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THE WEDDING, THE HONEYMOON, THEN THE TRIP HOME TO JAMAICA

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This is the Third extract from EDNA MANLEY: THE PRIVATE YEARS by Wayne Brown published by Andre Deutsch and available from all bookshops at $6.50.

They were married on the morning of 25th June at the Registry Office in Kilburn, in a small, plain service witnessed only by Vera Manley and Lena, Edna's widowed sister. For more than a month before the wedding Edna had kept a chart that read '40, 39, 38, 37 ...' signifying the number of days left to the 25th, from which she carefully crossed out one number each day until she reached '4', when she was too excited and busy to continue.

The chart may have been a necessary distraction, for though by 11th June Norman had finished his written papers and felt sure he had passed, the last two weeks were not smooth sailing. With a fortnight to go, Ellie Swithenbank, who had vacillated between reluctant acceptance and fits of anxiety, raised once more the question of the undesirability of children in a mixed marriage. Norman, in barely restrained anger, wrote to Edna asking her permission 'to point out (to Edna's family) one or two moral trifles that they don't seem to grasp'; but Edna for once was too busy or too tired to face the prospect of a fight. Her mother, she wrote Norman placatingly, was 'just a broken reed & all mothers are & besides old man I thought you knew mater — leave her alone & she'll get accustomed to anything — argue against her and you'll drive her to the wildest extremes — you'll upset the wedding... & I'll lose my little remnant of a home for ever — I don't say don't write — I leave it to your judgment — but I think if you see the funny side of it you'll have to laugh at yourself — my back is very broad.' To which Norman replied: 'I think I agree. I was so wild at first, but yesterday coolness came and it's not worth it.'

There it appears the matter ended; but there was one final scolding, to be endured this time by Edna. On 22nd June her old headmistress, Miss Hanna, wrote to her:

'My dear Edna,Here is a little reminder of my love to you. You have never grown up to me my girl, just the hot-headed warm-hearted monkey you used to be. Perhaps you will get sense now!

'But you know my girl, you are losing a great deal of the beauty & value of your marriage by not having the service in church. You know Edna I am not a bit narrow, but it hurt me horribly to think that one of my girls should not go to the house of our Father, & desire the blessing of his son on that most sacred rite.

EDNA MANLEY ... THE PRIVATE YEARS

Mrs. Manley in the 1950s.

'Your own father & your forebears will, I think, be sorry that one of their children thinks little of the church they loved. Why?

'I wonder is it our fault, for not living more sincerely.

'But God is very good Edna to foolish virgins & I think he will hear my prayer for a great blessing — much greater than you deserve — to be on your pretty head on the great day. Your old & loving friend, E.C. Hanna.'

The wedding service over, the couple had a late breakfast with Edna's family at Neasden, then travelled by train to Oxford, where Norman's viva had been set for 27th June. On the 28th they set out on their honeymoon; and on the 29th Ralph Swithenbank, Edna's favourite brother, wrote to her: 'Edna (beg pardon, Mrs. Manley!)....'

For the first part of their honeymoon they bicycled south to the New Forest, the scene of Norman's long walk two summers earlier. There they stayed for a fortnight, sleeping in a tent that Norman built himself, and in which he sat exclaiming proudly while his creation withstood a thunderstorm. After that they travelled to France for another fortnight, dividing their time between Paris and the nearby village of Senlis, where they stayed at a farmhouse that, Edna remembered many years later, 'didn't have a proper toilet. You had a hole in the floor with a grill that jumped and I was .... Oh it upset me terribly at first. Norman had to really calm me down over that.' They visited Ypres, where Norman, map in hand, tracked down his old dug-out and clambered down into it with Edna scrambling happily after him; and they found the field where Roy had been buried. Edna remembered later 'that landscape with those tortured torn stumps of trees, like men with their arms in the air... and miles and miles of desolation still. And then we went back to England, and crossing on the Channel I was terribly sick, and for days after I landed, and then I realised that I must have just got pregnant.'

Back in London they took a flat in Clapham. Norman divided his time between his Chambers and following half a dozen famous advocates round the courts, where he learnt, according to himself, 'not only technique but style, and ... that to watch a man in action — good, bad or indifferent — was the quickest and surest way to learn what to do and what not to do and how to do it.' Edna continued at St. Martin's, but switched her evenings from the Royal Academy to the Sir John Cass. In their free time they roamed the art, music and theatre circuits, stretching their slender finances.

On 30th May, 1922, at the Maternity Home Hospital in Cardington, Edna after a difficult labour gave birth to a seven-pound son, whom in memory of Norman's brother and Edna's favourite they called Douglas Ralph. Eleven weeks later, on 18th August, father, mother and infant boarded the Elders & Fyffes banana boat, the **Camito**, for Jamaica.

