

Men I Have
Known

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Contents

Prologue	1
Introduction	3
Growing Up	5
Dangerous Times	13
Royal Air Force Days	23
Civilian Again	53
Family Connections	87
Going Solo	111
The Icing on the Cake	125
Epilogue	157
Index of Names	159

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Prologue

I have always preferred the company of men – I consider them a challenge.

Fate has led me on a journey from schoolgirl to author via au pair, trainee actuary, wartime Royal Air Force officer, hotelier, pig breeder and scrap-metal dealer. On the way, I have travelled widely and met many men from many backgrounds – military and business, TV and politics, academic and agricultural, art, music and literature. Some were fascinating, some repellent. There were intriguing men but also traitors, interesting peasants and friendly tycoons. I knew many of these men well and some only as a passing acquaintance. They have amused me and taught me; some have caused me anger; some have loved me; some helped me and others have hurt me. And now in my nineties, I am still meeting interesting men. Long may it continue!

I never imagined that I would meet a Major who would later govern a once British colony, who after a tyrannical reign would escape to Saudi Arabia. Nor that I would meet, on several occasions, a future prime minister as well as the great Winston Churchill. Now in my sunset days, I take a delight in recalling the men and my memories of them.

Introduction

I had not expected to write this book – it came about when I mentioned to my publishers that I was to give a talk to a group of local businessmen. I had spoken to them some time before about my work for the WAAF in the Filter Room, and had been invited to join them for lunch. I was entertained by around thirty interesting men, a most convivial occasion. After lunch they asked me if I would return to speak to them in the following year. I agreed readily, and their chairman asked what the subject of the next talk would be. Off the top of my head and after a couple of glasses of excellent wine, I rashly said, ‘Men I have known!’ Little did they know why that phrase had jumped into my head.

Shortly after the war, my husband and I became hoteliers and were given the job of managing an inn in the centre of Reading by the family brewers, Simonds and Sons Ltd. It wasn’t a glamorous post: the inn’s clientele consisted at the time of Irish workmen, who were building the local nuclear plant, and local prostitutes. There was even a shillelagh behind the bar for protection!

Intent on bringing about a change, we put up all the prices and decided to offer a limited lunchtime food service. Converting one of many Victorian bars – the Snug – into a snack bar, I needed to decorate it in style. From a nearby delicatessen merchant, I purchased a range of Italian delicacies and a collection of his salami sausages; long ones, short ones, curled ones, some wrapped in foil and some in decorative twine. I hung this collection from a rear shelf in a colourful and attractive display.

When we had our first visit from the area Catering Manager, no

doubt bent on evaluating our abilities, he pointed to the pendulously decorated shelves, and asked, 'And what have we here?' I cast caution to the winds, and replied, 'Men I have known, Sir!' Fortunately, he had a great sense of humour – he laughed, and from that moment, we became friends.

So that was the title of my talk, recorded by Candy Jar Films, and destined eventually to be turned into a sometimes serious and sometimes tongue-in-cheek book. I hope it entertains you.

Growing Up

Harlow Frederick Le Croisette

My father was the eighth generation of a family of Huguenots who escaped from France in 1698, at the time of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes and the subsequent persecution of the Protestants.

At the age of fifteen he trained for five years as an apprentice cabinet maker and joiner, receiving his indenture certificate on the 3 March 1906. He volunteered early in the First World War and joined the Royal Fusiliers as a despatch driver, serving in the Somme and at Passchendale and in 1917 he transferred to the newly formed Royal Flying Corps. This is when my interest in the RAF was born.

His was the first male influence on my life. I would remember him leaving home very early every morning taking advantage of the cheap workman's ticket on the tram to the furniture factory in Islington. He could turn his hand to everything from sweeping the chimney to re-soling my shoes. He would cut my hair and take me out in the garden when the sky was clear and show me the planets. He would help me with homework and he found time to teach the local Boys' Brigade gymnastics. He was industrious and fun, he was reliable and thrifty. He gave me my work ethic; he was the blueprint for my life.

Gilbert – My First Love

In the 1930s few schools were co-educational. However, I considered myself lucky living in London as both my primary and secondary school had mixed classes so I was never intimidated or ill at ease with the male

GROWING UP

of the species. I decided I liked boys and I had my first boyfriend when I was seven-years-old. His name was Gilbert, and he had ginger hair. I wrote him a poem, 'Sweetheart divine, will you be mine?' However this glorious relationship did not last very long. I pushed him over one day and he got tar on his socks. His mother banned him forthwith from any further contact with me.

At my grammar school, Southgate County, boys and girls mixed freely. Together we would go to Alexander Palace – known as Ally Pally – for weekly roller-skating sessions and then on our way home we would stop off at the Leg of Mutton pond for a little gentle canoodling – all fairly innocent, not going farther than a kiss and a cuddle and home by eight o'clock. I had been influenced by the local Baptist Church to remain a virgin until I married, a rule I rigidly obeyed for a long time. In retrospect, I am not convinced that was a good idea and often wonder what I missed.

