

wicked and degenerate. And yet I know with absolute certainty that there are not ninety-nine people out of a hundred less wicked and degenerate than we are. I don't want to boast, but we *are* alive, aren't we? And our two lives, outside and inside, are rich lives—not little meagre repetitions of meagre cerebral habits.

So carefree were they that quite often at Long Barn Harold's friend and Vita's would join the same weekend party, and the four of them would refer to the situation quite openly. Lady Sackville gives in her diary this instance of their attitude, her embarrassment leading her to an unfortunate choice of phrase:

Sept. 23, 1923. Vita is absolutely devoted to Harold, but there is nothing whatever sexual between them, which is strange in such a young and good-looking couple. She is not in the least jealous of him, and willingly allows him to relieve himself with anyone. They both openly said so when I was staying at Long Barn, and Reggie Cooper [who had been at Wellington and in Constantinople with Harold] was there too. It shocked me extremely. . . .

To this easy relationship they gave a moral base, both having analytical minds, and they evolved a "formula" for their marriage, "a firm, elastic formula," said Harold, "which makes it so easy for us both to duplicate the joys of love and life, and to halve their miseries"; or, as she put it to him, "We are sure of each other, in this odd, strange, detached, intimate, mystical relationship which we could never explain to any outside person." The formula ran something like this: What mattered most was that each should trust the other absolutely. "Trust," in most marriages, means fidelity. In theirs it meant that they would always tell each other of their infidelities, give warning of approaching emotional crises, and, whatever happened,

return to their common centre in the end. Vita once put her "little creed" for Harold in these words: "To love me whatever I do. To believe my motives are not mean. Not to credit tales without hearing my own version. To give up everything and everybody for me in the last resort."

The basis of their marriage was mutual respect, enduring love, and "a common sense of values." There were certain things that were wrong absolutely, and so long as they agreed on what those things were, it did not matter much if in other ways they behaved differently or even (in the eyes of the world) outrageously. When we were children, they divided misdemeanours into "crimes" and "sins," and applied the same rule to themselves. Crimes were naughtinesses, for which we were punished. (My mother was not very good at that. When I broke the greenhouse windows, she decided to spank me on the bottom with her hairbrush, but never having done such a thing before, she used the brush bristle-side downwards, and the bristles were very soft.) Sins were so dreadful that for them we were never punished at all: their very exposure was enough. There were only three sins: cruelty, dishonesty and indolence. Vita herself had been guilty of the first in 1919–20; never again. Harold was innocent of them all. Their morality can be summed up as consideration for other people, particularly for each other, and the development of their natural talents to the full. It was an amalgam of the Christian virtues and the eighteenth-century concept of the civilized life.

In 1929 they debated on BBC radio their ideas about marriage, and this was their conclusion:

Harold: You agree that a successful marriage is the greatest of human benefits?

Vita: Yes.

H. And that it must be based on love guided by intelligence?

- V. Yes.
- H. That an essential condition is a common sense of values?
- V. Yes.
- H. That the only things that will stave off marital nerves are modesty, good humor and, above all, occupation?
- V. Yes.
- H. And give and take?
- V. And give and take.
- H. And mutual esteem. I do not believe in the permanence of any love which is based on pity, or the protective or maternal instinct. It must be based on respect.
- V. Yes, I agree. The caveman plus sweet-little-thing theory is long past. It was a theory insulting to the best qualities of both.

Marriage, they thought (but not for a BBC audience in 1929), was "unnatural." Marriage was only tolerable for people of strong character and independent minds if it were regarded as a lifetime association between intimate friends. It was a bond that should last only as long as both wanted it to. (Both, for this reason, were strongly in favor of easier divorce.) But as a happy marriage is "the greatest of human benefits," husband and wife must strive hard for its success. Each must be supple enough, subtle enough, to mould their characters and behaviour to fit the other's, facet to facet, convex to concave. The husband must develop the feminine side of his nature, the wife her masculine side. He must cultivate the qualities of sympathy and intuition; she those of detachment, reason, and decision. He must respond to tears; she must not miss trains.

