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Entrances

The power of Rattigan's best plays comes from the implicit rather than the explicit, from unspoken feelings, buried emotions and hidden truths. So too with his life. Rattigan's public persona of the effortlessly successful, unfailingly cool and well-mannered popular playwright concealed a much less confident, more tormented and private Rattigan. He or members of his immediate family often deliberately hid or distorted key events in his life or about himself. Yet his most powerful work comes straight from that hidden part of himself. Equally, the best of the work provides the least distorting window into the real man.

The first uncertainty about Terence Rattigan is the date of his birth. The most likely date, 10 June 1911, was a wet and blustery Saturday. A long spell of sweltering heat had ended abruptly the day before. A rain storm had settled the eye-pricking dust of London's pavements and soaked those taking part in the full-scale rehearsal of the Coronation. George V was to be crowned in twelve days' time.

Most of the visitors who already thronged the capital were relieved at the sudden drop in temperature, but not Terence Rattigan's father Frank, home on leave from North Africa, nor the royal guest who had been put in his charge for the duration of the celebrations – Sid Menebhi, ex-Grand Vizier of Morocco. Frank Rattigan was thirty-two, a qualified Arabic speaker (for which he received an additional salary allowance from the Foreign Office) and on his own admission an unconventional diplomat. He

seemed to have a brilliant career in front of him. He had entered the Diplomatic Service in 1902, at the age of twenty-three, after leaving Oxford without taking a degree and going abroad to study languages. Since May 1909 he had been Second Secretary on the staff of the British Legation in Tangier; an important position because Morocco had recently been the focus of international tension between France and Germany.

It was typical of Frank Rattigan that in taking leave with his beautiful young wife Vera in May 1911 he should combine professional advantage with domestic convenience. Many other British colonial administrators, diplomats and officers serving overseas arranged their annual leave that year to coincide with the Coronation. Unlike Frank Rattigan, however, few of them managed to get themselves a role in the ceremony itself. Escorting his Arab charge to meet Lord Derby, the Duke of Rutland and senior officials at the Foreign Office was good for Frank Rattigan's career; accompanying him to the ball at Derby House, playing tennis with him at Belvoir Castle, with Lady Anglesey and the seventeen-year-old Lady Diana Manners (later Lady Diana Cooper), helped his social standing; arranging the provision of amenable young ladies for the Grand Vizier's off-duty hours provided him with the opportunity to indulge his own taste for fluffy blondes.

Frank and Vera Rattigan had been married for five and a half years. Vera was strikingly beautiful, erect with a perfect figure and gently curling fair hair. The wedding had taken place shortly after Frank's appointment to the staff of the British Embassy in The Hague. At first Vera had been nervous of the social duties entailed in being a diplomat's wife, but being a young woman of energy and character, she entered easily into her husband's hectic life. With the help and guidance of other wives in the diplomatic circle in The Hague, she soon mastered the complex etiquette and rules governing the round of functions and entertaining that made up diplomatic existence in the capitals of Europe. Frank was lax in these matters almost to the point of eccentricity. While on the embassy staff in Vienna he had sent other dancers flying at a court ball in honour of the Prince of Wales by a wild perform-

ance of the polka when partnering Princess Mary. On another occasion he had been rebuked by the court chamberlain for dancing a Boston with the daughter of an ambassador when the orchestra had been playing a waltz. In breach of every rule of etiquette Frank Rattigan had sneaked away from the ballroom on yet another state occasion because he was bored by the slow rigidity of the dancing. In the refreshment room he was joined by an Austrian, resplendent in a general's uniform, who asked him why he was not dancing. He replied, with undiplomatic honesty, that he was bored. The general, whom Rattigan did not recognize, laughed and suggested an inspection of the palace's collection of sporting trophies might be more amusing. The identity of the general, who was by then showing Frank Rattigan round the gun rooms, was only revealed when an aide-de-camp clicked his heels and approached them saying: 'Your Imperial Highness, some of the important guests are about to leave!' The 'general' had been Frank Rattigan's host, the Archduke himself.¹

Vera provided a steady influence on Frank. She was also an asset in her own right. Vivacious, but at the same time assiduous in the duties of an embassy wife, she was well able to hold her own in the most exalted company. Both Vera and Frank came from distinguished families of Irish lawyers. Frank's grandfather, Bartholomew Rattigan, seems to have moved from County Kildare in the 1840s to practise as an advocate in India.² His son William in turn practised at the bar in India, becoming the greatest authority of his day on Indian law and publishing numerous books on the subject. He also produced a short book entitled *Events to be Remembered in the History of India from the Invasion of Alexander to the Latest Times*. In his first chapter, he said he was trying to rescue the story of Alexander from 'the enveloping dark and filmy haze of mythological story', an enterprise to be undertaken later by his grandson Terence in his own, rather different, way. At the time of Frank's birth, William Rattigan was Chief Justice of the Punjab. When he retired with a knighthood and returned to Britain, Sir William became Member of Parliament for North-East Lanarkshire. Another Rattigan, Sir Henry Adolphus Rattigan, followed in his footsteps and became Chief Justice of the Punjab.

In spite of the social position they had achieved, the Rattigans were not wealthy. Frank's father, Sir William, believed in the virtues of self-reliance. When he was six, Frank, who spent his early childhood in India, was presented by his father with a saloon rifle and a daily ration of six cartridges and told to roam about and fend for himself. Later, as a young man studying for the Diplomatic Service entrance exam at a crammer in France, Frank was short of money, and kept himself in funds by regularly winning a weekly sweepstake on a pigeon-shooting competition at the local country club. Frank, who undoubtedly loved and respected his father, would in his turn expect the same self-reliance and ingenuity from his sons Brian and Terence.

