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No Angel

The Spoils of Time: 1

Written by Penny Vincenzi

Published by Headline Review

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Penny Vincenzi

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The Main Characters

LONDON
Oliver Lytton, *head of Lyttons publishing house*
Lady Celia Lytton, *his wife and senior editor*
Giles *and twins* Venetia *and* Adèle, *their children*
Margaret (LM) Lytton, *Oliver's elder sister and business manager*
Jago Ford, *LM's lover and father of her son* Jay
Jack Lytton, *Oliver's young soldier brother*
Lily Fortescue, *an actress friend of Jack's*
Sylvia Miller, *Lambeth mother of seven befriended by Lady Celia*
Barty Miller, *her daughter, living with the Lyttons*
Sylvia's eldest son Billy
Sebastian Brooke, *bestselling author edited by Lady Celia*
Guy Worsley, *novelist discovered by Oliver*
Gordon Robinson, *a solicitor friend of LM's*

COUNTRY
Lord Beckenham, *Celia's father*
Lady Beckenham, *her mother*
Caroline Masterson, *Celia's sister, based in Scotland*

NEW YORK
Robert Lytton, *Oliver's older brother, a successful property developer*
Jeanette Elliott, *wealthy widow of a banker, Robert's wife*
Laurence *and* Jamie Elliott, *her sons*
Maud Lytton, *Robert and Jeanette's daughter*
John Brewer, *Robert's partner*
Felicity, *his wife, a poet published by Lyttons, and* Kyle, *their son*

Part One
1904–1914

Chapter 1

Celia stood at the altar, smiling into the face of her bridegroom and wondered if she was about to test his vow to cherish her in sickness and in health rather sooner than he might have imagined. She really did feel as if she was going to vomit: there and then, in front of the congregation, the vicar, the choir. This was truly the stuff of which nightmares were made. She closed her eyes briefly, took a very deep breath, swallowed; heard dimly through her swimmy clammy nausea the vicar saying, 'I now pronounce you man and wife', and somehow the fact that she had done it, managed this marriage, managed this day, that she was married to Oliver Lytton, whom she loved so much, and that no one could change anything now, made her feel better. She saw Oliver's eyes on her, tender, but slightly anxious, having observed her faintness, and she managed to smile again before sinking gratefully on to her knees for the blessing.

Not an ideal condition for a bride to be in, almost three months' pregnant; but then if she hadn't been pregnant, her father would never have allowed her to marry Oliver anyway. It had been a fairly drastic measure; but it had worked. As she had known it would. And it had certainly been fun: she had enjoyed becoming pregnant a lot.

The blessing was over now; they were being ushered into the vestry to sign the register. She felt Oliver's hand taking hers, and glanced over her shoulder at the group following them. There were her parents, her father fiercely stern, the old hypocrite: she'd grown up seeing pretty housemaid after pretty housemaid banished from the house, her mother, staunchly smiling, Oliver's frail old father, leaning on his cane supported by his sister Margaret, and just behind them, Oliver's two brothers, Robert rather stiff and formal and slightly portly, Jack, the youngest, absurdly handsome, with his brilliant blue

eyes restlessly exploring the congregation for any pretty faces. Beyond them were the guests, admittedly rather few, just very close friends and family, and the people from the village and the estate, who of course wouldn't have missed her being married for anything. She knew that in some ways her mother minded about that more than about anything else really, that it wasn't a huge wedding like her sister Caroline's, with three hundred guests at St Margaret's Westminster, but a quiet affair in the village church. Well, she didn't mind. She didn't mind in the very least. She had married Oliver: she had got her way.

'Of course you can't marry him,' her mother had said, 'he has no money, no position, no house even, your father won't hear of it.'

Her father did hear about it, about her wish to marry Oliver, because she made him listen; but he reiterated everything her mother had said.

'Ridiculous. Throwing your life away. You want to marry properly, Celia, into your own class, someone who can keep you and support you in a reasonable way.'

She said she did not want to marry properly, she wanted to marry Oliver, because she loved him; that he had a brilliant future, that his father owned a successful publishing house in London which would be his one day.

'Successful, nonsense,' her father said, 'if it was successful he wouldn't be living in Hampstead, would he? With nowhere in the country. No, darling,' for he adored her, his youngest, a late flower in his life, 'you find someone suitable and you can get married straight away. That's what you really want, I know, a home and husband and babies; it's natural, I wouldn't dream of stopping you. But it's got to be someone who's right for you. This fellow can't even ride a horse.'

