

## **BLOOMSBURY'S UPSTAIRS, DOWNSTAIRS**

The diaries of Vanessa Bell's housekeeper, Grace Higgs, give a different view of the Bloomsbury Group

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In the summer of 1920, a sixteen-year-old girl presented herself for work at 50 Gordon Square in the Bloomsbury area of London. Her name was Grace Germany, and she had been sent by an agency in Norwich to act as housemaid to Mrs Vanessa Bell. It is possible that she knew her employer to be one of the leading artists of the day; what she cannot have guessed at was the unconventional nature of her household – or that she herself would be part of it for more than 50 years.

Grace's diaries – filed under 'Higgs', the name she took on her marriage in 1934 – have recently been acquired by the British Library. To academics, their main interest will be as a record of the comings and goings at Charleston, the Sussex farmhouse which acted as a country retreat for the Bloomsbury Group, and where Grace was installed as housekeeper. But they also shed fascinating light on life as it was lived below stairs in the aftermath of the First World War – its tensions, its entertainments, its sexual mores.

The details of Vanessa Bell's strange ménage have been much written about, but so central are they to Grace's story that they are worth briefly setting out again. The elder sister of Virginia Woolf, Vanessa became married in 1907 to the art critic Clive Bell, by whom she had two sons, Julian and Quentin. The marriage lasted only a few years, and Vanessa set up house instead with the painter Duncan Grant, even though he was primarily homosexual; but Clive remained a close friend and frequent visitor, and when Grant and Vanessa had a daughter, Angelica, Clive agreed to pretend that the child was his. The final twist came when Angelica grew up to marry a former boyfriend of Grant's, the novelist David Garnett.

How long it took Grace to fathom what was going on around her we do not know. The daughter of a Norfolk farmer, she was an intelligent girl with a very limited education, having left school at thirteen and gone to work – according to an autobiographical note – in ‘Stamp, Jam & Gramophone factories’. Her first experience of domestic service was a bad one: the doctor who employed her had ‘an awful temper’, and her routine was unremittingly tedious: ‘Work just as usual’ sums up a typical day.

But to open her diary for 1921 is to discover a young woman who has taken on a new lease of life. In October of that year, she accompanied Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant and Vanessa’s three children to stay for three months in a rented house near St Tropez, and her account of the expedition is full of girlish exuberance – as well as a strong sense of the absurd. Changing trains en route is a taste of things to come: ‘we were quite unprepared & had to rush very quickly to get our luggage out, (which we threw out of the window) before the train started again. Mr Fry [Roger Fry, the art critic and a former lover of Vanessa’s] was waiting on the platform...’

Duncan Grant strikes a particularly comic figure, wheeling the washing into St Tropez on Angelica’s pushchair, and borrowing thirteen-year-old Julian’s overcoat (‘I do not think I ever laughed so much...the sleeves reached to his elbows’.) On the beach, he vacates a changing hut to make way for Grace and another girl: ‘the poor man having left his trousers inside, had to trot about with his shirt safety-pinned between his legs, to prevent it blowing up.’ Vanessa Bell is more poised, at least until the owner of the house arrives, ‘putting us all in great commotion...[Madame Vidrac] has yellow hair of the most extraordinary hue, a complexion which she makes herself and a very shrill voice. Mrs Bell in a terrible state...’

Vanessa, meanwhile, recorded her impressions of Grace abroad in a letter to Clive: ‘Our French cook...is very practical and I think looks upon Grace as a hopeless amateur – as indeed she is, trapesing around in exquisite

transparent clothes, with a handkerchief tied around her head, very lovely and quite incompetent. However, she picks up a few words of French occasionally and makes herself understood with the help of a dictionary.’

