CHRISTOPHER
INSIDE OUT
ISHERWOOD

KATHERINE BUCKNELL

'A first-rate biography of the man, the writer and the lover'
DAVID HOCKNEY

Praise for *Christopher Isherwood Inside Out*

"This is a first-rate biography of the man, the writer, and the lover. If he had stayed in England, he would have been the squire of Marple Hall in Cheshire—very, very different to the Christopher I knew" DAVID HOCKNEY

"Katherine Bucknell writes so well, the depth and width of her research is astonishing, and she brings Isherwood to life with vividness and acute perception. Her understanding of his complex character is truly remarkable, as well as of his many different worlds on both sides of the Atlantic, and of his vast number of friends and lovers—Bachardy, of course, in particular. She is also excellent on Isherwood's work, which she writes about with exceptional vision and clarity" SELINA HASTINGS

"This book—profoundly sympathetic to its subject, lucidly and excitingly written—is both a fast-paced story of an extraordinary life and a broadly illuminating history of vast cultural changes across eight decades and four continents. Katherine Bucknell, having edited four volumes of Isherwood's diaries, has distilled her expertise into the finest literary biography of its century" EDWARD MENDELSON

"The best biography I've ever read. Christopher Isherwood was a mindful, moral man, an example for all, and a wonderfully talented writer. Katherine Bucknell explores every moment of his life—English, German, American—and links them all to the vast ongoing project of his life and work . . . Every page is full of surprises" EDMUND WHITE

"The best biographies make the reader feel they are looking over the subject's shoulder, watching them grow up and into life. Katherine Bucknell does exactly this, marshalling an enormous range of scholarship with insight, empathy, and humour. Her long immersion in Isherwood's work and life is lightly worn, she writes beautifully, and whether she is invoking declining English country-house life, Weimar Berlin, mid-century Hollywood or the alternative cultures of California, one trusts her judgement implicitly. *Christopher Isherwood Inside Out* matches its subject's narrative skill and psychological insight, and brilliantly illuminates his search for a new way to live" ROY FOSTER

Copyrighted Material

“A roller-coaster ride through a genuinely remarkable life. Katherine Bucknell has had full access to all the primary sources—and it shows. Her Isherwood is both fascinating and dangerous, as reckless in his relationships as he was scrupulous in his art. His virtues shine, and his faults are documented with admirable candour” NEIL BARTLETT

“Every writer or student of writing should read this book because it so intelligently pinpoints the sources of the characters and events in his novels; it helps explain the pragmatic mechanics of inspiration and the vital importance, to a writer, of selection. It’s so clear that he was not only a genius but an exquisite craftsman . . . But genius can be foreboding; you don’t often want to be in its company. What’s wonderful is [Bucknell has] captured the excitement and the engagement of being with him . . . A magnificent achievement” MARTIN SHERMAN

“Open this thick book to almost any page about Christopher Isherwood’s important and glamorous life, and you will find a lot about the fascinating people this supreme twentieth century literary artist often saw. What stars he knew in his magic circle during his many lives, from thirties Berlin down to post-war Hollywood and after” JAMES IVORY

Copyrighted Material

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD INSIDE OUT

Copyrighted Material

ALSO BY KATHERINE BUCKNELL

SCHOLARLY EDITIONS

By W.H. Auden, *Juvenilia: Poems 1922–1928*

By Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Volume 1, 1939–1960*

Lost Years: A Memoir, 1945–1951

Diaries Volume 2, The Sixties, 1960–1969

Diaries Volume 3, Liberation, 1969–1983

By Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy, *The Animals: Love Letters Between Christopher Isherwood and Don Bachardy*

COLLECTIONS

Edited with Nicholas Jenkins

Auden Studies 1, "*The Map of All My Youth*"

Auden Studies 2, "*The Language of Learning and the Language of Love*"

Auden Studies 3, "*In Solitude, For Company*"

FICTION

Canarino

Leninsky Prospekt

What You Will

+1

The Flynn Guarneri (audiobook)

Copyrighted Material

Christopher Isherwood Inside Out

KATHERINE BUCKNELL

Copyrighted Material

Chatto & Windus
LONDON

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Chatto & Windus, an imprint of Vintage, is part of the
Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses
can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published by Chatto & Windus in 2024

Copyright © Katherine Bucknell 2024

Katherine Bucknell has asserted her right to be identified as the author of this
Work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to
re-produce the copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace
copyright holders and to obtain their permission. The publisher apologises for any
errors or omissions and, if notified of any corrections, will make suitable
acknowledgment in future reprints or editions of this book.

penguin.co.uk/vintage

Typeset in 10.25/13.5pt Janson Text LT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780701186388

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

For the Animals and the Others

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Sri Krishna:

You and I, Arjuna,
Have lived many lives.
I remember them all:
You do not remember.

Bhagavad Gita IV,

"Renunciation Through Knowledge"

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

PROLOGUE 1

1. SON OF THE BRITISH ARMY, HEIR TO THE ESTATE (1904–1915) 11
2. SACRED ORPHAN (1915–1923) 89
3. FAILED HISTORY SCHOLAR, PUBLISHED NOVELIST (1923–1929) 158
4. BERLIN, SEX, POLITICS, AND FAME (1929–1939) 203
5. HOLLYWOOD SCREENWRITER AND HINDU MONK (1939–1945) 298
6. AMERICAN APOSTATE (1945–1953) 370
7. THE IDEAL COMPANION: DON BACHARDY (1953–1961) 445
8. EXISTENTIAL ISHERWOOD: THE OUTSIDER (1961–1964) 550
9. THE ANIMALS' GOLDEN AGE (1964–1986) 639

Copyrighted Material

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 731

NOTES 735

PICTURE CREDITS 813

INDEX 815

Copyrighted Material

Prologue

THE SS *CHAMPLAIN* AND THE SS *AMERICAN TRADER*

Christopher Isherwood was looking for a permanent loving union as he steamed across the North Atlantic toward America in January 1939. "Off the coast of Newfoundland," he wrote in his diary, "we ran into a blizzard. The ship entered New York harbour looking like a wedding cake."

A fair-haired American rent boy waited for him on the pier, "pinched and scarlet with the cold."[1] An English dancer waited for him back in London, hoping, after a tearful farewell in a taxi, to be sent a ticket to join Isherwood in New York. Another young Englishman was completing his undergraduate degree at Cambridge University, dejected that Isherwood had ended their romance just a few months before. In Germany, a young man of twenty-three was serving a sentence of hard labor for illegal sexual acts and draft evasion after a five-year love affair with Isherwood spent partly on the run from the Gestapo. Accompanying Isherwood aboard the *Champlain* was an old friend, a poet, who had fallen unrequitedly in love with him back in 1926.

There had been and would be more—many more—boys, as he romantically called them. Younger boys who needed protection; taller boys who offered it; boys with whom Isherwood felt mentally or physically matched and energetically rivalrous. He charmed them all; his charisma was legendary. Something stopped him from caring. In his 1945 novel, the overlooked gem *Prater Violet*, he was to write in the voice of the narrator based on himself:

> Love, at the moment, was J. [. . .] After J, there would be K., and L., and M., right down the alphabet. [. . .] J. isn't really what I want. J. has only the value of being now. J. will pass, the need will remain. The need to

Copyrighted Material

> get back into the dark, into the bed, into the warm naked embrace, where J. is no more J. than K., L., or M.

Such a need—impervious to the individual personality of the beloved—was fed in Isherwood by fears that had haunted him since childhood. Fears that had been intensified by the death of his father in World War I and by the consequent shattering of his childhood world—the decline of his father's landed family, the hopeless grief of his mother, the developmental backwardness of his younger brother, the forced parting from his German boyfriend, his growing certainty of the coming of World War II. Isherwood summarized these fears in a passage of internal monologue in *Prater Violet* that conveys, as fiction, his intense and continuous feeling of imminent annihilation, of the approaching end of his world and himself:

> Death, the desired, the feared. The longed-for sleep. The terror of the coming of sleep. Death. War. The vast sleeping city, doomed for the bombs. The roar of oncoming engines. The gunfire. The screams. The houses shattered. Death universal. My own death. Death of the seen and known and tasted and tangible world. Death with its army of fears. Not the acknowledged fears, the fears that are advertised. More dreadful than those: the private fears of childhood. Fear of the height of the high-dive, fear of the farmer's dog and the vicar's pony, fear of cupboards, fear of the dark passage, fear of splitting your finger-nail with a chisel. And behind them, most unspeakably terrible of all, the arch-fear: the fear of being afraid.[2]

Isherwood had been on the run from fear ever since he could remember. He ran from his schoolmates in childhood. He ran from Cambridge University and a proposed academic career. He ran from Hitler's Berlin. In 1939, at the height of the fame he shared with his lifelong friend, the poet W.H. Auden, he ran west, from New York to Hollywood, where he found work writing for the movie studios and where he unexpectedly—and to some implausibly—embraced pacifism and a new religion, Vedanta. Vedanta was personified for him in a surrogate father, a Hindu guru, who offered unconditional personal love and trained him in devotional techniques that helped control his debilitating anxiety.

Isherwood was seeking a new way of life. As he and Auden had both recognized, their writing had failed to prevent the rise of fascism and could not change the world; Isherwood resolved to change himself. As the hopes of the thirties expired and old orders and conventions collapsed around him, he turned inward, to self-examination. In the near term, this would bring

Copyrighted Material

accusations of escapism; in the long term, it would place him in the vanguard of a new civil society which was to prize, with evolving vocabulary and emphasis, self-understanding, self-realization, non-attachment, consciousness-raising, civil rights, equal opportunity, social justice, mindfulness, wokeness.

For more than two years during World War II, February 1943 to August 1945, Isherwood lived as a monk in the Vedanta monastery in Hollywood and considered taking preliminary vows. He managed six months of chastity before reverting to a life of spiritually illuminated promiscuity, running again—through countless new love affairs. The most important of these was a serious though ultimately self-destructive six-year relationship with a charming and belligerent Irish-Catholic-Cherokee alcoholic from Kentucky, Bill Caskey.

At last, in the spring of 1953, Isherwood fell in love with a boy who was in some ways just like all the other boys, and in other ways, completely different. Don Bachardy, Isherwood eventually wrote in his diary, "has mattered and does matter more than any of the others. Because he imposes himself more, demands more, cares more—about everything he does and encounters. He is so desperately alive."[3] With Bachardy, who became a portrait painter, Isherwood was to live the life he had long imagined—physical and domestic intimacy, shared games and disciplines, daydreaming and art. As the years unfolded, Bachardy's passionate vitality was to carry them off Isherwood's life script with reckless and invigorating genius and to make real, despite betrayals and separations, the storyteller's cliché of happily ever after.

A DAY BEHIND the French liner SS *Champlain* that carried Isherwood across the Atlantic in 1939 steamed another boat, the SS *American Trader*. In boxes in the hold of the *American Trader* were 550 sets of printed pages for *Goodbye to Berlin*, the collection of fictionalized diary passages and stories based on Isherwood's real-life experiences in Berlin from 1929 to 1933 when Hitler was rising to power. Leonard and Virginia Woolf were about to publish the book at the Hogarth Press and Bennett Cerf at Random House had bought the printed pages to bind in his own cover for the U.S. market. The pieces had already appeared individually in the U.K., mostly in the magazine *New Writing*, attracting widespread praise.

When reviews of *Goodbye to Berlin* began appearing in March, the British papers were almost uniformly positive about Isherwood's portrait of the Berlin that had vanished six years earlier. In the U.S., recognition took until May, when the leading literary journalist Edmund Wilson published a knockout review in the *New Republic*. Wilson called Isherwood "a master" of

Copyrighted Material

social observation whose eye was free "from national or social bias." He compared the "transparency" of Isherwood's prose to Pushkin's—"You seem to look right through Isherwood and to see what he sees." Moreover, Wilson recognized Isherwood's discipline in keeping his writing "accurate, lucid and cool" in the mounting historical crisis. The novel "never gives way to sentimentality or melodrama," Wilson wrote. "To have done this is in itself to have scored a kind of victory at a moment when such victories count even more than they always do."[4]

Goodbye to Berlin secured Isherwood's fame. It trademarked his view of the city in ways that made it impossible for him ever to say goodbye, really, to Berlin. Berlin followed him across the Atlantic in the pages of his book and made him the center of continuing public attention that shaped his life both from the inside and from the outside. In 1951, one of the stories, "Sally Bowles," was adapted for the stage and became a hit Broadway play, *I Am a Camera*. In 1955, the play became a film. In 1966, it was transformed again into *Cabaret*, one of the most successful musicals of all time. In 1972, *Cabaret* was adapted for the screen, launching Liza Minnelli to superstardom as Sally Bowles, the sexual renegade and would-be showbiz star created by Isherwood. More than half a century later, *Cabaret* is still being staged somewhere in the world every day.

Isherwood had also made himself into a character in his Berlin stories. This character—named by him Chris, Christoph, Isherwood, Herr Issyvoo—reappeared on stage and screen with new names invented by adapters—Clifford Bradshaw, Brian Roberts. None of these characters was really Isherwood, partly for literary reasons and partly because Isherwood was a gay man writing at a time when his sexuality made him an outlaw. As an outlaw, he had to disguise himself. All the while, in real life, Isherwood was fighting for space in which to live and grow.

In the 1930s, his writing about Berlin, with its concern for the destiny of the workers and the poor as well as its enthusiasm for the sexually freewheeling night life, set up an expectation among his readers that Isherwood was a leader of the literary left. This expectation was greatly enhanced by the leftist plays and a travel book about China on which he collaborated with Auden. When the two emigrated together to the U.S., their followers, friends, fans and foes, felt abandoned and even betrayed. As World War II began, voices of the Left piled in with voices of the Right to attack them both as cowards for leaving their country in wartime, notwithstanding the fact that they made their departure eight months before the war started and that Isherwood had already lived abroad for most of the 1930s.

Copyrighted Material

Much of Isherwood's writing aims to explain in one way or another to those he left behind why he could not stay and live among them. Why he had

to run. Much of it presents the better life he sought for himself. For he always sought a better life and a better self. His spiritual journey, a journey that began with healing through devotional acts and personal love, lasted his whole adult life, and it channeled but did not quench his restlessness. His habit of harsh and public self-criticism, part of his process of change, often provided ammunition for his critics whether or not they ever subjected themselves to the same scrutiny.

Isherwood also always sought a new and larger audience, eventually this meant an American audience. For this, he worked to transform his writing as well as himself. The novel he came to consider his worst, *The World in the Evening* (1954), is in some ways his most revealing since it exposes his struggles over a period of eight years to analyse and reformulate his English literary self in a new American one; writing the novel, he retook some of the very first steps he had taken as a young writer, in order, mid-career and mid-century, to find his way as if from the beginning. His next novel, *Down There on a Visit* (1962), returns to stories and drafts abandoned in the 1930s in order to reexamine the whole idea of the self and the metamorphosing personality that found its only real home in California and in mysticism.

Isherwood worked on the boundary of fiction and nonfiction. He kept diaries most of his adult life and drew on them for his published writing, creating narratives more vivid, more revealing, more entertaining than what he documented. He altered the truth in order to make the truth more compelling, and his subtle and mysterious reworking accounts, more than anything else, for the lasting appeal of his writing. Arguably, many of his alterations get closer to the truth than mere documentation ever could; still, he put his reader on notice that fiction was at work. He combined many threads to spin his simple, seemingly light narrative line, and this gave his delicate work extraordinary strength and potency. Applying his literary skills to what he observed happening around him allowed him to intimate the flow of historical and cultural change beneath the surface of day-to-day events.

In this biography, I highlight connections between Isherwood's real-life experiences and his writing. I take you inside his imagination, where time is malleable and identity is changeable. I tell what happened to Isherwood and what Isherwood made from what happened to him. "What happened" includes the events of the imagination and the spirit—books he read, movies he saw, music he heard, rituals he practiced, fears, dreams or visions he had—as well as love affairs, toothaches, house fires, deaths of near ones, early fame, bad reviews. The differences between actual events, in so far as I can objectively establish them, and what Isherwood wrote about them may sometimes appear slight, but these differences reveal Isherwood's artistic intentions and his underlying political and spiritual agenda. They show Isherwood to be

Copyrighted Material

fruitfully conversing, both overtly and obliquely, with his literary forebears and contemporaries. They tend, also, to unmask a man who seemed to be hidden behind many masks—christened Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood, published under the name Christopher Isherwood, fictionalised in his work as William Bradshaw as well as the various versions of Christopher Isherwood, known to his British friends by countless nicknames, and eventually to his American friends as, simply, Chris. They also show that Isherwood changed and grew through the practice of writing. The narratives he published began as private adventures in his imagination. He drafted and redrafted his work, traveling routes that sometimes had no outlet, retracing his steps, trying again, until he made his way into new country. His surviving drafts and workbooks offer glimpses of these secret adventures. Even false starts expanded his interior life, revealing how he continued to evolve through his work, often with a collaborator, into his eighties. (In this book, I use "Christopher" for his childhood and fictional selves and "Isherwood" from the time he arrived at Cambridge at nineteen. He referred to himself in the third person in much of his work, indicating his detachment and the constant changing of the self over time.)

His mother's diaries, crammed with detail about his infancy and childhood, allow us to recognize how early and how deeply Isherwood began absorbing the experiences that were to shape his writing. The personalities and relationships among the adults in his childhood world—marital difficulties, sibling rivalries, tensions among servants and neighbors—washed over him constantly and shaped his psychological bedrock. They erupt again and again in his mature writing along with richly resounding echoes of his earliest fears and earliest friendships. When he wrote about Germany in the 1930s, Isherwood was also writing symbolically or covertly about Britain and all that he experienced during the years his imagination was forming. His first reading, his first trips to the theater and movies, his playing, his religious education, like his circle of family and friends, have outsize importance in his adult work and way of life. He often dismissed his mother and the past she treasured, but they make a meaningful contribution to every book he wrote. He found his narrative voice through her, and he often took women writers as his literary models and spoke through his women characters. The acts of self-criticism which engendered his lifelong process of personal growth began as criticisms of his mother and then of the parts of himself which once identified with her.

Perhaps because I am an American, I am eager to show you more of Isherwood's American life and work than earlier biographies have done. I commend those biographies to you; I build on them. None so far has addressed Isherwood's inner world, and his life project of coming to

Copyrighted Material

understand his own feelings. Perhaps because I am settled in London, I am also eager to show you the continuity between Isherwood's English and American selves, and his unexpected resuscitation in maturity of some of the best aspects of his boyhood and youth. The life he made for himself in California shared a surprising amount with his childhood world crushed by history, albeit with crucial differences. Moreover, the liberal atmosphere of Weimar bloomed again in southern California as the New Age experiments of the 1940s—to which so many European refugees were party—gave way to the counterculture of the 1960s and the open rebellion of civil rights movements for all minority groups.

I have spent several decades editing Isherwood's diaries and studying his writing. The books he left unpublished and unwritten at his death—in particular the million-plus words of his American diaries—tip the scales toward his adopted country. I focus new attention on his California life, in which he supported himself by writing for the movies and worshipped as a Hindu at the Hollywood Vedanta Society, because this is the life Isherwood chose when he was already famous and for which he gave up his public position in England and the approval of his circle there. Isherwood and Auden with their close friends Stephen Spender and Edward Upward and a wider circle including Cecil Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice changed English literature so boldly and completely in the 1930s that they became identified as a movement, even though some of them hardly knew each other and they were seldom all together in the same place. It is less recognized that Isherwood later had a varied and significant influence on American cultural life, especially in the cosmopolitan and anti-Establishment milieu that grew out of the dislocations and relocations of World War II and the jet-set excitement of the 1960s, and in particular through his close friendships with Aldous Huxley, Lincoln Kirstein, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Gore Vidal, Tony Richardson, and David Hockney.

I focus, also, on the life partner Isherwood singled out as the most important among many partners, Don Bachardy. This was the romantic relationship with which he publicly and professionally identified himself when he came out in the early days of gay liberation. I am lucky to have had unlimited access to Bachardy, who arguably knew Isherwood better than anyone else.

I often enter Isherwood's life through his work because it is the work which first made him worthy of public attention. His diaries offer wide-ranging and keen observations of the second half of the twentieth century, and I urge readers to explore them; in this book, I use them primarily for what they reveal about Isherwood himself.

Copyrighted Material

Many of the books Isherwood wrote in the U.S. drew on ideas and drafts promulgated during his English and European lives, reimagining their

themes and material in his new world. He returned to some themes and experiences again and again, addressing them differently in different times and different places. By reimagining them in his American writing, he honored the achievements of British modernism and the Bloomsbury Group, in particular his immediate forebears E.M. Forster and Virginia Woolf. His engagement with French and Russian writers was more clandestine but no less important.

