The Bolter

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To my mother

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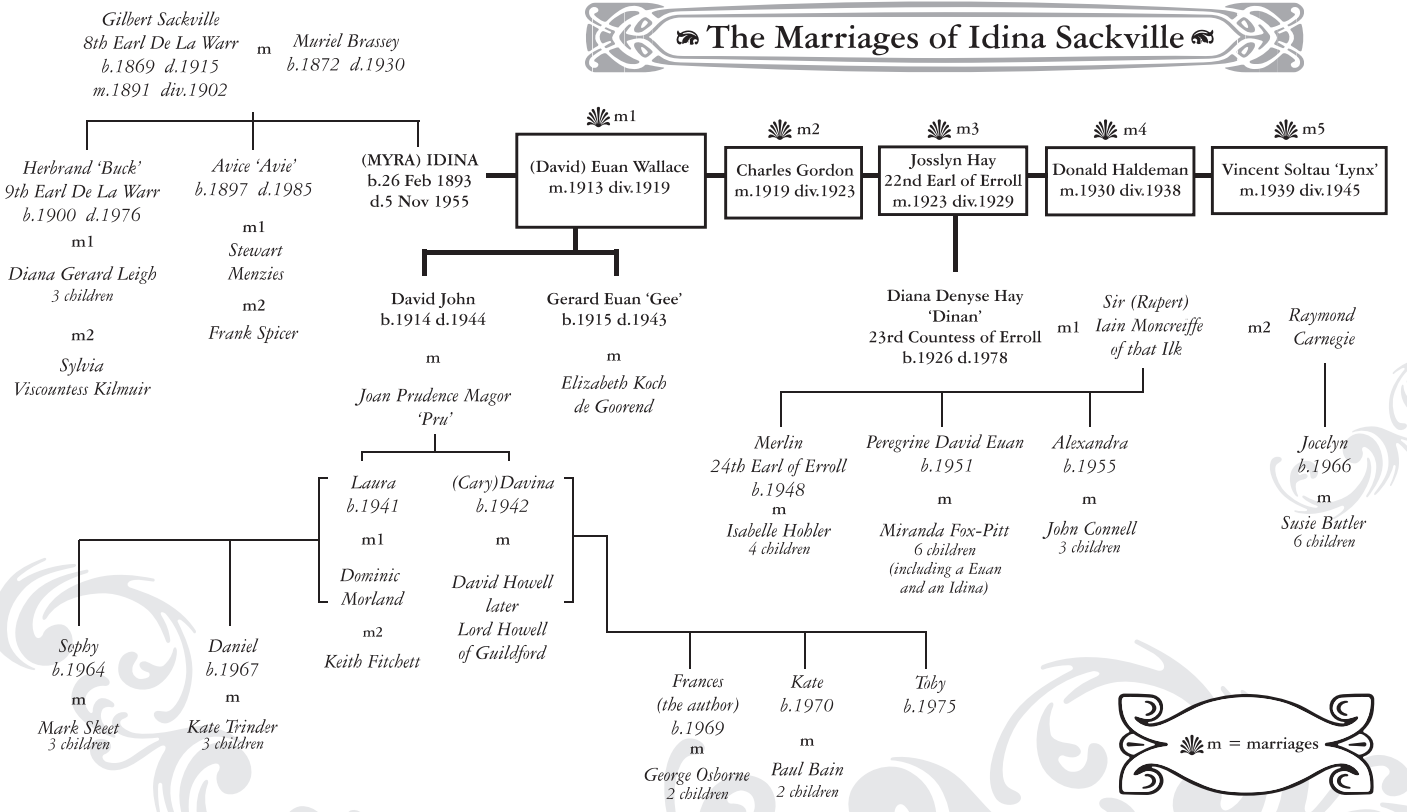

CLARIDGE'S HOTEL, MAYFAIR, 1934

Diary of David Wallace, aged nineteen

Balliol College, Oxford, Friday 11 May 1934

Had letter from Sheila, saying had seen my mother, who wanted to meet me. All v. queer . . . Not seen for 15 years. In some ways indifferent. Yet in others I long to see her. I certainly look forward to it immensely. I objectify it all, picture to myself. Young Oxford graduate, meeting mother after 15 years, moving scene, and not me.

Balliol College, Oxford, Thursday 17 May 1934

Letter from my mother; I knew it at once; suggesting meet Claridge's next week; had to write to Sheila to find out her name.[1]

On Friday, 25 May 1934, the forty-one-year-old Idina Sackville stepped into Claridge's Hotel in Mayfair shortly before a quarter to one. Her heels clipped across the hallway and she slipped into a chair in the central foyer. The tall, mirrored walls sent her back the reflection of a woman impeccably blonde and dressed in the *dernier*

cri from Paris, but alone. She turned to face the entrance and opened her cigarette case.

In front of her, pairs of hats bobbed past with the hiss of a whisper – she remained, it was clear, instantly recognisable. Idina tapped a cigarette on the nearest little table, slid it into her holder and looked straight ahead through the curling smoke. She was waiting for the red carnation that would tell her which man was her son.[2]

It was two weeks ago that she had been told that David needed to see her, and a decade and a half since she had been banned from seeing him and Gee, his younger brother. All that time, she had stayed away. Had it been the right thing to do?

Would she do it the same way again?

That afternoon at Victoria Station, when she had said goodbye to a husband she still loved, was a lifetime behind her. And the reality of what that life might have been was minutes, maybe seconds, ahead.

The cigarette finished, Idina lit another. And then, as she leant forward, a dishevelled young man came through the revolving doors. Six foot two, lean, she could see that he had her high cheekbones and unruly hair. His eyes, like Euan's, were a deep brown.

In his buttonhole was a red flower.

For a decade and a half Idina had been searching for something on the other side of the world. Perhaps, all along, here was where it had been.

Book One

Edwardian London

CHAPTER 1

THIRTY YEARS AFTER HER DEATH, IDINA ENTERED MY life like a bolt of electricity. Spread across the top half of the front page of the Review section of the *Sunday Times* was a photograph of a woman standing encircled by a pair of elephant tusks, the tips almost touching above her head. She was wearing a drop-waisted silk dress, high-heeled shoes and a felt hat with a large silk flower perching on its wide, undulating brim. Her head was almost imperceptibly tilted, chin forward, and although the top half of her face was shaded it felt as if she was looking straight at me. I wanted to join her on the hot, dry African dust, still stainingly rich-red in this black-and-white photograph.

I was not alone. For she was, the newspaper told me, irresistible. Five foot three, slight, girlish, yet always dressed for the Faubourg St-Honoré, she dazzled men and women alike. Not conventionally beautiful, on account of a 'shotaway chin', she could nonetheless 'whistle a chap off a branch'.[1] After sunset, she usually did.

