

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Deceived With Kindness

Angelica Garnett

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DECEIVED WITH KINDNESS

Angelica Garnett was born at Charleston, her parents' home in Sussex, on Christmas Day, 1918. As a young woman she studied acting before turning to painting, drawing, illustration and decoration. In 1942 she married David Garnett, who was twenty-six years her senior (and who died in 1981), and they had four daughters. She now lives in the south of France.

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To My Guardian Angel

DECEIVED
WITH KINDNESS

A Bloomsbury Childhood

ANGELICA GARNETT



PIMLICO

Preface to the Pimlico Edition

If I ask myself today whether I would write this book in the same way – that is, if given the subject, I would want to say the same things, the answer is Yes – albeit differently. In the ten years since it was published I have had time to see things – above all myself – otherwise, even to grow up a little. I am also less obsessed by the personalities and relationships of my mother, father and husband, less desirous of apportioning the blame, and less mesmerised by the idea of repeating or re-living my childhood. When, a year before my father's death, at the age of 59, I began writing, I was still wrapped in the caul that had bound me all my life, from which I was only just beginning to divest myself. I by no means clearly saw what I was doing – but only knew that I had to do it. The book was therefore a therapeutic exercise, an effort to save myself from hypocrisy and pretence by creeping out into the open. By the time I had finished it both my parents were dead, but I was terribly conscious of their shadows looking over my shoulder, not accusingly, but shocked and horrified at what, with the best will in the world, they had finally produced.

It is of course the same old story, the one we all live through in different ways, of the relationship with, and separation from, our parents. In my case this was obscured by the fact that the man I married was a near contemporary of my mother and father, as well as their devoted friend and lover, so that, without enough experience to understand what might lie beneath such a situation, I became the focus of an uneasy truce – rather than a war – of which I was however the unconscious but consenting casualty.

But it is not a story of violence or achievement. And perhaps, for modern readers, it is this that is most difficult to understand. Bloomsbury believed in and largely practised intellectual tolerance, but often failed to recognise the power of the emotions or the reasoning of the heart. Fascinating and vital, they hid their feelings behind an apparent detachment that I found at that time repressive and confusing. Separated as I was from them by more than the usual generation gap, their lack of physical warmth and animal spirits had the effect of inhibiting my own, making me either excessively shy and tentative in an effort to seem more grown up than I was, or arrogant and insensitive in my consuming desire to identify with them.

Brought up in the delicious climate of an Ivory Tower, I had no experience with which to counter or compare the unique one of being a spoiled, and apparently much loved child. Many years later, after Vanessa's death, I remember being assured by Raymond Mortimer that I *had* been much loved: and of course everyone thought so, including me. But I wonder whether a parent's love ought not to be tougher and stronger, more concerned with the relationship the child will eventually have with the world it inhabits and the common strengths, failings and emotions of its fellow inhabitants? Alienated by lack of experience, I remained both ignorant and afraid of these things, ill at ease and therefore constantly tempted to pretend.

Accusation and blame, however, are dreary props for the ego. I am convinced that, had I confronted my parents while they were still alive, in spite of any momentary pain and incomprehension, both they and I would have had a happier relationship. I cannot excuse myself for this omission, which I now see so clearly was my business and not theirs. If my marriage was an act of rebellion, it was ill-judged – and, moreover, I knew it at the time but failed to listen to the still, small but terrifying voice within. It was this failure and deadly suppression which coloured my marriage rather than David's own personality, and it was also necessary to recognise that, together with my resentment, I must discard the self-protective role of eternal victim.

Writing it out, that is to say committing myself to a definite point of view, seemed to hold the promise of exorcism. The effort I had to make to re-live my experience helped me define my attitude and indeed my self, and was, moreover, the only way that remained, given the fact that the other protagonists were all dead. But there were many moments when I wondered whether what I was saying was justifiable. I had known these extraordinary people from a child's point of view, immeasurably different from that of a contemporary, and I allowed myself to be led by the fascination of the subject beyond these limits into a certain amount of speculation. At the time I felt that this was the only way to avoid simple nostalgia and snobism, the latter not only a trap for the writer but for the public, always liable to over-identify with the members of an élite. Bloomsbury was the matrix from which I sprang, in many ways an extraordinary advantage: but I wished I could have called it by another name, and rechristened its characters, so that they might be seen for their psychological complexities and over-lifesize personalities without the label.