He revealed his sexuality obliquely and gradually to a public whose prejudices were fickle at best and often hostile. His 1976 memoir about his sexual liberation in Berlin, *Christopher and His Kind*, took the lid off his earlier works set there, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, and reclaimed the identity sanitized and flattened for stage and screen. But he never told as much about earlier struggles, during his school and university years, to understand his sexuality and decide what to do about it. He had searched for models to emulate, finding important ones he did not want to copy, such as Oscar Wilde. Meantime, his imagination was a haven in a world that sometimes felt threatening, even terrifying, and it offered an outlet for intense feelings of anger and revenge. At Cambridge with Upward, he had created a fantasy world, Mortmere, energized by anti-Establishment violence, sexual abuse, and black humor. Letting go in fantasy freed him to positive actions he might otherwise never have taken, a pattern which recurred throughout his creative life.

EVERY WORD ISHERWOOD wrote, apart from letters and his early diaries, was intended for the mainstream, a stream whose direction he was determined to alter while never to be seen doing so. The more time you spend with Isherwood, the more clearly you will see that his lightly connected episodic stories, his memoirs that compartmentalize a standout decade or key relationship, most of his novels—in particular his lyrical masterpiece about a day in the life of a homosexual, expatriate professor living in southern California, *A Single Man* (1964)—are part of an overarching imaginative endeavor to make sense of the twentieth century from a point of view that, when the century began, was outside the pale or at best on the margins, and by the time the century ended, had moved closer to the center. Isherwood's contribution to gay liberation, the watershed change in Western culture that strikingly overtook related and analogous movements for civil rights and social justice, was significant, subtle, and hidden away in many tiny rivulets both strategic and sentimental. His genius as a prose stylist and literary artist empowered him to engage his readers again and again until all his truths

Copyrighted Material

were told, even the truths that some of his readers did not like. He saw from the outset of his career that he must make homosexuality attractive to mainstream audiences if he was to change their view of it, and he worked to do this in all his writing in different ways.

I call this book *Christopher Isherwood Inside Out* because I hope it will reveal his powerful imagination and rich inner world, and also because as a gay man he came out to different audiences in different places at different historical moments to different degrees and in different ways—indirectly, implicitly, silently, comically, cautiously—but never completely until he explicitly announced his political commitment to gay liberation in the 1970s. Among writers, he was one of the first.

The gay world that lay hidden in plain sight through the first three-quarters of the twentieth century can hardly be imagined in today's Western culture—the difficulty, the danger, the pain, the excitement, the fun, the complexity and nuance of this secret community before liberation, before AIDS, before gay marriage. Isherwood's work and his life story allow us to return there in imagination, an urgent matter if we are to understand and progress from or even hold fast to where we are now. His contribution to the sexual openness of our culture in the twenty-first century is as great as his contribution to the literature of the twentieth century and cannot be separated from it. For how he lived as well as for what he wrote, he is worthy of our closest attention.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1

Son of the British Army, Heir to the Estate (1904–1915)

WYBERSLEGH HALL, HIGH LANE, CHESHIRE, 1904

Christopher Isherwood was never without an audience. He was born under the spotlight of a full August moon in a medieval manor house on his grandfather's estate in the north of England. His mother, Kathleen Bradshaw Isherwood, had sat out in the garden all morning, as she had sat out through many long, bright days that summer of 1904 with her own mother, Emily Machell-Smith, or with her husband, Isherwood's father, Captain Francis (Frank) Bradshaw Isherwood of the York and Lancaster Regiment, watching and waiting for an entrance which they could neither schedule nor control. "What a lovely year it was," Kathleen wrote in her diary many years later, "& I always associate it with harebells and heather & ripening corn . . ."[1]

The baby arrived just before midnight, August 26. To his mother, August 27 seemed more desirable because it was his grandfather's birthday. Thus, throughout his childhood Isherwood celebrated his birthday one day late, playing his part in his mother's family script—for the time being.

The isolated stone manor house was poised high on a chain of hills between two villages called Disley and Marple. The front view swept southwest over the flat Cheshire plain, the back rose toward rugged moorland and the Derbyshire border. "Never outside a novel or dreams was there such an absolutely perfect house and garden with such a wonderful charm about it all," wrote Kathleen in her diary. Isherwood was later to say that it looked "like a miniature castle" because the parapet along the top was ornamented with a local design called crow-step that looked like small battlements.[2]

Copyrighted Material

Wyberslegh Hall had been built in the fifteenth century. It was an ancestral home of Isherwood's Bradshaw forebears, purchased in 1606 by a branch

of the Bradshaws of Derbyshire and Lancashire, who also purchased other local property around the same time. The Bradshaws were thereby "landed" gentry as Isherwood explained to an American lecture audience in 1960, "families that have no title and are not ennobled, but who have lived in the same place with a certain amount of money, naturally, for two or three hundred years." Family snobbery "breathed into" Isherwood that this was "the real aristocracy of England."

In the later eighteenth century, the last Miss Bradshaw married a Mr. Isherwood, a timber merchant whose family later went into shipping—"commercial" and "democratic," as Isherwood noted.[3] The prized older name was joined with the new one, though there was no hyphen, and Isherwood's father and uncles were christened with Bradshaw as a given name to guarantee against becoming merely Isherwood.

Wyberslegh was comfortable and prettily decorated. Hallways and staircase were lined with dark pink paper; pink silk curtains draped the floor-to-ceiling windows in the drawing room where sofas and easy chairs were covered in pink and white flowered material. The blue-and-white dining room was crowded with mahogany furniture. The pale blue "stone" parlor had a floor of stone blocks and a fireplace reaching to the wood-beamed ceiling with tightly packed bookshelves around it.

Zulu weapons and shields from South Africa, where Frank served in the Second Boer War, hung in the upstairs hall. Small oriental carpets were thrown down on wood floors and layered on top of larger carpets. Ornaments brought back from southern Europe decorated mantels and shelves. In the main bedroom, cut-glass perfume bottles and silver-backed hairbrushes lay on a linen runner on the dressing table. Three big drawers of Kathleen's old drop-front desk were stuffed with sketchbooks, diaries, letters, pencils, pens. There was one large bathroom with a fireplace, the nursery, a spare bedroom, Frank's dressing room, a servant's room, and a tiny back staircase leading to the kitchen and scullery with cellars underneath for coal and wine.

At the back of the house, toward the east, was a working farmyard—threshing barns, cowsheds, a dairy. The farmers lived in the rear wing walled off from the main house and worked the surrounding fields. The outbuildings included a nineteenth-century carriage house and stables forming a substantial compound. At the front of the house, sloping down to a central carriage drive, were lawns shaded by a few big trees. The garden was "gay with wallflowers and forgetmenots and orange and tawny tulips."[4]

Kathleen had sparkling gray eyes and heavy brown hair that fell waving to her waist or which she piled on her head with pins or a dark narrow ribbon. Her brows were thick and widely arched and, like her nose and her mouth, they had a kink midway along, lending her face an intriguing

Copyrighted Material

beakiness and point. She was highly intelligent and vivacious, unevenly educated and liked to have fun. She once recorded in her diary that a family friend reminded her how in girlhood she had had "all the boys in love with me!"[5] She was an only child, pampered and put upon by her parents, who relied on her as companion and confidante, helpmeet and nurse. She was dutiful, cautious, and correct but also energetic and curious, and she sometimes longed for experiences that lay just beyond her grasp.

The pregnancy had seemed to her like the end of youth and possibility. Two months before the arrival of this first child, Kathleen had told Frank that her life was a failure. Her slim five-foot figure—102 pounds when she married—had swelled into "a perfect mountain,"[6] and she had felt too ill to drive out visiting in a carriage over the bumpy local roads let alone travel to London or to summer house parties. In July, she had signed her will, suggesting the mortal fear of childbirth underlying her self-pity.

Nevertheless, by the time the baby was a few hours old, Kathleen began to feel a new sense of purpose. Frank was only a second son, but she had produced the first male in the next generation, making her the mother of the presumptive heir to the family estate. Frank rode with the news down the hills to his parents at Marple Hall, an Elizabethan mansion with mullioned windows and a cloak of ivy that stood inside a walled garden surrounded by trees and half buried in a hollow at the end of a long drive. "The greatest delight and pleasure at its being a grandson. Flag flying in honour . . . Felt so proud and happy and thankful. [. . .] Many wires of congratulations."[7] It was a cause for relief and celebration, this flattering birthday gift for the squire of Marple Hall, John Bradshaw Isherwood, a newborn future squire to secure the family line and the Bradshaw Isherwood name.

The future squire, the family line, the continuation of the Bradshaw Isherwood name were not to be. The baby was to grow into a young man who could not accept any prescribed place in history, and a cascade of real and metaphorical bombs was to explode the world in which that prescribed place had seemed to exist. But until he reached university, the baby did what was expected of him, and even when he turned against upbringing and background, he carried them inside him.

WHEN CHRISTOPHER WAS born, his parents were both already thirty-five years old. Only a few members of the family worked for a living. Their houses were run by servants, their affairs by lawyers.[8] They were expert at entertaining themselves. They read, they painted, they traveled, they played and listened to music, performed in amateur theatricals, went to the theater

Copyrighted Material

and museums, took courses on literature, on church architecture, on archaeology, on bookbinding. They attended church with solemn regularity, sometimes twice on a Sunday. They pursued close and complicated relationships with their wide circle of family and friends.

In this group of busy adults, Christopher was a curiosity. On the night of his birth, his mother observed, “He screamed loudly but is the most delightful creature with amusing long slitty eyes like a Japanese baby but lovely skin.” The eyes that looked concerningly foreign to her were the chief physical feature of the charm that the baby learned to exercise upon his family circle and eventually upon the wider world. At nine months old, the eyes turned a piercing gray-blue with a small tawny patch in the right one, and much later they were overhung by romantically shaggy brows.

Christopher was adored by both his parents, and he was also looked to for diversion. “Frank is delightful with the Baby & they are most amusing together,” wrote Kathleen. For two weeks, she breastfed her son between the maternity nurse’s bottles, to her evident surprise: “light refreshment from me!”[9] Christopher recognized from a very early age that there was competition for the attention of his mother and father. Sometimes the Bradshaw Isherwoods made him the center of their lives, sometimes they did not.

FRANCIS BRADSHAW ISHERWOOD, educated at Cambridge and Sandhurst, the royal military academy, served as an officer in the British army for nearly twenty-three years during the period when the British Empire, the largest empire in history, covering a quarter of the Earth’s land mass, was at the height of its power. An 1899 photograph shows Frank with four fellow officers in dress uniform—spiked helmets, gold-braided epaulettes, tasseled sashes, swords.[10] Frank’s dark, snugly tailored jacket sets off his lean physique. His thick blond moustache flows luxuriously from nose to upper lip. Underneath the helmet, his hair was much sparser than his moustache; he wore it close-cropped. He had a broad, open face, and his blue eyes were big, contributing to a stillness and candor that contrasts with Kathleen’s moody mystery and flirtatiousness.

In mid-December 1899, thirty-year-old Frank had voyaged to Durban as part of the largest contingent of British troops ever sent abroad, to quell the two-month-old rebellion of the Boers, Dutch-Afrikaans farmers, against British rule. He wrote to Kathleen, then his sweetheart, of the beauty of the landscape, of the colors he would use to paint it, of his longing for music and art galleries. Nearly eighty men were killed and wounded around him the first time he advanced under enemy artillery fire. He wasn’t frightened when

Copyrighted Material

they were on the move, he said, but found it "demoralizing" when they had to sit in the hot sun being shelled. "Even at my worst, I always carry my knitting," he wrote. "It's such a resource." He was "making a pair of socks to march into Ladysmith," where he helped to liberate a besieged British garrison in February 1900.[11]

Then he caught typhoid and spent nearly three months in hospitals in South Africa before being invalided home. Once recovered, he served briefly in Ireland before a second South African tour, maintaining security in the newly annexed Boer republics. A month before the peace treaty was signed on May 31, 1902, he was released to sail home for good.

At the time of Christopher's birth in 1904, Frank was serving in Stockport, outside the northern industrial city of Manchester, as assistant to the commanding officer of the Fourth Volunteer Battalion of the Cheshire Regiment. He had secured this post near Wyberslegh so he could marry and settle down with Kathleen, even though it had meant leaving his own regiment.

The wedding took place on March 12, 1903, in Thurston, Suffolk, near Bury St. Edmunds, 165 miles southeast, where Kathleen grew up. Her maternal uncle, Sir Walter Greene, a wealthy brewer and the local Conservative Member of Parliament, hosted the wedding party at his large country house, Nether Hall, scene of the house parties, balls, hunt breakfasts and shoots Kathleen had attended throughout her girlhood.

The marriage was harmonious and close, but the courtship had been long and difficult because Kathleen's parents were reluctant to part with her, as Isherwood was to show in *Kathleen and Frank*, the poignant, widely acclaimed, and massive narrative about his family that he was to assemble in the late 1960s in California, a project of rediscovery and reconciliation with his rejected English past.

Kathleen's father, Frederick Machell-Smith, spurned Frank for being too poor and for courting Kathleen in secret. He held Kathleen hostage only through her guilt and fear since she was old enough to marry without his permission. By contrast, Kathleen's mother Emily insinuated herself into the lovers' relationship to claim them as her longterm companions. Emily and Kathleen both liked to talk and write endlessly about every detail of finer feeling, every nicety of dress, decor, and behavior, and whenever Kathleen's attention focused too closely on Frank, Emily became dramatically ill, inspired by her heroine, the celebrated French actress Sarah Bernhardt. Isherwood later recalled that Emily "was no imaginary invalid, but a great psychosomatic virtuoso who could produce high fevers, large swellings and mysterious rashes within the hour; her ailments were roles into which she threw herself with abandon."

Copyrighted Material

Emily was a classic beauty and imposed herself like an empress. On arriving at one of the many hotels and lodgings to which she was constantly on the move, she would have the landlady "move all the furniture around, perhaps turning the bedroom into the sitting-room and vice versa. She always settled in as if she were staying forever—a characteristically royal mode of behavior." In letters, Emily referred to Kathleen as "my Mama" and signed herself "Baby-Mama."[12] Through this role reversal, Kathleen's maternal instincts were already thoroughly engaged before Christopher was born.

Frank's family was far less showy emotionally, yet the family dynamic lying below the surface was complicated and intense. Frank's father, John, had a stroke very young, forcing him to leave the army; he limped, and his speech was unclear. He was "cheerful, generous, careless and indeed wildly extravagant with his money."[13]

Frank's mother, Elizabeth, née Luce, was the daughter of Thomas Luce, banker, brewer, and Member of Parliament for Malmesbury, Wiltshire. She was the ninth of ten children and had lost two elder brothers to the empire, one serving in the navy, one in the army. She was gentle and devout, "very quiet, very undemonstrative" and "very self-sacrificing" as Frank told Kathleen.[14] She loved her children and was attentive to their needs even in adulthood,

Drama in the Bradshaw Isherwood family emanated from Henry, Frank's handsome, blond, blue-eyed elder brother, the heir apparent, who instinctively attracted attention to himself and always got his way. Henry took a B.A. at Cambridge then qualified as a barrister though evidently did not practice; he was consulted by his father on financial and estate matters, giving him power over his four siblings which Frank, only a year younger, especially resented. He was homosexual, and for this the family seemed to dismiss him, despite his privileged position. His style was camp; he "lisped slightly and dropped his final g's, as in huntin' and shootin'; otherwise his enunciation was so precise that it seemed affected."[15] The family also dismissed Henry's spiritual struggles, which were clearly linked to his sexuality. As a young man, Henry converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism and entered a monastery "intending to give up the world," then he got rheumatic fever and decided—as Isherwood decided decades later in Hollywood—not to become a monk.[16] Instead, he regularly confessed "to an understanding priest," as Isherwood later recalled, "for, in his own way, he had remained sincerely devout."[17] In some respects, Uncle Henry offered Isherwood an example for his own life, but Isherwood was not prepared to be dismissed as a lightweight like his uncle nor to be indulged as overly dramatic. He wanted to be respected as a man, like his father. These contrasting father figures set up a conflict in Isherwood from an early age, especially because Henry and Frank were often in conflict with each other.

Copyrighted Material

By going into the army, Frank achieved some autonomy and a life with wider vistas, but he always had to work long hours for modest pay. Even so, he was never superficial in his intellectual, artistic, and sporting pursuits. He cycled to Manchester for weekly piano lessons, attended the Hallé concerts there with his German piano teacher, and was accomplished enough to invite other musicians to play with him at Wyberslegh.[18] He worked hard at his painting, too, taking classes and studying paintings in galleries, often with Kathleen who had also studied painting and could discuss it in a more sophisticated way than she could discuss music.

Jack Bradshaw Isherwood, the third brother, christened John after their father, was seven years younger than Frank and an even better pianist. He trained as a lawyer and entered the Civil Service, dealing with death duties and property deeds in a government legal department at Somerset House in London. In his youth, Jack lived a bohemian life in London, sharing lodgings with the late-Romantic composer and poet Cyril Scott with whom he followed a series of avant-garde wellness therapies that foreshadowed the experiments of the Huxley–Isherwood circle in California in the early 1940s. Scott even met a visiting swami and attempted to form a Vedanta society.[19]

There were two sisters. Mary (Moey) Bradshaw Isherwood, two years younger than Frank, was a tomboy golfer, always outdoors, until her lungs were severely damaged by rheumatic fever and she was forced to move to the coast for the sea air as a semi-invalid. Her piety and her evident unhappiness were expressed, like her brother Henry's, in her conversion to Roman Catholicism. She never married, and her most intimate companions were women.

Esther, the youngest child, a beauty, married against the family's wishes a clergyman called Joseph Hooker Toogood, a brilliant mathematician and gifted woodcarver, viewed by the family, according to Isherwood, as "a nearly penniless nobody with a funny lower-class accent."[20]

Frank's father favored the marriage between Frank and Kathleen and offered to let them live for free at Wyberslegh. He increased Frank's allowance and guaranteed that Kathleen would continue to receive this allowance if she were widowed. The marriage settlement had to be agreed by Henry, requiring much correspondence and discussion during which Henry extracted his own promises about the estate. Kathleen grew impatient, and her resentment toward Henry was to grow and to contribute to future conflict in the family.

Incredibly, Kathleen's father gave away the bride without ever speaking to Frank at the time of the engagement or the wedding. In private, he threatened and bullied Emily and Kathleen, greatly distressing them both. In fact, Frederick was seriously ill and underwent surgery that probably removed his

Copyrighted Material

prostate and perhaps castrated him. He ignored Christopher's birth just as he had ignored Christopher's father. His final act of cruelty, committed in secret, was to disinherit Kathleen.[21] She later received money from Emily's side of the family, the income from a trust set up for Christopher and his brother Richard by her favorite cousin and Christopher's godmother, Agatha Greene Trevor, one of Uncle Walter Greene's daughters with whom Kathleen had grown up at Nether Hall.

By the time Frederick died, Christopher was fifteen months old and Kathleen and Frank blissfully happy. Denied her own patrimony, Kathleen was to grow increasingly focused on Christopher's future as heir to Marple Hall.

IN THE LATE 1960s, as he worked on his big book about his parents, Isherwood—by then a connoisseur of sexual matters—scoured their papers for details of physical and sexual interaction. He imagined an "unsatisfactory" kiss when Frank first proposed, and another perhaps more passionate kiss a year and a half later before Frank gave Kathleen an engagement ring. He felt certain that "Kathleen wasn't capable of encouraging him by making a passionate response."[22] This was only conjecture based on his later knowledge of her and reflecting what he wished to believe; in her diary Kathleen usually omitted or relied on euphemism for matters of sex and passion.

Frank relied on Emily to address some of the unquenchable need for emotional intimacy he had detected in Kathleen. He referred to "the *trio* of friends" arriving together at Wyberslegh after the wedding, warning "I own to having felt in the past that you did expect and want more than the close friendship we originally made our ideal . . ." Moreover, he encouraged Kathleen to invite her mother to join their honeymoon in Cambridge, where the newlyweds had only two nights at the University Arms before Emily arrived. "We slept with our window wide open all night," wrote Kathleen after her first night alone with Frank—the only hint of abandon.[23] Kathleen's intense emotional needs were to crack through Isherwood's youth like a bolt of lightning.

Frank evidently approached Kathleen sexually in a way that suited her, for she wrote again and again in her diary that she could not believe how happy she was, beginning on the day after her wedding, and seven months into the marriage she became pregnant. Isherwood thought she was shy about physical love, but Kathleen was certainly practical about fertility. Her diaries came with a yearly calendar printed in the front pages, and she marked

Copyrighted Material

these with ink dots, counting out when to expect her periods. Isherwood left no comment on these records and possibly overlooked them. For 1904, Kathleen put an X over August 26, when Christopher was born, and made a note, "275 days from Nov 17." On November 17, 1903, she had seen a new kind of flower, "a wonderful bright rose crimson carnation," then read some poetry and a novel Conrad and Ford Madox Ford wrote together, *Romance*. She believed her son was conceived that night. D.H. Lawrence could not have supplied better symbols.

The baby was christened Christopher William Bradshaw Isherwood at Disley Church on September 27, 1904. He wore his mother's christening robe; none of the godparents was present. The infant cross-dressing was perfectly conventional, but, like the absence of the key witnesses, right away sounded a theme that was to be repeated.

