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For Francis Wyndham

and

in loving memory of my mother,

Dinah Bridge, 1920-1998

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The Cast of Characters

CHISWELL DABNEY LANGHORNE (1843-1919), known as “Chillie,” pronounced “Shilly”; patriarch of the Langhorne family; railroad entrepreneur, sometime tobacco auctioneer. Husband of Nanaire.

NANCY WITCHER KEENE LANGHORNE, “Nanaire” (1848-1903), wife of Chillie Langhorne, whom she married in 1864.

Their children in order of age:

LIZZIE (1867-1914) married Moncure Perkins in 1885; three children: Chiswell (Chillie), Nancy, Alice.

KEENE (1869-1916), married Sadie Reynolds.

IRENE (1873-1956) married the artist Charles Dana Gibson (1867-1944), creator of the Gibson Girl; two children: Irene (Babs) and Langhorne.

HARRY (1874-1907) married Genevieve Peyton.

NANCY (1879-1964) married Robert Gould Shaw II of Boston (1871-1930), divorced 1903; one child: Bobbie Shaw. Married Waldorf Astor, later 2nd Viscount Astor (1879-1952); five children: Bill, Phyllis (Wissie), David, Michael, John Jacob (Jakie).

PHYLLIS (1880-1937) married Reginald (Reggie) Brooks November 1901; two children: Peter and David (Winkie); separated in 1912, divorced 1915. Married Robert Henry Brand (Bob) in 1917; three children: Virginia, Dinah, Jim.

WILLIAM (Buck) (1886-1938) married Edith Forsyth; five children: Dabney, Phyllis, Harry, Keene, Douglas.

NORA (1889-1955) married Paul Phipps in 1909; two children: Joyce (later Grenfell) and Tommy; divorced 1931. Married Maurice Bennet Flynn (“Lefty”) in 1932.

Other main characters, in the order that their names first appear in the book:

ALICE WINN (b. 1902), younger daughter of Lizzie.

BOB BRAND (Robert Henry Brand) (1878-1963), later 1st Lord Brand of Eydon. Member of Milner Kindergarten and the Round Table, economist and banker, married Phyllis in 1917. Grandfather of the

author.

BOBBIE SHAW (Robert Gould Shaw) (1898-1970), only son of Nancy and Robert (“Bob”) Shaw Boston.

CHARLES DANA GIBSON (1867-1944), artist and illustrator, creator of the Gibson Girl, married Irene 1895.

DAVID ASTOR (b. 1912), Nancy and Waldorf’s second son, later editor of the *Observer*.

DINAH BRIDGE (1920-1998), younger daughter of Phyllis; mother of the author.

HENRY DOUGLAS PENNANT (1876-1915), the “Captain.” Soldier and trophy shooter, younger son of Baron Penrhyn.

JIM BRAND (1924-1945), only son of Phyllis and Bob Brand.

LEFTY FLYNN (1880-1950), former Yale football star, silent screen actor, and Nora’s second husband.

MICHAEL ASTOR (1916-1980), Nancy and Waldorf’s third son, author of *Tribal Feeling*.

MONCURE PERKINS (1861-1914), Lizzie’s husband, father of Nancy Lancaster and Alice Winn.

NANCY LANCASTER (1897-1994), Lizzie’s eldest daughter, gardener and decorator, who married (1) Henry Field, (2) Ronnie Tree, and (3) Juby Lancaster.

PAUL PHIPPS (1880-1953), Nora’s first husband, father of Joyce Grenfell and Tommy Phipps.

PETER BROOKS (1902-1944), eldest son of Phyllis and her first husband, Reggie Brooks.