(Edna was now 22 with a husband capable of great things. They reached Jamaica in August, the dry time of year, and they moved into the home of a friend, Leslie Clerk, on Retirement Crescent.

Edna and the baby suffered badly in the heat of Kingston and by the end of September she had found a nurse for the child, and leaving Norman behind to set up his chambers and find work, she moved with Douglas into a guest house in Manchester.

In the city, Norman got his first case, representing the plaintiff in a breach of contract case. He won it. In November, he earned 16 guineas; in December 25, and so he left the Clerks to rent his own place and bring his family from Manchester.)

The flat they moved into in Hope Road, directly opposite the entrance to Kingsway, was the upstairs half of a house. It included a large, octagonal living-room which, Edna later decided, only half in jest, was 'very significant (since) for one thing Norman couldn't walk up and down it, he had to walk around it.' As an image of going in circles, Edna's remark probably reflects her own state of mind at the time far better than it does Norman's; for the latter, however dismaying he was finding Jamaica after eight years abroad, was launched on his career: the next ten years would record his meteoric rise to the top of the island's legal profession, while Edna was stumbling from crisis to crisis.

Or rather, her life was dividing again, as it had done so often since her childhood, into private achievements and social catastrophes.

On her return from Manchester she began to model, from sketches made in the Mandeville market place, the figure of a kneeling woman offering for sale a string of beads. In the finished work the woman is sitting back on her heels, elbows tucked in, palms turned upward. Viewers would often mistake the string of beads for a rosary: an understandable error since the figure's attitude is one of prayer, a pathetic combination of supplication and offering. And when one remembers that this is Edna Manley's first work in Jamaica, and that the woman's offering, her string of beads, is her own handiwork and in this sense the expression of her self, it becomes evident that the figure is meant also to imply the offering and supplication of the sculptor herself towards her new country. The identification is one of suffering, of common exclusion from the established society. Jamaica market woman and English sculptor, they are both 'beadsellers' in this colony.

But from the beginning the work went slowly. Norman, encouraging as ever, helped to make the armature out of bits of wire and copper piping; but the modelling, which Edna did in Plastalina, a kind of plasticine that she had brought with her from England, lasted well into 1923; and the real problem came with the casting. As yet they could not afford bronze, and when Edna ordered plaster of Paris from London she found that the length of time that the shipment took to arrive adversely affected the 'quickness' of the material: 'You might be working, opening the bags, and then come upon a bad bag, and your mould would be spoilt and months of work would be jeopardised.' It was a serious and unforeseen setback, and for a time she must have panicked with the notion that everything, people and place, was conspiring to dissuade her from her art and therefore, as she thought of it, from any future other than that of mediocre conformity.

As before she sought solace in the immediacy of her relationship with animals. When Ralph Swithenbank visited her in Jamaica in 1924, he found among her dogs a large, black half-breed that she had acquired while still at the Hope Road flat; and in the following way, as he told it:

'She had seen the dog chained up at some other person's place, ravening, and she went up to speak to the dog although it was raging at her at the end of a chain and the person, a Jamaican, warned her not to touch it as the dog would have her hand off: and she said "I am not afraid of dogs," went up, patted the dog and accused the person of starving it and never letting it off the chain, and that was why the poor thing was mad with rage, and the person said she could have the dog if she wanted it, and she took the dog home with her, gave it a loaf of bread, and she said it wolfed down the whole loaf of dry bread because it was hungry. This was her dog, Tiger, that as a young married woman she wasn't afraid to go up to and pat....'

And there was the horse that she named House of Cards (a possible pointer to her state of mind at the time.) It was not the first — they had already bought a mare, Firefly, which, harnessed to a buggy, took Norman off to his Duke Street Chambers every weekday morning — but this was her colt, as emaciated when she first laid hands on him as any 'lean pony' of her girlhood dreams; and as she nursed him back to fitness, and rode him out mornings and evenings along the gullies and bridle paths of the plains and foothills north of the city, he became the centre of a phase of her life whose few gratifications she would recall with great vividness half a century later, in the months after her husband's death.

'And the months (of 1923)', she would write then, 'went by, filling out and filling my dreams. House of Cards. You, the first love of my youth, and as I remember you the air is full of the scent of logwood, the sounds of bees, and the fresh, chilling air of early morning. How I loved you, creeping out in the moonlight to lean over the stable door, and the smell of the fresh guinea grass, the stamp of your hooves and the crunch and rustle as you tossed the grass to get the best shoots. God, the glory of a morning ride with life and the world ahead. Oneness — my throat goes tight as it sweeps back over me, the line of horses that followed. Norman always said I was never faithful to a horse; I was faithful to a dog. After a few years I got to know a horse too well and the feeling of fantasy would fade into reality. Fantasy is the real world for me. It still is.'