The baby's father generally called him William; his mother called him Christopher William, or Christopher, or William. Already he had more than one identity. "William" commemorated Captain William Bradshaw of the York and Lancasters, "one of Frank's few close army friends," killed in South Africa in 1899, just a few weeks before Frank arrived there. Frank admired Bradshaw as an example of the true soldier—more mannish, more soldierly, more likable than himself. Isherwood said they were not related,[24] yet their surnames linked them. The choice of "William" was in any case supported by family history because a William Bradshaw had been the father of the Henry Bradshaw who originally purchased Wyberslegh Hall. Christopher William was to be even less like Captain William Bradshaw than Frank.

"Christopher" was justified by Kathleen as having belonged to at least two distant relatives, but really, it was personal whimsy: "she chose Christopher because she liked the name," Isherwood later wrote. She wanted him to be heir, but somewhere inside her was a defiant spark wanting him to be himself. Isherwood, writing about himself in the third person, agreed with Kathleen about his name: "It has always seemed to him to be *his* name, the only one which really describes him."[25]

The day after the christening, Christopher William, not yet five weeks old, traveled by train to London with his mother and nurse. They were met on board by Emily and her maid. Emily took Kathleen into her first-class compartment, relegating the baby to second class with nurse and maid. "Christopher William behaved with astonishing dignity," wrote Kathleen in her diary, "looking most impressive & important in his best clothes—"[26]

So began the first of countless journeys he was to make throughout his life. Already, he was the central character in a story. At present, it was Kathleen telling the story; in just a few years, he would begin to tell it with her in narratives they devised together. His authorial voice was to be rooted in hers,

Copyrighted Material

to grow from it, at first in collaboration and later in opposition. The conversation between mother and son was so intimate that even when he was not in her presence, Isherwood was to speak to her in his thoughts and in his writing. As he grew older, he sometimes experienced Kathleen as a rival with whom he competed unconsciously. Perhaps this is one reason he never read her diaries until after her death and why, in telling his own life story, he was to mock or to omit the infant details recorded by his mother. Yet many of these details illuminate his mature personality and his work.

Kathleen and nurse settled in rented rooms in Wimbledon, just outside London, where they walked or relaxed on the common with Christopher William. Kathleen loved her baby, but she had never been led to believe that she could care for him alone, and she could not sleep for worrying who would succeed the maternity nurse. After several missteps, she hired a temporary nanny called Davis. Then she packed and left her six-week-old son with a woman she had known for two days. She didn't see the baby again for three weeks, and she never went back to Wimbledon.

Frank took Kathleen to the Norfolk coast, driving, walking, and sketching. She interviewed another nanny, Anne Avis, at Liverpool Street Station in London, before catching the Norfolk train; she followed up a single reference, then sent Anne Avis to Wimbledon to meet Christopher William "before he was finally handed over to her." The rhyming pair of nurses, Davis and Avis, brought their charge to London on October 29, and Nurse Avis traveled on with Christopher William and his mother to Stockport and Wyberslegh Hall, where they arrived by carriage to find everything prepared by invisible hands: "The house looked so fresh & clean & the nursery very nice—and quite big with the smaller bed in it."[27]

The smaller bed was for Nurse Avis. She slept in it for the next three and a half years at Wyberslegh, and thereafter in Christopher's other nurseries for a decade in total. She was to create for him a simple, steady routine that ballasted him against the mania for movement and diversion that so often possessed his parents and which he himself came to love.

ANNE AVIS WAS about thirty when she began working for the Bradshaw Isherwoods, perhaps only five years younger than Kathleen. Like Kathleen she had been born near Bury St. Edmunds. She came from a big family and was raised by an aunt and uncle. She had once been engaged but her fiancé died.

Copyrighted Material

In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood described Anne Avis as "small and sturdily built. She was quite pretty when young."[28] In a photo taken when

Isherwood was five, she grips the reins of his pony as he sits astride at the front door of Marple Hall. Her posture is erect, her complexion well washed and weathered with a strong nose and bony jaw. Wavy dark hair covers her ears and is neatly pulled up underneath a straight brimmed little hat. She wears a tweed jacket and skirt, a high-necked white blouse and white fingerless gloves.

Anne Avis had no acquaintances or attachments in Cheshire. She sometimes went to the servants' supper at Marple Hall, and she grew friendly with the housekeepers there and at Wyberslegh. She was in contact with other neighborhood nannies once Christopher was old enough for playmates. She never missed church on Sundays.

As was the custom of the time, she devoted herself entirely to the baby, giving up her name for her new role; Kathleen called her Nurse, and Christopher was to call her Nanny. Every morning and every afternoon, Nanny took him out for several hours in his pram. Later, she took him in a stroller designed after a Victorian postal cart, which allowed him to sit up facing her. Kathleen recorded that Christopher's mail cart, a lavish gift from a friend, was "such a pretty white one"[29]—more suited to fairyland than to the wilds of Cheshire. Once a week, Nanny pushed Christopher the three miles to Marple Hall for lunch with his grandparents, then home again afterwards. The going was hilly, rough, and wet, and sometimes so muddy that the wheels would come off whichever vehicle she was pushing.

When Nanny was off or busy with chores like laundry, Kathleen herself looked after Christopher. She reveled in his robust health and infectious happiness, and their time together was given special importance by her natural sense of ceremony and by the fact that she reported it all to her diary. Everything she did was part of a performance for an invisible audience. She made a little book about Christopher William called *The Baby's Progress*, in which she recorded with excitement the milestones of his thriving baby life, underlining and supplementing in later years anything that seemed to prophesy literary talent.

To Christopher, Kathleen was glamorous and exciting. "I went in to see him in a jetted dress before going out to dinner," she noted in her diary in July 1906 when he was nearly two, "& he at once sat up in bed & said, 'Oh smart, pretty.' "[30] It was the usual intoxicating love affair between mother and child.

But Kathleen was often away for weeks at a time, a torment for Christopher, who would wave her off on the train, his infant yearning to be aboard fulfilled in his lifelong addiction to departures and arrivals.[31] In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood looked kindly on this traditional British upper-middle-class arrangement. Kathleen "had to be wife and daughter first, a mother

Copyrighted Material

second," he wrote. "Under the circumstances she was wise to leave Nanny supreme in her own sphere, instead of competing with her as a nurse and inviting comparisons."[32] In fact, competition and jealousy lay just beneath the surface. Baby, for his part, was in love on both sides of the covert power struggle between mother and nanny that unfolded over the years.

Though Nanny took Kathleen's authority seriously and thirsted for her approval, she had a subversive streak. Baby's was the only authority she liked to acknowledge. She signed her letters to Kathleen "Yours obediently" but celebrated a spirit of anarchy and independence in her charge: "I wish you could see the mischief Baby gets into, now he can get about the floor. Yesterday he got under the table & pulled the table cloth off. His jug was on the table with his milk in of course that broke he thought it was grand to see a little stream of milk running down the nursery." She was careful to assuage Kathleen's jealousy, adding that "he says, air Mama"[33]—where is Mama? Probably she knew that family and close friends reported on her and Baby by letter when Kathleen was away.

Nanny's absence was a greater torment than Kathleen's. When Nanny went on her annual holiday in July 1906, she and Christopher were "both in tears." When she returned, after two weeks away, he "Simply yelled,"[34] evidently punishing Nanny for leaving him. Triangles were to shape Isherwood's adult friendships, and they were introduced at an early age, along with the emotional principle that intimate companions should be interchangeable.

Christopher William's clothes were impossibly elaborate. One photograph shows him at sixteen months old lovingly slung on his mother's hip in the doorway at Wyberslegh in a snow-white dress, long-sleeved, reaching to his feet which are shod in tiny white shoes. A frilled white bonnet is tied under his chin with ribbon. Nanny made him a protective overall: "I can just slip that off if any one calls & he is beautifully clean," she assured Kathleen.[35] It was his first disguise, permitting him to descend to the freedom and pleasure of playing on the floor and to return fresh and pure in appearance to the eyes of his admirers. He was to play just as freely in the slums of Berlin and to return to the drawing rooms of polite society with no outward stain.

Isherwood later described Kathleen's parents Frederick and Emily as "star personalities, demanding complete cooperation from their supporting cast."[36] He presented Henry Bradshaw Isherwood as another star personality, with ostentatiously handsome features suitable for the stage. In this galaxy of stars, Kathleen and Nanny were like stage mothers, training Christopher William, the next generation of talent, to make himself a center of attention wherever he went and launching him into the limelight. On his first Christmas at Marple Hall: "Baby was established in Moey's room,"

Copyrighted Material

Kathleen recorded, "& receiving much attention—he was very good & looked so rosy & well His grandfather sent for him down to the dining room to have his health drunk—"[37]

Nanny created an offstage, where Christopher could retire from the demands of his first public and the pressure of his position as heir. In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood wrote that "he loved Nanny dearly. He bullied her and ordered her around but rewarded her by telling her his secrets . . . He treated her as a familiar with whom he could be shameless and at ease, as a servant with whom he could league himself against his own class."[38]

On his first birthday, Nanny gave Christopher a toy horse, a dobbin. In later years, Isherwood was to take Dobbin as his pet identity, and this pet identity formed the heart of a private world he shared with Don Bachardy, who took the identity of a kitten. Secretly, Isherwood and Bachardy referred to themselves as The Animals, and they evolved an alternative Animal world that afforded them the freedom and security that Isherwood first felt in his nursery. When Christopher was six, his parents brought back from Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina a crockery whistle in the shape of a horse which he kept all his life.

FRANK AND KATHLEEN themselves sometimes privately adopted alternative identities and engaged in quasi-literary role-playing. For instance, in his letters during their courtship, Frank had addressed Kathleen as Elizabeth for Elizabeth Barrett whom he, as Robert Browning, must rescue from her father and marry. From South Africa, he had portrayed himself as a gypsy, longing "to have a little cart and a little tent beside it and wander about from countryside to countryside at your own sweet will, not with a train of soldiers."[39]

Kathleen had an unconventional friendship with a woman about ten years younger than she, Mable Tristram, known as Mamie, who also liked to act out her feelings through role-playing. Mamie met and fell in love with Kathleen soon after Kathleen settled at Wyberslegh. There is no suggestion of a sexual relationship, but Mamie's letters are sensual. She told Kathleen that she wanted to sleep with an umbrella Kathleen had given her and that she was captivated by Kathleen's appearance, for instance on a walk: "When we were 'stuck up' and you were standing on the path I thought you were lovelier than I'd ever seen you."[40]

Sometimes Kathleen expressed impatience with the intensity of Mamie's feelings, but she encouraged the friendship, and she evidently enjoyed the role-playing. She sent Mamie a copy of John Ruskin's *Sesame and Lilies*, in

Copyrighted Material

which Ruskin proposed a chivalric order to instill kingly power in a man and queenly power in a woman. Thereafter, Mamie referred to Kathleen as her Queen, casting herself as Kathleen's handmaiden, writing to her on parchment in illuminated handwriting and sketching yearning figures in medieval dress. She referred to Frank and her own husband, Harold, as mystical personages and as Arthurian knights, alluding to her jealousy of Frank through these fantasy roles.

Mamie had another fantasy in which she and Kathleen were the Ladies of Llangollen, Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, the educated, upper-class women who in 1778 had eloped from their family homes in Ireland and settled at Llangollen in Wales where they created a Gothic house and garden and attracted the attention of the Romantic poets and their circle.

Sometimes Mamie assigned roles from the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson, a favorite author of Frank and a cousin of Kathleen through the Greenes. Thus, Christopher was born into games of pretend already being played around him with great flair—camps of courtly love, Gothic girl love, adventuring love. He was to become a master of this kind of game.

Eventually, the friendship with Mamie shifted into a more conventional emotional register, but Kathleen saved Mamie's letters, and later showed them off to her grown-up sons who laughed excitedly over them. Meantime, Christopher was to follow Mamie's infatuations with glee. At eleven years old, as Kathleen recorded, he baited one crush, a Mrs. Seeley, who had taken control of the Tristram household. Christopher, "knowing all, asked her 'innocently' where she lived, & if she had no home of her own!!"[41]

Christopher was often thrown together with Mamie's son, Leonard Tristram, three years older than he, who was to follow a spiritual path strikingly similar to his own. Leonard Tristram became a disciple of Krishnamurti, the one-time messiah of Theosophy, and settled in California. Isherwood was to draw on Leonard Tristram's life story for his final novel, *A Meeting by the River*.

MOST AUGUSTS, KATHLEEN and Frank spent a week or two in Oxford attending university extension lectures with Emily. Sketching trips abroad took place in October—to Spain in 1905 and 1907; to Italy in 1906 and 1909. It was in 1910 that they ventured to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Dalmatia.

During their absences, Christopher spent more time with his Isherwood grandparents at Marple Hall. Marple "had the self-assured charm of a 'country-seat,'" he recalled in *Kathleen and Frank*. "Coming into the house, you felt at once that you were in a showplace." Indeed, it was ranked "second

Copyrighted Material

to none among the old manor houses of Cheshire" in a lavishly illustrated article published in *Country Life* in the spring of 1919.[42]

The house was E-shaped, to honor Elizabeth, monarch at the time of construction, built of local red sandstone and much remodeled over the centuries. The original low-ceilinged entrance hall still ran all the way through the ground floor, with five or six doors leading off it, a white stone floor set with black marble lozenges and a huge fireplace. There were weapons and suits of armor on display, dower chests, pewter dishes, family portraits, stag heads. The massive black oak staircase mounted from the right side. Upstairs were tall canopy beds, initricately carved and draped; one bedroom included a minstrels' gallery.

The library, with perhaps fifteen hundred books, many behind glass doors in a massive oak bookcase, opened onto "a Victorian Gothic conservatory." The dining room could seat twenty. A Gobelins tapestry, "Winter," covered one wall, and Isherwood recalled, "Over the sideboard was a portrait of Queen Elizabeth in ruff and jeweled stomacher." Over the mantel was a unique double portrait of John Donne and his wife Anne More, harbinger of Isherwood's life theme, the writer and his soulmate, partners despite the opposition of their world.[43]

The drawing room, reached by its own staircase, had more recent formal furniture, another Gobelins tapestry, "Autumn," on the chimney wall,[44] and a massive pink marble fireplace brought back from Venice by Uncle Henry. Two caryatids as tall as a man supported the mantel.

Marple Hall was dark and shadowy, and being set in a hollow, "was apt to make you feel shut in." The interior was mostly paneled in dark oak, some panels decorated with gilded edges and coats of arms, and many of the windows were stained glass, dimming the light. The air was smoky from the chimneys of the nearby mills. "And there was so much furniture," wrote Isherwood.[45]

A shrine to King Charles I, known as King Charles's Closet, faced the foot of the drawing-room stairs in a tiny, dark, oak-paneled room. Here, as Christopher learned growing up, a great-aunt had prayed for forgiveness to an effigy of the martyr king kneeling as he read his death warrant which was signed by Christopher's most notorious forebear, John Bradshaw, the Puritan revolutionary judge appointed by Oliver Cromwell to preside over King Charles's trial. As Christopher also learned, there was a schism in the family between those descendants eager for expiation and those proud of the regicide. Isherwood was to proclaim his pride in the Puritan revolutionary, but over the years, he was to take both sides, and to devise a private myth about heroism that permitted him to reconcile them, as we shall see.

Copyrighted Material

The setting of Marple Hall afforded a dramatic surprise. There was a spectacular drop concealed behind the house. From the terrace, wooded

sandstone cliffs fell two hundred feet into a narrow valley where there was a pond, complete with an island and grotto. The pond had once filled the valley and formed part of the River Goyt which feeds the Mersey, "rapid and foaming yellow with chemicals from the mills" in Isherwood's memory of his childhood. The pond was called the Mere Pool, hence the name Marple.[46]

In 1907, the year Christopher turned three, he and Nanny stayed at Marple Hall in August and again in October and November, and Isherwood later remembered that he had liked to accompany the housemaids on their daily cleaning rounds. "Since Marple had many visitors in those days, some of them unexpected, its show-rooms had to be kept dusted and polished—" Like Christopher in Nanny's overall, Marple Hall had to be kept ready for its public. Christopher liked to be among those putting on the show, the servants: "But when the curtain finally went up, and some of the maids put on starched aprons and became actresses who served lunch in the Dining-Room, then Christopher was excluded. He had to sit still at the table and be waited on. He was just a member of the audience."[47]

Frank oversaw the electrification of Marple Hall, completed in 1904, but what Isherwood recalled in adulthood was "the thrill of visiting the engine-room to watch Coyne, the gardener, start the engine" which powered up the house from the ground floor to the attics. "This always seemed exciting and dangerous, because Coyne, who was muscular but small and light, had to climb onto the great flywheel and use his whole weight to get it moving, leaping off again before it kicked back."[48]

The suits of armor, the Flemish tapestries, the portrait of Elizabeth I, silver tankards, salvers, ancient leather books had all been placed there by previous generations. Christopher's paternal grandparents were mere passengers in a historical trajectory which took little note of them as individual personalities and which did not even permit them to decide what became of the house at their death. Their sons had the same names as their predecessors—Henry, Francis, John. Only a handful of Bradshaw Isherwoods had stood out in a long repetitious tale. During meals, Christopher was trapped in a Jacobean dining chair staring at a tapestry of winter and a painting of a dead virgin queen.

On top of this forced passivity, Marple Hall literally spooked him. He devoted many pages in *Kathleen and Frank* to the Marple ghosts, and one in particular that haunted both him and his younger brother. This ghost was a woman from nearby Brabyns Hall who had married into the Bradshaw Isherwood family, failed to produce an heir, and been sent back to Brabyns. She was known as Moll of Brabyns. "Moll was supposed to have resented the loss of Marple so passionately that her ghost came back to haunt it, looking for her wedding ring . . . Moll was also supposed to hate children, as being usurpers of 'her' property. So she wanted to scare them off the premises."[49]

Copyrighted Material

While his parents were away, Nanny reported to Kathleen that Moll of Brabyns haunted Christopher every night between midnight and 2 a.m. "How she must have reveled in the telling of it and in the knowledge that she was forcing her mistrustful mistress to believe her!" Isherwood wrote. Kathleen recorded it all in her diary. And what a grip it gave Nanny on her infant charge, for as Kathleen noted, "Christopher is naturally a nervous child, and if he ever does wake and find himself alone, shrieks almost hysterically for 'Nanny.' "[50]

In October, the hauntings took a fantastic turn when Christopher was removed from bed in his nursery while Nanny was at servants' supper. "A strange noise" was heard on the terrace outside the servants' hall, and then Christopher appeared inside, calling for Nanny. He reported that his father—more than a thousand miles away in Spain—had carried him downstairs. When Christopher was taken back up to bed, Uncle Jack had to force open the nursery door which was blocked from inside by a chair jammed against a chest of drawers. Isherwood methodically analysed the episode in *Kathleen and Frank* without arriving at the most likely explanation—that the servants were pranking Nanny for making so much of Moll of Brabyns. Perhaps he preferred not to address the loneliness and unease that might have driven Nanny to such behavior.[51]

It was the servants at Marple Hall who evinced vigor and purpose. The maids seemed to have control of the house; Coyne could start the generator; the coachman, Robert Dobson, drove Isherwood's grandfather through the village each day in the family brougham, often with Christopher accompanying, "fetching the papers & ordering the fish & going to bank"; Anne Pott, the housekeeper, assigned bedrooms and finalized menus. The family, like Christopher without Nanny, was helpless alone. The hauntings reflected attitudes and aspirations that could be expressed only in fleeting, indirect snatches, in servants' hall gossip, in grumblings, in jokes and tricks. They were part of the evidence that Marple Hall, and the hierarchical social structure on which it depended, was doomed: "After the First World War it was already obsolete, because it was too big. You couldn't maintain it without a large staff of servants, and servants had now become prohibitively expensive—"[52]

In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood recalled a sensation of relief when he could flip roles and join the haunters:

> Once or twice, when his schoolfriends came to stay, he played "ghosts" with them. They put on sheets and ran around the pitch-black passages or peered in through the kitchen windows from the darkness outside, wailing to scare the maids. From Christopher's point of view the

Copyrighted Material

> curious thing was that, as long as he was playing this game, he lost all his fear of the psychic menace; indeed, he felt that *he was part of it*.[53]

Going over to the other side—be it the dark side or the light side—was a strategy Isherwood used throughout his life to address fear or disillusionment, to negotiate confrontation, to break an impasse, to reach higher ground.[54]

THE MESSAGE FROM Moll of Brabyns to the occupant of the nursery was, essentially, "You do not belong here, you are a usurper," reflecting emotions within the Bradshaw Isherwood family, as well as among the broader household. Matters of precedence and sibling rivalry created intense resentment in all the adults around Christopher. He absorbed it, and it was to inform his mature fiction, particularly in the 1930s, something he never explicitly acknowledged.

