

Family Blottings

Sam Graves

An Englishman, not an Englishman
Lived in Spain, not in Spain

Orgivian riddle

I might as well start with something I would sooner rather leave behind: the sudden recollection a great many years later of a dream I had as a post-toddler, of my father on our barge on the London Thames (which sank in mid-river when it was towed away) attacking a door with a bottle on the other side of which my mother stood, with disastrous result. As to what I may have felt at the time I did not appear to have missed my father as we had living with us Geoffrey Taylor, a poet and biologist with many interests, and can only recall a happy childhood apart from a spell of misery at school for the deaf and mute in a Victorian terrace house facing the high embankment of Folkestone Central.

Mother describing a visit by Asquith to my ex-pub birthplace at Islip to which Father had invited the village postman. Instead of placing a chair under the erstwhile premier it was shoved under the postman; that when the more distinguished guest picked me up to kiss (I was a beautiful baby) Father quipped about political baby-kissing, for which he was apparently not forgiven.

As a small child on a swing constantly kicking over Father's two school silver boxing cups stood up on the ground. They got mercilessly dented and some years after Father's death I was confronted with one of them on his desk.

'Who won the war?' 'We did, of course,' said an irritated Father.

Mother said Father would take his work into the lavatory.

Memory of Father in the early thirties visiting us at Mells Manor of Jack Horner fame, which grandfather William was renting from the Asquiths, looking strained, and we children with William's small daughter Penny taking him over the ancient house and through the wood where a ginger pop bottle was found with a glass ball inside its neck, which Father said we could get refunded. Again: Beryl said such a bottle had stood on Father's desk.

Aged twelve staying with Father and Laura - the only memory I have of her - in Marylebone. He spoke to her in my presence in his version of Spanish, although I was unable to follow group conversation because of my deafness. The following morning he took me to clean the bath, consternation crossing his face on seeing my fait accompli.

Father quite excitedly recounting to me as a boy in a London taxi a *chaîn d'amour* apparently involving himself and others all of whom I knew at least by name, and his mother-in-law Mabel as a victim of the 1918 Spanish 'flu epidemic dipping her thermometer in cold tea so she could go out with her son Tony on leave, a story told elsewhere.

In my mid-teens Father said I should keep copies of my correspondence.

Father telling me that my brother could not bear clergymen and caraway cakes, and asked what my brother once saw in a Welsh village. When I perplexedly said "Clergymen eating caraway cakes" he thumped me laughing loud.

At Galmpton during the war Father jokingly converted into tapers a letter from Churchill, and I can still clearly see him huddled over the telephone with a sketch of an inverted top hat describing some period military battle to Basil Liddel Hart, who I understood

had through his writings given the German army generals the formula for their Panzer- blitzkrieg.

Father wrote to me when my brother David was reported missing in action in Burma, that if he survived his captors would with their Bushide (likely?) look after him.

Coffee with Father on the outskirts of Palma, when he quite suddenly got up, collected his papers and remarked he'd been unaware of the extent of extramarital affairs.

On the occasion of my engagement Father wrote that he did not mind my bride being German provided she was not a Catholic. My elder sister, however, soon after had a Catholic second husband, and despite a blanket statement Father acquired still more Catholics.

My mother telling how she met Father when he found a boy attempting a dangerous climb at Harlech Castle whom he took back to where his American parents were staying with the Nicholsons, and thus met my mother. I remembered the visitors' name as Burroughs and that he had invented - my mother's word! - the computer. Puzzled by this I many years later guessed the father had sold office furniture by that name in England. Then on the death of William Burroughs of *The Naked Lunch*, who with Ginsberg had co-inspired the flower-power movement in the States, I learned his father had brought forth the shop cash register. So my parents had probably stopped short of becoming the first computer-arranged marriage. Also, an Egyptian-German who borrowed a biography of Father from me idly wondered if my parents had not been the first hippies — but that was probably Augustus John who drove me home from Wales and declined a drink saying I had kept him from his pubs and wanted to go on.

When Mabel took her prospective son-in-law through the family photos Father flicked them back, which almost ended the engagement. Mother also gave the story that when she and Father queued at the London Zoo he threw her an engagement ring. (My wife always

complains about my throwing things). He told her that he had duck's disease. Although on the tall side I had to wriggle out from behind the steering wheel of a car I once had.

A few years before his death Eric Shipton, who had prepared the eventual ascent of Everest, told me the strange story of a young Welsh shepherd medium whom he showed around the Alpine Club, of which he was president. When Shipton – oh dear, his ancestress was the famous witch Mother Shipton – placed Irvine's ice pick in the shepherd's hands the latter went into a trance, giving an accurate description of the peaks around the summit. Unfortunately I should perhaps have asked Shipton if he thought that Irvine and Mallory had indeed reached the top, but took this as meant. Yet a great mutual friend later told me the medium had only described the Triangle below the summit, and the Alpine Club Library could only mention a Shetlands man and a medium Sir Oliver Lodge contacted who both claimed communication with Irvine 'on the other side'.

My parents once walked out of the Graves house at Harlech to avoid a visit from prime-minister Lloyd George during the war. If so this would have been perfectly in place in *Goodbye to All That*, whose book title also appears to be the only one I know in colloquial use anywhere.

I had heard that Grandmother Graves' boys had the habit when undressing of leaving their clothes on the floor where they stood. For a few astonishing days I found myself doing just that. On this note, no less surprisingly, was my seeming to recognise fleeting family looks on my small daughter that came at different times from different members of the family on my side.

Mother opened a shop in Knightsbridge in 1945 where she sold furnishing fabrics to her own designs. By a stunning coincidence the second-hand ledger account book her chartered accountant found for her was discovered not only to have come from the Bond Street shop where Roz's sister-in-law Betty Cooper sold lingerie, but also showed purchases Father had made for Laura.

Father's sister Roz once showed me a letter she wrote to Clifton College for the augmentation of her son's scholarship, which gave an astonishing record of the Graves' literary output. It sadly omitted the invention of the clock's second hand by the mathematical Bishop of Limerick.

The disparity of the professorial Graves and my mother's people with their mock bohemianism and sartorial elegance was visible; Father, however, had one foot firmly in the opposite camp.

It has now for some obscure reason crossed my mind that young Washington had never felled his tree.