There was nothing in either Frank's or Vera's family background that would have led anyone to expect that their second child would turn out to be a dramatist. The only evidence of an interest in the theatre was on Vera's side of the family, and that was tenuous. Her family, the Houstons, included a professor of political economy at Trinity College, Dublin – Arthur H. Houston. He was a noted authority on English drama and in 1863 gave a public lecture, which was subsequently published, entitled 'The English Drama – Its Past History and Probable Future'. The lecture contained one sentiment which his descendant Terence Rattigan would endorse a century later: 'The highest type of dramatic composition is that which supplies us with studies of character, skilfully worked out, in a plot not deficient in probability and by means of incidents not wanting in interest.' However, Arthur Houston's prognosis for the future of drama was not encouraging – he predicted that the drama would 'languish as a literary production' and that 'whatever power of depicting character and describing incidents as exists today...will be diverted into novel-making'.

The Rattigans' first child, Brian, had arrived after three years of marriage. He had been born with a deformity in one leg. A major reason for the Rattigans' return to England on leave in 1911 was that Vera was due to be delivered of a second child that summer. This is where the first ambiguity surrounding the facts of Terence Rattigan's life occurs. On what date was he born? The Births

column of *The Times* for Monday, 12 June 1911 carries this announcement: 'Rattigan on 9th inst. at Lanarkslea, Cornwall Gardens, the wife of Frank Rattigan, Second Secretary in H.M. Diplomatic Service, of a son'. Clear enough; yet throughout his life Terence Rattigan and his family would celebrate his birthday on 10 June and in every public document or authorized account of his life he would record his date of birth as 10 June 1911. Why? At this distance in time it is hard to be certain. The one person, apart from Terence himself, who we can be absolutely sure was present at the birth was Vera Rattigan and, there being no complications during the birth itself, she seems likely to be the most reliable witness to when it actually happened. And she seems never to have so much as considered suggesting that her son's date of birth was other than 10 June.

By contrast it seems improbable that Frank Rattigan was in the house when his second son Terence was born. The duties and social functions arising from his minor role in the Coronation and attending on his royal guest would have seen to that, with the result that he probably had only a hazy idea of whether his son had been born shortly before midnight on Friday, 9 June, or sometime early in the morning of Saturday, 10 June. However at some point on that Saturday, or possibly on the Sunday, he took a few moments between his duties as official host and minor ceremonial coronation official to contact *The Times* and place the birth announcement or to give a servant instructions to do so. The wording of the actual announcement, when compared to others appearing on the same day and in the preceding and following weeks, with its emphasis on Frank's official station in life, reads even in these formally constrained circumstances as a characteristically Frank Rattigan production. He did not get around to registering the birth officially for another month, no doubt reasoning that there were far more pressing and rewarding matters to occupy his time. Frank's attitude can be gauged from the fact that in the autobiography which he wrote a few years later he records the official visits he made in those weeks in the company of his Arab guest, the balls he attended and even the results of the tennis matches he played with his visitor, but he does not so much

as mention the birth of his son. In the same book, covering his life until 1920, Frank Rattigan includes such minutiae as his school cricket scores and the number of birds he bagged on various hunting expeditions, but alludes to his children only once, and then not by name.

The address recorded by Frank Rattigan as Terence's birthplace was 'Lanarkslea', Cornwall Gardens; that is to say, just off Gloucester Road, in Kensington. Lanarkslea was the house of his mother, Lady Rattigan, where Frank and Vera were staying for their leave. Lady Rattigan was now a widow; Sir William had been killed in a motor accident in 1904. This formidable Victorian lady started to play a large part in Terence Rattigan's life from the moment of his birth. Although Vera was not sufficiently recovered from the confinement to attend the Coronation ceremony itself on 22 June, she was soon up and about again, taking her place at the diplomatic receptions and magnificent balls that continued to be given in the weeks after the Coronation was over. As a result, baby Terence was left in the care of Lady Rattigan and the family servants.

Dennis Potter once referred to 'the lost but still dangerous land from which every writer is in exile: Childhood'. Over the years, as we shall see, many people were to remark on the direct influence Vera Rattigan exerted on what her son wrote, but missed the less immediately obvious, but equally important, presence of his father in almost all his work. Many of his most deeply felt plays are about relationships between fathers and sons. They are, at only a slight remove, about his relationship with his own father.

The first few months of Terence Rattigan's life are of particular interest, not only because of their presumed subconscious psychological effect on him, but because in his writing he would return over and over again to events that occurred during these early weeks.

In a general sense all Rattigan's writing can be seen as probing the uneasy translation of his class and generation out of the comfortable certainties of the days immediately before the First World War into the uncertainties and self-doubts of the period

after the end of the Second War – the years of Rattigan’s most consistent strength and maturity as a writer. The reason that the years before 1914 are generally seen as a golden age may, in part at least, be that it was the period of the greatest advance and influence of the middle class. Rattigan’s writing is exclusively concerned with the lives of the middle class – their loves and laughter, problems and disillusionments. The values he inherited, and reacted against, were those of the successful middle class whose apotheosis came in the years immediately before the First World War.

Frank had been educated at Harrow and expected his children to be so too; in addition to the family house in Kensington, there was a rambling Tudor house in the country. He spent his annual leave on the Continent or at shooting parties. His father had received a knighthood; Frank and other members of the family were well placed to be similarly honoured.

Serving abroad, Frank and Vera Rattigan may have been cut off from the true nature of affairs back in England, but a look at the newspapers on the first day of Terence Rattigan’s life reveals that public events were just as threatening as the storms which had swept away the recent spell of fine weather. In Germany, yet another battleship was launched on that day. The naval armaments race between Britain and Germany had been unconcealed for almost five years. The news from the East on 10 June 1911 was of the barbarous way in which the Sultan of Turkey had put down a rebellion in Albania. This was just one of a succession of revolts against the Ottoman Empire. A major European conflict was creeping inexorably nearer.