Angelica Garnett
Forcalquier, 1994

It is rather ironical that the word 'power' denotes two contradictory concepts: *power of* = capacity and *power over* = domination. This contradiction, however, is of a peculiar kind. Power = domination results from the paralysis of power = capacity. 'Power over' is the *perversion* of 'power to' ... Domination is coupled with death, potency with life. Domination springs from impotence and in turn reinforces it, for if an individual can force somebody else to serve him, his own need to be productive is increasingly paralysed.

Masochism is the attempt to get rid of one's individual self, to escape from freedom, and to look for security by attaching oneself to another person ... it can be rationalised as sacrifice, duty or love ... often masochistic strivings are so much in conflict with the parts of the personality striving for independence and freedom that they are experienced as painful and tormenting.

Erich Fromm, *Man For Himself: An Enquiry into the Psychology of Ethics*

Les sentiments pour les progéniteurs, ça fait partie des choses qu'il vaut mieux ne pas chercher trop à tirer au clair.

André Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*

Prologue

In 1975 I was living on the north side of London in Islington, a prey to loneliness and regret, following a love affair with someone much younger than myself. My lover had gone abroad, leaving me without news of any kind, and I spent many months of doubt and anxiety before compelling myself to admit that he would never return. My children had by that time left home, and my husband, David Garnett (called Bunny by myself and our friends), from whom I had separated several years earlier, lived in France. Now I found myself alone in one of those tall London houses, with nine empty rooms, not so much unhappy as disorientated.

What else had I ever been, however, in spite of a longing to prove the contrary? I had friends, of course, but I did not feel particularly close to any of them. Either they were friends of my youth with whom the links had become attenuated by time and a change of interests, or they were those of an older generation who were friends of mine mainly because they had known and loved my parents. With them I always felt secure, but also ill at ease, sensing that there was some profound inadequacy in me to which, in their kindness, they did not allude. Our relations were inhibited either because we could not achieve a sufficient intimacy together, or because I imagined that I had nothing to offer our friendship.

An extract from a diary kept at that time indicates my lack of self-confidence, the depth and importance of which I was only just becoming aware.

London 1975

While buying vegetables in the Caledonian Road I looked in a mirror and saw a vagueness, almost a hole, where I myself should have been. Compared with the woman next to me I seemed unsure, tentative, and wispy. Yet I was better looking, better dressed, even in better health. It was not that I was daydreaming, I was simply not present in the same sort of way. I often see something indefinable in the faces of those I meet in shops or public places that reflects my non-being; and then because I smile and am anxious to please they are reassured. It's obvious after all that I'm not an escaped lunatic.

Preoccupied with myself as I was, I began to be aware of the profound and disturbing emotions I felt for my mother, Vanessa Bell, and my father, Duncan Grant. I was beginning to question their behaviour towards me.

In 1961, when she was eighty-one and I was forty-two, my mother died. Her image and personality had always obsessed me: on the one hand I felt compelled to imitate her, while on the other I resented her dominance. With Duncan I had had a different relationship: light and easy, affectionate and undemanding. I had always adored him and was quite uncritical – in my eyes he could do no wrong. But recently I had become aware of currents beneath the surface, of unsatisfied desires and longings

which, partly because I did not know what they meant and partly because Duncan himself seemed so unaware, had become deeply repressed. I found it impossible to talk to him of such things.

Writing my diary proved helpful, for it provided a means of increasing my insight. Then another lifeline was held out to me by a young American called Frank Hallman, who wrote asking for permission to publish an article by my aunt, Virginia Woolf, and subsequently a memoir by Vanessa. At first we carried on a lively correspondence, and later in the summer he arrived in England. He was young, intelligent and sensitive, with a sense of humour. We liked each other immediately, a feeling which on my side was all the warmer because I hoped that here at last was that particular kind of intimacy for which I longed. I did not fall in love, but something in his manner affected me like an elixir; I was both stimulated and warmed by his evident affection. It was a reflection of what he felt for my mother, for whom he had conceived an enormous admiration. He had seen pictures by both her and Duncan in New York, but unlike most people, he had responded more strongly to Vanessa than to Duncan. It was Frank who dropped into my mind the idea that Duncan was not necessarily as attractive to everyone as he appeared to me, and that his imperfections, once realised, might make him both more interesting and more accessible.

