



**Once: As It Was,**  
**by Griselda Jackson Ohannessian.**

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*Beryl Graves*

Griselda Jackson is the eldest of Schuyler and Kit Jackson's four children and was twelve in May 1939 when Laura Riding, Robert Graves, David Reeves, Alan Hodge and myself came to stay at their farm in New Hope, Pennsylvania. She has written this memoir for her three daughters who used to ask her about the 'olden days', and for her two sisters and one brother – Maria, Cathy and Ben – 'who share many of the same memories'.

The first 130 pages of this most original and unusual book could be described as 'As it was'. 'As it was' was growing up, was schooldays, holidays, more schooldays, and, of course, family life on the Farm with their beloved parents Schuyler and Kit – and with an eye on what was going on in the world. For instance, Griselda recalls a Sunday visit to their relatives the Talmadges:

We were all seated at the table. Mr Talmadge was about to carve the roast. There had been some political discussion about the upcoming presidential election (1936). Then the upshot. Bousie [the name they used for their father] declared that he was going to vote for Roosevelt. Mr Talmadge turned purple in the face. He slammed down his napkin and the carving knife he had been about to use. In no uncertain terms he told Bousie to leave the house. Immediately. One could see Aunt Nannie holding her tongue. Mr Talmadge was too enraged to calm down. We left with empty stomachs. [...] The aborted Sunday dinner turned me into a staunch Democrat.

And now, what about 'Once'? In July 1939, the following announcement appeared in the 'News Section' of the *Jackson Quarterly*, of which Griselda was the editor:

The old ruin across the road which is on the Jackson's Farm has been rebuilt to a lovely little stone house in which shall live Miss Laura Riding, Mr Robert Graves, Mr David Reeves, Mr Alan Hodge and Mrs Bearal [sic] Hodge. All famous writers from England.

Mrs Jackson is in the hospital, sick in Philadelphia.

‘Altogether, yes, I was disappointed,’ writes Griselda. ‘They were not how I imagined “famous writers, poets” would be.’

Here Griselda gives us a picture of what it was like sharing a house with Laura. One afternoon, she and Maria were in Bousie’s study with two of the Matthews boys. The boys were telling them about Mallorca and how Laura had written a story about them and put it in a book called *Progress of Stories*. They found the book on one of the shelves.

And just when ‘Here it is!’ we had found the opening line ‘Tommy and Johnny were two very good little boys’, Laura came bursting in on us. She was in a fury. She wrested the book out of Tommy’s hands. ‘Don’t take things from your father’s shelves’ and turned to leave. I spoke up: ‘Our father always lets us take books from the shelves.’ Laura did not reply. She shut the study door with a bang and then we heard the click, clack of her footsteps going rapidly up the stairs. We were stunned.

Griselda little knew at the time that ten or so years earlier Laura Riding had left America and gone to work with Robert Graves, who then left his wife and four children for her, as Schuyler was about to do now.

This part of the book is of special interest to me as I was there much of the time. I remember the last occasion when Kit was taken to hospital. We were all at the Farm and I was told (by Laura, I suppose) to get Kit to join me in playing the piano and singing (!) so that they could phone the doctor without her knowing. This I did as best I could, though normally I neither play the piano nor sing. The children were there – I remember them singing. Yet I recall that what most shocked me on this occasion was that they made the tea in the kitchen without waiting for the water to boil!

Griselda writes:

During the holidays we had always occupied ourselves without adult supervision, so we hardly needed Robert to be appointed – by Laura of course – to do just that, supervise and advise. He thought putting on a play would be just the ticket and duly wrote a one-act play about horses for us to work on. But we had too many other things to do and didn’t have so much as one reading.

This is interesting, as Robert says (in *Occupation: Writer*): ‘I wrote “Horses” on the liner that brought me back to England from the States a few days before the outbreak of World War II; I shall not contradict anyone who reads it as self-satire.’ Robert never told me or mentioned elsewhere that he had written it for Bousie and Kit’s children. It was eventually performed on his birthday many years later in our family theatre in Deyá, by his grandchildren and their friends.

What ‘saved the day’, according to Griselda, was the arrival of Dorothy Simmons. ‘Thank Heaven, Dorothy Simmons arrived!’ she writes. ‘Dorothy proved

a wonderful buffer between us, the kids and the situation we had been in.'

Later, Dorothy and I took Maria, Cathy and Ben by train to Newport, Rhode Island, to stay with Tom and Julie Matthews. This was after Robert and Alan had left for Europe. I did not leave with them as Griselda says; in fact, I stayed on until early October when Tom Matthews got me a ticket to Liverpool: a long trip because by then we were at war with the Germans and sailed via the Azores, but a very pleasant one.

I also remember several evenings sitting with Dorothy and Laura in *The Rise* (what were we doing?). I knew Dorothy well from the days when we lived in London and had always liked her. Soon Laura and Schuyler moved to New York where they rented a flat, listing their names outside as 'Mr and Mrs Jackson' – when Laura had always insisted that women should keep their maiden names after marriage. Later they went to Florida where they set up an orange and grapefruit farm, exporting baskets of fruit. Some years later Dorothy and her husband Montague even went to work for them (Montague giving up his career and pension in England) but left shortly afterwards with their two young children: Laura made it impossible for them to stay on.

Finally, Griselda says: 'Nothing I learned afterwards altered my twelve year old view of the summer of 1939 when there was a touch of evil in the air and Laura was its source.' Yet was she? I can still not quite believe this, perhaps because I had always got on well with Laura: not being a writer or a painter, nor feeling any need to 'express myself', I was not under her professional scrutiny, the way the others were.

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Griselda and I met again after 60 years, one hot summer afternoon, in her New York apartment. Thank you, Griselda, for the book you have written about 'Once' and 'As It Was' – and about the distressing situation in which you so unexpectedly found yourself. It brings those days back and it's hard to believe it wasn't yesterday but a long time ago.