At home the Liberals, led since 1908 by Mr Herbert Asquith (whose relationship with his favourite son Raymond would one day be the subject of a long-nurtured but never completed Rattigan play and another of whose sons, Anthony, was to become one of his closest friends), had been in office for five years. To date the chief beneficiaries of Mr Asquith’s policies had been the burgeoning professional class, people such as the Rattigans, but the Liberals promised to spread the benefits of the wealth and commercial power accumulated during the previous

century of industrial and overseas expansion beyond the families of wealthy industrialists, landowners and colonial entrepreneurs not only to the middle class but to the working class as well. On that day, 10 June 1911, the ebullient Chancellor of the Exchequer, David Lloyd George, made a stirring speech in Birmingham in support of his new National Insurance Bill, by which he proposed a supertax on high incomes to pay for sickness and unemployment benefits as well as for old-age pensions for the needy. But on that day also the Seamen's Union announced its intention to call an all-out strike. In 1911 there were national strikes not only of seamen, but on the railways and in the docks. The women's movement erupted into violence. It was probably the worst year of civil and industrial unrest the nation had ever known.

For those members of the middle and upper classes who did not like the Liberal government there was at least one notable victory to celebrate that summer. In July 1911, the government finally paid compensation of three thousand pounds to Colonel Archer-Shee for the wrongful expulsion of his son from Osborne Naval College for the alleged theft of a five-shilling postal order. This seemingly trivial case had become inflated into a public trial of strength between the government and those who proclaimed that they were defending the rights of the individual against the growing and unbridled power of the state.

Nevertheless, the news which dominated the week of Terence Rattigan's birth concerned the preparations for the Coronation of George V and Queen Mary (who had once been Frank Rattigan's partner in the wild polka in Vienna). Capital and Empire were set for an interlude of complacent rejoicing. The celebrations surrounding the Coronation lasted until well after the ceremony itself. As a result it was not until the second week in July 1911 that Frank and Vera Rattigan got round to dealing with the formalities relating to the birth of their second son. On Monday, 10 July, a full month after the event, Frank Rattigan at last found time to go down to the Kensington Register Office to register the birth. Again, possibly using a copy of the *The Times* birth announcement to check, he recorded the date of birth as 9 June

1911. On the following Saturday, 15 July, they held a family christening at the old parish church of Kensington, St Mary Abbots, off Church Street. Here, in the imposing church rebuilt in the 1870s to designs by Sir George Gilbert Scott to have the highest spire in London, the newest member of the Rattigan family was baptized into the Church of England with the Christian names Terence Mervyn. But the ceremony, despite the impressive surroundings, seems to have left as little mark on the baby as the water from the font, as, apart from compulsory attendances at services at school and while he was in the RAF, Terence Mervyn Rattigan would show almost no interest in religion or matters spiritual.

Days later Frank Rattigan uprooted his family and returned to his post in Morocco. It is not clear whether Terence actually accompanied his parents when they returned to Morocco in the summer of 1911 or whether he was left in the care of his grandmother Lady Rattigan. However, the evidence does point strongly to him being with his parents at various times during their overseas postings in the years between his birth and the outbreak of the First World War. This period marked the start for Terence Rattigan of what was to become a lifetime of travelling and removals from one home to another.

Hardly had Frank and Vera begun to settle back into legation routine at Tangier than a message arrived from the Foreign Office in London informing them that, with effect from 30 January 1912, Frank was appointed Second Secretary in Cairo. As they packed their household possessions for the P.&O. steamer voyage that would take them dog-legging across the Mediterranean via Gibraltar, Marseilles and Malta to Egypt, Frank and Vera were sorry to be leaving Morocco. They would look back on their years in Tangier as the best, the most carefree and harmonious, of their married life. But the posting to the British Agency in Cairo was a golden opportunity for an aspiring diplomat. Not only did it represent an advance in Frank Rattigan's career, it meant serving under the legendary Lord Kitchener, hero of Omdurman and Commander-in-Chief in the Boer War.

For some weeks after their arrival in Cairo, while they looked

for a flat, the family lived close to the British Agency in the Semiramis Hotel, overlooking the Nile. Kitchener had a reputation for being cold, hard and inhumanly efficient. Frank was dumbfounded when, the morning after his arrival, he was summoned by his new chief and told he was to write the annual report on the Sudan, a massive document detailing the work of every branch of that country's administration. Kitchener asked sharply, 'Have you any comment to make?' Rattigan replied, 'No, sir, except that for the moment I know nothing about the Sudan.' 'Then you are in luck,' retorted Kitchener, 'for when you have finished you should know everything that can be known about it. I can give you exactly a fortnight to finish the draft report!'

Frank Rattigan accomplished the task and the two men subsequently became friends, Kitchener being a frequent and welcome guest in the Rattigan household. Frank's hours in Egypt were long and the work arduous. He had little time to spend with his wife and children, but in his few free hours Kitchener fostered Frank's interest in antiques by taking him on forays into the bazaars of Cairo. He also encouraged Frank's interest in excavating archaeological sites. The Rattigans' flat soon became fairly encrusted with small statuettes, bronze cats and other priceless objects of ancient Egyptian origin. These exercised an irresistible fascination over young Terence. His father describes how his younger son, aged about two, 'if left to himself for one moment', would reach up to any he could get his hands on and hurl them to the floor with excited cries of, 'Teeka, teeka!'³

Frank Rattigan's greatest friend in Cairo was Ronald Storrs, the Oriental Secretary at the Agency, later described by T. E. Lawrence in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* as the most brilliant Englishman in the Near East, 'always first and a great man among us'. Storrs, as much as anyone else, was to be the instigator of the Arab Revolt, and Lawrence's foremost champion and advocate. Although young Terence Rattigan cannot then have been aware of the identity of the public figures around him, and can hardly have remembered Ronald Storrs when he came to portray him as a character in *Ross*, such 'famous characters' were to bulk large in family reminiscences in later years. By the time Terence was an

adolescent, Frank Rattigan's own career had come to an abrupt end, but the 'great days' and characters of his successful diplomatic past remained a part of the family consciousness. Frank, by then denied the opportunity to consort with the famous or be personally involved in momentous events, would endeavour to sustain his own self-respect by keeping alive in his family memories of former times. Many families develop what could be called a family myth – memories of hard or successful, happy or anxious times shared which, through being repeatedly recalled over the years, take on a legendary character. The Rattigan 'family myth' covered the time from just before Terence's birth until immediately after his tenth birthday.