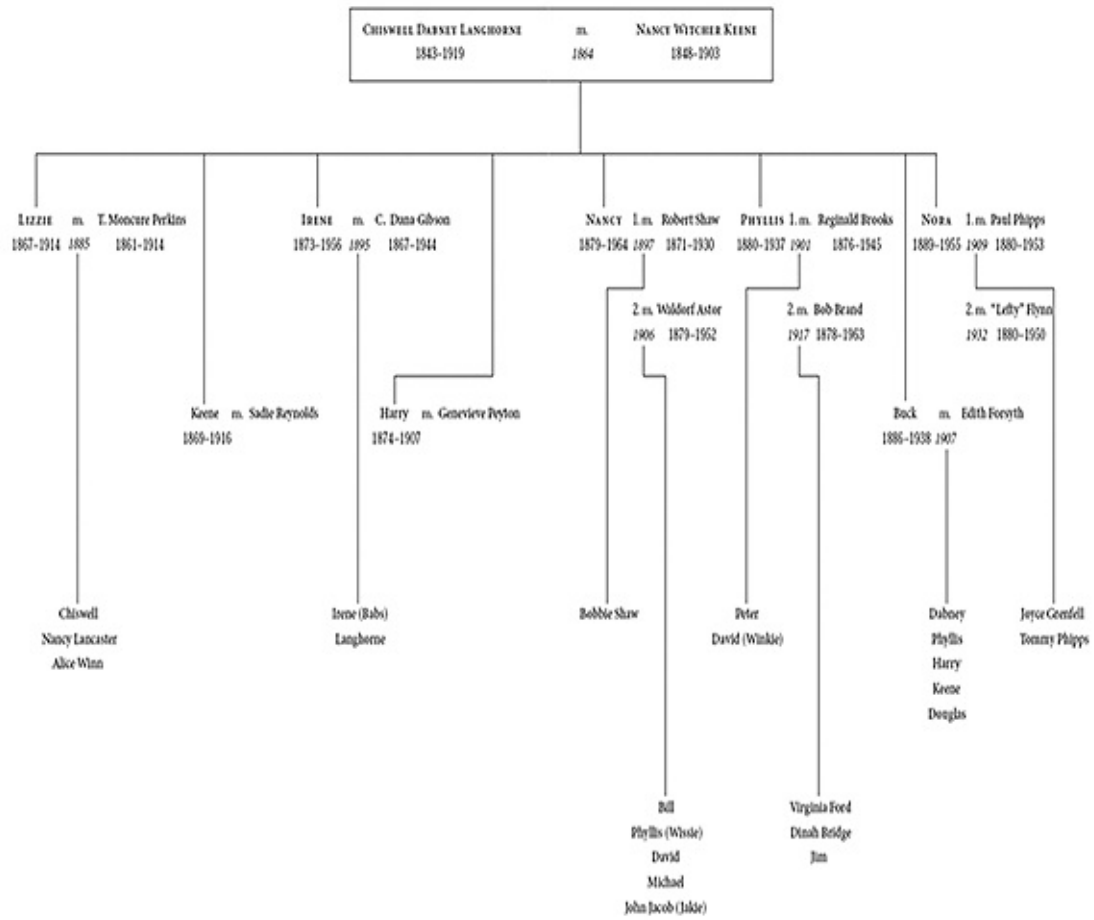
PHILIP KERR (1882-1940), later 11th Marquis of Lothian. Member of Milner’s Kindergarten and the Round Table; British Ambassador to the United States, 1939-1940.

REGGIE BROOKS (1876-1945), Phyllis’s first husband; father of Peter and Winkie Brooks.

WINKIE BROOKS (1910-1936), Phyllis’s second son with Reggie Brooks.

WISSIE (PHYLLIS) ASTOR, later Countess of Ancaster (1909-1975), only daughter of Nancy and Waldorf.

THE LANGHORNE FAMILY TREE



The Langhornes

THE LANGHORNE SISTERS of Virginia were a phenomenon in America, in the South and then in the North, long before the third of Chillie Langhorne's five daughters crossed the Atlantic and became, as Nancy Astor, in 1919, the first woman to take her seat in the British Parliament. For a decade or two after that, she was probably the most famous woman in the world. Nancy, in turn, had grown up in the shadow of her elder sister Irene. It was Irene who had first projected the sisterhood into the public imagination when she emerged in 1890 in Virginia, aged seventeen, as the last great Southern Belle. Two years later, she was the first to go north since the Civil War, to lead the debutante balls. She married, in 1895, the illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, creator of the Gibson Girl, into whose image Irene merged, thus achieving celebrity comparable now only in movie star or supermodel terms. Irene's rise to fame coincided with the moment that Chillie Langhorne, the patriarch of this family, who was born into the old Virginian squirearchy, a class ruined—like every other in Virginia—by the war, made a sudden fortune on the railroads and rescued his family from twenty-five years of poverty and hardship in the years of Reconstruction.

Langhorne installed his family at Mirador, a colonnaded house at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, where the younger children, Nancy and her closest sister, Phyllis, Nora, and Buck, grew up. For the northern admirers who came down on the train to propose to Irene and to inspect the glamorous family, the setting was important in the Langhorne sisters' myth. It was a long way from the overcrowded four-room bungalow in Danville, where most of them were born and spent their early childhood; or the dusty streets of funereal Richmond, where they had moved from one rented house to another. It was a sudden transformation—and a rare one for Virginians at the time.

Nancy and, soon afterward, Phyllis, barely out of their teens, and both beauties to rival Irene, followed their elder sister north, encouraged by their father and their mother, Nanaire, to escape the poverty trap in Richmond. Both made disastrous first marriages to idle, hard-drinking northern millionaires, and both made their retreat from this further humiliation by the Yankees, across the Atlantic to England—a place of “homecoming,” as they saw it—where Irene and Dana, on their grand tours, had already become assimilated into Edwardian royal circles. Nancy and Phyllis, both brilliant and fearless riders, shipped their horses from Virginia and first made their mark on English society on the hunting fields of Leicestershire. Within two years, having turned down many titled suitors, Nancy in 1906 married Waldorf Astor, whose father, William Waldorf Astor, had settled in England and who was considered then the richest man in the world. Later, Phyllis, who had taken longer to extricate herself from her own first husband, married Bob Brand, Oxford scholar, economic expert, and intellectual, known since he was a young imperial civil servant as “The Wisest Man in the Empire.”

Nancy and Phyllis found themselves in highly unpredictable circumstances at the center of English

Nancy and Phyllis found themselves in highly unpredictable circumstances, at the center of English politics and power, changing one vanishing world for another. But it was Nancy who drove the bandwagon, first by effortlessly conquering Edwardian society and the literary world and then by moving into politics from her base, with Waldorf, at Cliveden, their great house by the Thames. Under Nancy, even before the First World War, Cliveden had become a hothouse of political power that embraced both government and opposition, as well as Anglo-American intrigue.