In addition to resenting Uncle Henry, Kathleen—unused to siblings—took against her beautiful sister-in-law Esther Toogood and Esther's children, Christopher's first cousins, Joan and Timothy, born 1902 and 1905. To Kathleen, Esther's children ranked below Christopher, because Christopher was the heir and also because Esther had married beneath her. But Esther was a daughter of the house, and whenever the Toogood children stayed at Marple, Kathleen felt crowded out. On more than one occasion, Christopher's overnight visits were canceled. Nanny identified with Kathleen in all of this, on behalf of her charge, and in childhood, Christopher, too, adopted his mother's attitude. Even in *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood did not mention Joan and Timothy Toogood by name.

The fraught relationship between Frank and his brother Henry was made worse in October 1907, when Henry surprised the whole family by becoming engaged to an heiress, Beatrice Muriel Bagshawe. Both Muriel's parents were dead, and Muriel possessed two estates—the grander being The Oakes, near Sheffield, a seventeenth-century mansion with Georgian renovations. She had agreed that children could be raised Roman Catholic. "Poor C. W. his nose already seemed out of joint & his charms to have grown less, in view of his Bagshawe cousins to be!" wrote Kathleen.

Henry and Muriel's wedding was in London in November. Frank and Kathleen were in Spain and so did not attend. In the new year, Henry and Muriel, who adopted the joined surname Bradshaw Isherwood-Bagshawe, gave celebratory dinners for their tenants at The Oakes and at Marple Hall. Again, Frank and Kathleen did not attend. Henry was indignant and wrote Frank a stinging letter. A full-fledged feud was breaking out. To Kathleen,

Copyrighted Material

Frank observed, "If he is suffering so badly from a swelled head, the less we see of him in the future, the better. He writes as if we were in some way his dependants. . . . His tone most high and mighty."[55]

The unexpected marriage was not the first time Henry had toyed with Frank's expectations. Isherwood recalled in his draft for *Kathleen and Frank* that when Henry had entered the Roman Catholic monastery, he "wrote to Frank saying that, having given up the world and its goods, he was glad to think that Frank would be the one to inherit the family property."[56] Frank had looked on Henry as a dynastic cul de sac while seeing himself as the carrier of the true hereditary line of the Bradshaw Isherwood family, the virile, masculine line which had produced a male heir.

Frank was even angrier when he learned eight months after the wedding that Muriel and Henry's lawyers had changed the Bradshaw Isherwood entail to match Muriel's, so that the Marple Estate could be inherited through the female line, doubling the chance that Frank and Christopher might be pushed aside. Henry insisted the change had been forced on them by Muriel's lawyers but acknowledged he had been in a rush to marry. Indeed, he had extravagant habits, and he was happy to sign whatever his rich bride required. Whether or not he deliberately tricked his father, double-crossed his brother, and sold up his nephew, it certainly seemed that way to Frank and Kathleen. Henry's greed and manipulativeness entered family lore, and Isherwood was to build the first of his reputation-making Berlin novels, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935), on behavior like Henry's, using different characters and a German setting to act out the unscrupulous use of nearest and dearest that had electrified his childhood.

WYBERSLEGH HALL WAS not haunted, not fought over. It was bright with sunlight, and in *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood depicted it as belonging to the natural world of landscape and weather rather than to social history, politics, and power. This wild world, in which Kathleen and Frank had been blissfully happy for five years, closed to them in the winter of 1908 when Christopher was three and a half. Frank had to return to his own regiment which was stationed about eighty miles away at York—just the sort of reality that Henry Bradshaw Isherwood never had to face.

They took a tiny cottage in a village called Strensall where Frank taught signaling and his students, junior officers, regularly visited for tea and supper. Christopher's grandfather took him into the soaring Gothic interior of York Minster "to see the old regimental colours that he used to carry,"[57] and Christopher watched the soldiers parade in on Military Sunday.

Copyrighted Material

Frank and Kathleen never lived together at Wyberslegh Hall again. The slow Edenic time into which Christopher had been born became a kind of golden age which Kathleen remembered and referred to as a lost, perfect happiness. Kathleen, Christopher and Nanny became camp followers. They were to move with the regiment twice more over the next six years before breaking up the household altogether when World War I started in 1914.

Their later homes were buffeted less by the Bradshaw Isherwood family dynamic, and they had many additional happy, domestic hours. Still, the hauntings—and the emotional turmoil they embodied—presaged a permanent exile. "I feel like the Israelites journeying across the desert," Kathleen wrote in her diary, "I suppose one gets used to wandering."[58]

The fight with Henry over the entail went on through 1908. Frank was called to London for meetings with the family lawyer, and he and Kathleen were already hunting for another new house at his next posting. Frank broke down under the strain. In September, he had a severe relapse of the typhoid he had caught during the Boer War, "almost as if he had eaten something of a poisonous nature," Kathleen wrote. The doctor prescribed a "mild diet—Tapioca pudding, toast & milk—"[59] The plainest eating would never rid Frank of the germ living in his gut, nor of the family ghosts haunting them all.

FRIMLEY AND ALDERSHOT, 1908

After nine months at York, the Bradshaw Isherwood family relocated more than two hundred miles south, to Aldershot, established in 1854 as the first purpose-built British army camp. There were thousands of soldiers living in the area, along with everything required for housing, feeding, training, arming and transporting them: brick barracks, dining halls, parade grounds, a hospital for the wounded, and a graveyard for the dead. The camp, divided into North Camp and South Camp by the Basingstoke Canal, had its own schools, reservoir, gasworks, power station, and sewage. It was the heart of the British army, and it was still growing.

The Bradshaw Isherwoods settled three miles from camp at Frimley Green, surrounded by woods and ponds. The new house, Frimley Lodge, was bigger and much more to Kathleen's taste than the cottage at Strensall, and it was only forty miles from Emily and the delights of Edwardian London. Here they were to stay for three years, marked by Christopher's first attendance at school and culminating with the birth of his only sibling, Richard, in 1911.

Copyrighted Material

The constant movement to Marple Hall, Bury St. Edmunds, London,

abroad, and even to stay with Henry and Muriel at The Oakes never stopped. Christopher often came along. In April 1909, there was a two-week holiday with Granny Emily in Lyme Regis on the Dorset coast, where he played on the beach every morning, "intensely happy."[60] It was not his first seaside holiday. He had visited Penmaenmawr in Wales when he was just ten months old, and since then Kathleen had taken him to various seaside resorts nearly every year, and sometimes twice. Again and again, she described in her diary his complete physical abandon when he played on the sand by the water's edge, waded, and swam.

Sensitive as he was to the dark threat of Marple Hall, Christopher had an instinct for the light. His earliest summers were a daydream of innocent sensual intoxication. At Frimley, he helped his parents in the garden, planting and tending flowers, vegetables, and fruit for their own table. He and Kathleen took special hedonistic pleasure in the greenhouse, alive with baby fir trees or tomatoes or grapes: "It really is delicious there—quite 'summerland' as Christopher says, & we have long chairs, & get all the sun."[61]

The timeless garden world in which he played at home with his parents was matched by the seaside world where he lost himself with Nanny or all alone, free of fear, and which he sought to recapture in his adult life. For him, these outdoor worlds of garden and shore tapped the transcendent.

But set against these joys were shocks of fear that affected him with growing power. In June 1909, he suffered an extreme fright when he went with his mother and grandparents to see an exhibition of war games. The scale and realism—complete with gigantic mechanized artillery—terrified both him and Kathleen. Until now, Christopher had been thrilled by military shows, but suddenly Frank's army world of parade and flag-draped rituals exploded with chaotic troop movement and overwhelming noise:

> We found ourselves in the midst of a terrific battle, Aldershot supposed to be evacuating & the other side attacking. We looked down over a big valley & miles of country & the big cannons booming off all round us, were awful. C & I hated them & the guns in the trenches made a horribly fearful noise too.[62]

Of course, they did not know this game presaged horrible realities to come in a half-decade.

That October, when Frank and Kathleen returned to Marple Hall from one of their European trips, five-year-old Christopher collaborated with Kathleen on a story she called "The Adventures of Daddie & Mummie, chiefly about himself!"[63] Two versions survive, showcasing his joys and fears. One reports factually on Christopher's life at this time—his grandparents,

Copyrighted Material

the pony hired so he could learn to ride, the dog that walked with them, Old Dash, and the letters and postcards exchanged with his parents abroad. A vivid image is borrowed from a letter describing Florence, "in the garden they wrote and said the peaches hung ripe upon the trees."

In this embryo autobiography, Christopher and Kathleen addressed themes to which Isherwood was to return throughout his career. Already, letters played a role, joining present and absent; already "abroad" was the realm of safety and adventure where an exotic southern garden lured with its fruit. The climax was the return of the travelers just in time for Guy Fawkes Night and Christopher's excitement at being the center of attention when he disguised himself as the Roman Catholic rebel, who was hanged, drawn and quartered for trying to blow up the Houses of Parliament: "when Anne came to the door she saw the little boy dressed up as Guy Fawkes, and lots of other people came to see him, Even the cook, and some of the Maids."[64]

The other version focuses on the frightening backstage area in the attics at Marple Hall, where

> there was a little dark place called the Glory Hole rather like a Dungeon and there was a kind of little low archway with a nasty little hole in the floor, and if you looked down that hole you could see the foundation of the house—It is supposed that in olden days when people were troublesome they threw them down that hole—[65]

That dark hole sucked at Christopher, down into the past, into nothingness. His story announced to his maternal collaborator his determination not to be lost at Marple and not to be forgotten.

ONE OF CHRISTOPHER'S Frimley playmates, Arthur Forbes, made a particularly strong impression on him, and Arthur's mother, Agnes, made a strong impression on Kathleen, who pushed the friendship by allowing Christopher to accept spur-of-the-moment invitations from Arthur and accompanying him herself rather than sending Nanny. The Bradshaw Isherwoods and the Forbeses occasionally dined together in the evening. Major Forbes was descended from the 1st Earl of Granard, founder of his regiment; Agnes was pretty and played the violin. Frank accompanied her at home and in public, and Kathleen was evidently jealous. Her emotions around the friendship seem to have intensified Christopher's emotions toward Arthur, making Christopher feel that the friendship must succeed for his mother's pleasure if not for his own.

Copyrighted Material

As Christopher approached six years old, he was proving increasingly highly strung. Thunder and lightning upset him, playing with friends in new mown-hay made him ill (possibly he was allergic), and he was in tears again when Nanny left for her summer holiday in 1910. While Nanny was away, he experienced another extreme fright, this time on a funfair ride, "the Flying Ostriches, which went up & down & round, & round to sickly music." Humiliatingly, he had to be removed in front of Arthur, who "never turned a hair." Nanny returned that very day, and off went Frank and Kathleen to Oxford, up and down and round and round. By the time they got home again, they found "Poor C looking very pale—" His teeth were aching. Kathleen called in a doctor, who offered a range of worrying advice including circumcision ("a sword to my heart"), consulting an eye doctor, and "drilling to develop chest." The doctor prescribed both a sedative and a tonic.[66]

Kathleen's dentist advised that six-year-old Christopher's molars might be the cause of his misery. The eruptions in his mouth seemed to exacerbate something brewing in his psyche, making him afraid of things previously enjoyed, as Kathleen noted at Marple during August when "Even going on the pony seems to frighten him."[67]

It was decided that Christopher should give up riding the pony, which was sent back to the farmer. The Marple doctor agreed with the dentist, prescribed a tonic plus beef tea every night, and then Virol, a mixture of bone marrow, eggs, malt extract, and lemon syrup. Christopher seemed "brighter" on his return to Frimley, but when Kathleen and Agnes Forbes took him to play in the woods with Arthur, he panicked: "C. all on wires & all nerves terrified if the dog came near him & easily excited & up-set, changing colours quickly."[68]

These were the fears Isherwood evoked half a century later in his first novel written in California, *Prater Violet*, set on the cusp of fascist triumph in Germany and Austria, fears that had made him turn to the spiritual life: "the private fears of childhood . . . fear of the farmer's dog and the vicar's pony, fear of cupboards, fear of the dark passage . . . And behind them, most unspeakably terrible of all, the arch-fear: the fear of being afraid."

Frank supervised calisthenics and gymnastics as advised by the doctor to build up Christopher's chest, drilling Christopher with a friend. He also began to teach Christopher French. A year later, he began teaching him piano, even though it was agreed that Christopher "does not seem to have any particular ear for it."[69]

For Christopher, Frank was a dynamic presence, both in his public role as a soldier and in private as a playmate, storyteller, and teacher. In January 1909, Frank took the lead in an amateur production of John Lenville Hillcox's humorous dialogue, *In Chancery, or, Browne with an E.* Christopher

Copyrighted Material

sensed the excitement, but he was not allowed to see the show. This prohibition launched a tremor of anticipation so intense that Isherwood could summon it again all his life. In *Kathleen and Frank*, he wrote: "they let him peep into the hall just before the performance began and see the audience and the lighted curtain. What he so vividly remembers is the thrill this curtain gave him, with its infinite promise of what it would reveal when it rose."[70] In some of his other mature writing, Isherwood was to use the curtain image to mark the threshold of sexual fantasy at the entrances to bars that were staging areas for life-changing romances—the Cosy Corner, his first ever boy bar in Berlin, and the fictional Starboard Side, based on a real bar, the Friendship, in Santa Monica.

Toward the end of 1910, to help Christopher with his reading, Frank began making a little newspaper, *The Toy-Drawer Times*: "He could draw very fast and also write in block capitals (which were easier for Christopher to read) as quickly as most people could write long hand. He told Christopher the story as he did this. The stories were mostly adaptations from Dumas, Henty, Stevenson, Conan Doyle, H.G. Wells." They kept the newspaper going until Christopher went away to boarding school in 1914, and the authors Frank adapted became favorites of Isherwood in adolescence. Isherwood explained that the newspaper "evolved into a kind of comic strip,"[71] and it also foretold the moving pictures—silent, captioned—that Christopher was soon to see and fall in love with.

FRANK'S PAINTING WAS going well, engendering a crisis. Could he advance to a new level as an artist, perhaps make it the center of his life and turn professional? In February 1910, two of his watercolors were chosen for a show at the Old Dudley Art Society in Mayfair, and he considered retiring from active duty. When he heard that one of the pictures had sold for four guineas—enough to keep a working-class family for a month—he had a relapse of typhoid. He applied for a job in the Cheshire police force but didn't get it. Kathleen hated being an army wife; she wanted a settled home. That November, the Dudley showed three more of Frank's watercolors, and Kathleen recorded that "one was actually sold while he was there!"[72]

In December, Frank was bowled over by the epoch-making exhibition, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists," organized by the art critic Roger Fry to show London audiences what had been happening in French painting. It included work by Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, and marked a cultural watershed, when European ideas broke into the English Edwardian consciousness. Virginia Woolf, a friend of Roger Fry, was to

Copyrighted Material

identify the time of the exhibition as a turning point in human relations and the moment at which the techniques for writing novels, like those for making paintings, had to be made new; "in or about December, 1910, human character changed," she wrote.[73]

Kathleen went with Frank to the exhibition and recorded his enthusiasm, though she like many Londoners did not appreciate the show: "the select few see marvels, & the others jeer! [. . .] Frank liked them enormously & stayed on to gloat!"[74] The newspapers attacked the paintings for rejecting the skills accumulated by artistic tradition in favor of a spurious simplicity. It was pointed out that several of the artists were mad. Frank's own watercolors were not avant-garde, but he could not get enough of the post-impressionists and went back a second time with Emily.

His taste for the new also drew him, solo, to Covent Garden on December 8 to see Strauss's *Salome* performed for the first time in London after a ban by the Lord Chamberlain. The opera was based on a German translation of Oscar Wilde's play written in French (also banned). It had premiered in Dresden in 1905 and attracted controversy for its heavy blend of religion, eroticism, and violence, in particular Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils before her stepfather Herod and her lustful kissing of the severed head of John the Baptist. The version permitted at Covent Garden was not allowed to show the severed head.

Frank liked *Salome* so much that he persuaded Kathleen to accompany him to another performance. "A dish of blood was substituted for the head which seems even more disgusting but it was far less barbaric than I expected," she wrote.[75] Then Frank's excitement took its own erotic direction, spilling over into their physical relationship. During the first week of 1911, Kathleen, who considered her family complete, became pregnant.[76]

Accidents cascaded from Frank's passion and intensity. On Christmas Eve, he sprained his ankle beagling. Nevertheless, he took Christopher to the woods to cut down a holiday fir and ran eight miles across country with his men. At forty-two, he came in 125th out of 300, the fastest runner his age. In January, he fell into the Basingstoke Canal with his bicycle as he rode along in a heavy Burberry coat. He sang in a village entertainment, played bridge, painted, and continued to take Kathleen up to London to see the latest exhibitions and shows.

In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood wrote that in the mornings, he watched his father exercising "in his dressing room, naked except for his undershorts," and he remembered "taking a pleasure which was definitely erotic in the sight of his Father's muscles tensing and bulging . . . and in the virile smell of his sweat."

Copyrighted Material

The earliest overtly sexual fantasy he recollected was about his mother.

He wrote that while still living at Frimley Lodge—so before he was seven and a half years old—he began to masturbate, and that "He imagined himself lying wounded on a battlefield with his clothes partly torn off him, being tended by a woman; Kathleen, no doubt, in disguise. The mood of this fantasy was exhibitionistic; Christopher's own nakedness was what excited him. His 'wounds' were painless." As a wounded, partly naked soldier, Christopher was appropriating his father's identity, but, unlike his father, he was passive.

The man to whom Christopher looked up as a purveyor of knowledge, self-discipline, technical know-how could not be separated from the powerful physical creature who was intensely focused on his own goals. Thus, pedagogy and eros were linked from Isherwood's earliest years, and this link was to play out tellingly in his romantic relationships and his fiction. Sometimes father and son clashed, and Frank would lose his temper and shake Christopher: "Christopher may have been frightened a little, but this too is a sensual memory for him: his surrender to the exciting strength of the big angry man."[77]

When Christopher was six and a half, Frank entered his name for Wellington, the public school founded by the Duke of Wellington for the sons of army officers and regarded as the feeder school for Sandhurst. Frank and Kathleen must have been considering that Christopher might follow his father into the army. Rumors that the York and Lancaster Regiment would be posted abroad had likely prompted them to focus on boarding school, and it was confirmed on the day of their visit to Wellington that the posting would be to Limerick in Ireland.

All through the beginning of 1911, Kathleen felt unwell. By mid-February, she knew she was pregnant, and she lost her self-confidence, lost her social momentum, and lost heart. She went to confide in her mother who was staying at Ventnor, on the Isle of Wight. Christopher and Nanny soon joined them. It was his first visit to the island to which he would often return, and he was, according to Kathleen, "enthusiastic over his 'sea voyage'!!" She took him "to the alluring toy shop where a doll's house was purchased," as if in apology to Christopher for disrupting their ideal home life. The next day she returned alone to Frimley, feeling "seedy" then vomiting during the night.[78] Christopher had not yet been told that he would be playing house in altogether changed circumstances.

Nanny and Christopher stayed on the Isle of Wight until the beginning of March, loosely supervised by Emily and then alone. When they returned to Frimley, Christopher's age-mates were invited to join a regular physical fitness lesson at his house on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Frank gave over the drilling to a Sergeant Sturgess. According to Kathleen, "C. loved it."[79]

Copyrighted Material

Absent from the drilling was Arthur Forbes, who had disappeared from Christopher's life during the autumn of 1910, when Arthur's father was posted elsewhere. Before he left, Arthur gave Christopher a book for his sixth birthday, Beatrix Potter's *The Roly-Poly Pudding*, a gift Isherwood kept all his life.[80] He explained in *Kathleen and Frank* that *The Roly-Poly Pudding* was "one of his great early myth-books," because Marple Hall looked so much like Potter's illustrations of the "old old house" of Mrs. Tabitha Twitchit, "full of cupboards and passages" with thick walls that had "queer noises inside them, as if there might be a little secret staircase" and "odd little jagged doorways in the wainscot." In the story, the rats Samuel Whiskers and Anna Maria attack the runaway Tom Kitten behind the attic skirting board and try to make him into a pudding.[81] The tale was as frightening and beloved as Arthur himself.

The friendship also launched a memoir. Christopher collaborated with Kathleen on *The History of My Friends*, a tiny book which she wrote from his dictation, starting in the winter of 1910–11. The first chapter is about Arthur and tells that Christopher fought with him "when the Nannies weren't looking." Now, in hindsight, Christopher wished to commemorate Arthur as if he were a fallen hero: "I have got some Laurel Bushes in my garden, and sometimes we had games there too, we each had our own branches. Now that Arthur is gone, I begin to feel very sorry and perhaps I shall put up a monument to him and hang it on his branch where he got."[82] Arthur had burnished his glamour by leaving town, and Christopher did not find any of his other friends quite so captivating nor so challenging.

The History of My Friends established a principle in Christopher's life, that to have a friend is an achievement and worth writing about. The principle shaped many of his later books, both fiction and memoir. Collaborating with Kathleen on *The History of My Friends* taught Christopher, also, that friendship could be a performance, acted out for the entertainment of others. Performance was to inform many of Isherwood's later friendships and his writing, in which he often built his narrative on a portrait of a friend and on the development of the relationship. From a tiny age, he was committed to having a friend rather than losing one, even when he felt overwhelmed, disappointed, or betrayed, and he was also committed to gaining the upper hand by transforming the friend into a story.