Things had got much worse after that; she had shouted, raged, sworn she would never marry anyone else, and they had shouted and raged back at her, telling her she was being ridiculous, that she had no idea what she was talking about, that she clearly had no idea what marriage was about, that it was a serious matter, a considerable undertaking, not some absurd notion about love.

'Very overrated, love,' her mother said briskly, 'doesn't last,

Celia, not what you're talking about. And when it's gone, you need other things, believe me. Like a decent home to bring up your children in. Marriage is a business and it works best when both parties see it that way.'

Celia was just eighteen years old when she met Oliver Lytton: she had looked at him across the room at a luncheon party in London given by a rather bohemian friend of her sister's and fallen helplessly in love with him, even before they had spoken a single word. Afterwards, trying to analyse that sensation, to explain it to herself, she could only feel she had been invaded by an intense emotion, taken hold of, shaken by it; she felt immediately changed, the focus of her life suddenly found. It was primarily an emotional reaction to him, a desire to be with him, close to him in every way, not mere physical attraction which she had experienced to some degree before; he was quite extraordinarily handsome, of course, tall and rather serious, indeed almost solemn-looking, with fair hair, blue eyes, and a glorious smile that entirely changed his face, bringing to it not just a softness, but a merriment, a sense of great *joie de vivre*.

But he was more than handsome, he was charming, beautifully mannered, clearly very intelligent, with a great deal more to talk about than most of the young men she had met. Indeed he talked about things she had never heard a young man speak of before, of books and literature, of plays and art exhibitions. He asked her if she had been to Florence and Paris and when she said she had, asked her then which galleries she had most enjoyed and admired. He also – which she found more engaging than any of the rest – had a way of treating her as if she were as clever and as well-read as he. Celia, who was of a generation and class of girls educated at home by governesses, was entirely charmed by this. She had been brought up in the only way her parents knew and recognised: to marry someone from her own social class, and to lead a life exactly the same as her mother's, raising a family and running a household. From the moment she set eyes on Oliver Lytton, she knew this was not what she wanted.

She was the youngest daughter of a very old and socially impeccable family. The Beckenhams dated back to the sixteenth century, as her mother, the Countess of Beckenham, was fond

of telling everyone; the family had a glorious and quite grand seventeenth-century house and estate called Ashingham in Buckinghamshire, not far from Beaconsfield, and a very beautiful town house in Clarges Street, Mayfair. They were extremely rich and concerned only with running their estate, conserving their assets, and enjoying what was mostly a country life. Lord Beckenham ran the home farm, hunted and shot a great deal in the winter, and fished in the summer, Lady Beckenham socialised both in London and the country, rode, played cards, organised her staff, and – rather more reluctantly – saw to the upkeep of her extensive wardrobe. Books, like pictures, were things which covered the Beckenham walls and were appreciated for their value rather more than for their content; talk at their dinner table centred around their own lives, rather than around abstract matters such as art, literature and philosophy.

Confronted by a daughter who professed herself – after only three months' short acquaintance – to be in love with someone who, by their standards, was not only a pauper, but almost as unfamiliar to them as a Zulu warrior, they were genuinely appalled and anxious for her.

Celia could see that they were entirely serious in their opposition; she supposed she could marry Oliver when she was twenty-one, but that was unimaginably far off, three years away. And so, staring into the darkness through her bedroom window late one night, her eyes sore with weeping, wondering what on earth she could do, she had suddenly found it: the solution. The breathtakingly, dazzlingly simple solution. She would become pregnant and then they would *have* to let her marry him. The more she thought about it, the more sensible it seemed. The only alternative was running away; but Oliver had rejected that sweetly but firmly.

'It would cause too much anxiety, hurt too many people, my family as well as yours. I don't want us to build our life together on other people's unhappiness.'

His gentleness was only one of the many things she loved about him.