Nora, the youngest, wayward sister, was in turn forced from Mirador and across the water to England by Nancy and Phyllis, who hoped to tame her with a good English marriage, under their supervision. She arrived after a series of romantic episodes that kept the family constantly on the edge of scandal, and that continued even more scandalously after her marriage. (Part of Nora's claim on history, later on, was the fame of her daughter, the actress and comedienne Joyce Grenfell.) Of the sisters, only Lizzie, the eldest, born in 1867 soon after the war, who had married a Virginian, was left behind in this extraordinary exercise of mobility and transformation—but she continued, from Richmond, to have her stern effect on the family. The Langhorne boys in the family, Keene, Harry, and the youngest child, Buck, were no match for their formidable sisters, to whom their father had been more lenient. Keene and Harry succumbed to tuberculosis at a young age, aggravated by alcohol and much time spent “spreeing” in the mountains, trying to get away from their father's dominating control. Buck, a man of immense popularity in Virginia, survived these same afflictions for longer. He lived the pleasurable life of an eighteenth-century squire on a remote farm near the James River, “the only man I know,” said his father, “who inherited a self running farm.”

The lives of the Langhorne sisters spanned one hundred years, from the birth of Lizzie to the death of Nancy in 1964; from the end of the Civil War, through the traumas of Reconstruction, to Edwardian England; the politics and turbulence of the 1920s and 1930s, through the Second World War to the early 1960s. So enduring was the Langhorne sisters' myth that when Irene visited the White House in April 1945, a few days before Roosevelt died, and forty years after Nancy had married Waldorf Astor, Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her newspaper column, “The younger members of the family were fascinated by her, because she is still the Gibson Girl of her husband's drawings; and though some of the youngsters had never heard of the Gibson Girl, they fell a victim to her charm of manner and beauty. All of the Langhorne sisters are people one has to notice!” The sisters left an exceptional legacy of correspondence—many thousands of letters, most of which had lain in a large black trunk barely disturbed since my grandfather, Bob Brand, husband of Phyllis, had collected them in the early 1950s, as part of the process of grief after Phyllis's premature death. They tell the intimate story of these sisters and their odyssey on both sides of the Atlantic, of fame, fortune, and often of tragedy. The immense detail contained in this historical archive also provides a rare picture of the era—part nineteenth century, part twentieth—in which they lived.

“Nothing could be quite as lovely as that,” Nancy wrote about the Virginia of her youth some years before she died and after a lifetime in some of the finest houses in England. It was the Virginia of her better days that she was remembering; the years of her teens when her father, Chillie Langhorne, had struck his bonanza collaborating with the Yankees. He had bought Mirador with this quite sudden wealth, as a summer place—a colonial red-brick house with a farm, near Charlottesville, whose back porch looked across apple orchards and up a long gentle slope toward the Blue Ridge Mountains. The house had box hedges along its paths, smokehouses for the hams, dark green shutters on its Georgian windows, a fine cobbled stableyard. In Mirador, Chillie Langhorne had re-created a world belonging to the sentimental novels of the 1820s—years after the war that had devastated Virginia. None of the

to the sentimental novels of the 1850s, years after the war that had devastated Virginia. None of the sisters ever quite got over the idyllic idea of Mirador, and yet they abandoned it, despite the communal wealth at their disposal. But like many families with a sense of themselves, they had invested it with a symbolic importance beyond its natural beauty. Its importance was that it had created the Langhorne sisters.

Nancy was eleven when Irene, aged seventeen and “bewitching” to look at, was led by a beau on the dance floor at White Sulphur Springs and declared a Belle in her own right—a Cinderella-like transformation. The Golden Age of the Belle lasted for thirty years, from the end of the Civil War to the appearance of Irene. The system was taken immensely seriously in Virginia. It was a highly institutionalized fantasy, a means of foiling the memory of defeat, of ignoring poverty, of turning the clock back to some imagined 1840, of defending the inviolable purity of the white southern girl in the face of forced emancipation and Reconstruction. It was a lifeline of self-esteem. Irene capped this by taking herself north—Mr. Langhorne was glad to bury the hatchet—and leading the New York ballroom and then by marrying Charles Dana Gibson. He had created the “Gibson Girl” in 1890, five years before he married Irene. Her image—the upturned nose, what the poet Thom Gunn called her “sporting jaw,” the slender waist, the slightly disdainful look of the new emancipated woman—looked remarkably like Irene. Gibson had created the first nationwide fashion frenzy and he had become a cult figure himself, mobbed for his autograph. Their wedding in Richmond was an affair of American royalty and was seen as another symbolic end to the North/South hostilities. Irene became the Gibson Girl, the icon of the young American woman that gripped magazine readers for two more decades. She had turned the vanishing Southern Belle into a modern media fantasy. She then settled down with Charles Dana Gibson to be immortal, fixed in the moment of her fame, as the world changed about her.

