

Snobs

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ONE



I do not know exactly how Edith Lavery came first to be taken up by Isabel Easton. Probably they had a friend in common or sat on some committee together, or perhaps they just went to the same hairdresser. But I can remember that from quite early on, for some reason, Isabel decided that Edith was rather a feather in her cap, someone that little bit special to be fed to her country neighbours in rationed morsels. History was of course to prove her right, although there was no tremendously compelling evidence for this when I first met her. Edith was certainly very pretty then but not as she would be later when she had, as designers say, found her style. She was a type, albeit a superior example of it: the English blonde with large eyes and nice manners.

I had known Isabel Easton since we were children together in Hampshire and we enjoyed one of those pleasant, undemanding friendships that are based entirely on longevity. We had very little in common but we knew few other people who could remember us on our ponies at the age of nine and there was a certain comfort in our occasional encounters. I had gone into the theatre after leaving university and Isabel had married a stockbroker and moved to Sussex so our worlds scarcely crossed, but it was fun for Isabel to have an actor to stay occasionally who had been seen on television (though never, as it happens, by

any of her friends) and for me, it was pleasant enough to spend the odd weekend with my old playmate.

I was in Sussex the first time that Edith came down and I can testify to Isabel's enthusiasm for her new friend, later queried by her less generous acquaintance. It was quite genuine: 'Things are going to happen for her. She's got something.' Isabel was fond of using phrases that seemed to imply an inside knowledge of the workings of the world. Some might have said that when Edith climbed out of the car half an hour later, she didn't appear to have got very much beyond her appearance and a rather beguiling, relaxed charm, but I was inclined to agree with our hostess. Looking back, there was a hint of what was to come in the mouth, one of those cut-glass mouths, with the clearly defined, almost chiselled lips that one associates with the film actresses of the forties. And then there was her skin. To the English, skin is, as a rule, the compliment of last resort, to be employed when there is nothing else to praise. Good skin is frequently dwelt on when talking of the plainer members of the Royal Family. Be that as it may, Edith Lavery had the loveliest complexion I have ever seen: cool, clear, pastel colours under layers of flawless wax. I have all my life had a weakness for good-looking people and in retrospect, I think I became Edith's ally in that first moment of admiring her face. At all events, Isabel was destined to become a self-fulfilling prophet for it was she who took Edith to Broughton.

Broughton Hall, indeed the very House of Broughton, was a wounding seam that marbled every aspect of the Eastons' Sussex life. As first Barons and then Earls Broughton and lately, since 1879, Marquesses of Uckfield, the Broughtons had held mighty sway over this particular section of East Sussex for a great deal longer than most potentates of the Home Counties. Until little more than a

century ago their neighbours and vassals had mainly consisted of lowly farmers eking a living out of the flat and boggy marshland at the base of the downs but the roads and the railways and the invention of the Saturday-to-Monday had brought the *haute bourgeoisie* flooding to the area in search of *ton*, and, like Byron, the Broughtons awoke to find themselves famous. Before long, the local mark of whether one was 'in' or 'out' was largely based on whether or not one was on their visiting list. In fairness I must say that the family did not seek its celebrity, not at first anyway, but as the major representatives of the *anciens riches* in an upwardly mobile area their power was forced upon them.

They had been lucky in other ways. Two marriages, one to a banker's daughter and the other to the heiress of a large section of San Francisco had steered the family craft through the turbulent seas of the agricultural depression and the Great War. Unlike many such dynasties, they had retained some if not all of their London holdings, and various tricks with property in the sixties had brought them to the comparatively safe shores of Mrs Thatcher's Britain. After that, when the socialists did start to regroup they turned out, happily for the upper classes generally, to have been reborn as *New Labour* and so would prove much more accommodating than their rapacious political forebears. All in all, the Broughtons were the very acme of the 'surviving' English family. They had reached the 1990s with their prestige and, more significantly, their estates practically intact.