Just the same, she thought that night, he would not accede to this plan too easily. He would argue that pregnancy would also cause great distress; he would not see that they deserved it, her blind, insensitive,

hypocritical parents: hardly models of marital virtue themselves, her father with the housemaids, her mother with her lover of many years. Her sister Caroline had told her about him, the year before, at her own coming out ball at Ashingham. Caroline had had too much champagne and was standing with Celia between dances, looking across at their parents talking animatedly to one another. Celia had said impulsively how sweet it was that they were still so happy together, in spite of the housemaids, and Caroline had said that if they were, much of the credit should go to George Paget. George Paget and his rather plain wife, Vera, were old family friends; pressed to explain precisely what she meant, Caroline said that George had been her mother's lover for over ten years. Half shocked, half fascinated, Celia begged to be told more, but Caroline laughed at her for being so innocent and launched herself onto the dance floor with her husband's best friend. But next day she had relented, remorseful at disillusioning her little sister, said she mustn't worry about it, that it wasn't important.

'Mama will always keep the rules.'

'What rules?' Celia said.

'Society's rules,' said Caroline, patiently reassuring. 'Discretion, manners, those sorts of things. She would never leave Papa. To them marriage is unshakable. What they do, what all society does, is make marriage more pleasant, more interesting. Stronger, actually, I would say.'

'And – would – would you make your marriage more pleasant in that way?' Celia asked and Caroline laughed and said that at the moment, hers was fairly pleasant anyway.

'But yes, I suppose I would. If Arthur became dull, or found pleasure of his own elsewhere. Don't look so shocked, Celia, you really are an innocent aren't you? I heard it said the other day that Mrs Keppel, you know, the King's mistress, has turned adultery into an art form. That seems quite a nice achievement to me.'

Celia had still felt shocked, despite the reassurance. When she got married, she knew it would be for love and for life.

So – Oliver must not realise the full extent of her plan. She knew exactly how one became pregnant; her mother had instructed her with great and unusual forthrightness on the subject when Celia had

her first menstrual period, and besides, she had grown up in the country, she had seen sheep and even horses copulating, had been present at the birth of lambs, and had spent all of one night in the sweet steamy stench of the stables with her father and his groom, as her father's favourite mare dropped her foal. She had no doubt that she would be able to persuade Oliver into making love to her; as well as being absurdly romantic, constantly sending her poems, flowers, love letters pages long, he was passionately affectionate with her, his kisses far from chaste, intensely arousing – to them both.

Celia had rather more freedom than many girls of her age. Having raised six children, her mother had become weary of the task, and was in any case extremely busy and inclined to leave Celia to her own affairs. When Oliver came for the weekend at Ashingham, invited to join one of the Beckenham house parties as Celia's guest, they were able during the day (Oliver being quite unable to join in any sporting activities) to roam the grounds on their own and after dinner to sit in the library on their own, talking. The roaming and talking had led to a great deal of kissing; Celia had found she quite literally could not have enough of it, and was yearning for more – as, quite plainly, was Oliver.

She had not experienced passion before, either in herself or any of the young men she had met; but she found she could recognise it very easily now. As easily as she had been able to recognise love. He had been very respectful of her virtue, naturally, but she was absolutely confident that she could persuade him to take their physical relationship forwards without any difficulty whatsoever. Of course he would be anxious, not only that they would be found out, but that she would become pregnant. But she could reassure him about that, tell him some lie – she wasn't sure what; she believed there were times in the month when you were supposed not to be able to become pregnant, she had read it in some book in her mother's room – and then when it happened – well, there would be nothing more to worry about.

She was very precise in her plans: she pretended to have acquiesced to her parents' views, to have come to see that Oliver was not the right man for her – although not too swiftly, lest she arouse their suspicion – and stayed at home dutifully for several weeks, while

writing to Oliver every day. Then she went to London to stay with Caroline for a few days, ostensibly to do some shopping, and it had all been absurdly easy. Caroline had discovered that she was pregnant herself, and was wretchedly sick, totally uninterested in what her younger sister was doing, and unwilling as well as unable to chaperone her. Absences of two or three hours while Celia was officially shopping, seeing dressmakers, having fittings for the London Season, but actually discovering the raptures of being in bed with her lover, went almost unnoticed.

Celia had been right, Oliver was initially resistant to the risks of making love to her; but a mixture of emotional blackmail and a determined onslaught on his senses worked quite quickly. She would meet him at the big house in Hampstead, where he lived with his father, in the early afternoon; his father still spent every day at the publishing house, and it was easy for Oliver to pretend to be lunching with authors, or visiting artists' studios. They would go upstairs to Oliver's room, a big, light book-lined affair with huge windows on the first floor, overlooking the Heath, and spend the next hour or so in the rather narrow almost lumpy bed that swiftly became paradise for Celia. They found a physical delight in each other almost at once; Oliver was not exactly experienced, indeed his own knowledge had been gained at the hands of a couple of chorus girls introduced by his best friend at Oxford, but it was sufficient to guide him through Celia's initiation. She lay there, that first time, braced for discomfort, for pain even, looking at Oliver as he took her in his arms, promising to be very careful, and found herself discovering almost at once an acute capacity for sexual pleasure.

