The Bolter

Frances Osborne

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Extract

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The Marriages of Idina Sackville

(Myra) Idina born 26 Feb 1893, died 5 Nov 1955.

Marriage 1: (David) Euan Wallace; married 1913, divorced 1919. 2 children: David John, born 1914, died 1944 and Gerard Euan "Gee", born 1915, died 1943.

Marriage 2: Charles Gordon; married 1919, divorced 1923.

Marriage 3: Josslyn Hay 22nd Earl of Erroll; married 1923, divorced 1929. 1 child: Diana Denyse Hay "Dinan" 23rd Countess of Erroll, born 1926, died 1978.

Marriage 4: Donald Haldeman; married 1930, divorced 1938.

Marriage 5: Vincent Soltau "Lynx"; married 1939, divorced 1945.

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 bestselling 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.