At the end of 1913, Frank Rattigan was posted from Egypt to Berlin; as a result, young Terence, now two and a half years old, was unable to be with his parents for much of the first six months of 1914. This was probably because Frank and Vera were uncertain as to where they would live in Berlin. They must also have known that there would be a heavy load of work and formal engagements for both of them. Terence's elder brother Brian was now old enough to go to school and, although one cannot be absolutely certain, it seems very probable that both boys were once again left in the care of Lady Rattigan in Kensington.⁴

The children were not reunited with their parents until late July 1914, when Vera and Frank returned to England to take a family seaside holiday. However, hardly had their holiday begun than the confrontation between Austria and Serbia, following the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo, erupted, threatening a European war. Reading the news, Frank Rattigan realized he was needed back at his post. He telephoned the embassy in Berlin direct from the seaside resort and offered to return.

On 31 July, leaving his family to continue their holiday, he succeeded in boarding the last boat-train through to Berlin, which was packed with Germans returning in response to their government's order of general mobilization. When he arrived the next day it was to find that Germany had already declared war on Russia.

On 9 August, Vera and Lady Rattigan, who were still holidaying by the sea, were startled to receive a telegram from Frank summoning them and the children to London. He had already returned home again, having been forced to abandon their collection of furniture and antiques to the mercies of an angry anti-British mob raging through the streets of Berlin. He had applied in person to his old mentor and friend Lord Kitchener, now Secretary for War, for a post in the army, and was leaving next day for France.

When the women and children arrived back in Kensington they were dismayed to find Frank already kitted out in khaki, wearing the uniform of a captain which he had bought ready-made from a military tailor that morning. He was full of enthusiasm for his new role. He tried to allay their fears by explaining that because of his linguistic skills he had been loaned by the Foreign Office to the War Office to do a staff job with the British Mission to the French and Belgian armies. This could not entail the slightest danger. Next morning he left for France and a series of characteristically eccentric adventures. Terence and Brian were again in the care of their mother and grandmother.

A month later, despite the assurances he had given to Vera, Frank Rattigan was near enough to the fighting for a German shell to land only yards away from him. It blew him into the air and ruptured both his eardrums. On 17 September he was hospitalized in Paris. Frank Rattigan's brief military career was effectively over. At the end of 1914 he was recalled to the Foreign Office to work night shifts. It seems to have been at about this time that Frank and Vera Rattigan decided that they ought to have a permanent base of their own in England, rather than having to spend their leaves in Lady Rattigan's home in London. They bought the Old Manor House at Combe Florey, a very pretty village in a fold of the Quantock hills a few miles north-west of Taunton. Modest, low-roofed but charming, the building dated from 1450, its grounds, which included a trout stream, extended to seven acres. With characteristic enthusiasm, Frank Rattigan set about restoring the house, installing fine oak panelling, Tudor roses and gryphons, generally bringing it to 'a

style much grander than even its wealthiest previous owners probably enjoyed'.⁵

In March 1915, coinciding with the disastrous British campaign in Gallipoli, Frank Rattigan was posted as Second Secretary to the British Legation in Romania. Vera, as usual, accompanied him and Terence was once again entrusted to the care of Lady Rattigan. Although Romania was still neutral, it was likely to be engulfed in the war at any moment and was not therefore a safe place to take the children. This posting marked the beginning of a separation between Terence Rattigan and his parents which was to last for almost three years. Now nearly four, he had already seen little enough of his father because of his absences from home caused by work or sporting activities. Already much under the influence of the powerful personalities of his mother and grandmother, he would now be almost totally bereft of adult male company for three more formative years. During these impressionable years he was brought up by a grandmother, whom he increasingly grew to dislike, and by various well-intentioned aunts and friends. Rattigan claimed later that while his grandmother spoilt her other grandchildren, especially his elder brother Brian, she was hard on him.

But he was not short of companionship during these years. His grandmother's household seems to have been constantly full of a changing assortment of relatives' children deposited on Lady Rattigan whenever their parents became victims of the chaos and separation of war. In November 1916, Frank Rattigan's younger brother was killed in France. Cyril Rattigan had caused a family scandal some years earlier by marrying a Gaiety Girl – Barbara. Their three young children now came to live with Lady Rattigan, and seem to have spent the rest of their childhood in her care. It is not clear why Barbara Rattigan should have consented to allow Lady Rattigan to become entirely responsible for the upbringing of her children after her husband's death, but it was probably because of the combination of comparative poverty and Lady Rattigan's continuing disapproval of the marriage. Rattigan would later recall a mysterious and much-disapproved-of Aunt Barbara lurking in the family background. He also mentions in his

prefaces an indulgent Kensington aunt who fostered his interest in play-making by taking him to London theatres. Aunt Barbara seems to have been the only person in the family directly connected with the theatre, and it would be nice to think that Barbara Rattigan was that 'indulgent aunt'. Most of the details now seem irrecoverably lost, but what is certain is that when, towards the end of his own life, Rattigan discovered that his Aunt Barbara was still alive and living in straitened circumstances in Penzance, he took immediate steps to help her.