'It was wonderful, so wonderful,' she said, lying back, breathing hard, drenched with sweat, smiling at Oliver. 'I couldn't believe it, it was like – like a great tangle somewhere deep inside me being – being sorted out.'

He kissed her, surprised at her pleasure and at his power to grant it to her; then he poured them both a glass of champagne from the rather warm bottle he had smuggled up from his father's cellar and they lay there for an hour telling each other how much they loved one another, before he had to return to the offices of the Lytton Publishing House in Paternoster Row, and she to her sister's house in

Kensington (stopping off first to collect a bagful of fabric samples from Woollands of Knightsbridge). Two days later, they had another tryst and two days after that yet another; then she returned home, her head filled with happy memories, her heart with more love than ever before.

She calculated (having studied the subject carefully) that she was quite likely to have become pregnant that week, but she was disappointed; it took two more visits to London before her third period most wonderfully failed to arrive and, even more wonderfully, she began to feel sick.

After that there was, despite her happiness, dreadful retribution. She faced her parents with great courage and determination, and had to face Oliver's fear and shock as well. That was almost worse; he found himself confronting not only her condition, but a demonstration of her formidable will and what he was forced to recognise as her capacity for deceit. He had wanted to use contraceptives after the first time, but she had refused, saying they hurt her, that there was no need, she had taken advice on the subject, had talked convincingly of a douche (which she did not even possess). Oliver found her behaviour very difficult to come to terms with.

Nevertheless, through it all, through the rows, the raging, the threats of disinheritance, of banishment, of surgical intervention in the pregnancy, all of which she knew were not to be taken seriously, through the plans to which her parents finally agreed for a wedding ('small, very small, the fewer people hear of it the better,' Lady Beckenham had said), through Oliver's distress and the doubt in his eyes that came close to mistrust, through her own increasing physical wretchedness, through all these things she was happy. For the rest of her life she was to remember those afternoons in the small uncomfortable bed, in the big, rather cold room, filled from floor to ceiling with books, when she soared into orgasm, and then lay in Oliver's arms, listening to him talk not only of his love for her and of their life together, but also of his hopes and plans for his own future within Lyttons. He told her of a wonderful new kingdom, a seemingly magical place where books were created; stories told or talked about, ideas mooted and discussed, then turned to pages within covers, authors commissioned, illustrators briefed. She felt an immediate

understanding and something close to affinity with it all. Thus, sex and work became permanently joined together in her heart; and were to remain so for the rest of her life.

Her father was very good at the wedding; she had to admit that. Having finally agreed to it, declared himself beaten, he had gone into it with whole-hearted generosity; he instructed the staff to prepare a lavish wedding breakfast, made a splendid speech, produced an enormous amount of champagne, and finally disappeared, ostensibly to sleep but probably, as Celia observed to Caroline, to rendezvous with the latest parlourmaid.

Lady Beckenham had behaved rather less well; she was icily courteous to the Lyttons, sat stony-faced through the speeches – particularly the one made by Oliver's best man and older brother, Robert, who had recently emigrated to New York for a career on Wall Street – commenting in a hissing whisper to Caroline that she considered both him and it rather common. She ignored Jack altogether, despite all his efforts to be charming and friendly to her, and looked coldly on as he flirted tirelessly with every pretty girl in the room. She spoke insultingly briefly to old Mr Edgar Lytton, who was struggling to cope with what he clearly regarded as a painful and difficult situation, and to Oliver hardly at all. Finally she pointedly settled herself down for a long time with her two eldest sons and their wives, making it plain that was where she felt her proper place to be.

But to most of the guests, and certainly to anyone looking at the official photographs afterwards, of Celia in the exquisite lace dress her father had been unable to deny her, with the Beckenham tiara in her gleaming dark hair, and Oliver so extremely handsome by her side, it was hard to believe that the day had been anything but exceptionally happy.

