

The Holm

This was my first time to see Fidelio....In the first act there is a quartet "Mir is so wunderbar." The four protagonists come down to the footlights... seemingly unaware of each other, they each sing their line of music straight out to the audience as if it were not of their doing that the lines intermingle in a complex and perfect harmony that it takes the four of them to make.. When the curtain came down on the act I wiped the tears from my eyes and I said to Arnold, "Why is ensemble singing so beautiful? What makes it move us so much?" And he said "People would be like that all the time if they could. "

Nuala O'Faolain , *Are You Somebody* (p119)

Susannah Bentwich wanted life in her household to flow with the unforced inevitability of art. Everything should be done perfectly, and seem effortless, with no hint of strain. To an astonishing extent she achieved the effect she aimed for. Mrs Ramsay, the heroine of *To the Lighthouse* is forever beautiful, loving, always competent. Margery, sending a sister a copy of the book for her birthday, wrote "you must read [this book]. I never liked [Virginia Woolf] before. couldn't stand Orlando for all its cleverness. But this is deeply felt, and in those touches, those constant vivid flashes caught is our own Mother....Every single word is true and right."

In the summer of 1893 Susannah and Herbert had seven children and Susannah was pregnant. She persuaded Herbert that the family had outgrown "The Limes," and they bought a fifty-year lease on 58 Avenue Road. This house, which Herbert named "The Holm," stood at the edge of St. John's Wood, then a neighborhood of artists and writers, including Susannah's brother Tod. It had plenty of space indoors and out. (Sixty years later it became the residence of the Israeli ambassador.) There was a front garden full of chestnut trees, lime trees, and syringa that gave a wooded outlook from the windows. The back garden held seven pear trees and a lawn large enough for a tennis court. The basement had a large sunny kitchen and a playroom, that also served as the week-day dining room, had access to the garden. The ground floor had a snug study, a drawing room, stretching from garden to garden, with an alcove built out to house Susannah's beloved china nicknacks; a dining room papered once and for all with a William Morris design of chrysanthemums whose autumn shades threw a mellow light on the room and the oil paintings to which it served as a background.

"The first floor " wrote Margery, "was our Mecca, with Mother's bedroom, and just behind it the schoolroom, which was school for most of the children until they entered their teens....Upstairs (with a gate on the landing to prevent any baby's escape) .the youngest squad could disport themselves to their heart's content. " For the Bentwich children, life in The Holm lived in memory as a golden era, however laced with personal trauma or difficulties.

Herbert was as much in love with Susannah as ever. On March 25, 1894, he wrote from

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Swan Hotel, Bedford "What do you think of the above for an address? I could not resist the temptation to visit what I love to call my family place, being so near; and so we left Cambridge as the sun was setting, and arrived here in an hour, leaving good time for a stroll along the delightful embankment....I am resolved not to let another year pass without bringing my sweetheart here while our love is yet young and fresh, and we can enjoy together the delight of renewing recollections which make a boy again." As a child Herbert had spent many holidays in Bedford with his mother's family, pampered and adored by aunts and elderly cousins. These memories and connections shaped his imagination.

Susannah stayed firmly fixed in the present. On a summer holiday with the children at a Norfolk farm, she watched the children take turns jumping from the top of a threshed wheat stack onto some loose hay below, "frisking like a lot of kittens....It is scarcely necessary to add that I too wanted to be a child, and have my turn at jumping with the rest." She was still buoyed up by Herbert's love, and wrote: "The anxiously looked for letter as fresh and full of living thought as thirteen years ago acted as magic upon me this morning. I had had a very restless night and was not in the best of humours, but after reading and rereading my sweet love letter I felt like in former years, when a girl, ready to kiss the whole world, and to share my pleasure and my feelings with them all."

When Hebe was born, on December 12 1893, child bearing and the work of sustaining perfection had begun to tax Susannah's strength. Norman, and his sisters were sent, with an aunt, for ten days' holiday in Brighton. Norman wrote home, "My darling Mother, You would not get the New Ralga [neuralgia] I am sure, the weather is so beautiful, and the high waves and their rustling make a grand scene of nature. I hope that dear little baby that you have is quite well. Do not go downstairs though, or I am sure you will be tempted to re-start work."

Avenue Road lent itself to entertaining. The garden was adapted to open air fetes and Susannah had no lack of budding musicians that such occasions could help. Her touch would make a bare room suddenly cosy, -- a rearrangement of chairs, a plant or two, a few pennyworth of bunting, Japanese lanterns and a garden fete was created. If larger premises were needed Uncle Toddy's studio was nearby.