Kathleen's women friends doted on Christopher, and some took him on his own for meals and outings. Kathleen hosted a tea party for his favorites and then felt embarrassed when he showed off reciting prayers and hymns. Mrs. Cooke, wife of Frank's commanding officer, preserved until the 1930s a silver pocket book in which Chistopher printed for her, "I love you . . . & 'do you love me' with many xxxs."[83]

Copyrighted Material

One day Christopher and Kathleen "dressed up" and "pretended to be at a ball!" Isherwood recalled that he wore Kathleen's clothes and they danced a set dance, the Sir Roger de Coverley, at which Kathleen had been expert since parties in girlhood:

> Dressing-up meant the excitement and safety of disguise, you had to transform yourself as much as possible, so it was natural that you should change your sex. Kathleen didn't discourage this at all; she draped him in a silk petticoat and let him wear her furs and necklaces and even her switch [. . .] a lock cut from her own hair which she sometimes used to give body to the elaborate hairdos of that period.[84]

He was not only playing the part of a woman, he was playing the part of his mother, acting out the dynamic of their relationship in which they moved easily in and out of each other's minds, experiencing each other's emotions, flipping roles. Later, in his writing, Isherwood was to project aspects of himself through various women characters—Sally Bowles, Elizabeth Rydal in *The World in the Evening*, Maria Constantinescu in *Down There on a Visit*, and Charlotte Wildstein in *The Englishwoman*, his abandoned draft for *A Single Man*.

HE STARTED SCHOOL on May 1, 1911, with a neighbor, who taught five boys at his house. He loved it right away and took his class rank so seriously that he turned down a trip to London to see the street decorations for the coronation of George V: "C. is afraid of being bottom of his class if he went!"[85]

Relations among the boys were intense. "C. returned from school rather in disgrace I fear, & afterwards the other little boy's [*sic*] all ran after him . . . the one idea seems to be to fight each other," wrote Kathleen. He was not quick at sums, and he sometimes clowned. Still, by the end of his first term, he was delighted to win the prize for highest marks.[86]

Now that he had found something in which he *could* come first, Christopher became more self-confident with his age-mates, but he still had irrational fears. One schoolmate, Jack Biddulph, terrified him with a paper snake. Kathleen purchased a compressible wire snake for Christopher to get used to on his own, and he shortly came "home in triumph" having "torn in two" Jack's snake over tea, much to Kathleen's satisfaction.[87]

The snake phobia never went away. In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood Copyrighted Material described a recurring nightmare about a cobra which followed him along streets, through houses, and even through the ranks of Frank's soldiers lined

up on parade, but which never caught him. Vipers and cobras were to feature in some of his early writing, including the Mortmere stories, partly inspired by Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band," by Kipling's "Rikki-Tikki-Tavi," and by the vipers in George Borrow's *Lavengro* and *The Romany Rye*.

Kathleen saw a link between Christopher's phobias and his struggles with his friends, and she observed that he was happiest playing alone, in particular with a theater he made for himself out of a Quaker Oats box, "anything to do with plays [he] is wild about!" That spring, he fell in love with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* after seeing "pictures of the play in the illustrated papers."[88] Herbert Beerbohm Tree's spectacular production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* opened on April 17, 1911—a revival of his 1900 production—featuring live rabbits scampering on real grass, sparkling electrical lights on Titania's headdress, child extras to swell the fairy numbers, and countless other details of costume, lighting, and staging that made the enchanted wood come to life in Christopher's six-year-old imagination. Only a few months earlier, he had been taken to see the London department store Christmas decorations including "the Pixie's Cave, which he simply loved: it was all illuminated & toy rabbits ran up winding paths in a glen & fetched back presents!"[89] Kathleen read him Charles and Mary Lamb's version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* aloud, and he drew pictures of the fairies—Puck, Oberon, and Mustard Seed—and Snug the joiner.[90]

The vision stayed with Isherwood for the rest of his life. In 1970, he watched the Royal Ballet perform Frederick Ashton's adaptation at Covent Garden. Isherwood's friend Wayne Sleep danced Puck; Alexander Grant danced Bottom; tears of joy streamed down Isherwood's face. "For me, the magic quality of *The Dream* is that it seems to express pure happiness," he wrote in his diary. "The world of Fairyland is full of tiffs and feuds but they aren't serious, they are high camp, and high camp is happiness. Puck's relations with Oberon are so beautiful and animal, his vanity is beautiful."

Here was a timeless realm in which sexual affinities were changeable and amorphous, misadventure was only play, unhappy love was both caused and righted by the mischief of fairies, and no real harm could befall anyone. The relation between Oberon and his jesting, imperfect servant Puck offered one model of Isherwood's relation with his father in childhood and, with roles changed, his relation with Bachardy in maturity.

At Covent Garden in 1970, the tears came at "the first modest steps which Alexander Grant essays on his hoofs" because Bottom the weaver, transformed by Puck into an ass, acted out Isherwood's own private identity as Dobbin. Bottom is doted on by the fairy queen as if he were perfect; thus, his wobbly innocence offered an ideal of Isherwood's relation with his mother in childhood. Christopher's feelings for his mother and father had

Copyrighted Material

naturally seemed to him more important than their feelings for one another. Even in 1970, Isherwood still saw the adult marriage relationship in the play, between Oberon and Titania, as "merely ceremonious and frigid and uninteresting."[91]

IN MARCH 1911, Frank exhibited at the Old Dudley Art Society for the third time, submitting four pictures—scenes in Spain—which were all hung. Notices in *The Times* and the *Evening Standard* both mentioned his work, among more than 250 pieces: "well above an amateur standard," wrote the reviewer for *The Times*.[92] Frank haunted the private view. Then in mid-May, he was promoted to Major, delighting Christopher, as Kathleen recorded: "The Nursery decorated in his honour & the doll & Teddy Bears in their best, with devices—'Welcome to the Major' 'Congratulations to Major & Mrs. Isherwood & their little boy' etc!"[93]

Kathleen was increasingly unwell and unhappy. She feared the labor and was far more anxious than during her first pregnancy. A London doctor prescribed medication to control her nerves. At the end of July, a new development pushed her to the brink of hysteria. The regiment's move to Ireland was to occur just before the expected birth. Frank had applied for leave so he could stay behind with her, but Colonel Cooke gave it to a more senior officer, Major Ashton. It was already too late to get settled in Ireland before the baby arrived. Kathleen grew more upset. Frank went to London to talk things over with Emily, and they decided that he should leave the army. Kathleen tormented herself for the rest of the summer over how she was ruining Frank's life.

Frank genuinely feared for her health, perhaps for her life, and for the baby's. He may have wished for a calmer wife or a more robust one, but there is no evidence that he blamed her. On the contrary, it seems that he blamed himself for the pregnancy and internalized his guilt and dismay with consequences for his health and for his feelings about the new baby when it finally arrived.

He worried greatly about the loss of pay, including a pension due officers who had served twenty years; he had served nineteen and a half. He looked for other jobs and still hoped to become a professional painter. He resigned in mid-August and distracted himself by making up stories for Christopher. One which he had been making up since Wyberslegh days was about Christopher's two Buster Brown rag dolls, Bobbie and Albert. Buster Brown was an American cartoon strip character who spawned his own Broadway show and a line of children's shoes. The cartoon character had a blond pageboy

Copyrighted Material

haircut, elaborate, girlish clothes remarkably like Christopher's, and was full of youthful mischief. He was accompanied on his adventures by a faithful talking dog, Tige, a pit bull, whose words only he could hear. Buster was evidently the first of the boy scamps on whom Isherwood later doted in movies, and Tige was a forerunner of the talking dog in the play that Isherwood wrote with Auden, *The Dog Beneath the Skin, or Where Is Francis?*.

Frank hoped to publish a children's book with his illustrations, and he read the story aloud to his close friend, the Irish writer Ethel Colburn Mayne, with Christopher evidently listening, too. According to Kathleen, Mayne thought the story "delightful,"[94] but there is no evidence that she guided Frank toward a publisher. This episode was to be repeated fourteen years later, when Isherwood decided to submit his first novel to the very same judge for her professional opinion. Like Frank's story of Bobbie and Albert, Isherwood's first novel was never published.

Christopher's seventh birthday was celebrated in Frimley with a last voyage by punt along the Basingstoke Canal into the summer woods, his dream realm of freedom and affection, where, according to Kathleen, the charmed foursome—Christopher, Nanny, Kathleen, Frank—had picnic tea "just as we have done for the last three years in just the same spot!—"[95]

Frank took another step along his bohemian road when, on September 9, he found an art school in Reading to attend that autumn. But the enormous tension in the small family continued. There was gossip about Frank leaving the regiment; nobody had expected him to resign over Kathleen's pregnancy. He fell ill, evidently with another relapse of typhoid.

Ambivalence and regret culminated on September 21 when the regiment held a farewell dinner for Frank, "wearing his uniform for the last time," as Kathleen wrote, "a desperately trying evening for him."[96] Major Ashton's leave was canceled because, without Frank, Ashton was required as the only major. When the regiment finally left, Frank attended his first life-drawing class at Reading, and Christopher had tea with Nicky Ashton, a frequent playmate, who was waiting to be called to Limerick with his mother. Mrs. Ashton's bouquets and apologies that her husband's leave had taken precedence over Frank's—triggering Frank's resignation—could not placate an embarrassed, haughty Kathleen.

IN THE ILLUSTRATED papers, Christopher discovered another Shakespeare play, *Macbeth*, starring Herbert Beerbohm Tree,[97] and Kathleen read the story aloud to him from Lamb's *Tales of Shakespeare*. *Macbeth* was to become as important to him as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the hell to its

Copyrighted Material

heaven, haunted by supernatural malevolence and dark prophecy, teeming with images of rivalry, worldly ambition, and death. Here in the open was the passion for position that bubbled beneath the surface in the Bradshaw Isherwood family. At Marple Hall, Christopher was surrounded by weapons and armor. He was heir to a mythology of regicide. His mother smoldered with hopes for his future even if she lacked the bloody resolve of Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth was to offer a shorthand, too, for emotions that energized Isherwood's literary friendships, in particular with Auden, Stephen Spender, and Edward Upward, right to the end of Isherwood's career. When Spender was knighted in 1983, he was too embarrassed to inform Isherwood, because in their anti-Establishment youth, Spender had made fun of Auden for turning up at Buckingham Palace to accept the 1937 King's Gold Medal for Poetry from George VI. Spender was unabashedly ambitious for worldly acclaim; the other three insistently mocked it. "Edward Upward, in a letter, made us roar with laughter by quoting Banquo's line: 'Thou hast it now . . .' "[98] wrote Isherwood in his diary. (Banquo, guessing that Macbeth has murdered Duncan to gain the crown, rightly fears he may soon be a ghost himself.)

One image in a 1911 *Illustrated London News* showed Macbeth and McDuff in armor with swords and shields, about to fight. This kind of image, two men poised for combat, was to be offered to Christopher again and again—on the stage, in movies, in works of literature. It figured throughout Isherwood's imaginative and erotic life. Christopher made his own drawings of warriors, too. "The Duel," dated 1911, shows two brightly colored knights ready to close on each other. Other drawings show Christopher's fascination with the chivalric way of life: "In the Fight," "The Hunt," and "Pagaent" (as he spelled it).[99]

On September 22, Kathleen hinted to Christopher that a young rival might soon appear in his own household. He appeared untroubled by talk of the new baby; at seven, he was focused on rivalries with his peers at school. Just a week later, Kathleen's waters broke early: "a son was actually born by 1:15 a.m. Oct 1st rather a disappointment it was not the longed for daughter however F prefers sons," she wrote. In another diary entry, she pretended to talk herself out of wanting a daughter, but in 1934, when Richard was twenty-three, Kathleen told a friend, "Richard is such a good 'daughter' to me!"[100] As a daughter, Richard was as uncomfortably miscast as Christopher in his role of heir to the estate, but unlike Christopher, Richard gradually submitted to his mother's half-conscious fantasy and stayed at home keeping Kathleen company all her life.

Christopher was awakened in the night to see his mother and his new brother. Then, on October 3, he and Nanny were sent to stay with friends. Pushed from the center of family life, Nanny grew resentful. As Kathleen fell

Copyrighted Material

under the soothing spell of the maternity nurse, Nanny warned her "how ill the Major looked, which of course upset me dreadfully."[101]

Frank continued to keep silent at this crossroads in his life, but he never formed a strong positive attachment to Richard. After all, Richard was the second son that Frank himself had never been content to be, while Christopher, as heir, promised eventual triumph over the elder brother whom Frank resented and did not respect.[102]

Kathleen, turning forty-three that October, was exhausted by Richard's birth, and Richard had difficulty feeding. At four days old, he refused Kathleen's breast, and the next day, he "even refused his bottle & roared late on into the night."

Then, suddenly, the uncompromising rule of the army again interposed: "A bomb from Ireland came this morning—a letter from the Colonel enclosing communication from War Office—Frank's retirement not accepted unless he goes to the Militia for five years—this means a month's training each August, & might interfere with his taking another job."[103] Frank now had to decide all over again whether or not to leave the army. As a father of two and husband to a woman who required substantial care and comfort, he evidently saw no choice. That autumn, he had five pictures exhibited in a new show at the Dudley, more than ever before, but by mid-October, he was getting estimates for the cost of moving his family to Ireland.

Christopher marked an end to his involvement with the dollhouse that Kathleen had bought him on the Isle of Wight by writing a letter to his mother addressed to the family home from which he and Nanny had been excluded, and adding more than fifty supplicating Xs: "I have packed up the dolls house it is broken."[104] Indeed, it was.

When he returned to Frimley Lodge, Kathleen wrote, "Poor C rather hurt in his mind thinking R was receiving more attention than himself." Nanny was banished on holiday, and Christopher slept in his mother's room in the bed usually occupied by his father. He was bathed and dressed by the maternity nurse. His father walked him back and forth to school, then the cook, then an acquaintance. He focused on regaining his position with Kathleen. On October 29, when she at last dressed to come downstairs for Sunday lunch, he was invited out with friends, but "my first appearance so he refused to go—"[105] Two days later, aiming to impress, he dressed himself for the first time in his life.

In mid-November, the baby was christened Richard Graham Bradshaw Isherwood (partly to honor a bachelor cousin, Sir William Graham Greene, a distinguished civil servant). Then, the maternity nurse departed, and Nanny at last took charge of her new, larger nursery: "with the 2 beds & cot in a row—"[106]

Copyrighted Material

Frank left for Ireland at the end of November. Christopher was looking

forward to a day in London and the fulfillment of his most ardent wish—to attend the theater. Off he went with Kathleen on December 6, 1911, to see this year's mechanized Christmas decorations and afterwards to the Coliseum.

He saw "a playlet called *The Slum Angel*," part of a variety show, as he recalled in *Kathleen and Frank*: "a real motor-car and a coach with live horses were driven onto the stage. Christopher can remember his almost frantic delight at this. [. . .] it seemed to destroy the barrier between everyday life and make-believe. If *this* could happen in a theater then anything was possible *anywhere*!"[107]

In *The Slum Angel*, two members of the upper classes venture into east London to take a group of poor children for a day in Epping Forest. Thus, on this early, spectacularly sentimental occasion, crossing the barrier between imagination and reality coincided with crossing another barrier—between classes. This combination of transgressions was to excite Isherwood again and again as his imagination developed in the years to come.

The miracle of theater was closely associated for Christopher with the miracle of Christmas. For several years, he had been dressing up as St. Nicholas to give out gifts at his annual Christmas tree party. In 1910 for Christmas, he had received toy theaters from two of his playmates who already recognized his obsession. In 1911, on Christmas morning, he received a large and splendid toy theater which surpassed all his earlier ones, and within a few months, he was to establish himself as a boy impresario.

While Kathleen and Frank attended a touring production of *Macbeth*, Christopher, left at home, launched his own Shakespeare season. "He pinned posters on the nursery door and expected Kathleen, Frank and Nanny to attend every performance."[108] He began with *Macbeth*, drastically abridging to include only scenes of violent murder and haunting guilt. He soon abridged *Othello* the same way.

For actors, he cast the china animals from his nursery mantelpiece. He preferred them to the cut-out cardboard kings and queens that came with the theater because, he later explained in *Kathleen and Frank*, he was more interested in the essential mythic qualities of his characters' experience than in the realistic details. The china animals had long been part of Christopher's imaginative life. In Frimley, aged five, he had given them a Christmas tree party, digging up a pine tree with Frank and lighting it with candles bought with his pocket money. The china figures were *animals*—creatures as in Beatrix Potter's books—not people with conventional prescribed identities. They had pleased him in many fantasies, and they were reliably under his control. When he later created fictional characters, he likewise used figures familiar to him—from life and from books—then added realistic surface details both to disguise the identity of his original model and to reveal the essential qualities that interested him.

Copyrighted Material

LIMERICK, IRELAND, 1912

Limerick was the main port on Ireland's west coast, in the estuary of the River Shannon. Irish forces withstood a number of English sieges at Limerick in the seventeenth century, and Irish-Catholic supporters of James II made their last stand behind its medieval fortifications before being expelled to France in 1691. Afterwards, Catholics were banned from public office, from owning land, from voting, from practicing their religion in public, while the Protestant upper class, both Irish and English, prospered through the Atlantic trade. The town was expanded in the Georgian style during the late eighteenth century, with wide streets and crescents lined with terraced houses. During the Great Famine in the 1840s, Irish-grown staples like oats and wheat were shipped out of Limerick to England even though the Irish were starving to death, and shipments were sometimes protected by British troops. Tens of thousands of Irish emigrated via Limerick to North America and elsewhere.

Kathleen left Christopher and Richard at Marple Hall with Nanny and went ahead to meet Frank. It was Frank's third tour in Ireland, and the pressure to ensure Kathleen's happiness there was enormous. Two days after she arrived, he had another of his accidents while running with his men and cut an arm and a knee badly. The knee became infected, and Frank was confined to a wheelchair. It was one way to let his wife know that he could not carry all their burdens alone.

She viewed sixteen Limerick houses, rejecting everything in the grander Georgian streets—too large, too many stairs, not intimate. At last, she found Roden House, "a queer attractive rambling old place," tucked behind a recently built technical school and adjacent to the barracks. A glass veranda ran the length of the downstairs and looked onto a fountain and a "spreading apple tree." Steps led down to a vanished orchard through an iron gate with crumbling pillars topped by urns. Upstairs, there were seven windows across the front, "An old beamed anteroom occupied the centre, with stained floor . . . and from this the other rooms wandered away." The layout defied military order and sameness. "There was something very romantic too and un-obvious about it all," as Kathleen later wrote.[109]

Christopher arrived by steamship in Dublin with Nanny and Richard on February 15, 1912. Kathleen met them, and they spent a night in Ross's hotel before continuing to Limerick by train. He began school two days later. In fact, it was Miss Mary Mercer's high school for girls, attended by a few boys. Before the end of his second week, Christopher was having snake nightmares and had stopped eating properly. He was sent home early, where he grew worse and vomited: "I think the change & excitement have been rather

Copyrighted Material

much for him," observed Kathleen. He "complained of the children being noisy & rough," which disappointed her.[110]

By late March, he was securely at the top of his class even though he struggled to find friends. He, Nanny, and Richard caught colds that went savagely to their chests, partly because they were breathing in large amounts of coal smoke inside Roden House. The chimneys in the drawing room and nursery did not draw, which had been concealed from Kathleen by the house agent.

All through his first school term, Christopher went on coughing until he was finally put to bed. He was far more anxious than anyone realized, and he must have sensed Kathleen's impatience which she confided often to her diary: "if he moves much he still coughs a good deal & seems also in a nervous state crying almost hysterically over the idea of the asp, which he saw a picture of in the illustrated Shakespeare of Cleopatra & which terrified him . . ."[111]

He was evidently looking at Cassell's *Illustrated Shakespeare*, which shows Cleopatra fondling the asp and one of her women already dead, with the caption, "Come, thou mortal wretch / With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsicate / Of life at once untie."[112] In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood explained of Cleopatra's suicide with the asp, "when younger, he had believed that she actually swallowed it and that it bit her inside, which seemed to him superlatively loathsome." He jokingly threw in a Freudian interpretation about serpents, "that his fear was nothing but a repressed longing to submit to anal intercourse."[113] It was a suggestive aspect of his snake phobia, perhaps revealing more unconscious sexual fantasies about his father and mother. More plainly, the worm of jealousy had been eating young Christopher since the birth of his brother. "C seems to have grown so much quieter than he used to be & quite retiring & shy," Kathleen wrote in her diary. "Richard's advent has rather put him in the background as far as strangers are concerned."[114] Everyone admired the baby, not the boy.

CHRISTOPHER CONTINUED UNWELL, wakeful and vomiting, and seemed too delicate for boyish life in Limerick. Next was a nosebleed, possibly from dehydration as well as the smoke in the nursery. He was never diagnosed with whooping cough, but Kathleen so feared it that she applied the name to his cough, as she was to do with other illnesses later on.