At the beginning of 1923 the young family moved into a small house, called Worthington, at the junction of Trafalgar and Lady Musgrave Roads — but not before there had taken place at the Hope Road flat two events that later (and perhaps significantly) seemed to have become connected in Norman's mind.

One was a burglary: one evening late in 1922 thieves entered their upstairs flat — an easy enough task as they were in the habit of sleeping with the windows open : and made off with a varied haul that included Norman's army medals and perhaps a score of silver athletics trophies, medals and cups, adding 'insult to injury', according to Norman, by emptying the baby's milk bottle as well.

The other was an unexpected visit from a cousin. As Norman was to tell Basil McFarlane: '... my wife and I were sitting in this little room we had ... and who should walk in but Alec as we knew him — Alec Clarke — fresh home from Cuba. Such a dandy! Oh, dressed with the most immaculate care — with all the airs and graces of a Cuban grandee. His ties matched the handkerchief in his pocket and that matched his socks — his hair was pomaded and he was full of airs and graces — he was a real la-d-da. He spent about three months in Jamaica and then he went off — back to Cuba. That's one reason I have for remembering that place (i,e, the Hope Road flat) very well.'

B/N Manley, Edna

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This cousin was later to become Alexander Bustamante. He was equally related to them both. (It must be remembered that Norman's and Edna's mothers were sisters. Their grandmother, Mrs. Shearer, was married twice, first to a Mr. Clarke. Her first son by this marriage was Alexander's father.)

Norman had last seen Alec Clarke over fifteen years ago at Belmont, Margaret Manley's estate in Manchester, where

... from time to time all (his) sisters stayed ... and even he himself spent a year there living with us as a Junior Overseer. It was to Belmont that he came, leaving his job as an employee in one of the C.E. Johnston & Co.'s stores on the north side of the island... and from Belmont that he left for Cuba as a young man of 21 or 22 years of age. I remember him vividly. There was nothing in those days to indicate the person he would become when he was 50 odd years old except his zest for life and a certain wildness and indifference for what others thought. I best recall the fact that he was a good horseman and the peasants from far and wide would bring their animals to Belmont for him to 'break', as the word was in those days. Also he played a fine game of draughts. I do not recall that I ever beat him, but he was 20 plus to my 10 years of age!

By an unlikely coincidence the cousins had arrived home within months of one another, each after an extended stay abroad; but as 1923 opened there can have been no reason for either of them to dwell on it.

Even less for Edna. Worthington, the new house, had its attractions — for example the black goat on the lawn from which Edna coaxed milk for the baby Douglas — but they were easily overshadowed by the fact that work on the 'Beadseller' was going very slowly and, more tellingly, that the society continued to be hostile to her.

There were several aspects of small-island colonial society that, combined, could make life difficult for a young, emancipated Englishwoman. One, as we have seen, was the housekeeping role expected of a wife and mother. Even as a child in Cornwall Edna had resented doing her share of the housework. Later, as a young married woman in London, she had surprised and pleased her husband by announcing that she was prepared to do the cooking — though this decision, one suspects, represented less a change of heart than the price she was prepared to pay for the privacy of living in a self-contained flat: rather than endure the territorial chaos of boarding-house life, she would cook. Now however, in Jamaica, confronted by what she later called the 'black darkness of the 1922-23 kitchen where you cooked on charcoal and everything was covered with smoke', she baulked.

Then there was the smallness of the community. Jamaica by 1922 could boast a population of nearly nine hundred thousand, but the upper and middle classes, which had no social intercourse with the rest, comprised less than a tenth of it: a small and consequently very close group, denying the possibility of privacy. The child who had so often sought the desolate solitude of the Cornish moors, the girl who had embraced the anonymity possible in wartime London, would find no escape here.

And a colonial society focused on, yet cut off from, its metropolis four thousand miles away, suffers from a fundamental boredom. V.S. Naipaul has noted that in Trinidad the traditional form of greeting is 'What's happening?', the implication being that things invariably happened 'elsewhere'; and Jorge Luis Borges makes the same point in a poem about Argentina when he writes: 'The universe, the tragic universe, was not here, and perhaps should be looked for somewhere else.' From this boredom and the smallness of the community there emerged a habit of gossip far meaner and more intense than the normal curiosity between neighbours. And since it was parasitic, the expression of a society that could discover no means of spiritual replenishment other than by devouring itself, it could contain no compassion or generosity. Within a month of arriving in Jamaica, Edna had joined its victims.