Norman's Bar Mitzvah in 1896 was celebrated in Victorian style with family dinners. The Solomon grandparents, and all the Solomon aunts, uncles, and cousins lived within a half hour's walk. There was a children's fancy dress ball, at which Lilian and Nita wore Norwegian costumes.

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In the children's eyes Mother was perfect. If she undertook a project it was sure to succeed. She cared for the smallest detail and left nothing to chance. She always told you the exact corner of the precise box in a certain drawer where you would find a thimble, or a piece of trimming or whatever it was, and it was sure to be there. Because of her wonderful reliability there emanated from her a perfect sense of security. Naomi remembered "in the days of dances the feeling of implicit confidence with which I used to go down to her bedroom in a dress which looked hopelessly passe and hair which wouldn't set properly, knowing quite well I should be set right in ten minutes. She (we used to think it sacrilege to use "she" for Mother when we were little) would put a pin in here or there --and when Mother put pins in they never came out and they never shewed-- and with a brooch or a piece of lace she made all the difference to the look of the dress."

To be sure, Susannah's apparently effortless perfection required, besides her own devoted work, a staff of teachers, and governesses. Frauleins and Mademoiselles, who taught the children to speak German and French were significant figures in their lives. But Susannah remained the authority and the reliable source of comfort.

Naomi, as a child of ten, had "a slight curvature of the spine" for which the doctor prescribed twenty minutes of massage every evening. For the first ten minutes it did not hurt, but after that it grew more and more painful. One evening Fraulein was in a bad temper; her hard hands were even more painful than usual.

Naomi begged to be let off.

Fraulein insisted: "Nein, du musst noch zehn minuten aushalten!"

Naomi began to fidget; Fraulein started to scold. Suddenly Susannah's footsteps were heard on the stairs, and her voice, saying, "What's all that noise I hear?"

Fraulein explained the situation from her point of view.

Naomi, in tears, was ashamed to look up. Then she heard the door closing. Her mother's fingers were rubbing her back gently up and down. They felt soft, and Naomi felt so safe in her mother's hands that she did not mind how long the massage went on. At the same time her mother spoke soothingly, saying, "You must do what Fraulein tells you, dear. You know what the doctor said. If you want to grow up big and strong and play tennis like Budge and Margery, and go to school, you must let Fraulein rub your back every night, like a good girl."

She put Naomi to bed, heard her say her prayers, tucked her up, and gave her a kiss. Sixty years later Naomi remembered wondering "how I should be able to obey the commandment and love God even more than I loved my mother."

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Two years after the Bentwiches moved to Avenue Road, their ninth child being on the way, Susannah and Herbert found someone to take responsibility for all that involved the kitchen. Sara Alexander, a Jewish woman from Hamburg, known to all as "Cookie," entered the household in December 1894, and was signed on for life by the birth of Thelma, whom she loved as "her child." Thelma was born March 15, 1895.

Cookie was thick-set and undersized, almost a dwarf, with a large head set in on her shoulders; a comic figure, caustic, full of quips; with a word for everyone "the salt and pepper in the family menu, the corrective for too much soulfulness." Though scrupulous about maintaining a kosher kitchen at home her favorite dish out was a ham sandwich. She remained for twenty five years the family's greatest domestic support. She saw to it not only that meals were prepared, but that all kitchen and household supplies were replenished.

As far as music was concerned Cookie liked only musical comedy tunes played on her phonograph. She told those who wanted to use the kitchen as a practising room, "Dat blessed Music makes me sick and you sick." She had nicknames for everyone; "Miss Muckabout" (Nita), "Nosy Parker" (Carmel), or "The Hat mit de Boy," (Jose), and so forth. When roused she would even speak her mind to "the Master." Her nickname for herself was Lady Rothschild -- she did things in style. Good fare and good cheer were in the kitchen. She characteristically kept a good margin ahead of necessity; and when there was a train to be caught she was at the station early.

A letter from Susannah says: "How you would laugh or perhaps pity me, were you to see me here in the waiting room at Victoria with Cook by the side of me in state, bag and basket perched in front and by the side of her, and nearly an hour to wait. I told her to get a fourwheeler to help kill time; when lo and behold she hailed a taxi and we got here in 10 minutes, to find we have an hour all but five minutes to wait. Fortunately I have my famous pen which always seems to come to the rescue...."