The *Sunday Times* was running the serialisation of a book, *White Mischief*, about the murder of a British aristocrat, the Earl of Erroll, in Kenya during the Second World War. He was only thirty-nine when he was murdered. He had been only twenty-two, with his whole life ahead of him, when he met this woman. He was a golden boy, the heir to an historic earldom and one of Britain's most

eligible bachelors. She was a twice-divorced thirty-year-old, who, when writing to his parents, called him 'the child'. One of them proposed in Venice. They had married in 1924, after a two-week engagement.

Idina had then taken him to live in Kenya, where their lives dissolved into a round of house parties, drinking and nocturnal wandering. She had welcomed her guests as she lay in a green onyx bath, dressed in front of them and made couples swap room keys according to who blew a feather across a sheet at whom, and other games. At the end of the weekend she stood in front of the house to bid them farewell as they bundled into their cars. Clutching a dog and waving away, she called out a husky, 'Goodbye, my darlings, come again soon,'[2] as though they had been to no more than a children's tea party.

Idina's bed, however, was known as 'the battleground'. She was, said James Fox, the author of *White Mischief*, the 'high priestess'[3] of the miscreant group of settlers infamously known as the Happy Valley crowd. And she married and divorced a total of five times.

It was November 1982. I was thirteen years old and transfixed. Was this the secret to being irresistible to men, to behave as this woman did, while 'walking barefoot at every available opportunity' as well as being 'intelligent, well-read, enlivening company'?[4] My younger sister's infinitely curly hair brushed my ear. She wanted to read the article too. Prudishly, I resisted. Kate persisted, and within a minute we were at the dining-room table, the offending article in Kate's hand. My father looked at my mother, a grin spreading across his face, a twinkle in his eye.

'You have to tell them,' he said.

My mother flushed.

'You really do,' he nudged her on.

Mum swallowed, and then spoke. As the words tumbled out of her mouth, the certainties of my childhood vanished into the adult world of family falsehoods and omissions. Five minutes earlier I

had been reading a newspaper, awestruck at a stranger's exploits. Now I could already feel my great-grandmother's long, manicured fingernails resting on my forearm as I wondered which of her impulses might surface in me.

'Why did you keep her a secret?' I asked.

'Because' – my mother paused – 'I didn't want you to think her a role model. Her life sounds glamorous but it was not. You can't just run off and . . .'

'And?'

'And, if she is still talked about, people will think you might. You don't want to be known as "The Bolter's" granddaughter.'

My mother had been right to be cautious: Idina and her blackened reputation glistened before me. In an age of wicked women she had pushed the boundaries of behaviour to extremes. Rather than simply mirror the exploits of her generation, Idina had magnified them. While her fellow-Edwardian debutantes in their crisp white dresses merely contemplated daring acts, Idina went everywhere with a jet-black Pekinese called Satan. In that heady pre-war era rebounding with dashing young millionaires – scions of industrial dynasties – Idina had married just about the youngest, handsomest, richest one. 'Brownie', she called him, calling herself 'Little One' to him: 'Little One extracted a large pearl ring – by everything as only she knows how,' she wrote in *his* diary.[5]

When women were more sophisticated than we can even imagine now, she was, despite her small stature, famous for her seamless elegance. In the words of the *New York Times*, Idina was 'well known in London Society, particularly for her ability to wear beautiful clothes'.[6] It was as if looking that immaculate allowed her to behave as disreputably as she did. For having reached the heights of wealth and glamour at an early age, Idina fell from grace. In the age of the 'flappers' that followed the First World War, she danced, stayed out all night and slept around more noticeably than her fellows. When the sexual scandals of Happy Valley gripped the world's press, Idina

was at the heart of them. When women were making bids for independence and divorcing to marry again, Idina did so – not just once, but several times over. As one of her many in-laws told me: 'It was an age of bolters, but Idina was by far the most celebrated.'[7]

She 'lit up a room when she entered it', wrote one admirer, 'D.D.', in *The Times* after her death.[8] 'She lived totally in the present,' said a girlfriend, who asked, even after all these years, to remain anonymous, for 'Idina was a darling, but she was naughty'.[9] A portrait of Idina by William Orpen shows a pair of big, blue eyes looking up excitedly, a flicker of a pink-red pouting lip stretching into a sideways grin. A tousle of tawny hair frames a face that, much to the irritation of her peers,[10] she didn't give a damn whether she sunburnt or not. 'The fabulous Idina Sackville', wrote Idina's lifelong friend the travel writer Rosita Forbes, was 'smooth, sunburned, golden – tireless and gay – she was the best travelling companion I have ever had . . .' and bounded with 'all the Brassey vitality' of her mother's family.[11] Deep in the Congo with Rosita, Idina, 'who always imposed civilization in the most contradictory of circumstances, produced ice out of a thermos bottle, so that we could have cold drinks with our lunch in the jungle'.[12]

There was more to Idina, however, than being 'good to look at and good company'. 'Apart from the difficulty of keeping up with her husbands,' continued Rosita, Idina 'made a habit of marrying whenever she fell in love . . . she was a delight to her friends'.[13] Idina had a profound sense of friendship. Her female friendships lasted far longer than any of her marriages. And she was known never to steal men from other women – only to scoop up those already abandoned.[14] And above all, wrote Rosita, 'she was preposterously – and secretly – kind'.[15]

As my age and wisdom grew fractionally, my fascination with Idina blossomed exponentially. She had been a cousin of the writer Vita Sackville-West but rather than write herself, Idina appears to have been written about. Her life was uncannily reflected in the writer Nancy Mitford's infamous character 'the Bolter', the

narrator's errant mother in *The Pursuit of Love*, *Love in a Cold Climate* and *Don't Tell Alfred*. The similarities were strong enough to haunt my mother and her sister, Idina's granddaughters. Aged seventeen and eighteen, fresh off the Welsh farm they had been brought up on, they were dispatched to London to be debutantes in a punishing round of dances, drinks parties and designer dresses. As the two girls made their first tentative steps into each party, their waists pinched in Belville Sassoon ball dresses, a whisper would start up and follow them around the room that they were 'the Bolter's granddaughters', as though they, too, might suddenly remove their clothes.