The trouble was that neither Norman nor Edna had arrived in Jamaica with more than a superficial notion of what to expect. This, it is true, was Norman's failure. But there is such a thing as the seductiveness of islands, and it increases with absence. Norman, after eight years abroad, had succumbed to it, as had his Aunt Ellie, Edna's mother, several years before. Between them they had transmitted to Edna the notion of a Jamaica where, though admittedly there was 'no art', there was however 'no problem of race', only, in the early morning, choirs of birds; and in the all-too-willing imagination of the young girl the dreams had constrained the reality.

They had decided, as early as the previous November, to have another child. This one would be a daughter and they would call her June Patricia, the first name commemorating the month they had spent together at Milford-on-Sea in the summer of 1920; she would be the incarnation of their 'second romance', as Douglas had been of their first. Now, within weeks of returning to Jamaica, Edna obligingly conceived.

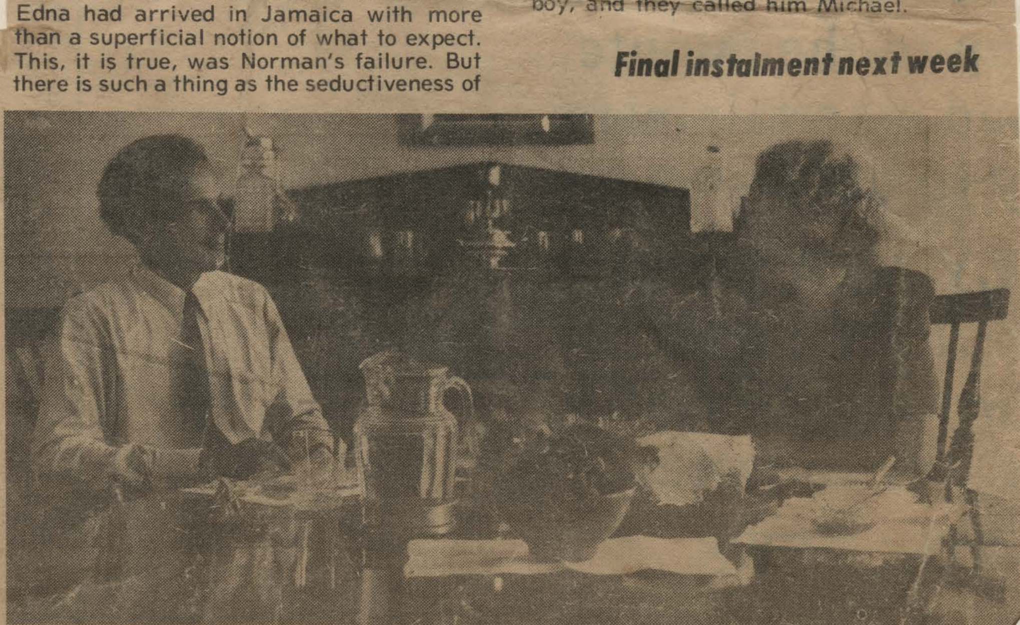
It was against this background of money troubles and infrequent cases that Norman, towards the end of September, prepared to attempt one of his more spectacular defences, on behalf of a man accused of arson. He would rest his case, he decided, on a demonstration that a match, lit and thrown into a tin of petrol, would be e tinguished by the petrol before it could ignite it.

That weekend, at Spitzbergen with Edna, he arranged an experiment. The petrol was found, the match struck and thrown in. Nothing happened. Triumphantly he leaned over the tin to have a look.

'I was seven months pregnant', Edna recalled, 'and I heard the screaming and yelling and the shouting, down at the bottom, in the cowpen... and I tore down the hill, only to find Norman with his whole face blackened, every bit of skin was burnt off. (This was poetic exaggeration.) He didn't have an eyelash, his hair was four inches back from his hairline, no eyebrows; and I rushed back up, climbing over a big heavy five-bar gate, which was always kept locked because of the cows, to get some butter or fat to cover his face, and ran back down to put it on, and we got him back up the hill and sent for a doctor, and he was very, very ill. But about three or four hours afterwards I began to get labour pains, and I had to keep very quiet about it because he had had such a terrible shock ... and then I couldn't hide the fact anymore that the baby really was coming. We stayed over a few days (at Spitzbergen), he couldn't travel right away, and I knew I shouldn't travel, and we had to get somebody to drive the car back, we didn't have a driver in those days, and we ultimately got back and then I sent for the doctor, and he said "Listen, you've got to get into bed, because this baby's coming", and for two months I stayed upstairs in Drumblair, because I couldn't face the stairs. And we were happy, in spite of it, we went on being happy, and Norman told me once or twice he thought I was behaving very well and that bucked me....'

As her time approached she entered the Nuttall Nursing Home, only a mile or so south of the Drumblair grounds; but when on 10th December after an uneventful labour, 'June Patricia' arrived, 'she' was a boy, and they called him Michael.

Final instalment next week



Breakfast at Drumblair