Before returning to the States, Frank suggested that I might write a short book about Charleston – the house near Lewes in Sussex where I was born and brought up – and the life we lived there, but I resisted the idea strongly. He evidently imagined sketches of childhood, cameolike portraits of the remarkable people who had surrounded me. But I saw that even to produce these I would be forced into an involvement, from which in fact I had never been free, with the question of my relationship with Duncan and Vanessa. Already I was afraid of the effort it would cost me, of adventuring into the disturbing perspectives of the past.

Since Vanessa's death, Duncan had lived on in the country at Charleston. I often went down to see him, making the two-and-a-half-hour journey by car, assuming, much in the way small children do, that I should always be welcome. Undemonstrative though he was, Duncan never made me feel otherwise, and in that place and in his presence I had the sensation, a false one as it turned out, of being a whole and integrated person. Probably because it was not a genuine feeling, I could seldom if ever paint when I was at Charleston, an inability made all the more painful by the familiar sight of the works of art all over the house. In consequence I took more and more to gardening. I loved the walled garden with its ancient apple trees and cottage flowers, but I never felt satisfied with my weeding and pruning, and was pursued by a spectre of perfection which was both unattainable and unnecessary; added to my other feelings, it made me both grumpy and taciturn. Every day I saw Duncan slowly ageing in front of his easel, dedicated to his painting and responding happily to a host of faithful admirers, while I, rigid with suppressed love and a misery in which there was more than a tinge of jealousy, suffered from his obvious lack of interest in my life.

He was by now very old and, unable to live alone, was looked after devotedly by the poet Paul Roche, a friend of long standing, who filled the house with his grown-up children and their companions. Like a circle of butterflies they fluttered round Duncan, sometimes delighting in him, sometimes ignoring him, while he, confined to a wheel-

chair, looked on them all from a distance. Provided he could continue to paint, which he was at the time doing very well, he preferred to remain detached, apparently unconcerned with what went on around him; although an occasional spark of life showed he was not as oblivious as he seemed. He lived, more than anyone I have ever known, in the present, whereas I had one foot buried in the past and, even though I didn't live at Charleston, found it difficult to accept the youthful invasion. Like a rapid current, it swept past me to occupy spaces which I had regarded as particularly my own.

Mistakenly, I clung to a certain authority there which Paul quite naturally resented, a situation which led to a sharp correspondence between us. In my diary I tried to sort out some of my emotions.

London 1975

Perhaps it's Paul's letter that has depressed me. He looks after Duncan in the most extraordinarily competent way, which, even had I the necessary physical strength, I could not do. And I think that Duncan is happy in that masculine menage which comprises the very young, the middle-aged and the very old. Paul's son, T., is a miracle of gentleness and good humour; but I can't help shrinking when they talk, as they often do, as though Duncan himself were absent, when there he is sitting at his table smiling the smile of a Taoist poet. It is shocking to think he may actually enjoy this kind of indelicacy.

Paul's letter makes it clear not only that he thinks of himself as Duncan's son, but that Duncan thinks of him as the son he always wished to have. I feel murderously jealous, as though I had been given a blow in the face, although when I think of Duncan longing for a son I feel a lot of sympathy for him. It is baffling that it has taken me all these years to realise how much I resent his neglect of me, divesting himself of all responsibility, as though I were an object rather than a human being. It didn't seem like this in my childhood, when I was on the whole far happier with him than with Vanessa, because he had no axe to grind and never exercised emotional blackmail.

It has taken Paul's letter to make me aware of Duncan's feelings, and although I feel extraordinarily thick-headed not to have realised them earlier, I am glad to think that I now know Duncan better. If anything it increases my love for him. His great age makes it difficult to know what he thinks of me; it is obvious he confuses me with Vanessa – he calls me by her name, and although I know this is common in old people, I suffer a small shock every time he does it. I get the impression he cares little for me or my life, but I have to admit that I have not made it easy for him to do so.

To become aware of my jealousy of Paul was an advance, in the tangled web of repressed emotion in which I was then living.