Not that any of this was a problem for the Eastons. Far from resenting the family's privileges they positively worshipped them. No, the difficulty was that despite living two miles from Broughton Hall itself, despite Isabel's telling her girlfriends over lunch in Walton Street what

luck it was having the house 'practically next door', still, after three and a half years, they had never set foot in it, nor succeeded in meeting one single member of the family.

Of course, David Easton was not the first upper-middle-class Englishman to discover that it is easier to demonstrate a spurious aristocratic background in London than in the country. The problem was that after years of lunches at Brooks's, Saturdays at race-meetings and evenings at Annabel's, mouthing his prejudices against the modern, *mobile* society, he had entirely lost touch with the fact that he was a product of it. It was as if he had forgotten his father had been the managing director of a minor furniture factory in the Midlands and it was with some difficulty that his parents had put him through Ardingly. By the time I met him I think he would have been genuinely surprised not to have found his name in Debrett's. I remember once reading an article in which Roddy Llewellyn was quoted as complaining that he had not been to Eton (as his elder brother had) because it was at Eton that one picked up one's lifelong friends. David happened to be passing my chair. 'Quite right,' he said. 'That's exactly how I feel.' I looked across the room to catch Isabel's eye but I saw at once in her sympathetic nod that she did not want to be in my conspiracy but rather in her husband's.

To an outsider it seems a vital ingredient of many marriages that each partner should support the illusions of the other. Protected, as he had been, by a combination of Isabel's kindness and most London hostesses' indifference to anything beyond their guests' ability to talk and eat the food, it was now bitter indeed to sit at smart dinner tables and be asked about Charles Broughton's trip to Italy or how Caroline's new husband was shaping up and to have to murmur that he didn't really know them. 'But how extraordinary,' would come the answer. 'I thought you

were neighbours.' And even in this admission there was a certain dishonesty, for it was not that David did not *really* know them. He did not know them at all.

Once at a cocktail party in Eaton Square he had ventured an opinion about the family only to hear his companion ask, 'But isn't that Charles over there? You must introduce me and we'll see if he remembers where we met.' And David had had to say he felt sick (which was more or less true) and go home and miss the dinner they had all been going on to. Lately he had taken to assuming a slightly dismissive air when they were mentioned. He would stand, loudly silent, on the edge of the discussion as if he, David Easton, preferred *not* to know the Broughtons. As if he had tried them and discovered they were not quite to his taste. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In fairness to David I would say that these frustrated social ambitions were probably as secret from his conscious mind as they were supposed to be from the rest of us. Or so it seemed to me as I watched him zip up his Barbour and whistle for the dogs.

Fittingly perhaps, it was Edith who suggested the visit. Isabel asked us at breakfast on Saturday if there was anything we'd like to do and Edith wondered whether there was a local 'stately' and what about that? She looked across at me.

'I wouldn't mind,' I said.

I saw Isabel glance at David deep in his *Telegraph* at the other end of the table. I knew and understood the Broughton situation and Isabel knew I knew, though, being English, we had naturally never discussed it. As it happens, I had met Charles Broughton, the rather lumpish son and heir, a couple of times in London at those hybrid evenings where Show Business and Society congregate but, like the crossing of two rivers, seldom mingle. These

encounters I had kept from Isabel for fear of salting the wound.

'David?' she said.

He turned the pages of his newspaper with a large and insouciant gesture.

'You go if you want to. I've got to drive into Lewes. Sutton's lost the petrol cap of the lawn-mower again. He must eat them.'

'I could do that on Monday.'

'No, no. I want to get some cartridges anyway.' He looked up. 'Honestly, you go.'

There was reproach in his eyes, which Isabel dealt with by pulling a slight face as if her hand was being forced. The truth was they had an unspoken agreement not to visit the house as 'members of the public'. At first David had avoided it because he had expected to know the family quite soon and he did not want to run the risk of meeting them from the wrong side of the cordon. As the months and then years of disappointment had unfolded, not visiting the house had become a kind of principle, as if he did not want to give the Broughtons the satisfaction of seeing him pay good money to see what should, by rights, have been his for nothing. But Isabel was more pragmatic than her husband, as women generally are, and she had grown accustomed to the idea that their position in the 'County' was going to be deferred for a while. Now she was simply curious to see the place that had become a symbol of their lack of social muscle. She did not therefore require much persuading. The three of us packed into her battered Renault and set off.

