Henry told me last week . . .," or "A. J. B. was dining with me and said . . .," but their chief desire was to cap one another's information. So this is the great world, thought Anquetil; the world of the élite; and he began to wonder what qualities gave admission to it, for he had already noticed that no definite principle appeared to dictate selection. He was not really very much interested, but the study would do well enough as an amusement for a Sunday afternoon under the trees of Chevron, listening to chatter in which he could not take part. This organisation puzzled him, for, so far, he could perceive no common factor between all these people; neither high birth nor wealth nor brains seemed to be essential—as Anquetil in his simplicity had thought—for though Sir Adam was fabulously rich, Tommy Brand was correspondingly poor; and though the Duchess of Hull was a duchess, Mrs. Levison was by birth and marriage a nobody; and though Lord Robert Gore was a clever, ambitious young man, Sir Harry Tremaine was undeniably a ninny. Yet they all took their place with the same assurance, and upon the same footing. Anquetil

knew that they and their friends formed a phalanx from which intruders were rigorously excluded; but why some people qualified and others did not, he could not determine. Some of these women were harsh-faced, and lacked both charm and wit; their only virtue, a glib conversance with such topics as came up for discussion and a manner of delivering themselves as though the final word had been uttered on the subject. If this is Society, thought Anquetil, God help us, for surely no fraud has ever equalled it. These are the people, or a sample of them, who ordain the London season, glorify Ascot, make or unmake the fortune of small Continental watering-places, inspire envy, emulation, and snobbishness—well, thought Anquetil, with a shrug, they spend money, and that is the best that can be said for them. Lying in his long wicker chair, he could see some of them strolling about the lawn, and so low did he lie that the green lawn appeared to stand up behind them, like a green cloth stretched on a wall, with the little domes of the parasols moving against it, and the trim waists cutting their hour-glass pattern above the flowing out of the skirt.

Down in the steward's room the butler offered his arm gravely to the Duchess of Hull's maid, and conducted her to the place at his right hand. Lord Roehampton's valet did the same by Mrs. Wickenden the housekeeper. Mrs. Wickenden, of course, was not married, and her title was bestowed only by courtesy. The order of precedence was very rigidly observed, for the visiting maids and valets

enjoyed the same hierarchy as their mistresses and masters; where ranks coincided, the date of creation had to be taken into account, and for this purpose a copy of Debrett was always kept in the housekeeper's room—last year's Debrett, appropriated by Mrs. Wickenden as soon as the new issue had been placed in her Grace's boudoir. The maids and valets enjoyed not only the same precedence as their employers, but also their names. Thus, although the Duchess of Hull's maid had stayed many times at Chevron, and was indeed quite a crony of Mrs. Wickenden's, invited to private sessions in the housekeeper's room, where the two elderly gossips sat stirring their cups of tea, she was never known as anything but Miss Hull, and none of her colleagues in the steward's room would ever have owned to a knowledge of what her true name might be. It is to be doubted whether Mrs. Wickenden herself had ever used it. Mrs. Wickenden and Vigeon the butler, between whom a slightly hostile alliance existed, prided themselves that no mistake had ever been made in the Chevron steward's room, and that consequently no disputes had ever arisen, such as were known to have happened, most distressingly, in other houses. The household at Chevron was indeed admirably organised. For one thing, any servant who had been at Chevron for less than ten years was regarded as an interloper; at the end of ten years' service they were summoned to her Grace's presence and received a gold watch with their name and the date engraved upon the back; a few encouraging words were spoken by her Grace and henceforward they were accepted as part of the establishment. But for this one, brief,

intimidating occasion, the under-servants rarely came into contact with her Grace. It was to be doubted whether all of them knew her by sight, and it was quite certain that many of them were unknown to her. Various anecdotes were current; one to the effect that the duchess, meeting the fifth housemaid at the foot of a stair, had asked whether Lady Viola were in her room and had been completely routed by the reply, "I'll go and see, madam; what name shall I say?" Then there had been that other terrifying incident, when her Grace, taking an unusually early walk in the park on a Sunday morning, had observed the black-robed, black-bonneted procession setting off for church, and had descried a white rose coquettishly ornamenting a bonnet. The white rose had bobbed up and down across the grass. It was a gay little flower, despite the purity of its colour, and to the shocked eyes of the duchess it had represented insubordination. Mrs. Wickenden, summoned on her return from church, was equally scandalised. She explained the whole matter by a deprecatory reference to "those London girls," and the culprit had been discharged from Chevron by the afternoon train.

It was, however, seldom that any complete stranger obtained a situation at Chevron. The system of nepotism reigned. Thus Mrs. Wickenden and Wickenden the head-carpenter were brother and sister; their father and grandfather had been head-carpenters there in their day; several of the housemaids were Mrs. Wickenden's nieces, and the third footman was Vigeon's nephew. Whole families, from generation to generation, naturally found employment on the estate. Any outsider was regarded with suspicion and

disdain. By this means a network was created, and a constant supply of young aspirants ensured. Their wages might range from twelve to twenty-four pounds a year. To do them justice, it must be said that the service they one and all gave to Chevron was whole-hearted and even passionate. They considered the great house as in some degree their own; their pride was bound up in it, and their life was complete within the square of its walls. Wickenden knew more about the structure than Sebastian himself, and Mrs. Wickenden had been known to correct her mistress—with the utmost tact and respect—on a point of historical accuracy. Such disputes as might arise between them—and the household was naturally divided into factions—were instantly shelved when any point concerning the interest of Chevron arose. Shelved, perhaps, only to be renewed later with increased but always dignified animosity. A vulgar wrangle was unknown, and indeed it was only among the upper servants that any such thing as a jealous friction existed. Such small fry as under-housemaids and scullery-maids and the like were not supposed to have any feelings: they were only supposed to do as they were told. The severest discipline obtained. But it was known that an occasional clash occurred between Mrs. Wickenden and Mr. Vigeon; and when that happened, in however dignified a privacy, the repercussion was felt throughout the house, and the ragtag and bobtail might be observed scurrying with additional diligence through hall and passage about their tasks, and many an eye might be furtively wiped under the stimulus of an undeserved scolding.

But when the steward's room was full of guests, and the