Shortly afterwards Paul, as he sometimes did, carried Duncan off to his own house in Aldermaston where, besides other conveniences, the comfort and warmth were greater than at Charleston. This gave me an opportunity to return there alone – a visit I needed to make not only because I had begun to explore, however tentatively, my disaffection with the past, but for the purely practical reason that the house was falling into

disrepair. I was worried about the future of Charleston, full as it was of paintings, decorations and objects of every kind – a testimony to the life we had lived there – and I wanted to find a way of preserving it. It had been obvious for some time that the work should be undertaken as soon as possible, but my reluctance to disturb Duncan had made it difficult to know how to begin.

I was therefore able to take advantage of Duncan's and Paul's absence to make a tour of inspection in the company of the agent and his assistant, hoping that they might persuade our landlord to repair the outside fabric. In spite of their friendliness, I discerned in their eyes a gleam of disbelief and a determination to disregard all but the solid and tangible, of which admittedly there was very little. They were visibly unmoved by the charm of the decorations, and indeed as we went round the house seemed to shed all its qualities, like so many petals falling from a flower, to reveal the mark of damp on the walls, the holes in the roof, the plaster coming away from the wallpaper, the exposed laths filled with woodworm, etc. The imperceptible shrugs of the two men, their loaded silences, the way the agent said, 'I'm no connoisseur but ...', my feeling that I seemed to be doing the wrong thing in showing them round, added up to something unpleasant like a drop that gathers at the end of one's nose ...

At the time the landlord was building a disproportionately large silage and hay barn behind the old farm buildings. As yet unfinished, it was a skeleton of bolted steel girders rising above the moss-covered slates and tiles of the flint barn. A milking parlour for four hundred cows was planned for the rickyard. The white chalk road full of potholes was to be concreted, and I imagined the constant rumbling of tractors and the hum of the milking machine interposing a mechanical screen between ourselves and the sounds of the countryside. Although farming is less destructive than many other pursuits, I felt that the air of the Sleeping Beauty which then possessed Charleston would inevitably disappear. I grew more and more depressed, especially as it became clear that the rent Duncan paid was too low to justify the landlord spending anything on repairs. I knew it was right that the agent should see it, yet I felt as though I had asked him there for nothing. He could not believe that anyone would be interested in helping us to preserve it, and thought that our only chance was to put the murals in a museum. I am thankful that the agent has since been proved wrong, but at the time I suffered greatly from the fact that my defence of Charleston had been so unconvincing.

Meanwhile my correspondence with Frank Hallman continued and, in the course of his other visits to London and one to Sussex, our friendship deepened. But in the summer of 1976 the telephone rang, and a voice on the other end of the line told me that Frank, on the previous day, had dropped dead of an aneurism. Our friendship, so full of promise, was brought to a tragic end. He did not even have time to publish Vanessa's memoirs. A year later I sold my house in Islington and went to live at Charleston, from where Duncan had again departed to Aldermaston, as it turned out for the last time. I thought I could keep it going until his return in the spring, but living there again was a psychological experiment which held greater risks than I had imagined.

I loved the place and all that was in it, but there was a sense of compulsion about my return, as though this time I were going back to the cave of the enchantress, the

role in which I saw Vanessa. Surrounded by the subtle and glowing colours which splashed and streaked every surface, transforming walls, mantelpieces, doors and furniture, all familiar to me from childhood, I was too close to see things dispassionately, and yet I could not tear myself away. I moved about the house as in a dream, aware of the atmosphere distilled by the vibrant colours and yet hardly seeing them, preoccupied with the effort of imagining Duncan and Nessa in their early years, youthful as I had never known them. I felt as though I had a debt to pay – and yet, on reflection, I had begun to wonder whether the debt was mine or theirs.

Obscurely, I felt it necessary to come to terms with them in a place where I had spent a large part of my childhood and which I had always thought of as my home. At the same time the force of personality of both my parents, together with their philosophy or attitude to life, constituted a threat which until then I had never properly considered. My fear was that this threat, inextricably mixed with their love for me, would swamp me for ever. I was again alone, with no one to talk to and, in any case, little idea of how to describe my state of mind. Had it not been for the visits of one of my younger daughters, Fan, the experiment might have ended in disaster.