Limerick thoroughly suited Frank, who threw himself back into military life with vigor. His injured knee healed; he ran eight miles and "came in about 150th out of 600," as Kathleen proudly reported.[115] He was often away on training schemes, night attacks, campouts, even court martials. At home,

Copyrighted Material

he worked in the garden, assisted by Christopher, and he painted, often in the glass porch, making a subject of Roden House and the apple tree.

Frank also introduced Kathleen and Christopher to the countryside, taking them for drives on Saturday afternoons at a steady clip-clop southwest toward the Clare Hills and the Galtees, then back through Corbally for a scenic view of Limerick Cathedral with bridge and river in the foreground. He bought a mare who was to become a personality in all their lives, proving to be as high-strung, time-consuming, attractive and enduring as Kathleen herself. They called the mare Kitty, which had been Frank's nickname for Kathleen since the days of their courtship. Frank, Kathleen, and Christopher were pulled along through the Irish landscape by this horse-kitten anima much as Frank was pulled along all his married life by Kathleen. Thus, the slow-paced horse-drawn world that Christopher's father grasped by the reins was charged with the unpredictable drama and excitement of Christopher's beautiful mother. The horse-kitten anima was to reappear in the secret myth world of Isherwood and Bachardy. Isherwood's nickname for Bachardy, too, was Kitty.

Kathleen struggled like Christopher to form a new social circle. She did not know how to mingle outside the social parameters in which she had been raised; she automatically befriended the colonel's wife, and even the wife of another major, but recoiled from the wives of officers ranking beneath Frank, the subalterns. Organized religious services were among the things she enjoyed most easily, and she went often. In church, the order of service was printed in advance and the hierarchy was crystal clear, with God at the top, where everyone could look up to Him.

She worried about Christopher's difficulties interacting with other children without recognizing how much his behavior mirrored her own. He expected his childhood friends to treat him with ceremony and found unsupervised play difficult. He was especially challenged by a pair of Irish twins, Bob and Jack Armstrong, partly because there were always two of them. He pushed himself to the limit in their presence, and Kathleen noted that "he always seems to manage some mishap when he goes there!"[116]

In *The History of My Friends*, Christopher and Kathleen wrote of Bob and Jack Armstrong: "A governess called Miss Smith was with them till last Christmas and she made things very nice when I went . . . but after she left there was a great difference and somehow we did not seem to get on so well."[117] He was happiest at school where, as for Kathleen in church, the program was planned in advance and the hierarchy was clear, with the teacher to look up to at the front.

In later years, Isherwood was to undergo an extreme and difficult inward revolution, throwing off his mother's shyness and snobbery in order to embrace the so-called inferiors that she feared and did not understand—the

Copyrighted Material

servants, the life of the streets, the boys of the Berlin slums, and the barely clothed beachgoers of Santa Monica who knew each other by first name only without any title or rank or by no name at all. In order to change in this way, Isherwood used instincts that his mother possessed but which she directed only toward her intimate family circle—intuition about the inner life revealed through small gestures of dress, behavior, and speech. What Kathleen could read in Frank or her mother and father, Isherwood learned to read in strangers. He was able to get onto an intimate footing with foreigners, outsiders, and "inferiors," and to charm them.

Auden "couldn't understand my capacity for making friends with my inferiors," Isherwood was to write in the 1970s. The theater critic Kenneth Tynan, by contrast, admired in Isherwood "the classlessness that he shares with almost no other British writer of his generation. (I've seen him in cabmen's pull-ups and grand mansions, with no change in manner or accent.)"[118]

IN THE SUMMER of 1912, Christopher made friends with a bossy, imaginative, and savage little girl called Mirabel Cobbold, daughter of Frank's new commanding officer, freshly settled opposite the Bradshaw Isherwoods. As with Arthur Forbes, Christopher was transfixed by a strong personality that threatened to overwhelm him. Mirabel was another only child—like Arthur and his mother, like Kathleen, like Christopher before the arrival of Richard.

Kathleen encouraged the friendship, even though Mirabel brought out in Christopher the passivity that Kathleen deplored. "She hits him & teases him & gives him things & takes them away but he seems to have no sense of retaliation, & never attempts to hit back, & does just as she tells him." Mirabel was three and a half months older, "a head taller," and far more confident. She stole the show from Christopher's other playmates: "it is quite extraordinary the influence Mirabel has on him, how he believes all she says & how he follows her like a dog."[119]

They shared a tempestuous imaginative life. "Mirabel & Christopher played Swiss Family Robinson (which he is now reading!) in the yard of the Technical, fighting wild beasts & sailing on imaginary rafts," wrote Kathleen in her diary at the end of August 1912. Behind Roden House, there was an empty piece of ground that belonged to the technical school. Abandoned materials from design and building projects—"planks, barrels, packing cases, detached doors, broken laboratory apparatus, wire, rope, plumbing fixtures, sheets of glass," as Isherwood recalled in *Kathleen and Frank*—were ideal for making ships, rafts, and huts for desert island adventures.[120]

Copyrighted Material

Mirabel grew up to be a writer like Isherwood and unleashed her

personality in her books. There were two fantasy adventure novels leavened with sex, violence, and criminality, *Deborah Lee* (1930) and *Sea-Tangle* (1931), which she wrote soon after being widowed in her first of three marriages. She worked as a journalist in China, Japan, and Macedonia, and published two nonfiction books about her real-life adventures as a member of South Africa's white women's voting and education rights movement, and as a participant in the first trans-African waterways expedition, up the Zambesi, across the interior, and down the Congo.[121]

There is no evidence that Isherwood read Mirabel Cobbold's books;[122] still, he was familiar with the intensity and self-belief with which she delivered them. Themes that appealed to her appealed to him, too, including orphans from privileged backgrounds who travel the world and prevail over fear and cruelty. Theirs was the authorized fantasy world offered to children in classics of English literature in the early twentieth century, acted out in make-believe, repeated to friends at school, imagined again and again.

At ages seven and eight, the frenzy and unpredictableness of Mirabel Cobbold's playing thrilled Isherwood. All his life, he was to seek similar challenges in friendship. In artistic collaboration he was to become a master at directing such imaginative energies, but he did not collaborate with women later on, and sometimes his friendships with women foundered because he allowed himself to be loved, bossed, and managed up to a point and then dismissed any woman who invaded his emotional life too closely or who failed to understand his sexuality. The friendship with Mirabel Cobbold foreshadowed other "big sisters" that Isherwood was to adopt in adulthood, and Mirabel was a forerunner of the fictional character Sally Bowles, yet she was not described in *The History of My Friends*. That original collaboration with Kathleen admitted only boys of a certain class and education.

ON HIS EIGHTH birthday, Christopher received an extraordinary new device from his father: a magic lantern—precursor to slide projectors—that projected images from glass plates: "never had he imagined anything quite so delightful! & he could hardly leave it for a moment."[123] He remained obsessed for months, commanding others to his magic lantern shows just as he did to his toy theater performances.

His world was about to become even brighter, for during September 1912, a cinema opened at 69 George Street. "C. has been excited for weeks past," noted Kathleen.[124] It was called the Gaiety, and it was to give Christopher as much pleasure as anything in his life so far.

Copyrighted Material

Isherwood recalled in *Kathleen and Frank* that "Christopher's lifelong

devotion to the movies began as an indiscriminate appetite for any two-dimensional happening on a lighted screen in a dark theater." The content mattered so little that he later found it "hard to remember individual film actors or films from the Limerick days."[125] It was the play of light in darkness that captivated him—like the night light in the nursery where he was safe with Nanny, candles on Christmas trees, a Penny Bazaar lantern carried by his mother through a darkened house in a game of make-believe about a forest,[126] the light on the stage curtain at Frimley when he had been too young to see his father in *In Chancery*, *or Browne with an E.*, the beams from his magic lantern.

The cinema screen was itself a threshold between reality and make-believe, and his sense of excitement on that threshold never abated. The movie projection was not threatening because it was delivered by a machine, and the darkness offered Christopher anonymity and physical repose. Self-consciousness fell away; he need not perform or attract attention.

Companions to watch with also made him feel safe. First, there was Nanny, then Kathleen and Frank, and later there was a Limerick friend, Eddie Townshend, met at the Wednesday-afternoon drill classes launched by the regiment in mid-October. Isherwood later recalled that Eddie Townshend "needed someone smaller and weaker than himself to boast to and protect . . ."[127]

CHRISTOPHER WAS AT last getting comfortable with moving around. At Christmas 1912, the Bradshaw Isherwoods decamped to Marple Hall, the only time they made the Irish journey as a family. Christopher reveled in the trip and sent postcards to his Limerick playmates from on board ship. For Christmas that year, Frank gave him a globe, and Christopher's other gifts also fed his growing appetite for faraway places: "an atlas, & books about Australia & Canada 'Near Home & Far Off' all of which he liked much as he loves geography."[128] When he shortly had the run of a Penny Bazaar, he added a series called *Peeps at Many Lands*.

Kathleen continued to be the main figure in his religious education, dividing his worship between home services she devised, the garrison church, and, later, Limerick Cathedral, a twenty-five-minute walk from Roden House. One rainy Sunday, "for a sermon," she began to read Christopher *Pilgrim's Progress*. "What shall I do to be saved?" asks Christian, "Whither must I fly?" Down the years, Isherwood was to ask himself the same questions, time and again, as he hurried and over-hurried along his own pilgrim route. They also began the catechism, to which Christopher was to give his responses out loud hundreds of times until he was confirmed at Repton six and a half years later in November 1919. These teachings, too, he took earnestly to heart, promising to

Copyrighted Material

renounce the devil and his works and "all the sinful lusts of the flesh," to believe in the Christian faith, and to live by God's will and the ten commandments.[129]

At eight and a half, his life was a constant effort at self-improvement, both physical and spiritual. In addition to drill, which he found difficult now, there were dancing classes at a local hotel and piano lessons with one of his schoolteachers. Even in the holidays, he practiced his multiplication tables and his catechism. Shortly, Kathleen began reading him *A History of England*, a collaboration between Rudyard Kipling and the imperialist historian C.R.L. Fletcher in which the forging of the empire, "the great cause of freedom and Protestantism," was a project just like Christopher. "England's being hammered, hammered, hammered into one!" ran one of Kipling's incantatory poems about England's destiny to subdue other peoples.[130]

Christopher was remorselessly assessed by Kathleen and, increasingly, by himself. In some ways, he was painfully backward, just learning to cut up his own food, use a knife and fork, tie his shoes. Kathleen's wish for him to be tougher and more masculine contradicted the Christian teachings and feminine sensibility in which she schooled him. He tried to please her in all things, and already he was able to present an untroubled surface concealing inner turmoil. His teacher at Miss Mercer's, taken in by this smooth surface, wrote to Kathleen: "Your boy is a most satisfactory pupil in every way, decidedly clever and original, as well as being attentive. He is so straightforward and reliable that I often think he would make an ideal clergyman."[131]

But fear was never far off, especially in Christopher's inner world. One day, Kathleen recorded that Mrs. Cobbold "disturbed me a good deal about Christopher, he so easily gets over excited & frightens himself over the stories he tells himself . . . & he is always telling himself stories . . ."[132]

The Easter holidays 1913 saw Christopher's second Shakespeare season—*Hamlet*, *As You Like It*, *Macbeth*—for an audience of dolls and teddy bears. Probably around this time, he also acted out a play he wrote himself, *La Lettre*, in French and evidently influenced by Sarah Bernhardt who had become his idol as well as Granny Emily's. Isherwood described the play in *Memoirs of Pine House*, a fictionalized memoir that he began in 1931 and soon abandoned: "a lady received a letter to say that her son is dead. Whereupon she exclaims, 'O! Il est mort' and falls to the earth."[133]

The play, of course, dramatized Christopher's fantasy that he was the chief object of his mother's affection and that his death would undo her. This fantasy was to be shredded by his father's death two years later, a reality that Isherwood did not mention in *Kathleen and Frank*. According to *Memoirs of Pine House*, the play was banned by Frank: "One day, during a party, I appeared wearing a skirt made out of the nursery table-cloth and performed this play in public. The guests were amused. But my father forbade me ever

Copyrighted Material

to do such a thing again." Much later, the adult Isherwood insisted Frank was annoyed because the child Christopher invaded the party "without previous announcement or permission," yet Isherwood knew that his craving for attention had been the real problem: "The indulgent applause of his captive audiences went to his head. He wanted more and more of it."[134]

IN APRIL 1913, Kathleen moved Christopher from Miss Mercer's to the school attended by the Armstrong twins. She and Frank wanted Christopher to go to school with boys. He was soon top, but the pressure of the other boys was nearly overwhelming. He "cut out the little Armstrongs" now that he was in class with them.[135]

Eddie Townshend, who didn't attend the new school, was the only boy Christopher felt like playing with. *The History of My Friends* makes clear, with a tone of melodrama, that Christopher's friendship with Eddie was calculated to make an impression on Jack Armstrong:

> I began to cast off Jack who had long been cool—presently I told him I had entirely cast him off, that his chances were gone and I was now best friends with Eddie—I think this annoyed him. Eddie is twice the size of Jack & me but that doesn't make any difference.[136]

Of course it made a difference. Years later, writing *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood still remembered the reassuring size and strength even though he could not remember what Eddie looked like. On the other hand, he did remember what the Armstrongs looked like: "The wrinkled monkey-face of Jack Armstrong and the hot red button-nosed face of Bob, both of them tow-headed, are still dimly printed on Christopher's memory."[137] He was to commemorate the Armstrong twins in the sexually hot character Jane Armstrong, his gender-bending portrait of his 1940s boyfriend Bill Caskey in *The World in the Evening*.

By 1966, when he first began looking at his parents' letters and diaries in preparation for writing *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood recognized how completely his childhood playmates had been absorbed into his personal mythology. "As a character or a fact goes into the making of a myth-character (or a mythological circumstance), so its original moves toward oblivion by me." Individual details were forgotten not because the friends were unimportant but because he had assimilated them:

Copyrighted Material

> Arthur Forbes, Brian Wynne, Jack and Bob Armstrong, Russell Roberts, what do I remember about them now? Almost nothing. I see Bob

> Armstrong's hot defiant red face and bristle of blond hair; the face of Russell Roberts (which now seems much more charming than silly)[.] I see nothing of the faces of the others; not even of Eddie . . .[138]

These brief, intense friendships offered archetypes he reused and elaborated on again and again in his writing. Because he was taken away to England for months at a time, Christopher's Limerick friendships were not entirely real. The same was true of his friendships in England, with children living near Marple, whom he saw only intermittently, and among whom he was often placed on a pedestal as grandson and heir of the squire. His best friend at Marple Hall was his age-mate Alan Coyne, eldest of the gardener's six children. They grew up together in the unbalanced intimacy of above and below stairs, Isherwood possessing a social status that gave him a certain kind of mastery in the relationship; Alan possessing a talent and toughness for outdoor life. With Alan, Christopher played the same games as he played with Eddie and Mirabel, building huts and citadels and fighting imaginary enemies. Outdoors, the Coynes were friends, but indoors, they were servants, allowed to share only kitchen meals and one special party at Christmas.

The moral discipline of continuous interaction and equal status did not exist for a camp follower, a family heir, nor later for a boarding-school boy. Conflicts could be abandoned rather than resolved, a poor preparation for later bonds. On the other hand, the discontinuous unreality of Christopher's friendships was a motive for telling stories about them, to make them real and permanent. But like Mirabel Cobbold, Alan Coyne did not make it into *The History of My Friends.* Nor did Isherwood ever mention Alan in his later work, even though he was to repeat aspects of the friendship in some of his mature relationships.

Christopher saw his first moving pictures before Limerick. In London in 1910, there were "Animated Photographs" at the London Hippodrome on Charing Cross Road, likely *A Day at the Seaside*, an eight-minute Kinematograph filmed in Brighton. In 1911, he saw the Pathé newsreel of the coronation of George V after Frank and his men had helped to safeguard the route of the procession.[139] In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood listed what he could recall of films and actors seen at the Gaiety, including Lillian and Dorothy Gish, the Keystone Cops, the Italian version of *Quo Vadis?* and episodes from serials like *The Perils of Pauline.*[140] Later, he saw Forbes-Robertson's *Hamlet* and at least one "exciting detective drama!!"[141] *Quo Vadis?*, based on the 1896 historical novel by Polish Nobel Laureate Henryk Sienkiewicz, was

Copyrighted Material

an epic multi-reeler about the dawn of Christianity. Before that, Christopher's first multi-reel film was evidently *From the Manger to the Cross*, which portrayed the life of Christ and was shot on location in the Holy Land with silent titles from the Gospels. He went to the Gaiety at least once a week. His taste for movies, like his taste for people, ranged from the culturally highbrow to the commercial and pedestrian, from the sacred to the profane, though by the time he was a teenager, he was to develop sophisticated critical views.

For his ninth birthday, Christopher received a Kodak Brownie from his Isherwood grandparents. This put the power of the camera into his own small hands. The Brownie was a lightweight cardboard box, about five inches high, covered in imitation leather. It was the culmination of American inventor George Eastman's work from 1878 onward to bring photography to the mass market. With Eastman's pocket Kodak, any amateur could "snap" shots of ordinary life. (The iPhone of the early twentieth century.)

The Brownie was aimed at children, and its brand name was taken from the folklore sprites popularized in North American magazines by the cartoon strips of Palmer Cox and by his illustrated verse volumes, starting with *The Brownies, Their Book* (1887). "Brownies" decorated the cameras and advertisements, adding a toylike whiff of mischief and magic. There was no need to focus or to adjust the aperture or speed. The photographer stood five to eight feet from the subject, held the camera still—against the body at waist height—looked down through the viewfinder and depressed the metal shutter with the thumb. The advice in manuals of the period was to hold your breath and listen for the click. Steadying the camera against the body made an intimate physical connection, the photographer becoming one with the camera. "I am a camera"[142] was to be the most quoted line in all Isherwood's adult fiction, and he was already preparing to write it.

Frank learned how to develop the films in the developing box that came with the camera, and he and Christopher shared this hobby for many months. Probably also for his ninth birthday, Christopher obtained a blue, cloth-bound album with "Camera Studies" embossed in gold on the front, and Kathleen began to paste in and caption his work, mixing in earlier photos by others. There is an action shot of soldiers parading to church in Limerick while little boys in plus-four suits and caps watch from the edge of the road; arguably one of the boys is Christopher. A photograph labeled "Three Generations" shows John Isherwood, Frank with Christopher sitting on his shoulders, and Kathleen at the park gates at Marple on Christopher's third birthday. Frank and his father wear light-colored wool three-piece suits, Frank with a bow tie. Kathleen is wearing an embroidered white summer blouse, a white skirt reaching to the ground, and a wide-brimmed straw hat decked with flowers.

Copyrighted Material

A later shot shows Christopher, Richard, and Nanny, in swimming

costumes, grinning and squinting into the sun as they kneel in the wavelets of the Irish Sea at Penmaenmawr; Kathleen took this on September 15, 1919. Immediately underneath is a picture of her in widow's weeds and black hat in front of Beach Hut 29, where her diary records she sat that day. In Isherwood's handwriting, the picture is captioned "Lady into Fox," added after he read David Garnett's 1922 novel of that title, about a shy young woman of twenty-four, tiny and beautiful, with brilliant hazel eyes and reddish hair, who is turned into a fox while out walking in the woods with her husband. The husband continues to sleep with her and to care for her and her cubs, though she grows increasingly wild. Eventually, fox and cubs are mauled by hounds, and he cannot save her. Such was the transformation in the way Isherwood was to see his mother after he passed his sixteenth birthday.

There are photos of Christopher's cousins Joan and Timothy Toogood and of Alan Coyne. The collection unspools into his preparatory boarding school at St. Edmund's, where shots include a favorite teacher, Mr. Sant, and the entrance to the walled swimming pool, scene of excited, semi-nude horseplay. From his public boarding school, Repton, Isherwood stuck in photos of boys playing tennis and of his Officer Training Corps campout at Strensall, where he sits in his khaki uniform outside a tent with fellow "officers" just like his father. Later there are shots of his rooms at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and of Edward Upward's rooms.[143]

Isherwood was to make further albums of his friends and his travels abroad. In Berlin, this included boys and boyfriends. Photos or the negatives from which to print them were passed around and traded. Isherwood referred to one German collection as "the Famous Boys Series." He recognized the link between his photos and his emotional life. In 1938, he was to write in his diary: "I am ambitious in my friendships, too. I am proud of them, like a collection—and the affection of my friends is like a large sum of money invested in the Bank."[144] His inclination to collect shaped his life. There were to be many other collections—books, people, places, experiences—all in some way raw material for his art.

THE BRADSHAW ISHERWOODS had arrived in Ireland a few months before the introduction of the Third Home Rule Bill in the British Parliament, April 11, 1912. This third of the four bills it took to achieve Irish independence from Britain triggered rising tension throughout Ireland between those Irish, mostly Roman Catholic, who wanted freedom from British imperial control and those, mostly Protestant, who feared the rule of the suppressed Roman Catholic majority. To Kathleen, as to Isherwood when he was

Copyrighted Material

writing *Kathleen and Frank*, animosities in Limerick seemed to be religious, between Catholics and Protestants, rather than between Irish and English. This view permitted British occupiers to see themselves as peacemakers rather than oppressors and perhaps overlook the poverty surrounding them.