The young couple honeymooned very briefly – as befitted their income and Celia's rather fragile physical condition. At three months, she was at the peak of her pregnant misery, constantly sick, and plagued with headaches; so wretched in fact, that she was almost unable to enjoy her wedding night. They went to Bath for a week, and while they were there she suddenly began to recover, so that by the time they reached London again she felt almost well, had lost her pallor and regained her energy. It was just as well. Again greatly to his

credit, Lord Beckenham had bought the young couple a house as a wedding present; it was in Cheyne Walk – he had insisted that it was not to be in Hampstead – charming, large, but in an appalling state of repair.

For the first few months of her marriage, indeed until the birth of the baby the following March, Celia was entirely occupied with restoration and refurbishment. Rapturously happy, she transformed it into something quite gloriously original. At a time when walls were heavily coloured, hangings dark, lamps dim, Celia's house was a brilliant statement of light, somehow a reflection of the river which she loved. There were white-painted walls, curtains in bright blues and golds, pale wooden floors, and several of the new impressionist-style paintings instead of the heavy portraits and landscapes so fashionable then.

Having worked on her house all day, she would wait impatiently for Oliver's return, and they would often dine in the morning room on the first floor, with its lovely view of the river, while she pressed him for every detail of his day.

Oliver was only able to afford the most modest staff: a very overworked cook-general and the promise of a nursemaid when the baby came, so she often made supper and served it herself, which gave her great pleasure. Quite often she insisted he brought his father home for supper. She adored Edgar Lytton; he had Oliver's gentle courtesy, his charm, his deep poetic voice. He had also, clearly, once had the same golden looks. He was an old man now, seventy-five years old, for Oliver and Jack had been late children, the result of a second marriage. His wife had left him a year after Jack was born. But he still worked all day at Lyttons, with Oliver and the daunting Margaret, still showing the flair and business skill which had brought the publishing house its admittedly rather modest success – and said it was there that he wished to die.

'I hope I shall be found in my office, entirely penned in by books,' he said to her more than once, and Celia would kiss him fondly and tell him she hoped nothing of the sort would happen for a very long time.

He took her to the Lytton building in Paternoster Row at her own insistence, and was surprised and charmed by her genuine interest in

it and in his stories of how he had launched the company. Lyttons was now rising to join some of the great names in London publishing – Macmillan, Constable, Dent, John Murray – but its beginnings had been extremely humble and its success entirely due to Edgar's talents and foresight.

He had made a marriage in 1856, which was both happy and fortunate, to a Miss Margaret Jackson. Margaret's father, George, owned a bookbinding shop that was also a printing works, and when his ambitious young son-in-law professed an interest in printing a set of poetry books to add to the educational pamphlets he was already doing well with, George encouraged him. These were followed by a history of England and by the time George died in 1860, the publishing house of Lytton-Jackson had been launched. Its greatest success was based on Margaret's suggestion for a series of books to be published in serial form, after the style of Mr Dickens. A new and brilliant young writer was commissioned to write fifty-two weekly instalments of *The Heatherleigh Chronicles*, the story of a small town in the West Country, not unlike Mr Trollope's *Chronicles of Barsetshire*. These made a great deal of money. The next piece of publishing inspiration was a set of school primers and then an exquisitely printed and illustrated set of Greek and Roman legends. The first editions of those books were extremely valuable; three of the five volumes owned by Lyttons were kept in the company safe.

Margaret, however, died in 1875, having borne Edgar Robert and Little Margaret. Broken-hearted and lonely, Edgar then made a disastrous second marriage to Henrietta James in 1879. She was a silly, vapid woman and ran away with an actor five years later, leaving behind two sons Oliver and Jack. Her defection was almost a relief to Edgar, and this intrigued Celia considerably.

'Such a sad story,' she said when Oliver told her, 'but I'm so glad he did marry her, otherwise I wouldn't have you now.'

Little Margaret showed a great flair for publishing from her earliest years; it was considered inevitable that she should follow her father into the firm. In an age where women had no rights, apart from those granted them by their husbands, and few were educated beyond the age of fifteen or so, she was highly unusual not only in winning a place at London University to read English, an almost unimaginable

achievement, but also in holding a highly complex and difficult job, working alongside men as their undisputed equal. Robert, on the other hand, showed no interest in publishing at all, and became a banker, sailing for America and the heady delights of Wall Street in 1900.