The eldest sister, Lizzie, had borne the brunt with her parents of those twenty years since the war and resented the Yankee beaux coming down in droves, in private railroad cars, to get a fashionable taste of the South and to propose to Irene. In Lizzie’s time, no one went north from Virginia, it was unheard-of. When Nancy and Phyllis were small children, the family had lived in Danville, with several children and destitute relations crammed into four rooms. Their mother, Nanaire, had eleven children—“all of them unwanted,” Nancy liked to say, most of them born under these harsh conditions. Three died in infancy after Lizzie was born. Later, Lizzie helped Nanaire to raise the remaining four, and in contrast to Nanaire, she did it severely and was forever resented for it by her siblings. She never enjoyed the pleasures of a Mirador childhood. Before the Langhorne fortunes had changed, she had married a Virginian, Moncure Perkins—an option all of the others avoided—and was the only one to remain there, despite the mystical attachment to it that the other sisters claimed all their lives. Lizzie belonged to the old Richmond of Reconstruction, of black-veiled war widows, drunken husbands, winter mud and summer dust, of obsession with genealogy and, above all, with talk. It was a place rebuilt out of rubble in late Victorian style, of mahogany furniture and gas lamps, of deep conservatism, of cultivation and shabbiness, and close-knit pride where everybody knew everyone else on the ten blocks where they all lived. Lizzie became sad, somewhat embittered by the way her sisters treated her, and ended up fatally dependent on Nancy’s controlling purse strings.

In Irene’s wake, Nancy, Phyllis, and later Nora, the youngest sister, began to exercise what the mother called “the right of every Langhorne daughter to become a Belle.” They became famous in succession. Chillie had taught Nancy and Phyllis to ride, bareback at first, to jump the steep Virginia snake fences and to break and train yearlings, to be fearless, to take “excessive” risks. The combination of beauty and brilliance on the hunting field—Phyllis became the best rider of her generation—gave them an advantage of mobility never lost on the sisters in later times. They were

generation—gave them an advantage of mobility never lost on the sisters in later times. They were helped, too, by the wave of admiration and forgiveness toward the South that followed Reconstruction and the northern fantasies of an old and gracious world, “distinguished” and “aristocratic.” Industrialists and carpetbaggers were sending their daughters to the spas in white flannel blazers to teach them how to be Belles, imagining a pageant of southern chivalry. By the time they had appropriated “Belle,” it was all over. The Langhorne sisters had gone north, where every appearance at a horse show or a ball and certainly each engagement or marriage was a sensation reported in the *New York Times*.

There was nothing self-conscious about the way the Langhorne sisters carried on at Mirador. In the Republican political imagination during Reconstruction, Virginians especially were looked on with suspicion as Tories and aristocrats. And the Langhorne sisters had taken effortlessly and naturally to the new wealth, reverting to the old simplicities of rural life of Chillie’s boyhood, of horses and hunting, of quail shooting and leisurely farming. Country Virginia was no cotton-growing Georgia, with great plantations and labor gangs. It was Anglophile, gentle, enclosed. It was almost unchanged since the days of Thomas Jefferson at Monticello a hundred years earlier; cultivated, unpretentious, with good food and endless hospitality, and a preoccupation with gardens. Mirador was furnished not with the Victorian mahogany of the Richmond bourgeoisie, but with old Georgian furniture bought cheaply with mixed cretonne, unfashionable chintz—the walls painted different shades of gray. They danced waltzes and two-steps in the parlor to the fiddle and banjo played by black musicians, and sang in close harmony. They lived closely with their servants, treating them—some of them former slaves—as they would their subordinate relations, calling their nurses “Aunt,” hugging them in their photographs. They lived closely enough to inherit the religious feelings and diurnal superstitions of their black staff, and to adopt their particular humor and sense of the ridiculous. It was built in to the Langhorne style. They liked performing, too—especially Chillie, the tempestuous, all-protective patriarch “who kept them all in stitches with his plantation songs, his dancing and inspired high jinks.” “The Langhorne sisters are like street musicians,” a Chicago psychiatrist who knew the family said some years later. “They entertain you whether you ask them to or not.” They were clannish, quick and merciless with each other, battering out vanities with their cruel games of “truth” that, to the amazement of visitors, brought sounds of terrible weeping from behind closed doors, followed by hysterical laughter. “We were fitted for battling in our family,” Phyllis wrote. The *M* in Mirador, she said, stood for misery as well as mirth.

The Langhorne sisters seemed to have invented themselves through this collective mystique of sisterhood. To outsiders, they were fascinating and impenetrable, giving the impression that no one would ever get as close to them as they were to each other. It was this relationship that anchored their lives, that produced the glamour and excitement for the strings of admirers who fell in love with each or all of them. They gave off the sense that they were set apart, even unique. They were thought of in the plural long after their separate careers were a matter of history. They produced this effect in part because each of them had such a strong sense of her own identity. They were starkly different types: Lizzie, the strict pioneer figure, of stern elegance and Puritan disapproval; Irene, passive and golden, the image of what men expected from women of that era—unintellectual, chaste but flirtatious, stately and amusing—was the eternal Belle and the most ready victim of her sisters’ wit. Nora, the youngest, was the eternal child. Dreamy, disorganized, and unschooled, she was talented—a brilliant mimic and inventor of skits, a talent inherited by her daughter—with a romantic smoky singing voice that she accompanied on the ukulele and guitar. She was physically the most alluring as well as the kindest hearted of them all. She was also free with her favors, unable to tell the truth and irresponsible with money. Her life was punctuated with seductions and belated debts and broken appointments, even

money. Her life, punctuated with seductions and boings, debts and broken appointments, was charmed one until her last years, successfully devoted to making sure everyone had a good time. She said of herself that she had “a heart like a hotel.” One of her beaux added, “And every room was full. Of all the sisters, she was considered the best company, the cosiest and most reassuring, and children she was enchanting. “If you had half an hour to spend on earth, you’d spend it with Aunt Nora,” said one of her nieces. “Then,” she added, breaking the metaphor, “you wouldn’t see her for a year.”