Photographs of Grace from this period show a gangling young woman with a long, inquisitive face and bobbed hair. Quentin Bell later remembered her as ‘a lively, innocent, forgetful and easily startled girl, coping in the most amiable manner with the eccentricities and vagaries of artists and their friends’. She was not conventionally beautiful, but there is no doubt that men found her very attractive: among those mentioned in the diary is a French army officer (‘he wanted to come part of the way back with me, but I managed to give him the slip’). The least prepossessing is a customer in a shop who overhears her trying to buy underwear: ‘whenever the wretched man saw me in St Tropez he came & whispered the French name for bloomers.’

Grace’s diary-keeping was sporadic, particularly in the middle of her life, but her journal for 1924 is one of her most detailed, and it is this that reveals more than any other the pattern of relationships among the servants in London and Sussex, with their undercurrents of flirtation and jealousy. Chief among the *dramatis personae* are Mrs Harland, the cook; Alice Mary, a housemaid who seems, in the terminology of the day, to be no better than she should be; and Edgar Weller, an occasional helper at Charleston who is clearly much smitten with twenty-year-old Grace. ‘I have been trying to write to Edgar,’ she notes on 29<sup>th</sup> February, ‘but I really do not know what to say, as he is so serious, he talks of settling down, & I am sure I cannot settle down.’

Perhaps the free-thinking attitudes of her employers had begun to rub off on Grace: she certainly perceived herself as an independent modern woman, proud of her left-wing views, which were fuelled by the sight of hungry children and war veterans begging on the streets of London. This, and a

strong sense of sexual morality, put her at odds with Mrs Harland in particular:

‘I had an awful row nearly down stairs, about my awful Socialist views,’ she writes on 5<sup>th</sup> March. ‘Mrs Harland thinks, that the poorer classes, never ought to be allowed to raise themselves up...Mrs Harland also thinks that if a wealthy man offered to make advances towards a poor girl, she should be honoured & allow him to do whatsoever he liked with her, for the sake of a few miserable shillings...& also she should be able to brag about it, that she had been mistress for one night or a few weeks or months of a man with money. Also she thinks I am mad because I said if a rich or poor man wanted me he would have to marry, for if I was mistress of a man & he turned from me to another woman, I would kill him. & she also says I am mad, because I said I do not want to get married, as I would lose my independence...’

Mrs Harland may have had relaxed views on extra-marital sex, but she clearly did not like the idea of it too close to home: the following day Grace records that ‘We had a big dinner party, & I had my hair waved, & it looked lovely, everybody kept telling me so, & Mrs Harland was mad, especially when Mr Harland said so, she was very jealous.’

It seems that Grace’s attractions were also noticed by another husband, for at around the same time she notes that ‘Mr Bell came to lunch, & as usual said some very idiotic remarks, making me feel very uncomfortable’. The following month he makes her a present which today would be tantamount to sexual harassment, though she admits to being delighted with it: ‘I had a lovely Easter egg from Mr Bell with a lovely pair of silk stockings inside, I must not let Alice Mary know.’

Clive Bell, however, was less serious and persistent than Edgar Weller, who on 26<sup>th</sup> April ‘came & proposed for about the eighth time’. A photograph from one of Grace’s albums shows Edgar as a self-possessed young man, posing in cricket whites with a cigarette in his mouth; but he had

met his match in Grace, who told him in no uncertain terms that she did not love him. Finally, at the beginning of July, he gives up: ‘Had a great shock. I thought I had a cheque, then when I opened the letter found it was from Edgar giving me the sack. Thank heavens.’

Among the other faces in the album is that of Alice Mary, who – strong-jawed and rather dumpy – looks ill-cast as a floozy; but this how she seems to Grace. ‘It is wicked,’ Grace writes, ‘but I have a secret satisfaction to know that Alice’s beau, did not turn up last night, I think it is wrong for her to go out with a married man, until late hours of the night...’ Alice’s reputation is not helped by the arrival of an anonymous postcard ‘with a very indecent picture on it’ (though this turns out to be a prank played by a girl called Emily); nor by her behaviour at the pub near Charleston where the servants drink: ‘Alice it appears has been getting up into roars at the Barley Mow with a man named Ufflet, I think she has a very bad name around here.’ When she leaves the household at the beginning of October, it is in typically reprehensible fashion: ‘Alice has gone away, but we do not weep, she has taken my ring & a pound, alas poor me...’