But Oliver, like Margaret, seemed to have printing ink in his blood. By the time he was fifteen, he was working at Lyttons in his school holidays – his father was proud to have been able to send him to Winchester – and at the age of twenty-two, down from Oxford with a first in English, he moved into what was known as the second office, as Edgar's undisputed heir. If LM, as Little Margaret was now called (a most unsuitable name for a girl over six feet tall, with a resounding voice and an imposing manner), resented this, she never said so or even hinted at it; she was in any case paid exactly the same salary as Oliver, and her influence was as broad as his. It was a highly successful partnership; LM's talents were for the business side of publishing and Oliver's for the creative.

As for Jack, he showed little interest in anything except pretty girls and certainly in nothing remotely intellectual; the army had been suggested as a career by his housemaster at Wellington, who had said he was, if nothing else, brave and extremely popular.

Celia loved Jack; they were the same age, and like her, he was a youngest child.

'Both of us spoilt babies, and isn't it nice?' he said to her once.

He was extremely charming, less serious than Oliver, amusing, irresponsible, always full of fun. Oliver doted on him, but at the same time worried about his tendency to play his way through life.

'Oliver, he's only nineteen,' Celia said, 'not an old married man like you.'

However Jack had slightly redeemed himself in the family's eyes recently; having joined the army, he had been commissioned into the 12th Royal Lancers and seemed set for a successful career. His commanding officer told Edgar that Jack appeared to have that rare combination of qualities so essential to good soldiering which made him popular both with his men and his fellow officers. It was a long way from the bookish world of his family, but it seemed to suit him.

Celia also invited LM frequently to the house and sought her

friendship. Despite her slightly daunting personality, Celia had liked her immediately. LM was almost fearsomely clever and articulate, could demolish anyone in argument, and appeared rather serious, but she was actually very good company, had a slightly quirky sense of humour and an intensely curious and ingenious mind. No one seemed to know much about her; she lived on her own, and kept her own counsel. Although she dressed rather severely, and wore her dark hair pulled starkly back, she had style and something that came close to glamour; in a crowd, she attracted attention, and men, almost to their surprise, found her attractive and even sexually disturbing.

She was very kind to Celia, if slightly sternly so, and appeared to like her, even inviting her opinion on the latest books from time to time; it also helped Celia in those early days, intellectually in awe of the family as she was, that LM clearly regarded Oliver very much as a younger brother.

'Don't be ridiculous, Oliver,' she would say, or, 'Oliver, I sometimes wonder if you have the slightest idea what you are talking about,' and would even occasionally catch Celia's eye and wink at her. She was already, Celia felt, a most valuable friend.

Giles was born in March 1905. To Celia's total astonishment, her mother (who had refused to have anything to do either with her or the house until then) arrived two days before the birth, with a large suitcase and one of the maids from Ashingham. She not only stayed with Celia throughout her labour but then remained – an immense comfort and help to her – for a month afterwards. Although she neither explained nor apologised for her earlier behaviour, Celia recognised the gesture for what it was, and accepted it gratefully.

Celia was in fact deeply shocked by the experience of childbirth. Although she bore it with stoicism, and not a sound reached Oliver's ears as he paced the house in an agony of anxiety, she suffered very much. It was a long labour, although straightforward. She felt the first contraction at dawn on one day and was not delivered of Giles until a brilliantly bloody sunset flooded the river the following evening. It was not even the pain which distressed her, nor the exhaustion, so much as the brutality of the whole procedure, the humiliation and what appeared to be the wrenching apart of her entire body. She lay

in their bed afterwards, exhausted and exsanguinite, holding Giles in arms so weak she feared she would drop him, wondering why she felt so little for him. She had expected some sort of rapture, an echo of the flood of love which she had felt for Oliver, and found only a rather dull relief that the pain had stopped. He was an ugly baby, and a large one – eight pounds – and he continued to wail for most of the rest of the night. Celia felt he could at least have rewarded her with a smile, or a nuzzle of his surprisingly dark head. When she told her mother this, Lady Beckenham snorted and said there was nothing on God's earth as unrewarding as the human baby.

'Or so ugly. You think of foals, lambs, puppies even, all much prettier, and a lot more interesting.'

Celia had decided – having read a great many rather modern books on the subject – to breast-feed him, but he was a finicky feeder and she found trying to thrust an agonisingly tender nipple into his ungrateful mouth so unpleasant that she handed him over with great relief to the nursemaid after two days. At least that way she got some sleep.

