

acorns, under a tree. But my consecutive existence began in the nursery at Lancaster Gate – the nursery that I can see now, empty and odd and infinitely elevated, as it was when I stood in it for the first time at the age of four with my mother, and looked out of the window at the surprisingly tall houses opposite, and was told that this was where we were going to live. A calm announcement – received with some excitement, which was partly caused by the unusual sensation of extreme height, as I peered at the street below. The life that began then – my Lancaster Gate life – was to continue till I was twenty-eight – a man full grown – all the changes from childhood to adolescence, from youth to manhood, all the developments, the curiosities, the pains, the passions, the despairs, the delights, of a quarter of a century having taken place within those walls.

A portentous place! Yes, but exactly how portentous it is not easy to convey. Its physical size was no doubt the most obviously remarkable thing about it; but it was not mere size, it was size gone wrong, size pathological; it was a house afflicted with elephantiasis that one found one had entered, when, having mounted the steps under the porch, having passed through the front door and down the narrow dark passage with its ochre walls and its tessellated floor of magenta and indigo tiles, one looked upwards and saw the staircase twisting steeply up its elongated well – spiralling away into a thin infinitude, until, far above, one's surprised vision came upon a dome of pink and white glass, which yet one judged, with an unerring instinct, was not the top – no, not nearly, nearly the top. Below the ground-floor there was a basement, above it there was a drawing-room floor, and above that there were four floors of bedrooms; so that altogether the house contained seven layers of human habitation. But that was not all; all the rooms were high, but the height of the drawing-room was enormous; so that, if one had the courage to go up the stairs, one found, when one had surmounted the first floor, that one was on an airy eminence, surrounded by immeasurable spaces of yellow marbled wallpaper, and alarmingly near the dome; its pink lights seemed to glitter almost within one's reach, when, abruptly, one's course deviated; one turned to the left up six strangely broad steps, and came upon quite a new part of the building – the bedrooms, piled two and two on the top of one another, connected by quite an ordinary, small staircase, and forming a remote, towering outgrowth upon the monstrous structure below.

The house had been designed extraordinarily badly. The rooms that looked on to the street (one on each floor) were tolerable; all the rest were very small and very dark. There was not a scrap of garden, not even a courtyard; and so lugubrious was the outlook of the back rooms that the

windows of most of them were of pink and white ground glass, so that one never saw out of them. In a London winter, very little light indeed came through those patterned panes. My mother, taking a hint from my father's office in the City, had 'reflectors' put up – huge plates of glassy material, slightly corrugated, which hung opposite the windows from chains. The windows themselves were so large that it was almost impossible to open them. Little circular ventilators were cut in them, working by means of cords. All this presented a peculiar spectacle, as one sat in the schoolroom – at the end of the passage on the ground-floor – or in 'the young ladies' room', behind the dining-room; a tiny apartment, far higher than it was either long or broad, with a gigantic mahogany door, and the vast window, pink and frosted, with its string and ventilator, and a dim vision of filthy yellow bricks, chains, and corrugations looming through the fog outside.

And besides the height and the darkness there were other strange inconveniences. There was the one and only bathroom, for instance, perched, with its lavatory, in an impossible position midway between the drawing-room and the lowest bedroom floors – a kind of crow's nest – to reach which, one had to run the gauntlet of stairs innumerable, and whose noises of rushing waters were all too audible from the drawing-room just below.

Then, in spite of its gigantic size, the house, somehow or other, seemed to have very few rooms in it. My father was the only person who had a sitting-room to himself. In the miserable little 'young ladies' room', Dorothy and Pippa, and Pernel, and later on Marjorie, led an oddly communal existence; privacy there, I suppose occasionally there must have been, but privacy arranged, studied and highly precarious. But, strangest of all, my mother had no room of her own. There was a large writing-table in the dining-room, and at that writing-table, amid the incessant *va-et-vient* of a large family, my mother did all her business – and she was a busy woman, with a multitude of outside interests, a large correspondence, and a curiously elaborate system of household accounts.

No doubt, in all large families, there is very little privacy; and one might say that Lancaster Gate was, in essence, the crowning symbol of the large family system. The one implied the other. The same vitality, the same optimism, the same absence of nerves, which went to the deliberate creation of ten children, built the crammed, high, hideous edifice that sheltered them. And so it was inevitable that the most characteristic feature of the house – its centre, its summary, the seat of its soul, so to speak – should have been the room which was the common meeting-place of all the members of the family – the drawing-room. When one entered that vast chamber, when, peering through its foggy distances,