First, however, there was Duncan's ninety-third birthday party, given by Clarissa and Paul Roche at Aldermaston. I drove over there and was taken in to see Duncan in his room at one end of the house. He was very quiet and gentle, wearing his little knitted cap *à l'orientale* – absolutely himself. He asked questions about Charleston and about my daughters. Surprisingly alert, he remained personally uninvolved; he was affectionate, but I was mainly conscious of his exquisite good manners.

Friends arrived and were invited into the sitting-room. Duncan was wheeled in and people went up and spoke to him: as always, he showed himself open to new impressions. Clarissa, who is a superb cook, provided us with a delicious meal, and Duncan was served in his own corner. There were gossip, giggles and intimacy; no arguments or intellectual profundity, only towards the end (and after a lot of wine) a few personal revelations. It was the sort of occasion Duncan always enjoyed.

Duncan occupied an agreeable room full of Paul's books and his own pictures. A canary flew from cornice to cornice, or perched on Duncan's feet. A door gave on to a newly built conservatory, its roof supported by a central pillar of looking-glass, which Paul imagined would eventually be surrounded by a pool of water. Already he had filled the corners of the room with camellias and other plants. I felt as I went into it that I was stepping into a dream, a dream of the South, of perpetual sunshine and lethargy, and a little startling in our northern climate. It was hardly an interior which Duncan would have created himself, and I wondered whether he liked it. The important thing, however, was that he was still producing small paintings, which meant that he must be happy.

In the spring of 1978, about two months after his birthday, Duncan died. Not long beforehand he had returned from Paris with a chill, having been to see the great Cézanne exhibition at the Grand Palais. Staying at the British Embassy as a guest of Sir Nicholas Henderson, an old friend, Duncan fell out of bed on his last morning there and caught cold: Paul, who was with him, postponed their return for twenty-four hours and then brought him back to Aldermaston and put him to bed.

I cannot be sure how long it was after this that Paul called to tell me how Duncan was. After he rang off I suddenly realised how bad things were, and that unless I went over to Aldermaston I should probably never see him again. I suggested to my brother Quentin, who lived only three miles from Charleston, that he might like to come with me; I drove and we arrived in the afternoon. Duncan, frail as a skeleton leaf and speechless on account of his bronchitis, was nevertheless pleased to see us. He lay in bed with his cap on and with his hands, blue with cold, lying on his chest. We found ourselves in the awkward position of making conversation round someone who, though hearing and seeing, could not participate. Quentin was full of resource and knew better than to ask Duncan questions to which he could not reply. I was more or less silent. Paul kept on bringing the conversation back to the subject of who was to be the author of Duncan's biography after his death, like a child who has been told not to touch a sore spot and cannot forbear doing so.

We must have stayed for about an hour, which, though all too short, was sufficient to tire Duncan. It was indeed the last time I saw him: he was perfectly self-possessed, alive to all that was going on, gentle and remote with the distance that age confers. He never appeared to suffer, either from his physical ailments or from his necessary dependence on others. He looked like a cross between a mandarin and a gnome, and as I stared at his hands, long and narrow, I remembered how delicate and dancelike his gestures used to be.

The drive back was exhausting, but it was nice to be alone with Quentin, and I think he was as glad as I was that we had been. I was pleased that my general inertia had not prevented me from asking him to go with me.

About a fortnight later Paul rang to say that Duncan had died quietly and peacefully; just the way one expected him to go – Duncan never did anything painfully. It was decided that he should be buried beside Vanessa in Firle churchyard.

The funeral itself took place on a grey spring day. The little churchyard was very green and situated in an *au-delà-du-temps*, reminding me for some reason of the garden of the Hesperides: Paris and the Three Graces would have been welcome. As it was, there was a small crowd of friends, including our former cook and her husband, and Angus Davidson, the author and translator. He was calm, dignified and pale, the only friend from Duncan's past. A lot of people were in tears. Paul's daughter had painted the coffin with wreaths of flowers, a Pre-Raphaelite gesture that would have delighted Duncan.

After the funeral Paul and his children drove off, and the rest of us, with the exception of Quentin and his wife, went back to Charleston. We sat around the tea-table feeling purged of our petty rivalries and jealousies – or so it seemed to me; Angus's benevolence and distinction may have influenced us. Then they all went away, leaving me once more to my solitude.