Occasionally the gossipy atmosphere of the kitchen becomes too much for Grace: ‘Every time I go out,’ she complains, ‘I have so many lies told about me that I dread to go out at all.’ But there is also plenty of boisterous good fun, particularly at Charleston. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September Grace writes: ‘Arthur West Will White E. Kemp, Spenser Wooller call in, & started chasing me, they were a terrible nuisance.

‘Last night Arthur West, White & Kemp (both soldiers climbed Mr Grant’s window & tried to get in his bedroom. I beat them out.’

On the following day, ‘Tom West told Mrs Upp he was my young man, and tried to kiss me; thereupon I called upon God to let me die, & he could not kiss me & gave it up as a bad hope.’ But, she adds, ‘Arthur West did. The Rotter. Mrs Upp so amused that she passed water, & had to go upstairs.’

Unlike Alice Mary, Grace knows where to draw the line, and when her reputation is threatened she acts quickly and decisively: ‘Tom West insulted me by saying that Edgar Weller slept with me last Easter, which was a great lie, I called his father over & told him, he very severely reprimanded Tom, who cries & came & begged my Pardon.’

What is curious is that while Grace records in detail these below-stairs carryings on, she at no point alludes to the unconventional arrangements upstairs. Why should this be? Did she not consider it her place to comment on her betters’ behaviour, or was there some other reason?

‘If she was keeping a private journal, it wouldn’t have been out of awe and respect that she kept quiet about her employers,’ says the author Lucy Lethbridge, who is writing a history of servants in the twentieth century. ‘It may simply be that the servants of the time weren’t as easily shocked by what went on upstairs as we tend to imagine. As a country girl, she would have been aware of plenty of unorthodox relationships in the community where she grew up: it’s a modern fallacy to think that people didn’t know as much about these things then as we do now. And if she really had been shocked, she could simply have upped and left.’ In such matters, Lethbridge adds, there was often an instinctive understanding between the upper and the lower classes: it was middle-class people who were far more likely to take exception.

Grace’s view of those upstairs is not always respectful: on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1924 she writes, ‘I met Mr & Mrs Leonard Woolf, rideing on their bicycles to Charleston they looked absolute freaks, Mr Woolf with a corduroy coat which had a split up the back...Mrs Woolf in a costume she had had for years.’ This is not to say that she disliked Virginia Woolf: during the same stay at Charleston she notes, ‘Mrs Woolf arrived after tea to the great joy of the household, as she is very amusing, & helps to cheer them up’; and among the correspondence in the Higgens archive is an obviously treasured postcard from the novelist, complimenting Grace on her cake-making.

Frustratingly, the diaries reveal nothing about how the sought-after housemaid finally settled for an ex-soldier called Walter Higgens: there are none at all for the period between 1927 and 1944, during which Grace ceased to follow Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant between London, Sussex and a France, and began to live at Charleston full-time as housekeeper and cook. When they resume, Grace is the mother of an eight-year-old son, and the brief, irregular entries are chiefly concerned with mundane events – visits to the dentist and hairdresser, Home Guard darts matches, hens laying eggs. Only in 1959 does she begin to write at length and in detail once more.

By this time Grace was in her mid-fifties, with an altogether different status to the giddy, ‘quite incompetent’ housemaid of the early diaries. She had become an excellent cook and was, says Vanessa Bell’s biographer Frances Spalding, ‘the mainstay of the house. Everything depended on her eventually.’