Nancy, the most flamboyant of them all, represented power—an irresistible force of nature, bred in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was turned loose initially on the stuffy Edwardian ruling class in England, and then on the House of Commons, and finally, with more devastating effect, on her own family. This innate “power engine” enabled Nancy, at first, to cut her way through life with astonishing facility, although it disguised frailties in her psyche. She had many weapons at her disposal, beyond the fact of her married wealth and the grandeur of Cliveden. There was certainly a touch of genius to her wit and verbal speed, her intuition. She was the most compelling performer in a family bred on spontaneous performing. Nora was brilliant in her way, but Nancy was gifted with the attributes of an anarchic, radical comedian: lack of caution, deadly mimicry, comic timing, and an uncanny intuition for hitting the weak nerve, for “divining your inmost thought,” as Bob Brand wrote of her. She was gifted, too, with a rare social fearlessness unknown in Edwardian England. Nancy said to a pompous British Cabinet minister at Cliveden, having got the attention of the whole table, “I don’t know your wife thought you were a bore when she married you, because she told me so, but nobody could have thought you’d be as bad as this.” The rest of her guests, who had been saying this behind his back, were convulsed with laughter. And the minister’s vanity was flattered by this apparent display of intimacy. A less-gifted performer would never have got away with it, and even Nancy sometimes failed. She could be prejudiced, bullying, deliberately tactless; she could act, as one of her relations described it, with the instincts of a gangster. Even this could be exciting in the way that she could instantly transform situations; her behavior was always a guarantee against boredom, pomposity, convention. Nancy had a passion for meeting people, and it was this cheek and directness that enabled her to connect instantly with people she wanted to get on terms with, her “betters,” as she called them. She had long and loyal friendships with Arthur Balfour, the last of the great aristocratic Tory prime ministers; with George Bernard Shaw; with Sean O’Casey, the Irish Communist playwright, with whom she corresponded for forty years; and with T. E. Lawrence, none of whom were the bullyable types needing her patronage.

Nancy got almost everything in life through her wit—she never used her beauty for flirtation, as a instrument of power—but also through an incomparable courage, a combination used to powerful effect on the political hustings. They enabled her to hold on to a largely working-class constituency for twenty-five years of political turbulence, as the first woman MP; and they helped her to withstand the battery of male resentment that greeted her in Parliament for many years after she took her seat. Nancy had no reflective power; she was often wildly wrong in her political judgments. She relied entirely on instinct; she saw herself as a “fighting woman” from Virginia. If she could sense a nerve attack, often leaving her victims speechless in disbelief, Nancy could also empathize with suffering almost to the point of feeling it herself. Then she would act—an engine of kindness—putting into gear the vast resources at her disposal of money and secretaries. There appeared to be no limit to her generosity or the number of people, famous or obscure, who benefited from it.

But the sister who had the deepest emotional effect on those around her, particularly on men, was Phyllis, eighteen months younger than Nancy. When the beaux were courting, Nancy remembered

Phyllis, eighteen months younger than Nancy. When the Deaux were courting, Nancy remembered, “They liked me but it was Phyllis they always fell in love with.” Such charm as she had is indefinable but clearly she possessed it. Feminine, sympathetic, there was a luminous quality to her beauty, melancholy in her nature, a “minor key,” as her sisters called it, and a streak of introversion so foreign to her father and her siblings. She radiated some mixture of love and goodness along with the connecting Langhorne gaiety. She was musical, a brilliant horsewoman and huntress. She was also the most popular within her family, except with her father, who disliked her reticence and her need for solitude, and liked to watch the tears swell “like diamonds” in her eyes when he made her cry. Of all Nancy’s contemporaries, including husbands and admirers, Phyllis was the only person Nancy loved her entire life. She loved her with such a passionate longing that at times it seemed as if Nancy’s other attachments were an exhausting duty and challenge. It was to Phyllis that Nancy confided, in her early letters from Cliveden, the panic she felt having married into the Astor clan, the longing to be back in Mirador, and her grief, which lasted for twenty years, for her mother’s death. Only Nancy knew, for some years, of Phyllis’s great and secret romance with a captain in the Grenadier Guards, and the many sadnesses of her life.

Phyllis and Nancy, whose lives are the center of this story, appear at first to represent opposite, complementary forces. If Nancy represented elemental power, Phyllis, at least in Nancy’s eyes, stood for the inner life Nancy had always longed for and never achieved, despite her fanatical, and, in Phyllis, incomprehensible, devotion to Christian Science. These were the qualities Nancy missed after the death of Nanairé, her idol of long-suffering selflessness and the driving force for the great crusade of “goodness” that dominated her life. “Every day I pray that I shall be really spiritual and that I’ll be able to raise the dead,” Nancy confessed to a clergyman friend, “then I go out and all I do is raise hell.” Despite her bountiful compassionate heart, Nancy never acquired the gift of selfless love, the virtue that she exhorted on others and carried as her banner. She never understood why Nanairé’s rewards—total devotion from her children—had eluded her. She had assumed exclusive rights of ownership over them for many years with a clear conscience, believing she was doing God’s work, and that they were better off under her improving wing. She tried to exercise these rights over her sisters, too, particularly Phyllis. Having wanted to be like her saintly mother, Nanairé, she became more like her father, the irascible, tempestuous Chillie Langhorne, whose bullying ways she had always despised. (His full name was Chiswell Dabney Langhorne, known and pronounced “Shilly Langan.”)