In the meantime, and largely unknown to Lady Rattigan and the other members of the family in London, events were taking place in Frank and Vera's life in Bucharest which were to have a lasting effect on their son Terence. In May 1916, Frank had been promoted to First Secretary. With his chief, the Ambassador, his task was to further the British policy of persuading the Romanians to enter the war on the Allied side. In Bucharest, Frank and Vera had become great favourites at the Romanian court. In particular they had gained the confidence of Queen Marie, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria, the most influential figure in the country and widely recognized as the power behind the Romanian throne. As a result Frank was able to provide first-hand information for inclusion in embassy dispatches back to the Foreign Office in London of long conversations with the queen, outlining in minute detail the power struggles raging in the Romanian government. In August 1916, encouraged by a powerful Russian offensive, the Allies had succeeded in persuading the Romanians to enter the war on their side. Frank Rattigan's role in this achievement was duly recognized by the ambassador and reported back to London.

However, the Germans counter-attacked and inflicted a massive defeat on the Romanian army, sweeping it from the field. In December 1916, Bucharest fell and Frank and Vera made a hurried retreat, together with the rest of the diplomatic corps and the Romanian government, to the provincial city of Jassy.

Conditions were catastrophic, hunger and disease widespread. While Frank and the Ambassador, with the depleted legation staff, set about improvising new offices in a commandeered mansion,

Vera, with Queen Marie, her two eldest daughters, Princesses Elisabetta and Mignon, and such other embassy wives as remained, worked in the local hospitals looking after the sick and wounded. Vera became a great support to the queen, using the diplomatic bag to organize the collection and shipment of medicines and bandages from England to the beleaguered Romanians. As conditions deteriorated during the first half of 1917, Frank Rattigan became ill, struck down by septicaemia from a knee injury. By late summer Frank was no longer able to move. It was clear that it could only be a matter of weeks before Romania would be forced to surrender. On Sunday, 12 August 1917, Vera sought a formal audience with Queen Marie and asked for her assistance in trying to get Frank out of the country by train through Russia. Queen Marie recorded in her diary that ‘... if worst came to worst they would have to contemplate being taken prisoner by the Germans; awful thought!’⁶ Early in September, Vera and Frank boarded a train crowded with deserting Russian soldiers, on the start of their escape back to England. By the time they arrived in Petrograd, Frank was no longer fit to travel and, although the city was by then in the throes of the Revolution, Vera had no alternative but to put him into a hospital.

It took Frank and Vera until November 1917 to complete their journey back to London. By then Frank was so ill that he would be unfit for service for a whole year. Vera had cared devotedly for her injured husband throughout their hair-raising adventures in Romania and their protracted and dangerous journey home across Russia. Yet on their arrival home there was an unmistakable change in the relations between them – a change which Terence undoubtedly detected and which in turn affected his own relations with each of them. It subsequently loomed large in his writing.

It is hard at this distance to pin down the precise details of what had happened, but it seems that Frank Rattigan had had an affair with a Romanian countess. Whether she was the first of a succession of ladies with whom Frank would enjoy himself or simply the first that Vera found out about it is impossible now to

say. In Frank Rattigan's book there is a photograph of the wife of a Romanian cabinet minister, Vera Rattigan and a third lady described only as 'Countess'. There is no reference anywhere in the text to this 'countess'. Whether or not this is the lady with whom Frank Rattigan had the affair is unknown, but she bears a striking similarity to the succession of bubbly blondes with whom he later did have affairs. Over the years rumours about the liaison have multiplied, most of them owing their origin to stories told later by Terence Rattigan. So far as I can discover, nothing survives in the Foreign Office papers or the diaries of Queen Marie (who records many pieces of discreditable scandal concerning her own family and others in Romanian court circles) to support the more colourful embellishments on the basic story: that the affair became so public as to threaten a diplomatic scandal and the possible recall of Frank Rattigan to London or that it involved a member of the Romanian royal family. As we shall see, the most colourful of all, which involved Queen Marie's own solemn and sexually unattractive twenty-year-old daughter, Princess Elisabetha, was almost certainly founded less on fact than on Terence Rattigan's own schoolboy needs when he was at Harrow.

The important fact is that from late 1917 onward, throughout the rest of his childhood, Rattigan was aware of 'atmospheres' between his parents, half-concealed rows and outbursts, often suppressed into 'not-in-front-of-the-children' whispers or conducted in diplomatic French. His mother recalled that one morning during the last year of the war, when his parents were both at home, Rattigan, then aged seven, wandered into his mother's bedroom and announced that he would never marry – 'Wives can be an awful handicap to writers. They are constantly telling their husbands to do this, fetch that, and ordering them from the house.'⁷

From his earliest schooldays, Terence Rattigan's contemporaries remarked on his lonely, self-possessed air. It was not that Terry, as he was known, was unpopular or did not join in whatever games and activities were going on. Far from it. But behind the pretty blue eyes, fair hair and perfect manners, children and adults alike sensed a premature reserve. Even as quite a little boy, he was

possessed of exceptional charm and gentleness. When asked, in later life, what made him a playwright, he would reply that it was a misguided question and ask in return, 'What makes a man start doing anything – building bridges or making candlesticks?' He repeated many times that he could not remember a time when he did not want to be a writer. Certainly by 1918, before his seventh birthday, the idea of becoming a writer (not necessarily solely a playwright but a storyteller) was fixed and would never change. It was at about this time that he was taken to the theatre for the first time. He saw *Cinderella*. He was thrilled, transported out of himself. 'It was important to me, as a member of that audience, that Cinderella should go to the ball and marry the prince.' The little boy found himself caught up in a quite new kind of excitement: 'I believed implicitly in everything I saw on that stage.'⁸

By November 1918 Frank Rattigan was fit enough to be sent to Scandinavia as King's Messenger with dispatches. He returned in time for Christmas and then, in the spring of 1919, he and Vera set out again for war-ravaged Bucharest. The good work he had done there between 1915 and 1917 was recognized and he was now British Chargé d'Affaires. His task was to develop a lasting understanding between the new Romanian administration and the Allies. Frank Rattigan's dealings with the Romanian royal family, and, according to his son's later account with Princess Elisabetta in particular, were dramatically to change his father's life and the family's fortunes.

