

I visit my Uncle.

My father, William Greene, was the youngest but one of a family of eleven children. The name of the eldest was Benjamin. He was not only the head of the family in age but was so in position and wealth. My father was not rich and lacked the particular talents that would have made him rich.

Uncle Benjamin was short and stout with rather a florid face. He had a cheerful, confident look. Aunt Benjamin, as she was always called was very pretty. She was small but made herself look very stately in stiff silk dresses. The silk was often watered or of the richest poplin and her wide, full skirts were quite capable, I am sure, of standing up by themselves. All the same the effect of her dressing was not only stateliness but daintiness owing to the beauty of the lace of her caps, cuffs and collars. Uncle himself told the story that when Aunt accepted his proposal of marriage he leant over her to give her his first kiss. She put out her little hand and exclaimed - "Oh Benjamin ! Take care of my collar !" The little lady in silk ruled the house with a firm hand. Uncle said to me one day as we sat round the table - "I am only a guest in my own house". It was said with a smile at his wife.

Uncle Benjamin was a Director of the Bank of England for fifty years and was its Deputy Governor and Governor for two

consecutive years. When he was well on in the eighties, on behalf of the Bank of England, he undertook alone the whole business connected with the great Baring Bank crisis and brought it to a successful conclusion. He died at the age of ninety four.

Uncle lived, when in town, in Kensington Palace Gardens and his Country House was Midgham House in Berkshire.

When we were living in Bedford, as long as Aunt was alive, there was sent us every Christmas a whole chest of tea which was welcome and a parcel of dress materials. The parcel ought to have been welcome (for we were many to clothe) but I doubt if it were. The materials were very good and warm ones likely to last - perhaps too long. They were eminently suitable for tall and stout elderly ladies. Perhaps Aunt's housekeeper chose them. In spite of the dress materials being what they were I missed the excitement of the arrival of the parcel after Aunt died. There had been always a chance that there might be something pretty in it.

It was the custom of Uncle and Aunt to ask in turn one of their many nieces to stay with them. The visitor was usually asked to Midgham. When I was about fifteen or sixteen it was my turn to be invited. I am sure my wardrobe was inadequate but it could not be helped. I found the meals rather trying with two footmen and a butler in the room. Why one of the footmen at those meals had to push the chair under me when I could

have sat down and drawn it in quite easily myself I did not know. The footmen seemed to glare at my plate as if they were anxious to take it away as quickly as possible and it made me nervous. All the meals were very sumptuously laid out with much shining glass and silver. The late dinner with the fruit and wine and the yet more abundance of glass and silver - and all reflected in a polished mahogany table, - gave me a mixed feeling of pride and fright. I had only a pretty light summer dress to wear in the evening. Cousin Kate would be resplendant in a low dress. Aunt always looked fine in the morning or in the evening but Cousin Isabel kept me in countenance for she was always attired darkly and simply. My father was not only very much younger than his eldest brother but had married comparatively late in life while Benjamin married early. Isabel was about the same age as my mother. Kate looked remarkably young and wore young dresses. She might have alarmed me more than she did if she had talked to me for she had a quick, scornful manner. As she hardly addressed me she is merely a very dimly remembered figure in her evening dress but I can see her clearly in a riding habit with a shiny hat on and with a crop in her hand.

After dinner we went into the drawing room. I was given photograph albums to look at or prints of "places abroad" or coloured, doubly-taken photographs which I looked at through a stereoscope. It made the scenes, which were all of "places

abroad" much more real. I liked looking through it at the double pictures far better than at the albums for I did not know any of the people. Isabel tried to teach me chess but I was not bright enough at that game for her to go on with me for long. At nine o'clock we had family prayers and then I went to bed escorted by a maid. A bright fire lit up my bedroom and took away the gloom of the fourpost bedstead. A round shallow bath was near the fire on a blanket. There was as yet no bathroom in that luxurious house.

There were family prayers morning and evening. The butler, the two footmen and, with the exception of the cook, all the many maids marched in at a quarter to nine every morning. They sat in a row on chairs that went the length of the end wall of the dining room. The maids wore long, wide, cotton dresses either pink, blue or mauve. They were so well starched that they rustled as their wearers entered, sat down, knelt down and went out. At evening prayers the maids wore black dresses with white smart aprons and their caps more ornamental than in the morning. The cook came in then.