Immediately after Duncan's death I began to suffer from a continuous headache. At first negligible, after a time it felt as though, when I bent my head, a set of billiard balls clashed together in the middle of my forehead. Activities such as gardening became impossible. Examinations revealed nothing and pills were useless; finally a violent pain seized the back of my neck and more or less prostrated me. As I lay in Vanessa's bedroom I had the sensation of being sucked into a vortex from which, as in

a nightmare, it was imperative but impossible to escape.

Weeks went by during which no one was able to suggest what was wrong, weeks when I felt less and less capable of normal emotion. There was a moment when I thought of the pond as a solution, but Fan, who had been with me some of the time, came to the rescue when she wrote to say she thought I might die, owing to the strain of living at Charleston! This startled me into action, and I decided to move into a nursing home in London, where I was told I was suffering from a depression: a psychiatrist gave me jade green pills to swallow. I shall never forget the moment when, lying in bed in the evening, I felt an unmistakable trickle of vitality wriggle down my spine. I simply lay there, allowing this miracle to take possession of me, like an urn being filled with water.

It was a long time before I felt completely normal, but I could at least lead the life of an ordinary human being, and I returned to Charleston to an exceptionally beautiful spring, when the Japanese cherry that I had put in the year before flowered with the palest pink almond-scented blossom. The rediscovery of country life, the beauty of the downs and the garden, entranced me. In addition I felt a new freedom, and the idea of writing the book that Frank had suggested now began to take hold of me. It was a way of appreciating him, of remaining in touch with his memory, and I began to see that it might be my own way out of the labyrinth. As I thought about my childhood and adolescence I began to realise that the past may be either fruitful or a burden; that the present, if not lived to the full, may turn the past into a threatening serpent; and that relationships that were not fully explored at the time can become dark shapes, in the shadow of which we do not care to linger. To me, Vanessa had become such a shade.

When she was alive, I had seen her only as a stumbling block, as a monolithic figure who stood in my way, barring my development as a human being. Unable to wrench myself away from her for whom I had such feelings, I burdened her instead of myself with the responsibility for my life. The result was that when she died I felt almost nothing save the oppressive shadow of her presence and the faint hope that I might one day be free of it.

Why had I not revolted while there was still time, thus discovering my own self-respect and the ability to love Vanessa while she was still alive? I realised that I had never, during her lifetime, said to her, 'What does anything matter, since I love you?' Was this simply because I had been too inhibited, or because I *hadn't* loved her? In any case, now that she was no longer there it was impossible to say, but the idea that it might be possible to hold a dialogue with the dead began to form in my mind.

In the passage at Charleston I had hung some photographs of my grandmother, Julia Jackson, taken by my great-great aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron. As I looked at them I became conscious of an inheritance not only of genes but also of feelings and habits of mind which, like motes of dust spiralling downwards, settle on the most recent generation. Vanessa shrank into a mere individual in a chain of women who, whether willingly or not, had learnt certain traits, certain attitudes from one another through the years. One of these was clearly seen in a snapshot that always stood on Vanessa's writing-table, and which I now keep in the same place, of Julia in profile looking out of the window. Because of its intimacy it held a special significance for Vanessa, but for me at least half its meaning lies in its resemblance to Vanessa herself. It is not so

much the physical likeness as the resemblance of gesture and intention; there is a reluctance, a hesitation in the hand raised towards the light, a doubt betrayed by the subtle and gracious lines of the pose, which links Julia and Vanessa close together. I know that I too sometimes take such poses, for example on entering a room full of people of whom I feel shy. How far back do such inheritances go? Julia's mother for instance, one of the famous and beautiful Pattle sisters, did she also suffer from lack of self-confidence? It was she whom Vanessa, as a little girl, remembered enveloped in layer upon layer of shawls. She seems to have retired early from a life that was eminently respectable and impeccably dull to spend her mature years protected by her daughter from all disturbance. Was this merely Victorian indulgence or real fragility?

Yet, as I read Vanessa's early letters to her sister and to her husband Clive, I was astonished by a vitality that I had not known was there; it was like uncovering a spring of silver water. An earlier identity glowed tantalisingly through these pages and through other people's memories and allusions, calling to life the mother I had always wanted, and with whom so many had fallen in love. Such a woman had invented the vibrant colours and shapes that surrounded me. I remembered that Bunny, who had known her well in those days, described her as full of energy – riding a bicycle, going for walks, playing with dogs and children, making jokes, a woman full of sympathy and friendliness.