In the novels, Nancy Mitford's much-married Bolter had fled to Kenya, where she had embroiled herself in 'hot stuff . . . including horse-whipping and the aeroplane'[16] and a white hunter or two as a husband, although nobody is quite sure which ones she actually married. The fictional Bolter's daughter lives, as Idina's real daughter did, in England with her childless aunt, spending the holidays with her cousins and eccentric uncle. When the Bolter eventually appears at her brother's house, she looks immaculate, despite having walked across half a continent. With her is her latest companion, a much younger, non-English-speaking Juan, whom she has picked up in Spain. The Bolter leaves Juan with her brother while she goes to stay at houses to which she cannot take him. '"If I were the Bolter,"' Mitford puts into the Bolter's brother's mouth, '"I would marry him." "Knowing the Bolter," said Davey, "she probably will."'[17]

Like the Bolter, Idina famously dressed to perfection, whatever the circumstances. After several weeks walking and climbing in the jungle with Rosita, she sat, cross-legged, looking 'as if she had just come out of tissue-paper'.[18] And her scandals were manifold, including, perhaps unsurprisingly, a case of horsewhipping. She certainly married one pilot (husband number five) and almost married another.[19] There was a white-hunter husband who, somewhat inconveniently, tried to shoot anyone he thought might be her lover. And, at one stage, she found an Emmanuele in Portugal and

drove him right across the Sahara and up to her house in Kenya. He stayed for several months, returning the same way to Europe and Idina's brother's house. Idina then set off on her tour of the few British houses in which she was still an acceptable guest, leaving the uninvited Emmanuele behind. This boyfriend, however, she did not marry.

Even before that, the writer Michael Arlen had slipped her name from Idina Sackville to Iris Storm, the tragic heroine of his best-selling portrait of the 1920s, *The Green Hat*, played by Garbo in the silent movie of the book, *A Woman of Affairs*.[20] Idina had been painted by Orpen and photographed by Beaton. Molyneux designed some of the first slinky, wraparound dresses for her, and her purchases in Paris were reported throughout the American press.[21] When he had financial difficulties, Idina helped bail him out. In return he would send her some of each season's collection, delicately ruffled silk dresses and shirts, in which she would lounge around the stone-and-timber shack of the Gilgil Polo Club in the grounds of her Kenyan mountain farm, Clouds.

A farm halfway up an African mountain is not the usual place to find such an apparently tireless pleasure-seeker as Idina. Clouds was by no means a shack: by African mountain standards it was a palace, made all the more striking by the creature comforts that Idina – who had designed and built the house – managed to procure several thousand feet above sea level. It was nonetheless a raw environment. Lethal leopard and lion, elephant and buffalo, roamed around the grounds of its working farm, where 'Idina had built up one of the strongest dairy herds in Africa', said a fellow farmer who used to buy stock from her.[22] Idina took farming immensely seriously, surprising the Kenyans who worked for her with her appetite for hard work and her habit of, like them, walking around the fields and riding through the bush barefoot, and camping out on safari for weeks on end. But then, as Rosita put it, Idina 'was an extraordinary mixture of sybarite and pioneer'.[23]

However, behind this extraordinary mixture lay a deep sadness. When the poet Frédéric de Janzé described his friends (and enemies) in Kenya alphabetically for Idina he wrote: 'I is for Idina, fragile and frail.' When Idina is described, sometimes critically, as living 'totally in the present',[24] it should be remembered that her past was not necessarily a happy place. Driving her wild life, and her second, third, fourth and fifth marriages, was the ghost of a decision Idina had made, back in 1918, which had led to that fall from grace. On the day the First World War ended, she had written to her young, handsome, extremely rich first husband, Euan Wallace, and asked for a divorce. She then left him to go and live in Africa with a second husband, in comparison with Euan a penniless man. She went in search of something that she hadn't found with Euan. And when, not long after, that second marriage collapsed, Idina was left to go on searching. In the words of Michael Arlen's Iris Storm: 'There is one taste in us that is unsatisfied. I don't know what that taste is, but I know it is there. Life's best gift, hasn't someone said, is the ability to dream of a better life.'[25]

Idina dreamt of that better life. Whenever she reinvented her life with a new husband, she believed that, this time round, she could make it happen. Yet that better life remained frustratingly just out of reach. Eventually she found the courage to stop and look back. But, by then, it was too late.

A few years later she died, openly professing that 'I should never have left Euan'[26] and with a photograph of him beside her bed. Thirty years after that first divorce she had just asked that one of her grandsons – through another marriage – bear his name. Her daughter, the boy's mother, who had never met the ex-husband her mother was talking about, obliged.

At the end of her life, Idina had clearly continued to love Euan Wallace deeply. Yet she had left him. Why?

The question wriggled away inside me.

*

My mother told me almost none of the above. In fact, she told me barely anything at all. She simply said that Idina's first marriage had been to her grandfather, Euan Wallace, and that Euan Wallace was, by all accounts, breathtakingly handsome, heartbreakingly kind and as rich as Croesus. Their first child, David, had been my mother's father. A year later Euan and Idina had had another son, Gee. Idina had then gone to Africa, leaving the two boys. Euan married the famously beautiful eldest daughter of the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens and had three more sons. Later, within three years in the Second World War, Euan Wallace and four of his five sons, including my mother's father, had all died. My mother had been two years old, and had no memory of her father. None of the others had any children, including Billy, the only one to survive the war but who died of cancer before the age of fifty. My mother's and his paths had barely crossed, she said. The Wallace family had come to an abrupt end.

After this much, my mother raised a wall of noisy silence.

Idina was not, she said, a person to admire.

In 1990, when I was twenty-one, Billy Wallace's widow, Liz, died and we received a pile of photograph albums and some cardboard boxes. I sat on the floor of my parents' London sitting room and ferreted through them with my mother. The albums fell open to reveal endless pictures of Billy and his mother, Barbie, picnicking with the Royal Family; the princesses Elizabeth and Margaret as children outside Barbie's house; and a large black and white photograph of a young and beautiful Princess Margaret in the passenger seat of an open-top car, Billy behind the wheel.

My eyes widened.

'Aah, is this why your paths didn't cross?'

My mother nodded. 'Different lives,' she added. 'Now I need your help with this.'

She lifted the lid off one of the cardboard boxes and scattered the contents on the floor. In front of me lay the photographs of five

young Second World War officers. Their hair was slicked down under their caps, their skin unblemished, noses and cheekbones shining. The portraits were unnamed.

'There must,' my mother continued, 'be some way of working it out.'

She could identify her father from the other photographs she had. She had also known Billy well enough to pick him out. The three that remained were all RAF pilots: bright-eyed, smiling pin-up boys in their uniforms. They were my mother's uncles, Johnny, Peter and Gee Wallace. Yet we didn't know who was who. Each one of them had died shortly afterwards, and this was all of their brief lives that survived. Apart from my mother and her sister, who had been toddlers when they had died, the only relative left to ask was my mother's mother. And, even fifty years on, these deaths still upset her almost too deeply to raise the matter. After a couple of hours of puzzling, we slipped the pictures back into the mass grave of the box.