Riots broke out in Limerick in October 1912 following a Unionist meeting to oppose the Home Rule Bill. Kathleen blamed Roman Catholics for damage she saw to Protestant shops, churches, and church properties. There is no evidence that Christopher was afraid or even aware of the riots, although he later observed in *Kathleen and Frank* that Nanny "always" exaggerated any threat of danger. "Because of the sensational stories she later told him about their life in Ireland, Christopher grew up believing that the Regiment had been sniped at on its way to service at the Cathedral on several occasions. He only recently discovered this wasn't true."[145]

Other challenges were on the way, for Frank and Kathleen were looking at English boarding schools. As with houses and friends, they were choosy; they knew that their son might not easily conform to institutional life. They were inclining to St. Edmund's, in Hindhead, Surrey, not far from Frimley and Aldershot. It was small, accommodating about fifty boys age eight to thirteen in a large red-brick country house which had been converted to a school in 1900. A chapel, a dining room, a library, classrooms, dormitories, and playing fields had been added in the grounds, thirty acres of woodland, mostly pines. It was run by cousins of Frank, the Morgan Browns.

Frank wrote out a family tree for Kathleen, describing the seven children of his Aunt Fanny Bellairs, who had married the Reverend Morgan Brown, founder of the school. The seven were all either teachers or clergymen, married—if married—to teachers and clergymen, except Cyril Morgan Brown, headmaster since his father's retirement, whose wife had been institutionalized after a breakdown. Beside Cyril's name on the Morgan Brown family tree, Frank wrote: "?Mrs. insane." Cyril Morgan Brown ran the school with his three sisters and his daughter, Rosamira (Rosa), once a pupil herself.[146]

At Marple Hall over Christmas, Frank launched a new craze with this year's gift, "a box of conjuring tricks." Christopher gave his first magic show to the Coyne children and Richard when they gathered for the lighting of the tree; magic was to inform the development of his imagination from then on. Christopher told his mother that Christmas 1913 "was the best he could remember."[147] It was their last as a family.

Copyrighted Material

NINE-YEAR-OLD CHRISTOPHER WAS gravitating increasingly toward his father. During Nanny's New Year holiday, he asked to sleep in Frank's

dressing room, "so with electric torch by his side, a supply of books & a clock, he went off very grandly to bed. The first time he has ever slept alone." He repeated the exercise three nights in a row, rising early each morning and dressing himself. He knew by now that he was going to boarding school.[148]

There were extra lessons with his father for two and a half hours every morning, including Latin, probably for the first time. After tea, he practiced piano, and Kathleen then read aloud to him Walter Scott's historical romance *The Talisman* from *Tales of the Crusaders*.

The Talisman opens with a lavishly detailed scene of mortal combat, heavily eroticized and with the participants in disguise. As Sir Kenneth in armor rides slowly across the desert in Palestine, he is set upon by a Saracen at full gallop in turban and green caftan. They close in battle. Each repeatedly throws the other from his horse; both lose weapons and clothing in the fray. Having tested one another's physical strength to the limit, they ride to an oasis where they debate their beliefs, eat, pray, disrobe one another, and sleep beside their abandoned weapons. The Saracen's "sheeny and crescent-formed sabre, with its narrow and light, but bright and keen, Damascus blade, contrasted with the long and ponderous Gothic war-sword, which was flung unbuckled on the same sod."[149] The long encounter, with its ludicrously sexual imagery—swords like spent phalluses—models the kind of fighting-then-bonding relationship that Isherwood, in the 1970s, was to describe as Whitmanesque:

> Whitmanesque homosexuality is concerned with the mating of two completely masculine males. . . . A Whitmanesque male must have acknowledged another male to be a real man before he can accept him as a lover. First, they must test each other's virility. Therefore they have to fight. A sex duel is the necessary prelude to sex play . . .[150]

Fighting-then-bonding offered nine-year-old Christopher an appealing model for his rivalrous friendships with his age-mates, though he was not yet much of a fighter and preferred the idea of others fighting on his behalf. Part of Eddie Townshend's attraction was his talk of boxing. Sometimes Frank went to boxing matches in Limerick.

The Talisman also portrayed the tortured sublimation of courtly love which Christopher assimilated through his mother's voice as she read aloud to him. Whether his lady was kind or cruel, a knight lived only to serve her, "to fulfil her commands, and, by the splendour of his own achievements, to exalt her fame."[151] Wittingly or not, Kathleen cast a spell over her son, a part of whom, for the time being, lived only to serve her.

Copyrighted Material

Christopher was captivated, too, by the male-male bond between

Richard the Lionheart and the minstrel Blondel, for among his childhood drawings of dueling knights, maidens in distress and other scenes from chivalric life, is one of Blondel at the base of the tower where Richard is held hostage, and from where, according to legend, Richard sang out a song Blondel recognized, leading to Richard's rescue.[152] This kind of coded understanding between the master of men and the master of words was also to figure in Isherwood's mature writing.

THEATER TOOK OVER Roden House at the start of 1914. Frank began rehearsals for *The New Boy*, a three-act farce written by Arthur Law and first performed in 1894 in London, and Christopher undertook his third Shakespeare season. Then he accompanied his father to the theater and went backstage during a rehearsal. Isherwood later recalled in *Kathleen and Frank* that during the Limerick years, "He wanted to be an actor, like Frank."[153]

The "new boy" is in fact a mature, married man dressed as a schoolboy. In his puerile, fetching disguise, he is coddled, flirted with, abused, tossed in blankets, and pressured into stealing apples for which he is thrashed by a farmer and sentenced by a magistrate to ten further strokes with a birch. Frank—so recently Christopher's Latin master—was taking the part of the schoolmaster, Dr. Candy, who, in the original production, gave off "a perceptibly chilling atmosphere of impositions and canes."[154] Evidently, Frank was eager to make fun out of the kinds of things that might befall Christopher at boarding school.

Christopher and Kathleen went together to watch the dress rehearsal of *The New Boy*. Two days later, they spent an afternoon getting Christopher photographed in his new school clothes—his own new boy costume—and that night, he went again with his mother to the first performance of *The New Boy*.[155] He took Nanny to the Saturday matinee. He could not get enough of these larking adults who were playing for laughs the initiation looming in his own schoolboy life and who were presided over by his father in a shaggy white wig. Remarkably, by the time he wrote *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood had no recollection of seeing *The New Boy*.[156] Considering that he was nine and a half at the time, it is an extreme case of amnesia, evidently protecting him from a truth too painful to recall—that his father had sent him away to boarding school knowing full well the suffering that lay in store there.

Christopher's last few days in Limerick were idyllic. The weather grew hot, and the apple tree that Frank liked to paint blossomed. Christopher, Frank, and Kathleen, with rugs and chairs, sat underneath it. Christopher read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was not unlike the quiet weeks during

Copyrighted Material

which Frank, Kathleen, and Emily had awaited his birth at Wyberslegh Hall nearly ten years before. By adulthood, Isherwood was to forget it all.

The night before Christopher left for school, he attended one last show, a charity evening at the barracks. "[C]omic songs & recitation & Mirabel in white-duck trousers & all complete like a boy! Danced the horn pipe to the band she ought to have been a boy without a doubt!" exclaimed Kathleen.[157] Thus, Mirabel previewed the tomboy Sally Bowles, the gamine cabaret entertainer who boldly infiltrated Herr Issyvoo's group of male friends in Berlin. Isherwood later possessed a photograph of Jean Ross, his Berlin friend and announced model for Sally Bowles, dressed like a sailor boy in bell-bottom trousers, her feet spread wide in a defiant stance, hands shoved in her pockets, and on her head, a dark beret, slipped rakishly to one side. This was the androgynous renegade with whom he was to identify once his loving father expelled him from Eden.

BOARDING SCHOOL, HINDHEAD, 1914

Christopher left home in tears, chaperoned by Kathleen, for "a little London Season"—a surfeit of treats pretending that boarding school was something to celebrate. They stayed at Granny Emily's flat at 14 Buckingham Street overlooking the River Thames behind Charing Cross Station, "the center of the city, for the Strand was at the top of the street, and Trafalgar Square only five minutes' walk away."[158]

Dressed in his Eton suit and a straw boater, Christopher went with Kathleen to bookshops, the zoo, Madame Tussaud's, the Natural History Museum, Harrods, Westminster Abbey, and by bus to the airfield at Hendon outside London where, according to Kathleen, they saw biplanes "dropping off bombs & also once looping the loop! C very pleased & excited—" He had loved airplanes ever since living near Aldershot—an early center for aviation in England—where he and his grandfather, out walking, had been the first in the family to see an airplane in flight.[159]

They also saw Harley Granville-Barker's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. As he drafted *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood still recalled that the fairies were all in gold, and that he had been enchanted: "The supreme excitement of this magic lay in one's exposure to it; it was right there in the same room, and yet it was utterly other. In this sense it was almost like having a vision."[160]

It was a vision Christopher much preferred to reality. By May 1, he had a bad cold and cough and had to spend the morning in bed before Kathleen took him, dazed and sniffling, to Waterloo Station to meet Cyril Morgan Brown and the group of boys traveling to St. Edmund's. She went aboard the

Copyrighted Material

train to say goodbye: "till we actually were sitting in the train I do not think he realized," she wrote, "but he just managed to keep back the tears . . ."[161] Christopher had never even seen the school.

His first letter was a masterpiece of equivocation. "—he said he 'liked school fairly,' & thought 'the Masters looked nice,' & 'rather liked the boys but none specially' and he 'was fairly happy sometimes' but did not think he should ever like games'—" A few days later, he wrote again: "I have liked it much more since lessons started." The timetable included Latin and Greek, mathematics, French, divinity, music, geography, and history. English was not a subject, but spelling, derivations, and synonyms came up as part of geography and history.[162] Divinity included stories and was also literary.

At the end of Christopher's first week, Kathleen spent Saturday night at the school, and she saw him in bed in his dormitory with "eight other little boys." She was to visit at least once a term. But Frank was far better equipped than Kathleen to imagine what was taking place inside Christopher as he tried to adjust to institutional life. In a letter to welcome Christopher at school, Frank adopted a playful tone, expressing his hope that there would be no bullies like Bullock Major in *The New Boy* and challenging Christopher to show off his academic preparation. "I was very pleased to hear that you showed so much pluck," Frank wrote in another letter, after learning that Christopher had held back his tears on the school train, "It will be the greatest help to you in your school life."[163]

However, in *Memoirs of Pine House*, Isherwood depicted how tears held back at Waterloo Station flowed freely at school:

> At intervals, during lessons, or in the dining-hall or at prayers, one of us would begin suddenly to weep—drip, drip, drip, on to the book or the plate, the tears falling faster and faster until they broke into regular sobs; and then the sobbing changing gears into a blurred continuous sound of blubbering. Almost anything would set us off.

Isherwood's favorite master Ivor Sant, fictionalized as "Mr. Samson," comforted the Christopher figure with the words of Shakespeare's Henry V: "He was the only one of the staff who talked my language, the language of the theater: 'Courage, Isherwood, courage. Once more into the breach, Isherwood. Once more into the breach.' "

Memoirs of Pine House disguised identities and dramatically heightened certain essential truths about St. Edmund's. "Orme," a "notable weeper," becomes a target for other boys needing to make a show of strength. The Seniors warn Orme, then bully him in front of the other "New Bugs":

Copyrighted Material

> We watched, delighted, when Orme was made to run the gauntlet of knotted handkerchiefs, to lick people's shoes, to stand bare backed and be flicked with a wetted towel. Sometimes we were ourselves allowed to help with the torturing. Orme howled, yelled, cursed, called us sneaks, and cads and beastly rotters and then, when left alone, shed floods of tears. He wept passionately, helplessly, as though a spring inside him had broken and he could never stop. And yet, within half an hour, there he was being as sidey again as ever.[164]

"Sidey" was slang for uppity. Isherwood modeled Orme on Edmund Godfrey Russell-Roberts, who arrived at St. Edmund's the same term as he did and is described in *The History of My Friends*: "he is always rather an ass & violently passionate but I quite like him. He is very cheeky to the bigger boys, but last term he took me out twice."[165] The name Orme hints that Isherwood identified completely with the weeping, high-strung, bullied yet irrepressible boy. The boy could have been Russell-Roberts—Or me.

Memoirs of Pine House also tells about a senior boy scapegoated by his peers. An attractive, successful member of the cricket eleven shines too brightly and is dealt with on what the boys called Pay Day by "gorse-bushing." He is hunted through the school grounds then heaved into the gorse bushes. Scratched, bleeding, crying, he limps alone back to the house. "No one spoke to him or touched him. He was an outcast."[166]

Bullying at his preparatory school was to inform Isherwood's understanding of the brutality he witnessed in later years at Cambridge and, enlarged to horrific proportions, in Nazi rampages in Berlin. He considered his role as a victim or a participant to be interchangeable, flippable, like his role in the hauntings at Marple Hall. Anyone might be a victim. Anyone might be a perpetrator. Orme might be Russell-Roberts—*or* he might be *me*. Isherwood was to make this a theme again and again in his writing.

CHRISTOPHER WAS TO repress all memory of Frank playing Dr. Candy in *The New Boy*, reserving the bogie of the stern schoolmaster entirely for his real-life headmaster Cyril Morgan Brown. Unlike Frank, Cyril Morgan Brown was not prepared to let Christopher have his own way. Mr. Cyril, as the boys were told to call him, was older than Frank, nearly sixty, tall and handsome like all the Morgan Browns, powerfully built, with abundant gray hair, shaggy eyebrows, a flowing white moustache, and piercing blue eyes. Behind his back the boys called him "Ciddy." In the memoir following on from *Memoirs of Pine House*, Isherwood named him "Pa,"[167] making light of

Copyrighted Material

the frightening father role Morgan Brown adopted among boys and staff. Isherwood's later accounts of his first days at school made much of the clash between his boyhood self and this academically gifted, angry man whom Kathleen described in her diary as "very incapable & dazed."[168]

"I had just spread a slice of bread with butter and was in all innocence, proceeding to cover the butter with a layer of marmalade," says the Christopher character in *Memoirs of Pine House*, when he looked up to find all the boys watching him and the headmaster shouting: "I didn't think you'd be that kind of pig." The marmalade was scraped off the bread back into the marmalade dish. "'Don't let me see you doing that again,' he said. 'You're not in the pig-sty any more now.'" Christopher "blushing furiously, trying to keep back the tears of homesickness, misery and rage," had wanted to tell the headmaster, named Price-Jones in the memoir, that "at Home, I had always, all my life, been allowed to eat marmalade with butter. Nobody had even so much as suggested that this was wrong. [. . .] Mr. Price-Jones had insulted my home. He'd called it a pig-sty."[169]

Christopher's father loved pigs and had joyfully promoted piggyness to Christopher in at least one Beatrix Potter-like story about Mrs. Porkington Pigiwig, "an old Lady Pig in a blue bonnet," who, with her six piglets, ate up all the gooseberries and carrots in Master Christopher's garden and then forced their way into the nursery "and gave him a great smacking kiss with their great mouths and then began to dance around him in a ring." By contrast, "Price-Jones" expected the boys at his school to rise above their animal instincts. As in the dining hall, so on the sports field:

> If you try to catch a cricket ball on the boundary it hurts your hands very much. Your instinct is [. . .] to avoid the ball, or let it drop immediately. But instinct must be controlled. Control of instinct is called "character-building." Mr. Price-Jones was very good on this. "There's a pretty large bit of each of you," he remarked, "that's just a pig or a cow. Well, you've got to master it. Unless you want to turn into cows and pigs."[170]

The stand-off between Christopher and Morgan Brown reached a crisis at the school sports day in May. As depicted in *Memoirs of Pine House*, Christopher had been humiliated in the hurdles, obstacle race, and three-legged race, and the headmaster gave him the maximum allowed handicap in the premiere event, deliberately setting him apart as the smallest and least athletic boy in the school. The nearest boy started five or ten yards behind him, and the fastest runners 100 yards behind. "I suppose my smallness of size and my incompetence at cricket had convinced Mr. Price-Jones that I could not run. Actually he was mistaken. Actually, for my age I could run as well as or

Copyrighted Material

better than most boys."[171] Christopher had often watched his father win running races. *Memoirs of Pine House*, never completed, breaks off as Christopher nears the finish line in first place with cheering spectators running beside him.

But Isherwood was left with a lingering uncertainty as to whether he or Morgan Brown was the victor in this encounter. Because of the long head start, he never allowed himself to believe the win was anything more than a perverse trick Morgan Brown played on them both. In *Kathleen and Frank* he wrote: "Christopher's victory must have disgusted Ciddy—it was a victory of the wrong kind, unearned, flukey, farcical, a sort of send-up of the Morgan Brown way of life, and all the more stinging for being unintentional."[172]

Christopher's uncertainty about the victory was exacerbated by the absence of the audience for which he longed. Kathleen and Frank were both in Limerick, so one of Frank's favorite cousins attended the sports day, Marjorie (Madgie) Reid, née Luce. Then on Prize Day in July, no family or friends at all were present to see Christopher receive the silver cup and the form divinity prize which he also won that term. Kathleen came from London but left before the ceremony. Should Christopher believe these were worthy achievements if his family did not honor them? The theme of undeserved acclaim was to surface repeatedly in Isherwood's work, and it was to become far more complicated once his writing made him famous during the 1930s.

In *Kathleen and Frank*, recalling that Ciddy "preached a gospel of thoroughness, exactitude, levelheadedness and perseverance," Isherwood declared that he had duly acquired all these qualities. Yet he remained in touch with another self, forever tempted to be slapdash, vague, excitable, an opter-out. Boarding school required him to behave strategically and hide such weaknesses. "In retrospect, it seems to have been the most valuable single experience of his life," he averred in his draft for *Kathleen and Frank*. Yet he evoked depression descending, a gray, nondescript nothingness drowning him out:

> The images in his memory aren't painful or ugly, merely rather drab: battered boot-lockers, ink-stained wooden desks, narrow dormitory beds, lists of names on notice-boards, name-tags on clothes, names read out at rollcall—names which make you less, not more of an individual, which remind you hourly that you are now the household darling no longer, just one among many: Bradshaw-Isherwood, C.W. This feeling of lost importance is at the bottom of so-called homesickness; it isn't home you cry for but your home-self.[173]

Copyrighted Material

The conflict between home, where it was possible to be uniquely valued, and the institutional world, which taught him it was wrong to expect any kind of special treatment, grew more nuanced as he matured. At St. Edmund's, C.W. Bradshaw Isherwood began to calibrate just how much and on whose terms he would reveal his private emotions. If his name was the only unique thing his new world acknowledged, he would find a way to make his name stand out.

———

THE BRADSHAW ISHERWOODS, like most people, did not foresee the conflagration that was about to hollow out their world. Ireland was bristling with fight, and expectation was growing that civil war might break out over Home Rule. However, by the time Christopher returned to Ireland for his summer holiday at the end of July 1914, Austria–Hungary had been at war with Serbia for three days; Germany was poised to join Austria–Hungary, Russia to join Serbia, with Britain and France obliged to support Russia according to treaty. Christopher and Kathleen endured a rough crossing on a ship filled with three trainloads of people, over eight hundred, many seasick, including Christopher, and some fainting. It was only when Frank met their train in Limerick that Kathleen began to understand the European war would affect them all. "They had been expecting news all day to mobilize," she wrote, "it seems so appalling one can't take it in—. I never thought of Irish troops being called upon."[174] In the face of the international crisis, the Irish were to agree to shelve the question of Home Rule.

Isherwood's attention in his later writing to unsuspecting minor characters drowned by world events was rooted in the blindside of his own experience at nine. He had set out alone for the first time to attend boarding school, and he was met by a perfect storm of unexpected change. Nothing could have prepared him for the Great War. Nothing would ever be the same.