Nancy and Phyllis nevertheless had similarities of character rooted in their inheritance, which led them into the same damaging move encouraged by their father, marrying their northern millionaire by whom they had children and whom they then divorced. Chillie Langhorne’s instructions were contradictory: to be a Belle but also to make your own destiny. Both sisters reinvented their lives as far away from their first husbands as possible, believing they could close the door on the past not only for themselves but for their children, too. These parallel mistakes led ultimately to catastrophe in the family lives. The men they married or drew into their orbit in England were, this time, the brightest and the best, high-minded reformers and idealists closely connected with power who saw their great task as nothing less than federating the old Empire, and forging an imagined Pax Americana. Britannica, a civilizing, global rule of law that would end nationalism, the arms race, war itself. They belonged to the generation from before 1914, brought up in public schools and Oxford quadrangles, the last to believe that they were dealing with a rational, perfectible world, ready to stabilize itself in an ordered system under British and American guidance. Their plans were swept away by two world wars and economic collapse, the momentous upheavals of the century that also deeply affected the personal lives.

I grew up, for much of my holiday childhood, in the house of my grandfather, Bob Brand. He had married Phyllis, my grandmother, in 1917. In 1928, they moved to Eydon Hall, an elegant Palladian house with an antebellum feel, in the heart of Northamptonshire. It was bought to remind Phyllis of Mirador, and to put her in the best hunting country, or what my grandfather, brought up in Hertfordshire, called “a real grass country”: she was subject to bouts of melancholy, for which hunting was her one sure antidote. Her premature death in 1937 was a catastrophe for my grandfather, whose marriage had been a love affair sustained for twenty years, a love hard won and the only one in his life. In the twenty-five years he still had to live, he never got over his grief, and wrote in the pages he filled trying to make sense of it that when she died, “everything lovely had left my life.” He had been living, since, “in a spiritual half world.” Yet for him there was further tragedy to come.

By the end of the Second World War, when he returned to England from Washington, where he had also served in a key role for his country in the First World War, Bob Brand had become something of a hero of his times. The Wisest Man had lived up to his name, in part for his clear-sightedness and his predictions, which had all tragically come to pass. In the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, he was almost a lone voice in trying to persuade the Allies to drop punitive reparations demands on the Germans, warning of ruin and hyperinflation. When it came, in the 1920s and 1930s, he fought, again in vain, to get the bankers and governments to stabilize the mark. As early as 1936, he predicted—because he had watched the consequent rise of Nazism in Berlin—that we would have to fight Hitler in a war and urged his friends and his countrymen to rearm to prevent it. His warnings were ignored on all sides and by all the parties. When it was announced that his government had given him the peerage in 1946, the *Washington Post* took the exceptional step of writing a leader with the title “Honoring Mr. Brand”—praising him for his achievements. “Even more outstanding and precious,” it read, “is his record of friendships made.... Americans who have come into contact with Mr. Brand prize his friendship. It is restful to meet a man who is so sweetly reasonable, so devoid of dogmatism, so willing to learn and to share what he knows, and is so unobtrusive.” One of these friends was Felix Frankfurter, justice of the Supreme Court, adviser to presidents from Wilson to Roosevelt, who later wrote of “that gentle and wise man”: “Not one of the so-called private and unofficial ambassadors active in promoting harmonious Anglo-American relations was more effective or more welcome than Lord Brand was in his quiet way.”

Before he left America, Bob Brand paid a last visit to Mirador, sat in the garden, and wrote to Nancy: “Not a soul here. The house shut.... I have never felt such a ghost. When I think of two generations of gaiety laughter beauty here & now silence. This morning early the dove was soft mourning. This is a sound that whenever I hear it brings back to me hot mornings at Mirador when I first was in love with Phyl and when there was warmth and love and ease and happiness before me and the smell of honeysuckle, an indescribable mixture that marks this time out from any other in my life and when Virginia became, as it remains, the truly romantic spot in the whole world. Everything passes, everything changes and God knows what we are or why we are here. Some moments have made life worth living. But they are all gone except in memory and when I think of the names in the Mirador visiting book I wonder why I am still alive.”

To his grandchildren, too, Bob Brand was a man of great benevolence and sweetness of nature who looked at you through the same rimless glasses he had worn to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919. I remember his heavy corduroys, the thistle-cutter he carried, the black beret he wore as he took me on walks around his barely mechanized farm. Very little in the house had changed since Phyllis’s death. He had kept it that way, seeing no point in doing otherwise. The house in some ways was a shrine to Phyllis—her saddles and bridles were locked in a toolroom in the stableyard, untouched and unused.