'I was only two when my father went,' my mother murmured.

'Not went, died. Nobody left you. They all simply died, one by one.'

There was a theory, my mother continued, that it was the pink house. Pink houses are unlucky. They moved into that pink house and then they all went.

I nodded. My mother was not having a logical moment. The best thing to do was to nod.

Then, softly, I broke in. 'Idina didn't die then, though. Did you ever meet her, Mum?'

'No, I didn't.'

'Why not?'

'Well, it would have been disloyal to Barbie, who brought up my father. In any case, Idina wasn't interested in my sister and me. She didn't care.'

'Oh.'

'She was not a nice woman.'

'Why, Mum? You're not that old-fashioned. Just having a few lovers doesn't make you a bad person.'

'Well, it's not exactly the best, or happiest, way to behave, but you're right, that didn't make her a bad person.'

'Then what did?'

My mother turned and looked me straight in the eye. 'My grandmother was a selfish woman, Frances. In 1918, when my father was four and his younger brother, Gerard, just three, she walked out on them and her devoted husband and disappeared to live in Kenya with someone else.'

Then she went upstairs and came down again with another photograph. It was a black-and-white picture of two tiny boys in thick woollen and collared jerseys and knee-length shorts. Their hair has been tidied for the photograph but on each is bounding back in its own direction. Instead of looking at the photographer, they are huddled next to each other, eyes wandering up and to the side.

It took me another decade and a half to realise the full horror of that photograph and what I had been told Idina had done. Another decade and a half of simmering fascination until, in the first years of this century, I had two small children of my own, of whom I possessed innumerable photographs standing side by side, at the same age that my grandfather and his brother had been when Idina had left. I thought of those little boys often at my own children's bedtime, which caused me to linger, casting excess kisses into my little ones' hair and giving in to their unending 'Mummy, I need to tell you something. Just one last thing.' Idina, the person whom I yearned most to meet in an afterlife, had, according to my mother, done something that now made me feel quite sick.

But Idina was beneath my skin.

Just as I was beginning to fear the wear and tear of time myself, stories came to me of Idina's ability to defy it. In her fifties, she showed not a trace of self-consciousness when removing her clothes; even after three children 'she still had the full-breasted body of a thirty-five-year-old'.[27] At parties, she would walk into a

room, 'fix her big blue eyes on the man she wanted and, over the course of the evening, pull him into her web'.[28]

One evening, in the 1940s, Idina sauntered into the rustic bar in the Gilgil Country Club, where an officers' dance was in full swing. She slipped off her gold flip-flops and handed them to the barman, Abdul, asking him to 'take these, and put them behind the bar', walked across the floor, showing off still-perfect size-three feet, and folded herself on a pile of cushions next to the twenty-something girl who would later tell me this story. Idina raised her hand, always heavy with the moonstone of a pearl she wore, lit a cigarette and, blowing immaculate smoke rings, informed the girl that 'We share a boyfriend,'[29] making it clear that she held a both prior and current claim that she did not intend to relinquish. The boyfriend in question was a twenty-four-year-old Army captain, thirty years younger than her.

A great-grandmother sounds a long way away but in Idina's case it was not. Most families grow into a family tree branching out in several directions. The family between Idina and me, however, had been pollarded until all that was left was my mother and her sister, and several ungainly stumps where living relations should have been. Far from driving me away from her, the horror of what Idina had done in leaving her children magnified my need to know why she had left a husband she loved, and what had happened to her next.

And, oddly, stories abounded of that kindness referred to by Rosita Forbes and also of a woman who exuded maternal affection, wearing a big heart on her sleeve. 'While my parents were away,' said one female friend, younger than Idina, 'she looked after me so tenderly that I find it impossible to believe that she was anything but an adoring and excellent mother.'[30] This same woman made Idina godmother to her eldest child. So what had made her bolt from a husband she loved? Was there a story behind it, or was it just some impulse, an impulse that one day might resurface in me?

*

Eventually my mother handed me a large tin box containing Euan Wallace's regimented diaries bound in blue and red, together with two worn briefcases overflowing with photographs and letters.

Some were from Idina. She always wrote in pencil. She couldn't stand the mess of ink.

Her script was long and fluid, each letter the stroke of a violin bow, curling at the end. Her words, lurching across the page, thickened in my throat. 'There is so little I can say for what are words when one has lost all one loves – thank God you have the children . . . how unutterably lonely you must be in your heart'; her words to her daughter-in-law trembled upon her son's death.[31] Even within the breezeless still of a shuttered dining room, I held her letters tight, folded them, put them back in a pile weighted down, lest they should flutter away.

And out of these, and several other people's attics of house and mind, tumbled a story of a golden marriage slowly torn apart during the First World War, and a divorce that reverberated throughout Idina's life and still does today.

CHAPTER 2

THE FIRST UPHEAVAL IN IDINA'S LIFE CAME EARLY. SHE was four years old and her younger sister, Avice, called by all Avie at most, and Ave at worst, had just been born. Their mother, Muriel, exhausted from childbirth and her breasts overflowing with milk, was therefore not at her most sexually active. Idina's father chose that moment to leave her for a cancan dancer.

Gilbert Sackville, Idina's father and the eighth Earl De La Warr (pronounced Delaware) left the manor house in which he was living with his family in Bexhill-on-Sea. He moved a couple of streets away and into another property he owned. In this second house he installed the 'actress' whom he had first espied through a haze of whisky and cigar fumes in the music-hall on the seafront; a seafront which had been heavily subsidised with his wife's family's money. The year was 1897.

Idina's parents had married each other for entirely practical reasons. Idina's mother, Muriel Brassey, had wanted to become a countess. Gilbert, known as 'Naughty Gilbert' to the generations that followed, had wanted Muriel's money.

In a society that valued the antiquity of families and their money, Gilbert's family was as old as a British family could be. Eight hundred years earlier they had followed William the Conqueror over from Normandy and been given enough land to live off the rent

without having to put their hands to earning another penny. This is what was expected and, with just a couple of exceptions, in the intervening centuries the family had done an immensely respectable little other than live off the fat income discreetly generated by its vast estates. The exceptions were two crucial flashes of glory in the now United States. One Lord De La Warr had rescued the starving Jamestown colonists in 1610, been made governor of Virginia and then given his name to the state of Delaware. Another ancestor had been an early governor of New York, earning the earldom as a reward. But these men of action aside, Gilbert's family had been remarkably quiet and, after eight hundred years, the money was running out.