The family continued to grow: Carmel was born October 5 1898, and Joseph Solomon Bentwich, a second boy, on February 3 1902. By then, Lillian was twenty, Norman almost nineteen, Nita seventeen and so on down the line.

Herbert remained a jealous lover. In the summer of 1902 Susannah wrote:

One wee little phrase in your letter this morning read so familiarly- about being jealous of the wee babe. I think if I were to look through my love correspondence about the time the ten others were wee babies, I should find that same thought in each one. Well bless him! He is worth staying home for, and you will agree with me in this when I tell you he has gained 14ozs since last Monday; only fancy 1 lb all but 2 oz in a week. I feel as proud as the Birchington

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peacocks. I am glad however that you are at least beginning to feel yourself a father of girls and acting accordingly wisely and well.

Love and good hugs all around from

Chichy

In Carmel's childhood, the Bentwich household remained, as it had been, structured by music and by Jewish tradition. Carmel remembered being "fed" by music. Early and late she heard the sound of sisters on violins, cellos or pianos, and sometimes in trios or quartets together. Meals might be postponed for the end of someone's lesson or return from rehearsal. Sometimes there were jangling discords from the beginners; doors were opened, and a voice downstairs would shout to the upstairs, "Can't you play a bit softer?" or "Hebe, your A string must be out of tune; I can't get this passage right with that noise you're making!" But playing an instrument was a much desired achievement. For Carmel the piano was most available; and she developed a sense of "ensemble" very early. In January 1907 Margery wrote to Susannah (then in America visiting Lilian): "I was playing the Beethoven concerto in Birchington and Miss Carmel [age nine] gets the accompaniment, finds out the bar I am at, and starts accompanying really astonishingly well. She played only the top notes where there were thirds etc and picked out the melody in the bass and treble hand alternately as you know it comes and counted and waited simply wonderfully, always coming in at the right bar in an important part, even where she lost count a little before. It would have done your heart good to hear her."

Though Jewish custom and music remained constants, family relationships changed.. For Carmel, Mother was a distant figure, busy with dinner parties and entertainments, the clothing for nine girls, the special instructors, repairs and improvements of the home. Mother's bedroom was where the little ones, Carmel and Jose, repeated the morning prayers with her under the stained glass windows, and watched her doing her hair at the dressing table with its two sets of ivory brushes and exquisite silver dishes. Otherwise they saw her rarely unless they were sick.

Carmel's earliest memories of care were upstairs in the nursery with "Pompon,...the most sweet scented blousey comforter of the jealous, and disobedient little girl that I was. Even after a bright and beautiful little brother came to take my place on her knees, there was still her bosom to cry it out on, when I'd been scolded downstairs for some disturbing inquisitiveness." Pompon took her for walks to Regent's Park where they fed the ducks; she taught her to string beads and hem handkerchiefs; she arranged dolls' tea parties with Jose; she provided "Surprises" under the pillow each Saturday morning (ribboned packages containing a few chocolates or

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In Carmel's view of downstairs, Cookie controlled the kitchen and the domestic staff in absolute dictatorship on behalf of the "Master." "[While] French or German governesses ruled upstairs, there was spiritual warfare between upper and nether regions and we learned the arts of diplomatic negotiation very early ." Where "Mother" was remote, and the staff were to be manipulated, "Father" was a dragon., -- especially on Sunday morning Hebrew lessons. Carmel wrote: "After learning to read [Hebrew] there were parts of the morning and Sabbath prayers that we were expected to learn by heart.....When there was a tune I usually got enough of the rhythm to give the effect of knowing....[But my] confusion of the blessings for various occasions would so exasperate Father that invariably I would be sent upstairs in tears."

A few years later Carmel's view of the drawing room changed. The drawing room was across the hall from the dining room, and having the width of the house, led out to the garden at the piano end. "In the evenings between tea and supper when Mother could be persuaded to play for us we'd roll up the heavy felt carpet, and with her direction dance Minuets and Habaneras and ballets of Chopin valeses." Carmel adored the older sisters. She would watch, unseen, through an open doorway as, before going out, they put on last touches in front of mirror-fronted closets that held ball dresses and drawers of artificial flowers, and laces and ribbons scented with old perfumes. They seemed to her "more beautiful than any Renoir or Gainsborough titled lady."

Nita, Lilian, Norman 1899