On his return to Romania Frank Rattigan found Bucharest even more full of Ruritanian intrigue and scandal than when he left it. The previous year the Crown Prince had eloped with a commoner, but had been forced to divorce her and marry someone 'more suitable'. As a result the royal princesses were largely confined to the palace while the king and queen tried to arrange politically advantageous royal marriages for them. Elisabetta stood accused by her mother of pursuing men with 'cold-blooded persistence', though with apparently limited success. She was regarded by her mother as a particularly difficult proposition in the marriage stakes as she had become 'tremendously fat and lazy'.

When Queen Marie left Romania to represent her country at the Peace Conference in Versailles she took the royal princesses with her, and on her return left Princess Elisabetta behind in Paris to look for a suitable husband. In August 1919 Romania again got itself involved in a war, this time with Bela Kun's Hungary, and stood accused by the Allies of the loot and rape of thousands of innocent Hungarians. In this crisis Queen Marie turned to Frank Rattigan. 'She appealed to me,' he told his Foreign Office masters in a dispatch to London, 'as an Englishwoman turning to me for help and advice.'⁹ Once the crisis had passed, Frank Rattigan continued to advocate the Romanian cause with London, telling the new Foreign Secretary, Lord Curzon (who two years later would be his nemesis), that Romania, despite being 'exploited by a gang of unscrupulous politicians is the most reliable friend of British interests and policy in the Near East'.¹⁰

For the moment young Terence was unaware of the significance of these events. For him his parents' posting to Bucharest meant yet another long separation from them and a further sojourn in the care of his unloving grandmother. In May 1920, Rattigan was sent away to school, at Mr W. M. Hornbye's preparatory boarding school 'Sandroyd', near Cobham in Surrey. Sandroyd was a very grand school which prepared the sons of the richest and most distinguished families for entry to Harrow, Eton and Winchester. It was, of course, assumed that Terence and Brian would follow their father by going to Harrow.

Rattigan distinguished himself early at Sandroyd. Because his elder brother Brian was already there, he was automatically known when he arrived as Rattigan Minor. But, even at the age of nine, surnames were not his style. He told everyone his name was 'Terry' and insisted on calling everyone else by their Christian names – in those days a virtually unheard-of thing at a private preparatory school. Contemporaries remember him as a rather inky little boy, with two consuming interests – the theatre and cricket.¹¹

Rattigan next saw his parents in the Christmas holidays of 1920. During that holiday he regularly pestered one or the other of them to take him to the theatre. His mother later commented,

'If he had had his way he would have got there long before the dust sheets were removed from the seats.' That Christmas the Rattigan family had every cause to celebrate. In November 1920, Frank had been promoted to the rank of Counsellor of Embassy in the Diplomatic Service, and moved up into the second-highest salary band for a diplomat, starting at twelve hundred pounds a year (equal to more than forty thousand pounds today). With allowances on top, this represented comparative affluence. In January 1921, Frank set off for his new posting, as number two to Sir Horace Rumbold in another international hot spot – Constantinople.

Left on his own again, Terence's passion for the theatre continued to grow. When he accepted a part in a school play, his work fell off so badly that the headmaster offered him the choice of abandoning the part or taking a beating.¹² Rattigan chose the beating. At school and home alike he rapidly became accepted as the resident theatre expert, entertaining everyone with names, dates and places connected with the most obscure productions. He devoted all his pocket money to playgoing – taking gallery seats at a shilling or one-and-sixpence a time. He kept the extent of his compulsive playgoing a secret from the family and school authorities alike, sneaking out of the house, and sometimes out of school also, it seems, without telling anyone. In middle age he recalled the excitement of those stolen afternoons and evenings in the theatre:

By the age of eleven I was already a confirmed and resolute playgoer . . . If my neighbours gasped with fear for the heroine when she was confronted with a fate worse than death, I gasped with them, although I suppose I could have had but the haziest idea of the exact nature of the lady's peril; when my neighbours laughed at the witty and immoral paradoxes of the hero's bachelor friend, I laughed at them too, although I could have appreciated neither their wit nor their immorality; when my neighbours cheered the return of some favourite actor I cheered with them, even though at the time of his last appearance in London I had, quite possibly, not been born.

All of which, no doubt, sounds very foolish – seemingly no more than an expression, in a rather absurd form, of the ordinary child’s urge to ape the grown-ups. Yet I don’t think it was only that. Up in my galleries (or, as my pocket money increased proportionately with my snobbishness, down in my pits), I was experiencing emotions which, though no doubt insincere of origin in that they were induced and coloured by the adult emotions around me, were none the less most deeply felt.¹³

One is struck by the similarity of Rattigan’s experience to that of other artists who have felt neglected by their parents during childhood. Charles Dickens recalled that as a boy he would sneak upstairs to a room and shut himself up for hours ‘keeping alive my fancy and my hope of something beyond that place and time . . . reading as if for life!’ As a boy François Truffaut would sneak out of the house to go to the cinema, and for the rest of his life would ascribe his sense of delinquent excitement about every aspect of film-making to the thrill associated with those clandestine visits to local cinemas. Rattigan’s lifelong obsession with the theatre, the way in which everything else in his life was subordinated to it, echoes the experience of Dickens and Truffaut.¹⁴

Until he was ten years old the most notable feature of Terence Rattigan’s relationship with his father was separation, owing to Frank’s long absences abroad. But the summer of 1921 changed all that for ever. Late in May 1921, Frank Rattigan’s boss in Constantinople, Sir Horace Rumbold, returned to London for ten weeks for talks at the Foreign Office and his annual leave. Frank Rattigan was left in charge of a volatile situation. Following the end of the 1914–18 war, Allied troops still occupied Constantinople, but Turkey had a new popular national leader, Kemal Pasha, Atatürk, committed to restoring his country’s territorial integrity and full independence. Old animosities between Turkey and Greece had flared into armed conflict. There was the real possibility of a full-scale war involving the whole region. But back in London Lloyd George’s coalition government was openly divided, with Lloyd George pro-Greek and Lord

Curzon, the Foreign Secretary, eager to come to a lasting settlement with Turkey. It was a situation which called for cool heads, especially from Britain's man in the crisis centre itself, Constantinople. In the summer of 1921 that man was Frank Rattigan.