Muriel's family money had, in contrast, been made very recently and in the far less respectable middle-class activity of 'Trade', as it was snootily referred to by the upper classes who did not have to earn a living. And Muriel's family's trade was now, far from discreetly, criss-crossing Britain in brand-new thick black lines. Muriel's grandfather, Thomas Brassey, had employed eighty-five thousand men, more than the British Army, and had built one in every three miles of the railways laid on earth in his lifetime, making more money in the process than any other self-made Englishman in the nineteenth century. Upon his death in 1870, his financial estate, excluding any of his properties, was £6.5 million, 'the largest amount for which probate has been granted under any one will', wrote Lord Derby.[1]

Muriel's own parents, Thomas Jnr and Annie, had built one of the world's largest private steam yachts, the *Sunbeam*, and piled the family (a schoolroom had been one of the specifications) on board. Annie had then become the first person to circumnavigate the globe by steam yacht. Muriel and her siblings, Mabelle, Marie and Thomas, had thus spent formative days quite literally being washed overboard and rescued as they collected botanical specimens in the South Seas, and their evenings climbing volcanoes to feast with local chieftains. They were then turned into worldwide child

celebrities, for Annie had kept a detailed diary of these adventures and her accounts were published, reprinted dozens of times and translated into seventeen languages[2] after her death from malaria somewhere off the coast of Mauritius at the age of forty-eight. The book, *A Voyage in the Sunbeam*, is still in print today.[3]

Before this sea-burial, Annie had dispatched her husband to Parliament with the task of promoting the controversial cause of women's suffrage. Thomas Brassey Jnr therefore entertained Gladstone and his entire Cabinet at Normanhurst Court, his sprawling mock-French château in Sussex, and his double-width house in Park Lane. At the back of the latter he had put up a two-storey Indian palace, known as the Durbar Hall, bought from a colonial exhibition in London. He used it to display the trophies Annie had collected from her travels and, after her death, proudly opened it to the public twice a week. And, by the time Muriel married Gilbert, her father Thomas Brassey, son of a railway builder, Member of Parliament, had become Sir Thomas, then Lord Brassey, and was not quite yet an earl himself.

But he still wasn't grand enough for Gilbert's parents. Eight hundred years on, the Sackvilles remained ardent courtiers. Their darling son had, after all, been a childhood playmate of the next king but one[4] and should not be marrying into a non-aristocratic family who had had to make their money in Trade. Even more upsetting for them was that this Trade and the newness of the Brassey money was so obviously displayed. For a start there was all the soot and dirt and steam of the railways. And then there was Normanhurst Court, with all its bright-red brick, ornate ironwork, gratuitous church spire, general Francophilia and even its name reeking of ill-judged effort. And it was right on the De La Warrs' doorstep in Sussex. The two families vied constantly over who should be Mayor of Bexhill. The old Earl and Countess De La Warr refused to attend their son's wedding.

Thus disapproved of, Idina's parents had careered through their marriage at speed. Idina arrived within a year. She was named after

the wife of Muriel's brother, Tom, but was fashionably given a first name, Myra, by which she would never be called. By the time Idina was three, Muriel was pushing the boundaries of traditional society by opening Britain's first mixed sea-bathing area at Bexhill; hitherto men and women had been separated not just by balloonesque bathing dresses and machines, but beaches too. And, together with her husband, she had started racing the brand-new motor cars along the seafront. And that same year, Gilbert's father, perhaps reeling from the shock of all these modern goings-on, died. Gilbert therefore inherited the title of Earl De La Warr and Muriel became a countess at last.

The following year, Muriel's second child, Avie, was born and her husband left. Three years after that, in 1900, Muriel surprisingly gave birth to her husband's son and heir, Herbrand, called Buck as a shortening of his earl-in-waiting title of Lord Buckhurst. She then, as if to prove her parents-in-law's prejudices right, launched what was seen as an attack upon the upper-class establishment by divorcing Gilbert.

For Muriel, divorce promised both practical and political progress. Practical because divorce would prevent Gilbert spending any more of her money on other women. Political in that it would show that a woman need not be tied to an unsatisfactory husband.

For Idina, however, her parents' divorce would be less beneficial. It set the example that an unsatisfactory husband could be divorced and introduced her to the idea that husbands and fathers can leave. Both patterns of behaviour Idina herself would repeat, while reaching out for constant physical reassurance that she too would not be left alone.

For the young child of divorced parents in Edwardian England, life was not easy. The divorce immediately set Idina and her siblings well apart from their peers, for it was, in 1901, extremely rare – even though, among a significant tranche of the Edwardian upper classes adultery was rife. It was, along with hunting, shooting, fishing and charitable works, one of the ways in which those who did

not have to work for a living could fill their afternoons. The term 'adultery' is chosen carefully, for it applies only to married women. And it was married, rather than unmarried, women who were likely to pass the couple of hours between five and seven (known as a '*cinq à sept*') in the pattern set by Queen Victoria's pleasure-loving son, King Edward VII and his coterie of friends. This group had been named 'The Marlborough House Set' after the mansion Edward had entertained in as the Prince of Wales before becoming king.

The choice of this hour of day was purely practical. It took some considerable time for a lady to unbutton and unlace her layers of corsets, chemises and underskirts, let alone button and lace them up again. Lovers therefore visited just after tea, when ladies were undressing in order to exchange their afternoon clothes for their evening ones.

Where the King went, society tended to follow. If he took mistresses among his friends' wives, then so could and would those of his minions with both the time and the inclination (although many remained appalled by his behaviour). Married women were safer. First, they were not going to trap a man into marriage. Second, if they became pregnant, the child could be incorporated within their existing family. For this reason a married woman was expected to wait until she had produced two sons for her husband ('an heir and a spare') before risking introducing somebody else's gene pool among those who might inherit his property.

As long as a high-society married woman followed these rules of property protection and kept absolute discretion, she could do what she liked. In the oft-cited words of the actress Mrs Patrick Campbell: 'It doesn't matter what you do in the bedroom as long as you don't do it in the street and frighten the horses.' The boundary between respectability and shame was not how a woman behaved, but whether she was discovered. If so, her husband could exercise his right to a divorce: for a man to divorce his wife, she had to be proved to have committed adultery.

For a woman to divorce her husband, however, she had not only to be wealthy enough to support herself afterwards but also needed to prove one of the extreme grounds upon which a woman could obtain a divorce. His infidelity counted for nothing since any illegitimate children he produced would stay outside both the marriage and inheritance rights. A woman who wanted to escape an unhappy marriage had therefore to choose between two equally difficult options. The first was to prove not only that her husband had committed adultery but that the adultery was incestuous or that he had committed bigamy, rape, sodomy, bestiality or cruelty, or had deserted her for two years or more. Or she had to be branded an adulteress herself.