It was a woman that I could see through the much darker personality of the later Vanessa, which lay far more heavily on my consciousness. I was puzzled by the fact that there seemed to be more than the usual contrast between youth and age, as though for some hidden reason the two had been deeply divided at about the time of my birth. Although it was obviously rooted in what went before it, I could not understand what had happened to colour the second half of her life less vividly. I felt intensely attracted by the younger Vanessa, and at the same time faintly uneasy: the trouble, it seemed, stemmed from my birth.

1

Vanessa

For many years I was so much a part of Vanessa, and she of me, that I could not have attempted to describe her with detachment, and even now I sometimes feel as though she might be looking over my shoulder. It is only now, and still with hesitation, that I feel I can portray her from a greater distance and affirm my separation from a personality I have spent so much time thinking about. I hope to be excused a skeleton of biographical facts without which, to my mind, her behaviour would lack meaning.

Although she eventually formed part of a society that was to have lasting influence, it was a small group within which Vanessa exerted her power, a group very susceptible to personal ascendancy. Some of its members, notably Virginia Woolf and Maynard Keynes, gained world recognition, but there was some element in Vanessa which refused to compete, restricting her energies to a more personal arena, where she reigned supreme.

She reminded me of a mountain covered with snow: at its summit the sun shone with warmth and splendour, and there was a sweetness and gaiety in the air. Further down the clouds gathered, plunging the lower, more and slopes into darkness. At the centre of the mountain ran a deep river, glimpsed only at intervals, when it surged through a rift in the hillside with unexpected and disconcerting power.

It is strange that, given this power, Vanessa seems to have left behind her a memory less substantial than one might expect. Perhaps this is simply the effect of a complex personality difficult to define and therefore to remember, and perhaps it is also the consequence of her own reticence – her dislike of a public image. In order to understand Vanessa, one has to accept and enter her private world, a world from which she excluded all except her most cherished friends and relations, but within which she created a dazzling interior.

Vanessa was not only Virginia Woolf's sister, she was also the eldest of the Stephen family by her father Leslie's second marriage. Both her parents had been married before and both were widowed. Leslie's first wife, Minnie Thackeray, had left him with a backward daughter Laura, who was incorporated into his new family. His second wife, Julia Duckworth, a great beauty, had been passionately in love with her first husband and suffered deeply on his death: in spite of her vivacity she remained something of a tragic figure. On her marriage to Leslie she had brought with her three children by Herbert Duckworth: George, Stella and Gerald – the first two in their different ways of great importance to the Stephens.

The gap in age was considerable, however, whereas that between Vanessa and her full brothers and sister was as close as possible, as was their intimacy. Next to Vanessa came her adored brother Thoby, also of great importance in her emotional

development; then Virginia who through the accident of sex was thrown together with Vanessa, for a time becoming a psychological burden of considerable proportions; and lastly Adrian who as an unwanted child was spoiled, over-protected and inhibited. According to Virginia, Vanessa felt her responsibilities towards them keenly: thrust into a maternal role by nurses and Julia alike, she had no choice but to respond, tempted by rewards of love and affection, and proud no doubt of being thought capable and worthy.

But it was Julia whose nervous energy dominated the family, leaving behind in Vanessa's mind the glow of an unattainable ideal. One evening in the bathroom, when she and Virginia were still small children, Virginia suddenly asked Vanessa whom she preferred, her father or her mother. 'Such a question seemed to me rather terrible; surely one ought not to ask it. However, I found I had little doubt as to my answer. "Mother," I said.' Vanessa had, as it were, already been inoculated with Julia's image, and in later life it was this she longed to evoke. Whenever she talked of her Vanessa's voice would take on a hint of exaltation which hid her mother's profile through the gold dust of memory, revealing a figure of such perfection that it was hardly real at all. Clearly Vanessa was profoundly moved, as only a child can be, by her mother's personality. The aura of tragedy, her distinction, her natural authority had all left an indelible mark.