As we have seen, Frank Rattigan was an impetuous diplomat and during his time in Romania had developed strongly pro-Balkan and anti-Turkish sympathies. Early in July, without waiting for instructions from London, he told the Turkish Foreign Minister that there was no way that the British government could agree to Turkish demands for full independence. This was clearly inflammatory and Frank Rattigan was immediately contacted by London and left in no doubt of Lord Curzon's displeasure. Curzon felt equally strongly about the Turkish question and saw himself as locked in a Homeric single-handed struggle against a treacherous Prime Minister for control of British foreign policy. He was certainly not going to tolerate subordinates in the field pre-empting his policy. Frank Rattigan hastily penned a grovelling personal apology to Lord Curzon. But deliberately or otherwise, Frank Rattigan's apology was both grovelling and cocky at the same time. It survives among Curzon's personal papers, a measure of how important this issue was to him. Dated Constantinople, 11 July 1921, Frank Rattigan starts by saying that he is writing '... to express to you in person my regret for having gone too far in informing Izzet Pasha [the Turkish Foreign Minister] that HMG could not accept Mustafa Kemal's [Atatürk's] pre-emptory demand for initial recognition of entire independence... I would only wish to say that I had no idea of prejudging by local action the decision of HMG...' He goes on to try to justify his action, saying that to have waited for instructions would have wasted four days. He ends by alluding to previous government policy statements in a way that points to the fact that Lloyd George's preferred policy on the Turkish Question differed from Curzon's, and might be taken to imply that Lloyd George's policy was preferable to Curzon's. Diplomatically worded as it is, Frank Rattigan's apology can be read as a veiled act of defiance. Curzon certainly seemed to read it that way.

The undiplomatic diplomat had spoken his mind once too often. Frank Rattigan was allowed to stay in post until the Ambassador, Sir Horace Rumbold, returned to Constantinople on 1 August. But shortly afterwards, Frank Rattigan was called back to London, never to return to Constantinople, nor to any other post in the Diplomatic Service. Lord Curzon could not afford loose cannons. By the end of October 1921, although Frank Rattigan's term in Constantinople was not up, he was no longer listed as holding any position in the Foreign Office. In the book he published three years later, Frank Rattigan says of these events simply that he stayed on in Constantinople until the signing of the Lausanne Treaty at the end of July 1923. He did not. The Foreign Office List records him as officially 'Unemployed' from 1 June 1922 and 'Retired on a pension' from 1 December 1922. Frank Rattigan was forty-three. It was an inglorious end to a promising career.

In later years the exact circumstances of Frank Rattigan's demise as a diplomat would become the subject of conflicting accounts and not a little romanticization by both Frank Rattigan and his younger son. The different versions given by Terence Rattigan and Frank Rattigan at different times almost certainly tell us more about their own inner conflicts at the time of their telling and about their relationship with each other than about what actually happened. Frank Rattigan increasingly came to maintain, and in time perhaps even to believe, that the sole reason for him leaving the Diplomatic Service was his principled objections to appeasement of the Turks and that, as he could not conscientiously carry out Curzon's policy, he resigned. Terence, as we shall see, would at various times give totally different accounts of what had happened, depending on whom he was trying to impress or what demons within himself he was trying to slay.

One year after Frank Rattigan's departure from Constantinople, while he was still receiving a Foreign Office salary, but with a dark shadow hanging over the family's future, Vera Rattigan took her two boys away for a quiet holiday alone to a country cottage owned by a drama critic called Hubert Griffiths. In later years Terence Rattigan was to say that this summer holiday was

the turning point in his progress towards becoming a playwright. The only books in the cottage were plays, and for three weeks he read nothing else. He found himself fascinated by how plays were written, how character and situation were established and how stories were told through dialogue. At the age of eleven he was becoming immersed in the techniques of playwriting.¹⁵

By 1922 the post-war economic boom had bust and the government was looking for cuts in all departments. With his career as a diplomat now clearly damaged beyond repair, Frank Rattigan was probably relieved to get an offer of early retirement on a Foreign Office pension, even though it would not be enough for him to maintain his family in the style to which they had become accustomed. While they did not have to endure anything that approximated to poverty – Frank Rattigan had some investments and was able to play the stock market, though sometimes with catastrophic results – they all had to make adjustments. Frank tried to increase the family income by developing his interest in antiques into a business. He also settled down to write a highly coloured account of his adventures in the Diplomatic Service. Neither venture seems to have been particularly successful. In 1925 the Rattigans sold the house at Combe Florey which they had restored at such expense. A few years after that Frank Rattigan sold most of his collection of antiques at an auction in New York. Terence Rattigan would later estimate that his parents' total family income never again rose above a thousand pounds a year until that time came when he himself was able to supplement it from his own earnings.

Although Terence Rattigan was kept on at Sandroyd, he was not immune to the pressures of his father's changed circumstances. From now on, he knew that if he was to take his place at Harrow he would have to earn it by winning a scholarship. For the next fifteen years he was never as well off as his friends at school or university. His social position was never as secure. Everything that he coveted had to be won. Yet there were still reminders of the 'good old days', which perhaps only served to make the contrast with the family's new circumstances all the sharper. When Queen Marie of Romania paid an official visit to

Britain, she sought out the Rattigans and made time for a private visit with Vera to meet Terence at Sandroyd. To Rattigan's intense embarrassment he was presented to Queen Marie in front of the assembled school.