'Very sensible,' Lady Beckenham said. 'So common, really, breast-feeding, the sort of thing the tenants do.'

But if Giles was something of a disappointment to Celia, he gave great pleasure to his father. Oliver would spend literally hours holding him, jiggling him on his knee, studying his face for family resemblances and even, to the nursemaid's horror, giving him the occasional bottle.

The arrival of Giles prompted a truce between Oliver and Lady Beckenham; she was a naturally talkative woman and not prepared to sit with him in silence at mealtimes during Celia's lying in. Moreover he had managed to find a topic on which he could ask her advice. Lyttons were to publish a book about the great houses of England, and since his mother-in-law had personally stayed in at least half of them, she was able to give him a great deal of information.

She had photographs sent from Ashingham of the shooting parties which she had attended and given. Oliver looked at them, at the men in their tweed suits, greatcoats and brogues, at the women in ankle-length gowns, with large hats on their heads, and realised the pictures encapsulated the 1900s, the decade already known as the Edwardian

era: an era when the rich lived lavishly and with extraordinary self-indulgence. At the great houses, Lady Beckenham told Oliver, tea was a full-dress meal, ladies in elaborate gowns, gentlemen in short black jackets and black ties.

'And at dinner, seven or eight courses, full evening dress, of course, with decorations.'

After dinner at Cheyne Walk one night, slightly drunk on Oliver's finest claret, she explained what she called the disposition of the bedrooms at house parties.

'One had to know who should be near whom. The card placed on each door wasn't just to let every guest know where to sleep, but to be a guide – if you follow me – for anyone else who needed that information.'

Oliver nodded courteously while Celia sat transfixed, waiting for further revelations, but they did not come. Her mother realised she was talking too much and retired to bed.

It was a measure of her warming attitude towards Oliver, that she actually offered to introduce him to a few owners of the great houses. Nevertheless she still did not invite him to call her by her first name.

'I can't think of anyone who does, except Daddy,' Celia said, 'and she calls him Beckenham, you know, even to this day.' But she did at least begin to address Oliver by name for the first time.

'I still think he is a rather odd husband for Celia,' she wrote to Lord Beckenham, 'and a very odd father, far too involved with the baby, although one has to admit he is devoted to Celia and Giles and is certainly trying to do his best for them both. He does have a certain facility for conversation, and can be quite amusing, but I worry about his political views. He expresses some sympathy for the idea of the trade unions; I suppose that is his background and can't be helped. I'm sure he will learn in time.'

Giles was christened in Chelsea Old Church with at least some of the splendour that Lady Beckenham had wanted for the wedding. He wore the Beckenham family christening robe, a one hundred-year-old mass of frothing lace, received the family silver spoon and teething ring from his maternal grandmother, a large cheque from his paternal grandfather, and numbered an earl and a countess among his five godparents.

'Is it really necessary to have so many?' Oliver had asked, and yes, Celia said, it was.

'Caroline's baby had four and I'm not going to be outdone by her at the christening as well as the wedding.'

Oliver didn't quite like to point out that it had been entirely her fault their wedding had been such a low-key affair; she had become slightly formidable since Giles's birth. Something to do, he feared, with the arrival of her mother in the household.

Edgar Lytton particularly enjoyed Giles's christening; he spent much of the time holding the baby, giving him his finger to suck, rocking him when he cried, and appeared in all the official photographs beaming with happiness. It was extremely fortunate that the day gave him so much pleasure, that it had been, as he remarked to LM later, one of the happiest of his entire life, for that night he had a heart attack and died just as dawn was breaking. Oliver was at his deathbed, summoned urgently by LM, but was never quite able to forgive himself for failing to stay and have a glass of brandy with his father after escorting him home from the christening.

'Do stay,' Edgar had said, 'I don't want the day to end.'

But Oliver had refused, said he must get back to Celia and the baby. What he was actually anxious to be getting back to was not the baby, but Celia, and moreover a Celia naked in bed, as she had whispered to him that she would be before he left Cheyne Walk. She had only just felt able to resume their lovemaking after the traumas of childbirth. To the relief of them both, it was as rapturously wonderful as ever; but it was a long time before Oliver was able to experience it without a sense of guilt and betrayal.

The other legacy of Edgar's death, delivered into Oliver's hands at the end of a hideously sad time, was the control and, indeed, the ownership of Lyttons.