

could think what it could be. But the mystery was at last explained – the ex-Governor suffered, in moments of excitement, from a curious affection of the nose. While the family listened, a little hysterically, to this peculiar combination of sounds, all at once yet *another* sound – utterly different – burst upon their ears – the sound, this time, of rushing water. There was a momentary shock; and then we all silently realized that someone, in the half-way landing upstairs, was using the W.C.

There are various ways of ‘seeing life’; but it seems to me that, in one way or another, I saw a good deal of life in the drawing-room at Lancaster Gate. And of course my experience then was not limited to an enormous family: there was a constant succession of callers, there were repeated dinner-parties and at homes. The preparations for an afternoon party I have a queer vision of – a vision, as it happens, that can be accurately dated. The room was bared, the chairs ranged round the walls, and in the middle, walking up and down and showing themselves off were Dorothy and Pippa dressed from head to foot in white muslin with full flowing skirts, and black satin sashes round their waists, tied in immense bows. They were in mourning – for the death of the German Emperor; and that afternoon party must have been in the third week of June 1888. Often, there were musical parties, and, in the days when trousers were even more unfamiliar to me than they are now, I heard, to my intense excitement, that Grossmith – the almost mythical Grossmith of the *Sorcerer* and the *Pinafore* – was coming to sing and play. ‘I know what’ll happen,’ I whispered to Marjorie, in a great state of agitation, as we waited for the guests. ‘Just as Grossmith comes into the room, my knickerbockers will fall down.’ The grandest of the musical parties was much later, given in combination by my aunt and my mother, with Joachim and Piatti playing in their quarter. I can see at this moment, in my mind’s eye, the Olympian features of Sir Frederic Leighton, flushed with anger, as he entered on that occasion. I can hear him explaining, in heated accents, that he had made a mistake, had gone to the wrong house, and had been driving over half London in consequence.

It must not be inferred from these entertainments that we were fashionable or smart; on the contrary, if anything we were dowdy; though on the other hand, we were not in the least Bohemian. Our conventionality, slightly mitigated by culture and intelligence, was impinged upon much more seriously by my mother’s constitutional vagueness and immateriality, and by a vein in her of oddity and caprice. Her feeling for what was right and proper was unsupported by the slightest touch of snobbery; and, while it was very strong and quite unhesitating, it was surprisingly peculiar to herself. That her daughters should go into mourning for the German Emperor, for instance, appeared to her

essential; but her own dresses were most extraordinary, designed by herself, quite regardless of fashion. She had all her children christened, but she never went to Church – except in the country, when she went with the utmost regularity. She was religious in the payment of calls; but the arrangements of the household, from the point of view of social life, were far below the standard. We kept up the mere minimum of an appearance. Our butler, Frederick, the promoted gardener’s boy of Stowey House, uncouth, simian, with a great mouth, ill-covered by a straggling moustache, was one of the most unrepresentable of figures, and must have cast a chill upon the visitor to whom he opened the door for the first time. ‘Why do the Stracheys allow their man to wear a moustache?’ Marjorie, in hiding in the dining-room, once heard a military visitor inquire of another as they went down the passage together. ‘Why did they indeed? But in truth my mother would no more have dreamt of ordering the unfortunate Frederick – one of the most excellent of creatures, in spite of his ugliness – to shave off his moustache than she would have dreamt of going without a butler altogether and having a parlour-maid. A butler, but an unrepresentable butler, might have stood for the symbol of the Lancaster Gate establishment.

No doubt a contributing cause of our dowdiness was that we were only precariously well off. But, whatever the explanation, I think, as I look back, that the fact that we *were* dowdy was one of the redeeming elements in the situation. Few things could be imagined more terrible than a *smart* Lancaster Gate. As it was, there was something human in the untidiness and the dirt. It was a touch of nature that, in the hall, by the stairs, two bicycles should be grouped together, incompletely covered by a rug, that the dust was too thick on the red velvet in the alcove behind the cast of the Venus of Milo, and that, in the dining-room, my mother’s writing-table, littered with papers, stood out obvious and unashamed during the largest dinner-parties. To the children, at any rate, nosing into corners, the full incorrectitude of the place stood revealed. Visitors, perhaps, might not particularly notice, but *we* knew by heart all the camouflaged abysses, taking a sardonic delight in the ruthlessness of the introspective realism with which we plumbed and numbered ‘filth-packer’ after ‘filth-packer’ – for such was our too descriptive phrase.

What had happened was that a great tradition – the aristocratic tradition of the eighteenth century – had reached a very advanced stage of decomposition. My father and my mother belonged by birth to the old English world of country-house gentleness – a world of wealth and breeding, a world in which such things as footmen, silver, and wine were the necessary appurtenances of civilized life. But their own world was different: it was the middle-class professional world of the Victorians, in