As it happened, mutual adjustment was particularly easy for them, because they already possessed these quali-

ties. Vita since her childhood had never ceased to regret that she was not born a boy. Once she quoted to Violet Queen Elizabeth's magnificent phrase: "Had I been crested not cloven, my Lords, you had not treated me thus." She had inherited from her mother the aristocratic gift of command, and in most things she was very competent. Harold had certain feminine attributes, his emotionalism and his clemency. Vita could be intimidating; Harold rarely was, though in social and diplomatic London he was a young lion. If they witnessed together an act of cruelty, such as a Greek peasant beating his donkey, he would express his horror; she would furiously intervene. He obeyed regulations with the instinct of a trained civil servant; she would protest, sometimes refuse. Harold had a sentimental side to his nature that she lacked. He could be moved to tears by a film or play in which virtue was triumphant or innocence abused; she took both in her stride. She was the calculated risk-taker in their marriage, sometimes to the peril of them both. The risks he took were more spontaneous, motivated by a sudden surge of emotion, personal or political. But because they knew each other so intimately, and loved each other so deeply, neither was in the least irritated by these opposites. Vita would sometimes reproach him for being too mild, "put upon" she said (for instance by the low fees he accepted from editors), and he would tease her about the odd gaps in her knowledge of the world, like her total inability to understand an income tax form or add up a simple column of figures, or her ineradicable belief that rivers like the Nile which flow northwards must run uphill. Never, never did I see them lose their tempers with each other, and my mother told me that it happened only once. The incident was typical. She came into his room one evening and he shouted, "Go away!" Hurt and angry, she flung at him the lilies she was carrying, and slammed the door. He rushed after her to explain that his birthday present—a bust of Hermes—which he

was to give her as a surprise next morning was sitting unwrapped on his table.

No reader could fail to be convinced of their love for each other if I were to give constant quotations from their letters spread over fifty years, but such an anthology would become tedious and cloying in the mass. In most marriages love after a time becomes inarticulate, or is expressed in bed. In their marriage there was no bed, but both, being writers, found infinite pleasure in analysing their emotions. As they were so often apart, they wrote to each other thousands of letters, and these formed the warp and woof of their marriage, which was thus continuously enriched and rewoven. She spoke of "the great triumph of being loved by you," and both were perpetually amazed at their good fortune. Each loved most in the other the qualities she or he did not possess, Vita his leniency, Harold her wildfire romanticism, and it amused them to identify the differences between them in order to highlight the qualities they shared. They had many common interests: literature and travel and gardening; their children; their cottages; their possessions; their tastes; their plans, past and present; memories of joy and near-disaster. All these things formed a rich *pot-pourri* that never staled. Separation sharpened its tang. Painful as it was, absence often seemed to them like an illusion: the other might be in the next room. "Your letter," he once wrote to her from Persia, "makes me feel that distance does not matter, and that loneliness is only a physical, not a spiritual, displacement." They could reach out over continents to feel the other's pulse and measure it exactly. They could be together at Long Barn for hours, reading in silence, and then both speak suddenly at the same moment. This communion of feeling was as expressive as a touch or glance. If one were ill or in imagined danger (and to Vita every taxi seemed like a threat to him, every aeroplane certain murder), they would undergo tortures of anxiety. Harold would cable across half the world

for the latest news of her mild attack of sciatica. A hostile paragraph about him in a newspaper would drive her to despair, while he would worry agonizingly about a lecture or broadcast that she was anticipating with alarm. It was their constant involvement in each other's lives and feelings, caring without interfering, which was both the expression of their love and its strength. In the middle of the Second War, Vita wrote for Harold a poem that was read by the Poet Laureate, Cecil Day-Lewis, at their joint memorial service in 1968:

*I must not tell how dear you are to me.
It is unknown, a secret from myself
Who should know best. I would not if I could
Expose the meaning of such mystery.*

*I loved you then, when love was Spring, and May.
Eternity is here and now, I thought;
The pure and perfect moment briefly caught
As in your arms, but still a child, I lay.*

*Loved you when summer deepened into June
And those fair, wild, ideal dreams of youth
Were true yet dangerous and half unreal
As when Endymion kissed the mateless moon.*

*But now when autumn yellows all the leaves
And thirty seasons mellow our long love,
How rooted, how secure, how strong, how rich,
How full the barn that holds our garnered sheaves!*

That poem was written at Sissinghurst; but for fifteen years, until 1930, their home was Long Barn, which lies at the edge of a village known after its district as Seven-oaks Weald, halfway down a slope overlooking a quilted pattern of fields and small woods. When they first found it in 1915, it was a battered cottage in which Caxton, it was