I asked Edith if she knew Sussex at all.

'Not really. I had a friend in Chichester for a while.'

'The fashionable end.'

'Is it? I didn't know counties had fashionable ends. It

sounds rather American. Like good and bad tables in the same restaurant.'

'Do you know America?'

'I spent a few months in Los Angeles after I left school.'

'Why?'

Edith laughed. 'Why not? Why does one go anywhere at seventeen?'

'I don't know why one goes to Los Angeles. Unless it's to become a film star.'

'Maybe I wanted to be a film star.' She smiled at me with what I have since come to recognise as a habitual expression of slight sadness, and I saw that her eyes were not blue as I had at first thought, but a sort of misty grey.

We turned through a pair of monumental stone piers, topped with lead stags' heads, antlers and all, and started down the wide gravel drive. Isabel stopped the car. 'Isn't it marvellous!' she said. The vast mass of Broughton Hall sprawled before us. Edith smiled enthusiastically and we drove on. She did not think the house marvellous, no more did I, although it was in its way impressive. At any rate, it was very large. It seemed to have been designed by an eighteenth-century forerunner of Albert Speer. The main block, a huge granite cube, was connected to two smaller cubes with stocky and cumbersome colonnades. Unfortunately a nineteenth-century Broughton had stripped the windows of their mullions and replaced them with plate glass so now they gaped, vacant and sightless, across the park. At the four corners of the house squat cupolas had been erected like watch-towers in a concentration camp. All in all, it did not so much complete the view as block it.

The car crunched comfortably to a halt. 'Shall we do the house first or the garden?' Isabel, like a 1960s Soviet military inspector in the heart of NATO, was determined to miss nothing.

Edith shrugged. 'Is there a lot to see inside?'

'Oh, I think so,' said Isabel firmly, striding towards the door marked 'Enter'. It crouched in the embrace of the ponderous horseshoe flight of steps leading up to the *piano nobile*. The rusticated granite swallowed her and we meekly followed.

One of Edith's favourite stories would always be that she first saw Broughton as a paying guest, barred by a red rope from the intimate life of the house. 'Not,' as she would remark with her funny half-laugh, 'that the place has ever had much intimate life.' There are houses with such a sense of the personalities that built them, an all-pervading smell of the lives lived there, that the visitor feels himself a cross between a burglar and a ghost, spying on a private place with hidden secrets. Broughton was not such a house. It had been designed down to the last fender and finial with one single aim: to impress strangers. Consequently its role at the end of the twentieth century had hardly changed at all. The only difference being that now the strangers bought tickets instead of tipping the housekeeper.

For the modern visitor, however, the splendours of the state rooms were deferred, and the cold, dank room by which we entered (later we would know it as the Under Hall) was as welcoming as a deserted stadium. Hard-looking footmen's chairs stood around the walls, conjuring up a vision of endless hours of boredom spent sitting on them, and a long, black table filled the centre of the discoloured stone floor. Apart from four dirty views of Venice, a long way after Canaletto, there were no pictures. Like all the rooms at Broughton, the hall was perfectly enormous, making the three of us feel like the Borrowers.

'Well, they don't believe in the soft sell,' said Edith.

From the Under Hall, clutching our guide-books, we climbed the Great Staircase with its carved oak flights

clambering up around a burly and rather depressing bronze of a dying slave. At the top, after crossing the wide landing, we came first to the Marble Hall, a vast, double-storeyed space with a balustraded gallery round all four sides at second-floor level. Had we entered by the exterior horse-shoe stair this would have been our (intentionally flattening) introduction to the house. From this we progressed to the Saloon, another huge room, this time with heavy mahogany mouldings picked out in gold and walls hung with crimson flock wallpaper.