George – A Girlhood Crush?

It was not until I was in the sixth form that I settled on an official boyfriend – George Duncan, the son of the local police inspector. George was gorgeous, tall and blond, a keen athlete with the additional attraction of a slight trace of a Scottish accent. He was a fine singer and took part in all the musical festivals we had each year. He was also a great cricketer. I was envied by my friends when I became the chosen one. We started going out when I was fifteen-years-old. We were inseparable. Two years later his father was moved to take over Staines police station. We were broken-hearted but though we were many miles apart, we did our utmost to meet as often as possible.

Born in the years after the First World War and growing up in an outer suburb of London, I had no idea how a second war would soon change so many lives, bringing together people who in normal times would never have the opportunity nor the desire to mix. But war would also shatter relationships and we would grasp at happiness even for a

MEN I HAVE KNOWN

brief moment. George, my first love, was very special but would play a sad part in my life in future years.

T. B. Everard, M.A. Cantab

The revered headmaster of my grammar school, Southgate County, was a Member of the Royal College of Music and Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music, as well as holding an M.A. degree from Cambridge University. He was an innovative educationalist and an imposing figure – clean-shaven with steel-grey hair – always wearing his academic gown and inspiring immediate respect. As a talented and keen musician, he formed and conducted an excellent school orchestra. He was the motivator of the many musical productions including the annual Gilbert and Sullivan opera. The orchestra also played in the annual music festival and daily at assembly. He had a memorable habit of always having one pair of spectacles perched on his head, whilst wearing another pair and waving a third pair in his hands!

Parents of children entering a grammar school in the 1930s had to sign an agreement that they would keep their children in education until they were sixteen-years-old. We felt privileged. These were the days when the normal age to enter the world of work was fourteen. Mr Everard announced on my first day of entry to the sacred precincts, ‘There is no first form in this school. You will start in the second form and you will take the General Schools and Matriculation examinations in four years time. This will mean I then have at least one year to begin your education before you enter into the real world.’

We would have the choice in that final year of studying Science, Arts or Commerce. This was a revolutionary idea and no other school offered a similar plan. Nevertheless such was his leadership that the school obtained the highest matriculation results in the area and all students had an opportunity to specialise in a preferred subject, even if they were unable to stay until they were eighteen.

I elected to study Commerce and by the following May obtained

GROWING UP

passes in the City and Guilds examinations; in shorthand to 140 words a minute, typing to 60 words a minutes; and most importantly accountancy and book-keeping up to preparation of profit-and-loss accounts and balance sheets – an incredible start for a business career in those days. These skills have stood me in great stead in every part of my life. Furthermore, we were taught the foundations of economics, commercial French and commercial German. We were introduced to the basics of banking, taken to the Law Courts and Council meetings and generally equipped to enter the commercial world. Moreover, we were taught to speak eloquently and clearly. If we should ever have to speak from the platform, there was a large notice telling us to:

SPEAK UP – SPEAK OUT AND SPEAK SLOWLY

Advice which should be given to everyone. I will continue to sing the praises of T.B. Everard to my dying day, he gave me the confidence to address groups of people ranging from politicians to businessmen, to keep control of my finances and to believe that everything was possible if you tried hard enough.

George Mitchell – An Introduction to Showbiz

I remember the tall seventeen-year-old prefect when I was in my first year at Southgate County School. He was already a talented pianist and played in the school orchestra. He began his singing career in the school choir. Who would have guessed that later he would give so much pleasure to so many with his choir known as the Black and White Minstrels?

He was to become the musical director of this show and lead it to nationwide success. It was first broadcast on radio and then, in June 1958, appeared on television. It very soon became popular and developed into a regular Saturday evening prime-time show. During the nine years that the show was broadcast in black and white, the

MEN I HAVE KNOWN

singers' faces were blacked-up. This face make up was actually red as black did not film very well. Audiences regularly exceeded 18,000! The production gained considerable international kudos; in 1961, it won a Golden Rose at Montreux for the best light-entertainment programme and the first three albums of songs produced between 1960 and 1962 all did extremely well. However, in later years, the show began to be seen as offensive on account of the blackened faces of the white singers. It was regarded as stereotyping and a petition against it was received by the BBC in 1967. Later when it was presented without blacking-up, it was initially successful but finally ran out of steam. Despite his fame, he usually would turn up at school reunions, much to everyone's delight. Eventually George Mitchell emigrated to the United States.

Warren Mitchell – Till Death Us Do Part

He was another member of Southgate County School to reach the dizzy heights of fame. He had always taken part in school theatrical shows and later trained for an acting career. For many years he kept the nation laughing in the Cockney series, *Till Death Us Do Part*. I loved this programme, his character – a dogmatic old Cockney, a fierce Royalist and a true-blue Tory has gone down in history as one of the most watched programmes of its time. He played the indomitable Alf Garnett. Originally his name was Warren Misell and he arrived in my final year. He came from an immigrant Russian Jewish family. But when I knew him, he was a scruffy lad in the second form and of no importance to a sixth former. I remember he always took part in any entertainments that the school put on and showed a natural ability to act. Little did I realise how much he would add to the British comedy scene and how he would continue to act in many other roles for many more years.