Vanessa Bell, who turned 80 that year, was in declining health. She, Duncan Grant and Grace managed one more expedition to France, but by the autumn of 1960 she was scarcely able to leave Charleston. The following spring she contracted bronchitis. On 7<sup>th</sup> April Grace wrote:

‘Mrs Bell much worse, not able to move, Doctor does not expect her to live through the night, but so brave, when the doctor asked her how she was she said much better, her breathing is terrible, Ringmer nurse came this evening to help me make her bed & change her nightdress, Quentin took [his son] Julian to London & came back. Angelica coming on midnight train. Mr Grant trying so hard to keep her alive, feeding her every hour with spoonfuls of Brands extract.’ Later she added the single line, ‘Mrs Bell died at midnight,’ and the following day, ‘I shall miss her terribly.’

Grace had served her mistress with devotion (and occasional exasperation) for 40 years, and this was an obvious time for her to leave a far from luxurious house where she had to scrub floors and endure freezing winters. But there was still Duncan Grant – and Clive Bell, who remained a frequent visitor – to

think of, and so she stayed on. 'I am so tired, I wish I could retire,' she wrote two years later, 'but I cannot leave Mr Bell & Mr Grant, no one could look after them.'

Charleston was not the hub it had been, but the names which fill Grace's diaries for the 1960s are impressive nevertheless: 'Mr Peter Pears came for lunch and to stay the night a very nice person, he lives with Benjamin Brittain and is a very famous singer'; 'Mr Edward Heath Minister for the Opposition for lunch...did not arrive till 2.30 by which time we were all famished & had started our lunches'; 'L. Woolf & Peggy Ashcroft the actress (Dame) for lunch also Quentin.'

For many of those who came, Grace was not simply a servant but a friend. Lady Keynes, widow of the economist, often dropped in for a gossip, and Grace was a guest at one of the most fashionable weddings of 1964 when Lindy Guinness married the Marquis of Dufferin & Ava. 'The kitchen was very much the centre of the Charleston universe,' says Vanessa Bell's granddaughter Cressida. 'Everyone would end up in it. There was always a cup of tea and a "Grace cake"', which was a delicious sponge cake of her own invention. She was incredibly good-natured, and we were all very fond of her.' The art historian Richard Shone remembers her 'marvellous quiet voice' with a lilting East Anglian accent, and the warmth of her relationship with Duncan Grant: 'They were like equals – he would consult her over all sorts of things.'

It is clear that Grace – a keen reader of biographies – had a strong sense of the importance of the people she met, though according to Richard Shone she was never overawed by them. In 1970, as she celebrates the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her arrival in Gordon Square, a note of reminiscence creeps into her diary, as if she is keen to record things before they slip away. 'Listened to the life of Marie Lloyd & remembered Walter Sickert the painter at a Dinner party in 46 Gordon Sq, singing "My Young Man is Sitting in the Gallery",' she writes on



11<sup>th</sup> February; and the following day, ‘Listened to a radio scrip about Sir Frederick Ashton, Remember seeing him on a summer afternoon leaping about Charleston Lawn with red Roses threaded in his hair.’ When E.M. Forster dies she notes, ‘I remember him staying here when we had a fire behind the Kitchen Wall, & the fire engine came out, he was very amused.’

At the end of the year she and Walter finally retired to a house of their own in Ringmer. Duncan Grant continued to live at Charleston until his death in 1978 (Clive Bell had died in 1964), but the housekeepers who followed Grace were not of the same calibre, and the place soon fell into disorder and disrepair. In his will Grant left Grace the sum of £300: ‘I did not expect it,’ she wrote, ‘as I did not think the poor dear had much money. but it is nice to be remembered... Bless him, I still cannot feel he is gone.’

She herself died in 1983, a year after her husband. But she is not forgotten in the house she ran for so long (now fully restored and open to the public). In the upstairs corridor hangs Vanessa Bell’s portrait of her standing serenely over a mixing bowl, and behind the Aga is a set of tiles specially designed by Quentin Bell – a fitting tribute to a woman he described as ‘the guardian angel of Charleston’.