Phyllis—her saddles and bridles were locked in a tackroom in the stableyard, untouched and unused after her death. Her boudoir, a pretty room in a bow on the side of the house, with a desk, an Adam fireplace, armchairs, was also kept locked and unused, the plain silk curtains gradually falling apart. Elsewhere, the décor hadn't changed since she created it, and the lightness and grace of the architecture still reflected her southern taste, her furniture and paint. It was unlike any other house in the district, and one of the prettiest I have seen in England, to this day. My grandfather lived alone here, with a few members of the prewar staff, including the retired butler, Mr. Blyth, a man of eccentric informality compared to his peers in that formal profession. Phyllis had employed him in 1922 and had written to her husband, "He is the greatest treasure we have got." Nancy discovered that Phyllis had found the only butler in England who had the natural familiarity of the black staff at Mirador. Mr. Blyth could hardly move when I knew him, and I acted as his bicycle courier, riding to the pub for his cigarettes.

In contrast to Bob Brand's air of gravitas, there was nobody in my childhood who was as frightening, as exciting, or as powerful as my aunt Nancy: By then she was Bob's last contact with the world and the events they had shared so intensely. Each summer, my mother would take my sister and myself to visit Rest Harrow, her house by the sea at Sandwich in Kent. There were many cousins of my age and it was a holiday we eagerly anticipated: bicycles on the empty flat roads, evening cricket on the beach only a few yards from its deeply pebbled front door, the night sound of waves from the dormitory bedrooms, the drama of ships stranded quite close to the shore on the treacherous Goodwin Sands, whose distress could be examined through binoculars from the balcony. The Goodwin lighthouse wailed all night in the fog. It was the cleanest house I had ever visited—the smell of polish and wax and Jeyes Fluid, a forgotten product of delicious-smelling cleanliness, on the brown linoleum of the back stairs, the flowers in the sitting rooms. Above all, there was the presence of Aunt Nancy, who controlled everybody's lives. She was small and neat, with a sprig of lemon-scented verbena pinned to her brooch, and almost always holding a golf club. She gave out dark caramels from America (rationing was still in force) and would slip into imitations and mockeries, putting in false teeth and inventing wild games. In the morning, we would go to her bedroom to be given her version of a Christian Science lesson. Bibles were strewn about the bed, the text for the day marked and ready. I remember the rapid, repetitive delivery, her face covered in cold cream: "Man is made in the image and likeness of God." "Hold up your shoulders" was a frequent order from Nancy, often a form of greeting, and "Hold on to the Truth" or "Hold the Right Thought" her parting cautions. She radiated excitement and protection. She could also make you cry, quickly and brutally. Visiting children were often startled. One of my playmates, introduced to Lady Astor, was lightly poked in the chest with the greeting, "I hear you're a horrible little boy." He turned against her forever. I remember the alarm when she turned on me, catching me trying to conceal a piece of, to me, foul-tasting grouse in my napkin under the table, at one of her grand lunches. "What are you doin'?" There was a rush of words and then, "You're just as bad as that terrible father of yours...." My American father was in disgrace for his divorce and was struggling against alcohol—so embodying two of Nancy's most fervent and lifelong denunciations. But he, too, ended up her devoted admirer and she treated him with punctilious kindness.

Nancy had by now alarmed two generations of children with her sudden wheeling attacks. Her son Michael wrote of the trick of survival he had learned during his childhood at Cliveden, the house by the Thames where Nancy had ruled since 1906: always to keep the battle fluid when it was launched unexpectedly, above all to avoid being cornered. There was no question that she enjoyed reducing single children to tears as much as driving them, en masse, to a frenzy of excitement. They were often too young to know that this was her form of communication; that it came from affection, never from

too young to know that this was her form of communication; that it came from affection, never from dislike. Her tactic, with grown-ups, too, was to strike at the exposed nerve, the one that only she could see with her uncanny instinct, and then to sting again before the victim had time to react. As they were ready to walk off, she would wheedle and charm them into what would often turn into long-term friendship. But, by now, in the 1950s, Nancy, in her seventies, had lost her touch. It was already evident before the war, when her performance in Parliament had become garrulous and open to ridicule. The speed and timing had gone, leaving a blunter weapon in its place. She was warring with her children, having pushed them away with her overweening possessiveness. She was like a damaged prizefighter; the fearlessness after all those years of holding her corner was giving way to cantankerousness. Her son Jackie, taking her face in both hands, said to her, "The trouble with you, Mama, is that the engine's working perfectly but the steering's gone." Yet, as with a prizefighter, much of the footwork and magic was still visible, and no one who knew her well, even the children who had suffered her near-criminal record as a parent, put the score against her.