René Cadier – Just a Passing Acquaintance I Thought!

In these early teenage years I had piano lessons every Saturday, despite

GROWING UP

never having much musical talent. During the summer I would meet many foreign students staying with my music teacher. One, Rene Cadier, became a brief friend for a fortnight. He was a good-looking, brown-haired sixteen-year-old with charming manners and laughing eyes.

He told me he came from Pau in the Pyrenees and he wanted to be a pilot. This stuck in my mind. When he returned home, I thought that was the last I would ever see of him. How wrong I was! I could never have imagined how he would reappear a few years later under very different circumstances – at a time when he had reached safety after a dangerous but exciting adventure – an adventure which could have led to his death.

Jack Rolfe – Making an Entrance

Jack Rolfe taught me German in my last two school years and was another memorable influence: he took over the class from R.V. Groves who had given up teaching to start the School Travel Service. His successor arrived straight from university, in his early twenties. I was the first pupil to meet him. This young, rather dishy male was at the entrance to the school as I arrived, not sure which door to take. I pointed him in the right direction. He was tall with thick blond hair and his leg was encased in a frame and bandages, due to a rugby injury.

I had no idea he was to be teaching me in his first class. We assembled for our German lesson. The boys, bent on playing a joke on the new teacher, grabbed my bathing costume, pinned it on the blackboard and drew a sexy body around it!

The new teacher arrived – it was the same young man I had just spoken with, accompanied by the Headmaster, who pointing to the blackboard said, ‘To whom does this object belong?’

I reluctantly put up my hand, ‘It is mine, sir.’ I was duly and unfairly reprimanded until one of the boys admitted they were the ones responsible.

MEN I HAVE KNOWN

Once the class got under way, the new teacher asked me my name. I replied, 'Eileen Le Croisette'.

'Oh no,' he exclaimed in dismay, 'not another one of that family.' It seemed that he and my cousin Stanley had fallen out when both were students at London University – not an auspicious beginning. But things improved and he was responsible for my love of learning foreign languages. Later, in July 1939, he arranged for me to stay with his professor in Bonn in the Rhineland. I was thrilled when he came out on a visit to see me there and bought me my first glass of alcohol, *Apfelwasser*, a type of strong cider. Ten days after that visit, we were at war with Germany and he would be in the Army.

Werner Eisner – A Berliner and My Penfriend

As soon as I began to learn German, I acquired a penfriend. He lived in Berlin and was a couple of years older than I was. He always wrote in German. On leaving school, he began his training as a dentist. He never once mentioned politics but wrote about his love of music and his pet dog. His photo showed a dark-haired, serious-looking young man. I was certain he was not a Nazi and he never mentioned the *Hitler Jugend* but nevertheless, he like every young German had to complete those six months of compulsory work service called *Arbeitsdienst*. He wrote that he was helping to build motorways – and planting trees alongside the road. I doubt whether he realised that very soon these *Autostrassen* would be used to move vast columns of troops about to invade neighbouring countries or that the planting of trees had been planned to shield these movements from observation from the air.

The last letter I received from him arrived at my house on 3 September 1939, the day Britain declared war against Germany. In it, he wrote he had been called up to serve in the infantry. I found this strange and asked myself why a now fully qualified dentist was being sent to the infantry. That would be our last contact.

It was not until several months after peace was declared when we

GROWING UP

were able to receive letters once more from Germany that I learned what had happened to him. His mother wrote to my parents – a sad letter – asking if we had survived the war and continued, ‘Werner was killed in 1940 at Arras... as cannon fodder’. None of us realised what this meant until in 1980 I decided to visit Berlin and meet his sister, hoping finally to learn the truth. Her name was Gertrud, known as Gea. I asked what her mother had meant by ‘cannon fodder’ and why he had been sent to the infantry. ‘It seemed to me such a waste after all his training,’ I said.

She replied with bitterness in her voice. ‘We were labelled second-class citizens although we were Christians,’ and explained that on one side of the family there was Jewish blood, not enough to wear the yellow star but enough to be despised by the Nazi establishment. ‘He was sacrificed – put in the front line of the infantry, the first to be killed.’ She continued, ‘I too suffered – I was a trained nurse but when the Nazis came to power, I was not allowed to practice my profession. Instead they sent me to Auschwitz, not as a prisoner but as a clerk. I was made to keep the records of all the belongings taken from the Jewish prisoners. Daily I saw their suffering.’

She explained that the Nazis were meticulous in recording the name of every prisoner entering the camp. This was her job as they arrived at the death camps. She was made to list every detail of the possessions taken from these doomed victims – jewellery, books – everything they brought with them, except what they stood up in.

Recently the nephew of Werner and Gea made contact with me and the German connection is once more restored.