'Chicken tikka for me,' said Edith.

I laughed. She was quite right. It looked exactly like a gigantic Indian restaurant.

Isabel opened the guide-book and began to read in a geography-mistress voice: 'The Saloon is hung with its original paper, one of the chief glories of Broughton's interior. The gilt side-tables were made for this room by William Kent in seventeen-thirty-nine. The maritime theme of the carved pier glasses was inspired by the appointment of the third earl to the embassy in Portugal in seventeen thirty-seven. The Earl, himself, is commemorated in this, his favourite room in the full-length portrait by Jarvis, which hangs, together with its companion of his countess by Hudson, on either side of the Italian fireplace.'

Edith and I stared at the pictures. The one of Lady Broughton made a little stab at gaiety by posing the heavy-featured young woman on a bank of flowers, a summer hat trailing from her large hand.

'There's a woman at my gym exactly like that,' said Edith. 'She's always trying to sell me Conservative raffle tickets.'

Isabel droned on. 'The cabinet in the centre of the south wall is by Boulle and was a gift from Marie-Josèphe de

Saxe, Dauphine of France, to the bride of the fifth earl on the occasion of her marriage. Between the windows . . .’

I drifted away to these same, tall windows and looked down into the park. It was one of those hot, sulky days in late August when the trees seem overburdened with leaf and the green upon green of the countryside is stuffy and airless. As I stood there, a man came round the corner of the house. He was wearing tweeds and corduroys despite the weather and one of those tiresome brown felt derbies that Englishmen in the country imagine to be dashing. He looked up and I saw it was Charles Broughton. He barely glanced at me and looked away, but then he stopped and looked up again. I supposed that he had recognised me and I raised my hand in greeting, which he acknowledged with some slight gesture of his own and went on about his business.

‘Who was that?’ Edith was standing behind me. She had also abandoned Isabel to her orisons.

‘Charles Broughton.’

‘A son of the house?’

‘The only son of the house, I think.’

‘Will he ask us in for tea?’

‘I shouldn’t think so. I’ve met him precisely twice.’

Charles did not ask us in for tea and I’m sure he wouldn’t have given me another thought if we hadn’t run into him on our way back to the car. He was talking to one of the many gardeners who were drifting about the place and happened to finish just as we started back across the forecourt.

‘Hello,’ he nodded quite amiably. ‘What are you doing here?’ He had clearly forgotten my name and probably where we had met but he was pleasant enough and stood waiting to be introduced to the others.

Isabel, taken short by this sudden and unexpected

propulsion into the Land Where Dreams Come True, fumbled for something to say that would fasten like a fascinating burr inside Charles's brain and result in a close friendship springing up more or less immediately. No inspiration came.

'He's staying with us. We're two miles away,' she said baldly.

'Really? Do you get down often?'

'We're here all the time.'

'Ah,' said Charles. He turned to Edith. 'Are you local, too?'

She smiled. 'Don't worry, I'm quite safe. I live in London.'

He laughed and his fleshy, hearty features looked momentarily quite attractive. He took off his hat and revealed that fair, Rupert Brooke hair, crinkly curls at the nape of the neck, that is so characteristic of the English aristocrat. 'I hope you liked the house.'

Edith smiled and said nothing, leaving Isabel to reel off her silly gleanings from the guide-book.

I stepped in with the pardon. 'We ought to be off. David will be wondering what's happened to us.'

We all smiled and nodded and touched hands, and a few minutes later we were back on the road.

'You never said you knew Charles Broughton,' said Isabel in a flat tone.

'I don't.'

'Well, you never said you'd met him.'

'Didn't I?'

Although, naturally, I knew I hadn't. Isabel drove the rest of the way in silence. Edith turned from the front passenger seat and made a that's-torn-it expression with her mouth. It was clear I had failed and Isabel was noticeably cool to me for the rest of the weekend.