Even if she was the innocent party herself, a woman who obtained a divorce faced exclusion from the somewhat hypocritically bed-hopping high society. She was seen as spoiling everyone else's entitlement to fun as, once affairs had the potential to lead to divorce, it dangerously upped the stakes of illicit sex. And, by taking a case through the divorce courts she had opened her bedroom door to the eyes of anybody who could read a newspaper. The reaction of Queen Victoria to her son's being called as a witness in a divorce case summed up the upper classes' fear of divorce: his 'intimate acquaintance with a young married woman being publicly proclaimed will show an amount of imprudence which cannot but damage him in the eyes of the middle and lower classes'.[5]

Countless scandals bubbled just below the public's line of vision, and that is where, on the whole, they were kept. Unhappy couples were expected to put up and shut up, quietly arranging their lives to live apart if necessary. Before the First World War, only in the very worst, unavoidably public, cases did couples part, in the process miring both themselves and their children in scandal. Idina's parents were one of them.

Muriel cited adultery and abandonment. Gilbert and his cancan dancer were spending her money like water. In order to prove her case she had to write to her husband begging him for the resto-

ration of 'all my rights as a wife' and offering to live with him. After 'careful consideration' Gilbert replied immediately, by return of post, that he would not.[6] When the case was heard, the newspapers had printed both letters in full. For a countess with one of England's oldest titles to divorce her earl was scandal enough to shake the foundations of British society and Idina found that, even though her mother was legally the wronged party, her childhood friends were no longer allowed to come and play with her. Now nine, Idina was both old enough to miss her friends and realise that it was some change in her family life that had taken them from her. At least she had her cousins to keep her company. In this she was lucky. Muriel's two sisters, Mabelle and Marie, had both had sons, Jack and Gerard, within a few months of Idina's birth. And, after Annie's death, Thomas Brassey Jnr had married again, producing a daughter, Helen, just six months older than Idina. This small group might have been enough for a childhood. However, if she wanted to find a husband, when she reached eighteen Idina would have to make her way into the society of the outside world. And then, unlike her peers from conventional families, she would have to battle for acceptance in order to succeed.

After the divorce, Muriel moved her children out of the small manor house she had occasionally shared with Gilbert and into the countryside nearby. Five miles down the road from the medieval De La Warr stately home that Gilbert had been forced to rent to a family of newly rich bankers, she built a replica of it and called it Old Lodge. She surrounded Old Lodge with a picturesque farm and became a champion breeder of diminutive black-hided Kerry cattle. While Gilbert married twice more, Muriel never married again. She had enough money of her own not to need the burden of a husband. She did, however, devote the rest of her life to another man: the future leader of the Labour Party, George Lansbury.

Lansbury's father had been one of Muriel's grandfather's huge workforce. Muriel and Lansbury shared a fervent belief in women's

suffrage and Muriel rapidly added trade-union rights to her quiver of causes. She opened Old Lodge to Lansbury and his other campaigning friends, such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Hitherto it had been widely argued that people were poor because they were morally inadequate. Now the Webbs were proposing the near-revolutionary thesis that people were poor as a result of how the economy was organised. In due course the Trades Union Congress decided to field its own parliamentary candidates for election, creating the Labour Party; and in 1910 George Lansbury was elected Labour Member of Parliament for Bow and Bromley.

Muriel worked hard. Pound by pound she siphoned money out of her friends' and her own pockets for strikers' and suffragettes' food, bail and printing costs and, when necessary, to keep the trades union mouthpiece, the *Daily Herald* (now the *Sun*), afloat – at one stage funding an outright buyout for Lansbury. In his autobiography Lansbury wrote :

> Of all the women, outside those belonging to my family and the working classes, whom I have known and worked with, none stands higher in my memory and esteem than Muriel, Countess De La Warr. I never heard her make a speech, though she must have attended hundreds of public meetings and many private gatherings of committees.
>
> Over and over again her friends saved the *Daily Herald* from death in the old days when it was independent, and often it was her example and her work which helped women suffragists to hold on in the darkest days of defeat.
>
> Her love for human rights and duties kept her very largely out of society. She spent her days almost secretly doing good. Many, many people like myself owe her a big debt of gratitude for the continuous help she gave to causes in which we worked.[7]

Lansbury was a married man. Muriel is said to have had an affair with him. This may have been the only explanation society could

find for her politics but Muriel and Lansbury certainly spent several decades in a close working partnership. And, during this time, Muriel's former sister-in-law and Idina's aunt, Margaret Sackville, was having an affair with the future Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. It was all very cosy. In 1923 MacDonald would put Idina's younger brother Buck into his first government, making him Britain's first hereditary peer to become a Socialist minister. But the cosiness may have started even earlier. For it was and still is a suspicion among some of the family that Buck, conceived remarkably close to Gilbert's departure for South Africa in 1899 and some two years after he had taken up with the first of his cancan dancers, may have been Lansbury's, or even some other man's, son. And upon his return to England after Buck's birth, Gilbert did not move back home.

Muriel then took to religion. She became a prominent Theosophist. Theosophy was a cult that had been brought to Europe in the late nineteenth century by a Ukrainian mystic, Madame Blavatsky. The underlying principle of Theosophy, a combination of Hinduism and Buddhism, was that the dogmas of religious practice had corrupted pure communication with God. It was regarded as scandalous on several counts. Principal among these was the fact that the President of the British Theosophical Society, an Irish woman named Annie Besant, had written a book, *The Law of Population*,[8] promoting the use of contraception and advocating abundant recreational sex within marriage as being healthy for women. In the late 1870s, when *The Law of Population* had been published, it ran in direct contradiction to the belief of the Victorian establishment that women did not and should not enjoy sex, which was an unavoidable moment of regrettable bestiality unfortunately necessary to produce children. The work was condemned in *The Times* as an 'an indecent, lewd, filthy, bawdy and obscene book'. Besant, who rapidly became one of Muriel's closest friends, continued to preach her views; her audience included the adolescent Idina.

By 1911 the India-based Theosophical Society had sixteen thousand members. Besant, together with a co-Theosophist, Charles Leadbetter (who had moved to India as the police pursued him for allegedly interfering with the sons of his followers), claimed to have discovered the New Messiah. This was a Brahmin boy called Krishnamurti. Besant and Leadbetter brought him to England. Muriel offered the boy a home – with her own children at Old Lodge.