In this strange time of readiness and waiting, some things continued as normal. Frank drove Christopher and Kathleen out in the trap to tea with a friend, and Christopher went to play the piano for his old headmistress. On August 4, neutral Belgium asked Britain to intervene against Germany's proposal for free passage through Belgium to France, and Britain declared war on Germany that night. Kathleen made a late addition to her diary: "At 6-pm came a message from barracks that the troops are to mobilize at once[,] on the fifth day they will be ready to go."[175]

Copyrighted Material

Christopher was with his mother when Frank came to share the message. "This is the moment which Christopher's memory has chosen to retain, not

only as a picture but as a playback of Frank's voice," he wrote in *Kathleen and Frank*. "Frank looks in, only for a moment; he must hurry back to barracks. He says, 'The order to mobilize has come.' His tone is quiet, gentle, almost reassuring. Then he is gone."[176]

Preparations were rapid. Over the following days, Kathleen and Frank were back and forth to the shops, buying equipment—an air cushion, a sewing kit, a sleeping bag on which they painted his name in white. Christopher went on with his playdates as the carpets were taken up from underneath his feet, beaten, and rolled away. Kathleen gave a month's notice on Roden House and to the cook and maids. Two facing pages of her diary, August 5 and 6, are splotched with water and the ink blurred. Tears might have fallen on those days or on rereadings in subsequent years. On Sunday, August 9, the sun came out, and there was a cathedral service for the soldiers. "They marched down a thousand strong," wrote Kathleen patriotically. "In afternoon the troops were reviewed by the Colonel in the barrack square in their marching order & all their kit inspected."[177]

But the men did not leave. Days passed. The weather grew warm, then hot. Richard was "very irritable and fretful . . ." There was no news. Christopher spent an evening tucked away in front of the flickering screen at the Gaiety. In his draft for *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood was to recall that his father used this time "to make Christopher aware of some sort of message." As they waited, resolve suspended, Frank showed Christopher his weapons and expressed his reluctance to use them. In *Kathleen and Frank*, Isherwood was to shift into the present tense, lifting the moment out of time into an endless present: "He tells Christopher that his sword is useless except for toasting bread and that he never fires his revolver because he can't hit anything with it and hates the bang."[178]

Isherwood shaped the memory to resemble the beginning of the Bhagavad Gita, when the warrior Arjuna, facing the enemy armies he is destined to fight, tells Lord Krishna that he does not want to fight and throws down his weapons. In that moment of suspense, with the battle about to begin, Lord Krishna delivers his long, sacred message, the Song of God, explaining to Arjuna that death is not real, that Arjuna must fight because he is a warrior, and revealing himself, Krishna, as God. Thus, in his mature memoir about his father, Isherwood, without naming it, invoked the religious framework which permitted him to recognize his father's ambivalence toward the warrior role and at the same time permitted him to accept his father's devotion to his duty, his dharma. But this was not until the late 1960s, and Isherwood was to quest long and hard for this response to the sorrow of losing his father and to the feelings of confusion and helplessness which accompanied the sorrow. In the meantime, his father was to send more explicit messages,

Copyrighted Material

asking Christopher to take his place at home. These messages were to place a great burden on Christopher, a burden which he tried hard to bear and, later, tried hard to forget.

At last on August 13, another order came; the regiment would leave today or tomorrow. A further order came; the regiment would depart at noon on the 14th. But Nanny woke Frank and Kathleen before dawn: "it seems a wire had arrived at midnight,to tell them to be ready to go at 9 & 10 am." Kathleen and Nanny took Christopher and Richard to the barracks and then to see Frank off on the train: "there were a good many people to see them go . . . & it was just heart breaking . . ." wrote Kathleen.[179]

The day after Frank left, "C had a head ache all day & appeared limp." The air continued heavy and close with intervals of rain, and Christopher, like someone fighting to breathe, asked to have his tea on the roof of Roden House, "so we had it there and got a slight breeze."[180]

From Queenstown, Frank sent a postcard, "they have found us an awful old boat on which we are crowding [. . .] The mare will not go on board." A sling was made, but the sling broke and dropped Kitty between the boat and the quay. She "lay on the ledge and gradually slipped into the water. She then swam right round the ship and was headed off by a boat." Kitty had to be left behind. "She is so associated in my mind with you and it is dreadful to think of all the fright and indignities she has had to put up with," Frank wrote in another letter. A few days later, Kitty caught up with him in England, "She is rather bruised and cut about, but nothing at all serious. She walked on board the ship she came over in quite cooly."[181]

Frank was billeted in their honeymoon town of Cambridge. One of Nanny's sisters was married to the porter of Emmanuel College, a Mr. Shaw, and the Shaws "had been out to the camp & actually seen Frank's tent where he was sleeping!"[182] Frank wired Kathleen to come. While Nanny hastily emptied drawers, Kathleen took a moment to measure both her sons. Christopher was four feet three and a half inches. He was three days shy of his tenth birthday. He left Limerick with his mother, Nanny, and Richard, on August 24; from Crewe, he, Nanny, and Richard made their way to Marple Hall.

Kathleen went on to Cambridge. There, on Christopher's tenth birthday, she visited Emmanuel College, where Mr. Shaw "took me to see a picture of Bradshaw as a young man in the Common Room. Decided it would be very nice for William to be a Don."[183] It was a decision made in a time of great uncertainty and distress, and which Kathleen was to hold on to through thick and thin until Christopher was asked to withdraw from Cambridge a decade later. She was trying to see beyond the nightmare unfolding around them.

Copyrighted Material

Frank sent Christopher some toy airplanes and asked him to share

responsibility for Kathleen's happiness: "You must try & do all you can for her while I am away. It is a dreadful time for her, & you can do more to make it bearable than anyone else . . ." Later, Frank was to write Kathleen that he hoped "that William will come to 'the scratch' and show 'reciprocity' as Henry calls it. I'm afraid you won't get much out of Richard—"[184]

After Frank left for France, Kathleen joined the children at Marple Hall. She and Christopher sat and talked—initiating the intimate exchange, the reciprocity, that Frank knew Kathleen craved.[185] Christopher raised money from the household for a fund to supply the men in the regiment with socks and shirts, and he accompanied Kathleen and his Aunt Moey to Brabyns Hall to see arrangements for nursing convalescent soldiers. Then he returned to boarding school, where, since she had missed his birthday, Kathleen visited for ten days, bringing Emily and staying in a lodging house.[186]

Frank was reluctant to write to Christopher since the Censor forbade him to say much, but Christopher had been writing to his father ever since Frank left Limerick. In late September, Frank finally communicated from northern France, making it sound as if he were a hobo wandering for pleasure: "one night in a great farm with all the men in the barns & the next night in a church & so on." He mocked the Germans as drunks and thieves: "One night we slept in the bar of the village inn the Germans had been there before us & the whole place was littered with empty bottles & all the contents of the drawers, which had been emptied looking for money."[187]

John Isherwood wrote to Kathleen "saying I was to be sure & make Marple my headquarters & leave the children there whenever I wish to go away." She returned there only on October 26, having missed Richard's third birthday by nearly a month, and was punished for her long absence by the news that "he has begun to see the old woman who haunted Christopher at his age."[188]

Kathleen was stretched thin. The members of her family—including Emily—were scattered in four different places. She spent her second Marple Hall evening looking with Richard "at pictures of trains." Trains connected them. Richard was most at ease when his mind could run along a neat continuous track, where the movement of the cars was controlled and visible in advance. Interruptions and surprises were difficult for Richard. He played with trains to the exclusion of other toys; he watched real trains as if hypnotized. Kathleen herself was obsessed by trains, recording departure times to the minute, whether she caught a "good" train with through service or had to change, also class of travel, where she sat, food, luggage, and every cost.

When Kathleen returned to London, she arranged for Richard and Nanny to join her. She and Frank had decided that Richard was being spoiled at Marple Hall just as Christopher had been. In London, Richard continued

Copyrighted Material

fretful and often woke in the night. Kathleen soon realized that Emily's top-floor flat above Charing Cross Station was ideal for trainspotting: "we walked up & down on Hungerford Bridge to watch the trains & signals which are simply an endless delight & he sits for half an hour together at the dining room window quite absorbed!"[189]

Frank wrote to Christopher that two men they knew from Limerick were feared dead; one was Private Bell, who had often helped at Roden House. Frank candidly described a shell destroying the farmhouse where he was having lunch behind his trench, and his flight to the cellar. He was not allowed to say that the shelling was near Touquet, just inside Belgium: "I am living in an erection made of beer barrels and an old door at top, not at all bad but rather cold at night—However I wear 2 top coats & 2 woollen jackets & two waistcoats & a scarf & a woollen helmet & gloves & mittens & two pairs of socks & look just like Tweedle Dum & Tweedle Dee—."[190]

He sent home photographs of himself swathed in the motley layers that made him look like Lewis Carroll's combative twins as they are portrayed in John Tenniel's illustrations for *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*. In Frank's photographs, the men around him wear neat-looking uniforms and regulation hats, but Frank displays his enthusiasm for dressing up even at the Front, where he evidently met the savage cold with humor and his own style of camp.

Kathleen scoured London for wool gloves, trying to order forty pairs for the company; they were sold out in military suppliers and countless civilian stores. She sent weekly parcels of canned food, rum, tobacco, a new air cushion, writing paper, a cheap wristwatch because Frank's got damaged, an electric torch as a gift from his mother, knitting needles after he left his on a train.

For three weeks, Frank camped in a sandpit on the River Aisne, near Vailly, moving forward to trenches facing the German position on the north bank of the Aisne. Then, on October 12, he and his men rushed to help prevent a German advance on Calais. They traveled to the coast by train, then marched east through Flanders, camping in villages each night, pressured to hurry. While they advanced on Radinghem-en-Weppes in the third week of October, they met the enemy in the open for the first time. "I lost 60 killed & wounded in my company, & I think if we had taken it a bit slower it might have been avoided," Frank wrote to Kathleen.[191] He was already close to the place in Belgium where he was to die six months later; after the "Race for the Sea," the war became static, and the regiment would not move far. They were billeted in Bois Grenier, Touquet, Fleurbaix, Le Gris Pot through the end of 1914. From January through May, 1915, the 2nd Battalion York and Lancasters was to camp at Armentières and Chapel Armentières, moving forward from billets into the trenches for up to two weeks at a time.

Copyrighted Material

Once they were no longer on the move, Frank got home leave. He suggested a visit to Christopher: "he might like to exhibit a Father who comes hot from the Front." First was a whirl of pleasures and errands in London and a visit to Marple Hall: "when we got to the house we found quite a party assembled on the lawn to cheer him, & a large 'Welcome home' over the front door & flags flying," recorded Kathleen. Henry and Muriel came from The Oakes; during dinner, Kathleen felt faint and had to leave the table: "I collapsed in the hall & knew no more till I found myself on my bed . . . after which I was very sick!"

The anxiety she had suffered through the autumn, the constant pressure of travel, decisions, correspondence, errands, the sensation of relief at Frank's brief return, the knowledge that he must go back, overwhelmed her. Obviously, Frank was the one in physical danger and unceasing discomfort; still, Kathleen had every member of her family depending on her in a way she was not used to, even Frank for his supplies, and she was determined not to let any of them down.

They spent Saturday and Sunday in Hindhead, where Christopher was "very excited & pleased to see Frank."[192] Afterwards, he sent his father a sprig of white heather, which, according to Scots lore, brings good luck, especially in battle.

During this leave, Kathleen and Frank agreed that she would make a "memory" book about his war. Frank began to send things for it as soon as he was back at the Front, and Kathleen pasted in photographs, newspaper clippings, maps, narratives based on her diaries, postcards, Frank's letters to her and to Christopher. Eventually, she made two books, 1914 and 1915, a literary collaboration with her husband.

The first Memory Book opens with an article from the *North Cheshire Herald*, "A Marple Hero," headed by a photograph of Frank in uniform, hands behind his back, his face still and dignified, blank of expression. The piece ran on Christmas Eve, 1914, when Christopher was staying at Marple Hall and would have seen it:

> Major Isherwood has been in the fighting from the commencement. He returned to Marple a fortnight ago, and spent the weekend with his wife at Wybersley and his father at Marple Hall. He is now back in the trenches in France, fighting with his men, and enduring their hardships and vicissitudes.[193]

The newspaper account placed Frank on a stage, in the public eye, and at a new distance. There were obvious mistakes which Christopher might have noticed—Frank didn't visit Kathleen at Wyberslegh. Christopher might also

Copyrighted Material

have noticed that neither of Major Isherwood's two sons were mentioned. The article was unaware of Frank's fond intimacy with Christopher, of his solicitous questions in virtually every letter from the Front about Christopher's well-being and progress, unaware of Frank's wish to enhance Christopher's prestige at school by visiting him there "hot from the Front," unaware of Frank's instructions to Kathleen to give Christopher another London season during these Christmas holidays of 1914: "draw a nice fat cheque from Cox & go to London with Christopher for a nice long burst."[194]

Kathleen clipped other items about Frank from the *North Cheshire Herald*: "the men of the regiment speak in the highest terms of his remarkable pluck & bravery," and—quoting the wounded at what was now called Brabyns Military Hospital—"He was a fine man and a brave one and a soldier who inspired confidence in his men—"[195] The epithet Marple Hero was to be repeated again and again, crowding out the subtleties of Frank's personality, his astringence, his eccentricity, his wit, his slyness, his energy and creativity in varied avenues of art, culture, technology, and agriculture, his all-in willingness to participate, win or lose, success or embarrassment, in countless activities before any audience. Already, public rhetoric was beginning to encapsulate and entomb Frank with false solemnity and blind reverence.

As he began working on *Kathleen and Frank* in the 1960s, Isherwood was to write in his diary that he was digging into his parents' letters and diaries for the first time. Yet more than once he acknowledged that he must have read some of the material before. It seems unlikely that his mother could have worked on the Memory Books without Christopher being aware, indeed, he was sometimes in the same room with her as she did; moreover, when he was at Repton, aged seventeen, Kathleen sent him Frank's letters to St. Edmund's from the Front. While Kathleen focused on the Memory Books and her project of remembering, Christopher tried to forget; he was to turn away from the past with extraordinary determination, gradually repressing much of what he knew about his father.[196]

The Hero of Marple spent Christmas in the trenches, which were now proliferating in all directions, "a labyrinth" as he told Kathleen; "I have already lost myself repeatedly." When it rained, the trenches filled and flowed like streams and sometimes collapsed. The mud became so deep that walking from one place to another was exhausting: "poor old Clemson had to be dug out the other day!" Yet the men were getting fat, "No exercise & lots of food I suppose—" Frank had smashed his new wristwatch and was asking for another: "it is so awkward not knowing the time."[197]

He was horribly bored. Most of the time he was second in command, listening to his superior, Clemson, and doing paperwork. He sent Christopher a wry account of Christmas celebrations at the Front and the widely

Copyrighted Material

reported season of mutual understanding when soldiers from both sides left their trenches and fraternized. "They bore us no ill will but they had to fight because they were told to, and they wished the war was over," he wrote. Christopher, anxiously aware that his father was cold, had sent a pair of mittens as a gift. "I will throw away my other mittens, and wear yours when they come."[198]

IN THE ABSENCE of Frank's crackling energy, life at Marple Hall bogged down. "I feel sure the whole thing will collapse if they don't look out, but Father will never start anything on his own account as you know," Frank wrote to Kathleen. Henry was seldom there. In the spring of 1915, the nineteenth-century conservatory that opened off the library was demolished. It had become one of the most leaky parts of the house. "The Library will never be so attractive without it but of course it had got to the state that it was inevitable—" wrote Frank when he heard.[199]

Meanwhile, all through the Christmas holidays at Marple Hall, Christopher listened to Kathleen read aloud Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, as he had listened to her read *The Talisman* the year before. The heroes of these overlapping novels, Richard the Lionheart and his Saxon vassal Wilfred of Ivanhoe, are away at the wars in Palestine, and Richard is taken prisoner on the journey home. In their absence, Richard's false and capricious brother Prince John and the greedy Norman nobles oppress the native Saxons, neglecting the land and the people's welfare. Kathleen's voice brought *Ivanhoe* to life during teatime twilights and long dark evenings in the massive, decaying house. The parallels with Frank and Henry were obvious, with the birth order of the brothers reversed. There was even a historical link, since the family believed their Isherwood name derived from Sherwood Forest, fifty-five miles away, home to Robin of Locksley, or Robin Hood, loyal to King Richard.

Ivanhoe, gravely wounded when he competes in disguise as the Disinherited One in the tournament at Ashby de la Zouch, is nursed in secret by Rebecca, just as Richard the Lionheart is nursed by Saladin disguised as El Hakim in *The Talisman*. These manly invalids—Richard the Lionheart and Ivanhoe, kept horizontal by slender oriental healers and forced to postpone their heroic destinies—conform to the fantasy that Isherwood described in *Kathleen and Frank* as his first masturbation fantasy, before he was seven and a half years old, in which he imagined himself wounded on a battlefield and being tended by a woman. During 1915, illness and death were to affect Christopher so extremely as to make such fantasies attractive strategies for

Copyrighted Material

real-life behavior. The subliminal pull toward the sickbed and a feminine carer was to have power over him right into his middle age in Hollywood.

On the first day of the new year, 1915, Kathleen and Nanny spent the morning tying up scarves and socks and mittens to send to Frank for fifty new men. Christopher had caught a bad cold. According to Kathleen: "C's leg started acting again The best cure seems, bed & to wrap it tightly in a woollen scarf . . . Whether it is a sort of rheumatism subject to change of weather, or cramp, or growing pain I cannot think—he has it everywhere, & used to have it at Frimley too, as well as Limerick—"

Christopher's "acting" leg was revealing distress which he did not—could not—express in words. He was comforted when his "wound" was bound in woolens intended for his father's men at the Front, as if he wished to share his father's misery in the trenches and felt guilty that he could not.

The doctor told Kathleen that the "dull aching pain below the knee in the calf" of Christopher's leg was "a form of muscular rheumatism commonly called growing pain."[200] It appears to have been muscular rheumatism or fibromyalgia. The cause remains unknown. The condition is associated with a heightened sensitivity to pain, and it is measurable by increased amounts of relevant chemicals in the blood. It runs in families.

While his body silently confessed unarticulated feelings, Christopher confidently found words for a poem about the war. His subject was Louvain, the Belgian town sacked by the Germans in August 1914. They had looted and burned the ancient library, the university, the churches, and shot men, women, and children, attracting worldwide condemnation and offering dramatic justification for Frank's absence. He sent the poem to Frank, who, starved of sleep and swamped with paperwork, didn't rise to a reply, though he read it with care. "I really think his poetry is good," Frank wrote to Kathleen, "of course he uses rather stereotyped words, but he got quite an effect of horror and gloom in Louvain."[201]

In January 1915, Christopher joined Kathleen who was already in London for another pre-school season of treats. The centerpiece, hosted by Uncle Henry, was dinner followed by Louis Parker's stage adaptation of *David Copperfield*, in which Herbert Beerbohm Tree doubled the roles of Micawber and Dan Peggoty and the dashing twenty-seven-year-old Owen Nares played David.

The stage adaptation was evidently a first encounter with the Dickens novel that Bachardy later recalled was Isherwood's all-time favorite piece of fiction. Kathleen began reading *David Copperfield* to Christopher the following August. Jack Isherwood, who happened to be in the gallery at the same performance, reported "that Tree's 'Micawber' was vulgar beyond words & that he overdid the whole thing," and Kathleen also dismissed the production

Copyrighted Material

as "not convincing."[202] But Dickens broadly played, even camped up, might have been all the more captivating to a ten-year-old. Isherwood was to reimagine the bankrupt Micawber with notably theatrical flair in his celebrated Berlin novel *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, and he forever associated Mr. Micawber with Uncle Henry, struggling to avoid bankruptcy.

Christopher and Kathleen also saw *Maskelyne and Devant's Mysteries*, the latest version of a magic show he had already attended the previous April and which he now requested whenever he was in London. It was the best magic show of its time, running with various stars since 1873. John Maskelyne specialized in revealing to audiences the ways in which they were being fooled, and he wrote books unmasking everything from con routines and card-marking systems to Madame Blavatsky, the medium who co-founded Theosophy.

Our Magic (1911), written with David Devant, encouraged audiences to appreciate a magic trick as a work of art: "a conjuror is in reality 'an actor playing the part of a magician.' "[203] This is exactly how Christopher liked to see himself, and he was learning both how the tricks were done and how they could be done with dramatic persuasiveness. He later wrote: "He didn't see himself acting in Shakespeare but he did certainly see himself conjuring and very soon after this he began studying card-tricks, reading Hoffmann's books on *Modern Magic*, *More Magic* and actually buying conjuring apparatus from a shop called Goldston's just off Leicester Square."[204]

Professor Hoffmann's *Modern Magic* (1876) had begun as a series of articles in *Every Boy's Magazine*. Diagrams showed how to do tricks with coins, playing cards, dominoes, dice, rings, handkerchiefs, cups and balls, hats, gloves, strings, and countless other everyday objects. Practical tips included "*Never tell your audience beforehand what you are going to do*" and "*never perform the same trick twice on the same evening.*" Patter was essential; the would-be magician should "cultivate from the outset the art of 'talking,' and especially the power of using his eyes and his tongue independently of the movement of his hands."[205]

These principles became part of Isherwood's arsenal in front of any kind of audience. As a child magician, as an adult speaker, as a writer, he adopted Hoffmann's mantra, repeated by Hoffmann to describe any number of tricks, "a very good effect, especially if introduced in a casual and apparently *extempore* manner."[206] To appear casual required much preparation.

Magic tricks obsessed Christopher throughout his adolescence, and the idea of magic sums up the invisible, potent artistry which Isherwood tried for in all his books. For Isherwood, magic was a style, a subject, and even a code. He later recalled that as a young, unpublished author: "I imagined a novel as a contraption—like a motor bicycle, whose action depends upon the exactly co-ordinated working of all its inter-related parts; or like a conjuror's table,

Copyrighted Material