The breakfast depended for its cheerfulness, for me, on Uncle Benjamin. He had been working since six o'clock on his correspondence and, having his mind free from that burden, was ready to enjoy his kipper, bloater or fresh herring. He had one of these every morning at breakfast all the year round. He was so free in mind that he was able to give me a word or

two. At the end of breakfast Aunt, from behind the silver, would lean forward and say - "And what are your plans for the day?" This formula she repeated every morning in a sweet, grave voice to all at the table even turning to me. If it were fine I would say "I will draw trees in the park" if wet "I will read". Aunt would remind me that at eleven o'clock I should be taken to the Dairy. At eleven I was fetched by a maid or by Isabel or even by Uncle and taken to the Home Farm Dairy and there given a smallish tumbler full of rich cream. I liked that very much and it never made me ill.

After lunch Isabel or a maid would conduct me to my bedroom. In spite of my being at least fifteen years old I was helped off with my dress, laid on the bed and told to sleep. The maid would close the shutters and I would be left in the dark. I always have felt, and feel still, particularly active after lunch and the imprisonment was just misery to me. When the maid came in at three o'clock my cheeks would be burning from the irritation of my mind. I must dress for the inevitable and often appallingly dull afternoon drive. I sat opposite Aunt and Isabel or Uncle if he were at Midgham. I had my back to the coachman and the two fat horses. The coachman and footman wore coats of beautiful green cloth with silver buttons with our crest on them and they had cockades in their hats which I much admired. Two Dalmatian dogs, with plenty of black spots on them ran beside the carriage. The carriage was usually a

Victoria. As it was open we had heaps of fur rugs. When we passed the park gates I could, looking sideways, see something of the country. Uncle would always ask me to come with him when he got out to inspect a house that he was renovating or to visit the builder.

Sometimes he would ask me to come with him for a walk during the morning. He would then tell me about our sugar estates in St. Kitts. He had been sent to the West Indies by Grandfather when he was little more than a boy, - as, later, were all his brothers, - to manage the estates which were then worked by slave labour. He told me a good deal about the negroes. I gathered that he considered that slavery was suited to the negro people for they had such low brain capacity. I thought that this opinion was rather hard on the poor black people for they had no chance to show what they could do. I don't think I expressed my opinion to my uncle for I felt I knew so little about it. He loved St. Kitts, as also did my father, and I think he would have liked to return but he was tied **by** his business as West Indian merchant and by his work in the Bank of England.

When that long afternoon drive was over we would find waiting for us at the House a wonderful tea. The bread was home-made and delicious and it was cut into very thin slices with butter on it from the home farm. Hot buttered toast and currant scones were under covers, cakes, jam and honey were on the table. Tea, that even I knew was of the very best, was

poured out by Aunt Benjamin. The footman handing it to me put in plenty of cream for he found out that I liked it. The shining silver service that surrounded Aunt seemed to set off her beauty for she was unwrinkled. Her complexion shone pink and white and her snowy hair, rolled on each side of her face, seemed to set off that complexion. She looked, as I remember her, as if she were the embodiment of the stability and comfort of her class at that time. I am sure that she would have disbelieved in the possibility of any change in the condition of things. She seemed a sort of goddess - kind but remote.

Cousin Isabel was very kind and not remote. She was very religious and would often talk to me about religion. I did not know then the differences in Church matters but I know now that she must have been very low church. I think she would have liked to hold prayer meetings. She several times knelt with me in my room praying fervently for me. I did not mind it nor did it make me feel at all uncomfortable for I felt that she really cared for me and my future and that she was good and kind through and through. I have been told that, long ago, Isabel had been much in love with a young clergyman. She was not allowed to marry him as his circumstances were not considered good enough. It was sad for she would have made an excellent clergyman's wife.

On Sundays we all went together to the little church that Uncle Benjamin had built in the park. The family pew was very comfortable. Our Sunday dinner was not a cold one as in so

many houses. It was ample and hot. We had either a big joint of beef or saddle of mutton followed invariably by apple tart. After dinner Uncle, Aunt and cousins disposed themselves to rest or to read good books or to talk gravely on religious ~~subjects~~ subjects. No writing was done on that day and I did not draw.

During the week when it rained, I would sit on the wide window seat in the morning room often only pretending to read. Aunt and Isabel would be writing during the whole morning. The amount of time that they spent in writing notes and letters puzzled me then, I found out later that in Aunt's case it was because all her instructions for all household matters were given in writing "to avoid mistakes". Only very occasionally did the cook come to her to be interviewed. I looked out of the big window on to the park. One drizzly day I watched the drive and thought I would count how many people passed along it. Only one person came. He was a tradesman. He walked slowly through the damp, mist-laden trees. He did not guess that not one step he took was missed by a certain little young lady at the window. He did not return by the drive which disappointed me but that one figure passing by only once had been a relief to a deadly dull morning. When, long afterwards, I went to London, I decided that omnibus was infinitely superior to a "carriage and pair" and that streets were gloriously interesting compared to parks and I have never changed my opinion.