Vera could hardly have asked Queen Marie back to the family's London home, even had protocol permitted it. The family now lived in a rather poky flat at the top of a terrace house in Stanhope Gardens, Kensington, on the other side of Gloucester Road from Lady Rattigan's home in Cornwall Gardens. Rattigan's school friends who lived near by noticed that although he was always invited to their birthday parties, they were never invited to his home. One who did manage to get himself invited in after a visit to the cinema was intrigued to discover how small the flat was when they reached it after climbing to the fourth floor.¹⁶

Later, people could not understand how Rattigan, who had apparently come from such a comfortable background and had always appeared to possess such social poise, could write with such sympathy and precision about the feelings of social misfits and emotional failures. For many years he took steps to conceal the difficulties of his own childhood. His plays abound in characters who hide their insecurity and feelings of inadequacy behind a veneer of extrovert confidence and bluff social conformity. Towards the end of his life he would confirm that his interest in, and even self-identification with, such characters was already present by the time he came to move from Sandroyd to Harrow.

The drop in the family's income was not the only aspect of his father's resignation from the Diplomatic Service which affected Rattigan. It must be reckoned that once any sense of self-righteousness about the circumstances of his resignation had evaporated, his father increasingly came to see himself as a failure. He found himself entering what should have been the prime of life at a loose end – a middle-aged man with a brilliant future behind him. Perhaps to bolster his self-esteem he styled himself 'Major', the rank to which he was entitled as a result of his brief war service in France, and took to reminiscing about his great days shooting with European royalty or adventuring in the mysterious East. His one remaining hope was his sons. It was not

realistic to hope that Brian, with his disability, could emulate his father's schoolboy prowess at games, and Frank Rattigan seemed to give up on him. Instead, he concentrated all his own frustrated ambitions on Terence. He was determined that his son should follow in his footsteps and become a diplomat and a sportsman. The previously absent father became a pressurising father.

Despite the fact that he was now at home, Frank Rattigan's casual affairs with unsuitable young blondes continued, and even increased in number. Relations between Frank and Vera continued to deteriorate and there are grounds for supposing that the possibility of divorce arose more than once during the years that followed.

Vera Rattigan put her own rather different kind of pressure on her son. Her demands were emotional. 'That poor lost boy, Terry Rattigan' was how at least one family of friends referred to him in his early teens: gentle, polite but sad, the second son of what those close to the family knew to be an unhappy marriage. Vera was still a beautiful woman and not a few men were attracted to her, but she was not the sort of person to permit herself to enter into an affair. Hurt and disappointed in her relationship with her husband, she turned, like so many mothers before and since, to her children for emotional compensation. It was perhaps inevitable that her prime target should be her younger son. She was, as we already know, a strong personality and must have fairly smothered Terence with possessive emotion. She did more than show a consuming interest in all he did: she demanded an exclusive filial affection. Whether she could help herself or not, she vilified Frank Rattigan to his sons and tried to focus all their love on to herself, building up the impression of how unfairly and unfeelingly he had treated her. From this, plus occasional explosive outbursts and an all-pervading 'atmosphere', Rattigan grew up to side with his mother against his father.

Notes

- 1 Much of the information for the early life of Frank and Vera Rattigan is taken from Frank Rattigan's autobiography *Diversions of a Diplomat*, Chapman & Hall, London,

- 1924, editions of The Foreign Office List for relevant years and the Foreign Office Papers held in the Public Record Office.
- 2 The precise circumstances of Bartholomew Rattigan's emigration to India are unclear. Early editions of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, not always a reliable source, suggest he got a job in the Ordinance Department of the East India Company, while B. A. Young tells us in his biography of Rattigan (*The Rattigan Version*, Hamish Hamilton, 1986) that he may have gone to India as a private soldier.
 - 3 Frank Rattigan, op. cit.
 - 4 Terence Rattigan may have been with his parents for some of their time in Berlin, if only on a visit. Many years later in a radio talk which he gave he claimed to 'vaguely remember' being given a gift of sweets by Crown Prince William.
 - 5 Truman Press, *Somersetshire Country Houses and Villages*, printed by Walker & Co. for the sole Editor – Proprietor, T. Press, 1931.
 - 6 *The Story of My Life* by Marie, Queen of Romania, Cassell, London, 1935.
 - 7 Vera Rattigan interviewed in *John Bull* magazine, 6 December 1952.
 - 8 Radio talk by Terence Rattigan entitled *Theatre Sense*, BBC Home Service, 22 March 1949.
 - 9 Foreign Office Papers, Public Record Office, dispatch from Frank Rattigan dated 15 August 1919.
 - 10 Ibid., dispatch dated 8 October 1919.
 - 11 In addition to the records of Sandroyd School itself, my sources for Rattigan's time at Sandroyd include interviews conducted in 1978 with Rattigan's school contemporary A.J.H. Benn and the reminiscences of Roger Machell in Anthony Curtis's BBC Radio 3 programme *Rattigan's Theatre*, op. cit.
 - 12 Told by Rattigan to Kenneth Tynan and reproduced in an article in the *London Evening Standard*, 1 July 1953.
 - 13 Preface to *Collected Plays of Terence Rattigan*, Volume II, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1953.
 - 14 Charles Dickens in *David Copperfield* and his unpublished autobiography; François Truffaut interviewed by the author for BBC Television in 1973.
 - 15 Rattigan interviewed by Sheridan Morley for BBC Radio 4's *Kaleidoscope*, July 1977.
 - 16 Source interview with A.J.H. Benn, 1978.