All these political, social, sexual and religious theories inevitably played a huge part in Idina's childhood. While Muriel ricocheted between London and Sussex, preoccupied with politics and religion, the formal part of the children's education was looked after in the upstairs schoolroom by a golden-hearted governess, Miss Rowden, whom Idina, Avice and Buck called 'Rowie' or 'Row' and visited until the day she died.[9] After the morning's lessons were over, the afternoons were spent on rumbustious ponies, careering through picturesque fields and either over or through their bottle-green hedges. Then, from teatime on, after most other Edwardian children had been banished back to the upper reaches of their homes, Idina and, as soon as they were old enough, her siblings, remained in the drawing room, where they were plunged into the cut and thrust of the politics of the day. All grew up able to maintain a conversation with anyone, about anything.

Despite the social fallout from the divorce, it was a childhood that Idina clearly enjoyed. And, later, the moment she had an opportunity to build a house for her own family, it would bear more than a passing resemblance to Old Lodge. But then, having spent her adolescence debating workers' and women's rights with the politicians of the day, in her mid-teens Idina was sent to boarding school.

School was not an enjoyable place for Idina. After the discussions she had become used to at home, she found both the lessons and her fellow pupils intellectually disappointing and quickly earned a reputation for being 'already precociously educated and easily

bored'.[10] But these girls and their way of life were the environment in which Idina would have to make her way.

Despite their ink-stained fingers and well-worn Latin grammars, the 'way' for both Idina and her colleagues was to make themselves as attractive as possible and marry well. These, after all, were the only means by which they would be able to determine the lives ahead of them. Idina had to have been well aware of the shadow cast over her by her parents' divorce, but clearly decided that she wanted to close the gap between herself and her peers and made the most of the advantages she had in the marriage market that awaited her. She may not have been a natural beauty – that shotaway chin haunted her – but she had high cheekbones and, above them, a pair of wide, bedroom-blue eyes. She also had the money to dress well, and did so, teaching herself how to walk and stand so that the folds of material hung just so, making her clothes, as they should, appear a second skin. And, thus dressed, Idina somehow shone. She had 'a much-envied gift for wearing clothes attractively', as the *Daily Express* would later write. 'It has been remarked of her that the simplest gown becomes distinguished when she puts it on.'[11] Yet all that precocious education and easy boredom rapidly led to a potentially sharp tongue. Idina soon learnt that she could make the other girls 'terrified'[12] of her. And years later, when an old classmate and new arrival in Kenya approached her with a 'Do you remember me, we were at school together?', the sharpness would still be there. Idina turned to her, half smiled and replied, 'Oh, yes, you never powdered.'[13]

Idina, it was clear, was never going to meld with the other girls around her. However, she was now armed with a fast wit and ability to turn every head in the room. If she could not join them, she would beat them: she would take the few advantages nature had given her and make herself the most attractive young woman in town.[14]

And, by 1911, when Krishnamurti arrived at Old Lodge, Idina, who turned eighteen in February that year, was trying to do just

that. The wave of change of the Edwardian age had begun, along with its political causes, a fashion for female independence. The age of chaperones had more or less vanished. Young women whose fathers could afford to keep them in style stayed single. They travelled the world, attended lectures and political meetings, bought motor cars, hung around in groups, smoked and stayed out late at friends' houses, listening to the gramophone. And they had boyfriends, known as dancing partners. Unmarried, they didn't dare go all the way, for fear of becoming pregnant. But that still left open a wide field of sexual behaviour, though usually limited to the back of motor taxis since they still lived with their parents in the family's London townhouse. Although for the 'Saturday-to-Monday', as Edwardian weekend house parties were known, the young could rely on the older generation's exodus to the countryside.

Nonetheless, real freedom came only with marriage. In families where there were any boys to leave money to, most of it went to them. When girls were left money, they were not usually allowed access to the capital until they married. A young woman who wanted to buy or rent her own house therefore needed a husband either so that she could access her own money or so that he could pay for it.

In Idina's case, joining the marriage market was far from straightforward. The slurry of scandals in which her parents wallowed threatened to muddy the white of her dress. Socialism, suffrage and divorce had combined to earn Muriel a reputation as a 'class traitor'.[15]

The first hurdle for Idina was practical. Muriel had been presented at Court herself but, as a divorcee, was now excluded. In February 1911 Muriel therefore took Idina to London to stay with her sister Mabelle, now the Hon. Mrs Egerton, in her house in the highly fashionable St James's Place, on the very edge of Green Park. Muriel adhered to what traditions she could. Mabelle presented Idina at Court and then co-hosted with Muriel 'a small dance'[16] for

her at the Ritz. Mother and daughter then returned to London for the start of the Season at the beginning of May. Muriel put an announcement in *The Times*: 'Muriel, Countess De La Warr and Lady Idina Sackville have arrived at 11, St. James's Place,'[17] indicating to where invitations could be sent. Idina was 'out'.

So were the scandals. Krishnamurti's arrival in England, and Leadbetter's departure with the police in hot pursuit, had received a large amount of press attention. In addition to this, as the summer heat rose to unprecedented levels, Britain was fractured with strikes, and Muriel and George Lansbury were supporting them.

The spring and summer of 1911 were long and baking hot. As temperatures rose to 100 degrees, Idina's fellow debutantes were fully absorbed by the trial of staying cool as they attended the round of dances varying from Idina's small do to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's ball for several hundred in rib-crushing and stifling corsets.

Idina, however, breezed through both the heat and the dictates of fashion. She quickly worked out what suited her and how to wear it. When it came to the dances, having grown up with her male cousins as almost her only friends at home, she was very much at ease with the opposite sex. And sex, or rather sex appeal, was what Idina, both confident yet longing to be reassured, and thus willing to go a little further towards extremes than anyone else, promised from every pore.

Where convention demanded cool reserve, Idina threw herself into the rounds of debutantes' *bals blancs* with abandon. Nobody forgot a dance with her – her dance partners were still recounting those moments to her children thirty years later, during the Second World War.[18] Even in the United States, Idina was followed by the newspapers, being pictured alongside extraordinary combinations of the Prime Minister, Asquith's, daughter and the leading actresses and showgirls of the day[19] and being written up in print as far away as the *Oakland Tribune* as 'very accomplished' and 'a great favorite of Society'.[20]

But Idina perhaps pushed boundaries a little too far. The constant company of Satan, the black Pekinese tucked under her arm, may have been too much for many. And, dazzling as she was, Idina was nonetheless not entirely proper. And whereas British society has always adored the eccentrics whose differences celebrate the values they cherish, it has been less keen on those who might upset the extremely comfortable order of things. Idina was of the latter.

Even during her first season in London, this showed through. The desire for political change had been very firmly ingrained in Idina's upbringing. In between debutante dances she returned to Old Lodge and its maelstrom of ideas and, in July 1911, she co-founded the East Grinstead Women's Suffrage Society. And, by the end of the Season, although she had been a 'success' as a debutante, she was as yet not engaged to be married.