Both Bob Brand and Nancy were still alive when, in my teens, I was old enough to take in the Langhorne sisters' myth. "Gaiety, laughter, high spirits, spontaneity," was what they were said to have had in such abundance. Bob Brand wrote of "an exceptional fascination and charm which I have never known equalled in any family." They seemed to have set an unmatched standard for it. And there was the sense of Mirador—pictures of it abounded—as a lost paradise from where we all came. The legacy of Phyllis having chosen Northamptonshire for foxhunting was that we, her grandchildren, were brought up in a world of hunter trials, point-to-points, and pony club balls, where little had changed across three generations. This was just before teenage rebellion and rock and roll, when adolescents still tried to emulate their parents in their dress and their pastimes. Horse talk was the only conversation I remember with any outsider, particularly with girls at the orange juice balls in the drafty town halls of the Cotswolds. It was a very conventional world. Nobody hugged their servants in Northamptonshire or sang in close harmony, as far as I knew. Most of my relations with Langhorne blood in England did seem refreshingly different, even exotic, compared with the stiff English landed gentry. Their Virginian accent was light and resonant, a chime, not a drawl, but still with the declamatory southern cadence suited to storytelling. (This was not the case with their brothers. In the Waldorf Astoria, Buck Langhorne's next-door neighbor heard raucous black voices in the next room and complained to the manager, to be told that the gentleman was Lady Astor's brother and she owned the hotel.) At Haseley, there was Nancy Lancaster, Lizzie's daughter, a decorating and gardening genius, no less, who flew the Confederate flag from the pediment, and once threatened a bringer of divorce writs with a shotgun through an upper window. In her semidotage, Nancy Astor would stand with her and make uncoordinated remarks to visitors such as, "Do ring my niece often. She adores men," or, conversely, "Pay no attention to my niece. She lies for pleasure." (Nancy Lancaster, née Perkins, was married successively to Henry Field, Ronnie Tree, and Juby Lancaster. To avoid confusion, I have called her by her last married name throughout the story, the name by which she is best known posthumously and which furnished the title of her biography.)

One day, my housemaster at Eton burst into my room for one of his surprise visits and asked me if I was descended from the Ziegfeld Follies. I wrote to my grandfather, who replied, "Your grandmother would have been amused by this remark. Possibly Nora her sister might have added to the gaiety of the Z.F. though not your grandmother tho she had every wonderful quality. I don't know if I have ever shown you the letters I collected on her death here, which was the greatest disaster for me."

I didn't take up his offer until twenty years after he died. In the meantime, the stories of the southern Langhorne legend had settled into an orthodoxy of repetition, partly to do with the Virginia

southern Langhorne legend had settled into an orthodoxy of repetition, partly to do with the virginity way of oral history—where you can predict the next sentence if you have heard it often enough. Relations wrote privately published books of hagiography. There was an endless looking-back. I began to wonder about the perfection of it all. The rough side of life didn't seem to bite into the story. I had heard other tales, more shadowy ones: disasters never much discussed. Of my two uncles, Phyllis's sons from her first marriage, one had fallen or jumped to his death from a hotel bedroom in New York; the other had shot himself in a garage in Miami. As a schoolboy, I would catch glimpses of Bobbie Shaw, Nancy's son by her first husband. I was fascinated and shocked by his appearance at lunch with Nancy in Eaton Square in 1960. Podgy and creased-looking, he was dressed in a suit of a Teddy-boy mix: a long jacket, thick crepe suede shoes, narrow trousers, his hair slicked back and dyed jet-black, his fingers covered in rings, a Cartier watch on his wrist. He smoked Woodbines, the cheapest cigarettes you could obtain, which he kept in a Fabergé cigarette case. He made everybody laugh a great deal, even more than the other relations, and he was startlingly rude to his mother, able to say, apparently with impunity, in what sounded like a cockney accent, "Oh, Mother, do shut up." He had once been an officer in the Blues—the Royal Horse Guards—and a famous steeplechase rider. He was unlike any other grown-up I had ever met, exotic and extraordinary. Where did he fit into the story?

I first saw the letters Bob Brand had mentioned, some years before I started working on them, on one of my return visits to Eydon in the early 1980s to stay with my aunt Virginia and uncle, Edward Ford, who had inherited the house when Bob Brand died. They directed me to the disused servant's hall and to a large black trunk covered in Cunard and White Star steamship stickers. When I finally opened it, I saw what looked like two or three thousand envelopes, all neatly packaged and tied with string or with disintegrating rubber bands. Some were dated and sorted; a great quantity lay in random piles. They were letters between the Langhorne sisters, but mostly between Nancy and Phyllis, telling the story of their progress through the century. They included Bob Brand's entire correspondence with Phyllis from the day they met. They also contained correspondence of another great love affair—that of Phyllis and the Grenadier captain, which Bob Brand had preserved in the collection. He had added some pages of memoir to the collection and, it seemed, instructions to a future storyteller. The letter he said, would tell the story. He had tried—he had made some attempts—but found that he could go no further. "It is only now that I realise intensely the limitations of the common plain Englishman," he wrote. "I have no visual imagination, no power of describing what is perhaps indescribable, only a wound in my heart which never seems to heal."

Since he had kept everything, the letters in the trunk also contained the story of the next generation of the children who belonged to the first marriages in America, outsiders to the new lives Phyllis and Nancy created in England. They describe, in their own words, the price these sisters paid for crossing the Atlantic. In different ways, it was their past lives in America, which they had tried to excise from their history, that came back to haunt Nancy and Phyllis, particularly their relationships with their American children. Like a classical drama, a chain of events begun in Boston in the early 1900s led to an outcome that Bob Brand couldn't possibly predict, but which destroyed his family life and his happiness. This tragedy dominates the second half of this story, since it was central to the lives of

Nancy and Phyllis—and their relationship lies at the core of the narrative. In Nancy's case, I have drawn on correspondence between herself and her first child, Bobbie Shaw, that was not in the trunk and indeed for the rest of the story I have collected material from other archives, as well as from private collections, documents, and many interviews and memoirs.

The real voices in this book belong to the characters themselves. Most of the letters were not

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