In those days children saw less of their parents than they do now, and it seems that Julia was often absent from home on visits to relations. One has the impression of someone with a very firm sense of what was most important in life, valuing devotion and responsibility, only running away from them when they threatened to overcome her. She had a compelling, even dominating personality, and ran the household in a mood that may, one feels, have been a trifle tense. In spite of her underlying sadness, she could hold an audience spellbound and make them laugh. At times, she was tempted to direct the lives of others, performing charitable works and occasionally indulging in matchmaking. Anything but flirtatious or flighty, she aroused the passions of James Russell Lowell, the American author and at that time Ambassador, which were extinguished only with her death. And it was she alone who could command the obedience of J. K. Stephen, her husband's nephew, when he lost his mental equilibrium.

For Vanessa she remained a glamorous figure, authoritative and romantic, rustling in silk and for ever active, running from top to bottom of the house, or sitting, grave and concentrated, in silent communion with her husband in the drawing-room. Although she was only to know her mother for a bare fifteen years, the aura with which she surrounded Julia may have owed some of its magic to the fact that she did not survive into Vanessa's adolescence. She remained mysterious, deeply loved but scarcely understood.

After the death of Julia, and of her stepsister Stella shortly afterwards, Vanessa's sense of maternal responsibility, already forced into precocious maturity, became a vulnerable point in her make-up. Left exposed as the one who was expected to take charge of the large and – by our standards – formal household, she was obliged to account for every penny, week by week, to her persistent and guilt-ridden father.

If Leslie Stephen seemed relentless it was not because he was, in reality, insensitive or unimaginative, but with his unbalanced image of himself, he had little

idea of the effect he produced on young and tender natures. Always prone to the purple passages of emotional self-indulgence, he was, in spite of the sense of proportion that emerges from his writing, thrown into an excess of self-pity by his wife's death. One must, however, remember that this was the second such occasion in his life, and that he was now well beyond middle age. As a widower he found himself face to face with duties that had previously been carried out by Julia. It was she who at his request had held the purse-strings and now, after Stella's death, and though she lacked experience, he felt that Vanessa would take charge of them. His groans of despair and peculiar system of accounting resulted from a feeling of rage that fate should aim, at this stage, to transform him into a responsible adult, and his resentment was directed against Vanessa, as the representative of her mother, who had so selfishly deserted him on the threshold of old age. But he had not reckoned on a character protected from emotional blackmail by an inner wisdom and an absent-minded dreaminess that saw through his intentions. Outwardly insulated though she was, however, Vanessa's task was no less of a burden – and these scenes left in her mind a residue of intense dislike, owing to the pain of seeing her father behave in a way she could not respect. It may have been this impression that clarified her own attitude to money; in later life she gave with generosity and never attached conditions to the gift. If this was a reaction to Leslie's hysteria, it was an admirable one.

On the whole it was only when Leslie's egotism became uppermost that he aroused feelings of antagonism. When his children were small he identified with at least some of their interests – their opinions of what they read, their sailing boats in Kensington Gardens, and their fondness for butterflies and dogs. He observed his children's differing personalities, and as their minds developed they came to appreciate his honesty, integrity and unworldliness: whether they realised it or not they adopted many of his values. Vanessa greatly admired his rejection of Christian belief, which seemed to her both courageous and clear-headed: she admired and was seduced by the rationalist point of view, to which she accorded an importance in inverse ratio to the strength of her own emotions.

None the less, in a family that was highly articulate and self-conscious, Vanessa held herself a little apart, perhaps because she was the eldest. Her reactions were slower and more instinctive than Virginia's – possibly more so than Thoby's – and she often preferred to maintain a mute independence which impressed the more volatile Virginia with a sense of strength and responsibility. Vanessa was teased by the others for her silences but they were an indication of what lay beneath, almost like a piece of semi-opaque glass let into the floor through which, when the light was favourable, one might be lucky enough to glimpse things usually hidden. One of these was her shy determination to be a painter, the other her capacity for deep feeling, in which she herself may have found something disconcerting and even frightening. The whole cast of her mind, uninquiring and passive, was opposed to analysis: unlike Virginia, she never learnt to project the light of self-questioning onto her own behaviour. Instead she clung to a hope that all problems could be solved by rationalising them, and that there was somewhere a perfect system that would do away with threatening or painful situations.

In spite of her superiority of years and experience it was from her sister that Vanessa often felt the need to protect herself. While still a child Virginia, possessed of