Rather than let her daughter appear second-hand by doing the same social round again the following year, Muriel packed Idina off to the United States. On 30 August 1911 Idina sailed to New York on the *Olympic*, released by the strikers.

It was a glittering voyage. Every cabin was full[21] and the passengers' fortunes were as vast as the new ship aboard which they were sliding across the Atlantic. Among them was a Miss Emilie Grigsby, who presented $800,000 of extravagantly set diamonds, rubies and pearls to the US customs officials. Amid the storm of publicity that Miss Grigsby's arrival in New York caused, one of the other passengers, Mr Carlisle, the chairman of Harland & Wolff, the shipbuilders who had constructed the *Olympic*, saw fit to boast that 'the *Titanic*, a sister of the *Olympic*, would be ready next March to enter the Atlantic trade'.[22]

Idina was accompanying a middle-aged couple, both of whom were scions of American industrial dynasties. William Church Osborn, who was heavily involved in New York politics, was the son of railroad entrepreneur William Henry Osborn, and both the grandson of another railman, Jonathan Sturges, and the nephew of

the banker J. P. Morgan. Osborn's wife had been born Alice Dodge and her grandfather had been founder of the Phelps Dodge mining fortune. This had made enough money for one of the partners' widows to leave the staggering sum of over $36 million in her will.[23] Alice's sister, Mary, who never married, was one of Muriel's closest friends and the greatest donor to all her causes.

The Osborns were travelling with three of their four children: their two younger sons, Earl and William, and their daughter Aileen, who was a few months older than Idina. Nonetheless, when Idina arrived in New York she went to stay with Aileen's twenty-year-old cousin, Josephine Osborn.

Josephine had even more glamorous family connections than her cousin Aileen. Her father, Henry Fairfield Osborn, was William's brother but, rather than devote himself to politics, he had become an anthropaleontologist and was now President of the American Museum of Natural History. However, while Josephine's father absorbed himself in the past, her mother, Lucretia, who was the sister-in-law of another of J. P. Morgan's nephews, used her 'spacious'[24] house on Madison Avenue to host a series of balls for family members.[25]

Josephine's own coming-out dance had been held at home two days before Christmas 1908. Mother and daughter, in pink chiffon and white satin, 'received their guests in the ballroom entrance' at 11 p.m. The orchestra had been large enough to play 'throughout the affair', the 'dining and other rooms' took thirty tables at which each one of the three hundred guests had been seated for a 2 a.m. supper. Then the dancing resumed. The guests included Kermit and Ethel Roosevelt, children of the former President.[26]

Lucretia Osborn's coming-out dance for her niece Aileen, just a few months before Idina had arrived, had been more modest. It was 'small and informal,' and the guests, who had 'included a number of young married people and many of the debutantes', had been few enough to be fed in just three large dinner parties before arriving to dance at 10.30.[27] However, at the end of the

autumn in which Idina arrived, her hostess threw a debutantes' dance for another niece, Josephine's cousin Sarah Spencer Morgan, the granddaughter of J. P. Morgan's eponymous sister.

This dance, like Josephine's, was held just before Christmas and the house was an explosion of seasonal decoration, 'the staircase being festooned with greens and holly. The library and dining-hall . . . were decorated with cut flowers in vases, including hyacinths, carnations, lilies of the valley and American Beauty roses. The ceilings were hung with evergreen, broken by poinsettias.'[28] The mass of red and green and polished wood and books, along with the sense of impending occasion and limitless wealth, must have given the house almost as charmed a period atmosphere as possible. Still, this, for the Fairfield Osborns, was a small dance, for the beautifully decorated library and dining-hall were where the dancing was. The ballroom wasn't even needed.

Nonetheless, it was certainly an exciting evening for Idina. By now she had been in the city for almost four months, becoming 'not unknown as a visitor in New York', as the *Washington Post* would later write.[29] It was long enough to collect a chain of admirers and this dance, at the house in which she was resident, was one to which she could ensure every single one was invited.

Idina remained in the United States for a year, careering up and down the East Coast, turning heads and adding 'Newport and in the Berkshires'[30] to the list of places in which she was 'not unknown'. Twelve months later she came back to England, and as the spring of 1913 rolled in, she returned to London. But just as the round of parties started, almost as if they no longer presented a challenge, Idina turned back to one of her other interests: the campaign for Votes for Women.

The previous eighteen months of campaigning had seen a wave of violence by militant suffragettes who were committed to realising female suffrage by any means. They had smashed windows, burnt pillar boxes and chained themselves to prominent statues with such frequency that the protests started to disrupt

everyday life in the capital. In February 1913 they had even firebombed the house of David Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

In trying to control the protests, the Government had been facing the additional problem that many of the suffragettes, once imprisoned, were hunger-striking. Once a prisoner neared death she had to be released. In the spring of 1913 the Government passed a bill colloquially and pejoratively known as the 'Cat and Mouse Act'. This allowed it to release prisoners about to die and to reincarcerate them once they had recovered. The suffragettes' protests increased in fury at this until, on 4 June 1913, Emily Wilding Davison dashed out in front of King George V's horse in the Derby. She was crushed, and three days later died.

Idina was not a militant suffragette. Instead her East Grinstead organisation was a signed-up branch of the NUWSS (National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies), which believed that women's suffrage should be achieved by peaceful means. NUWSS members called themselves 'constitutionalists' or 'suffragists'. Davison's death shook them into making a mark for peaceful persuasion. They instigated a six-week campaign of local rallies around the countryside which would culminate in a mass demonstration in Hyde Park at the end of July.

The East Grinstead Women's Suffrage Society organised its own local rally, set for 23 July, just three days before the final rally of its one hundred thousand supporters in Hyde Park. In the early evening, ten protesters marched off, a silk banner billowing overhead. But when they turned into East Grinstead's High Street they met a mob of fifteen hundred anti-suffragists marching against them, hurling 'pieces of turf, a few ripe tomatoes and highly-seasoned eggs', reported the *East Grinstead Observer*.[31]

The first house the suffragists sheltered in was charged by the mob and its front door slowly and steadily bent until it cracked. The police dragged the women out the back to the branch's headquarters at the top of the Dorset Arms pub, where they were trapped for

several hours, listening to the crowd outside continuing to bay for their blood.

It was the only violent outburst in the entire six-week campaign, but Idina and her mother's involvement in the group was enough to confirm society's unfavourable opinion of Idina.

Nonetheless three months after this, she was engaged to be married – to one of the most eligible bachelors in Britain. He was a man with whom she would fall very deeply in love.