

THE MYSTERY OF LITTLE CONNIE

Sometime probably in the spring of 1907, a little girl named Connie was brought from her home in Aberdeen to spend two weeks with a couple living in Dorney. These people were her parents. At the end of the visit, Connie returned to Aberdeen and never saw them again. Who was Connie and who were her parents?

Connie had been born in London on 24 December 1904. Her mother was Mary Agnes Smeaton and three weeks after giving birth she married Connie's father. The following day, Mary travelled to Scotland, her home country, and left the baby in the care of Mrs Collie, a woman in Aberdeen who looked after illegitimate children. But Connie's parents had married, so why didn't they keep the child? The answer probably lies in the identity of Connie's father, and it was to be many years before she discovered who he really was.

The little girl was brought up in Aberdeen by Mrs Collie and then, after her death, by Mr and Mrs Bain, Mrs Collie's daughter and son-in-law. Mary was supposed to send weekly payments to pay for her daughter's care, but these eventually fell into arrears and then stopped. Twice Connie was taken to see her parents – the first time in Edinburgh when she was six months old and the second time in Dorney in 1907. Unsurprisingly, Connie later had no recollection of these meetings. Occasionally letters or presents arrived from Mary, and she appeared anxious at one point that someone might come making enquiries about Connie and maybe try to take her away. Mary asked Mrs Collie to burn this letter, but she didn't, and she and Harry Bain kept enough clues to be able eventually to unravel the mystery. In due course, Harry made enquiries on Connie's behalf, and all was eventually revealed in a court case in spring 1924.

Mary met Connie's father in March 1904, at a dance in Edinburgh where she lived. She was 19 and worked as a shop assistant. He was 21, a young officer in the Black Watch regiment. His name was Hubert Bowes-Lyon and he was a grandson of the 13th Earl of Strathmore, of Glamis Castle, from whom he had inherited £8,000. He could afford to set Mary up in a house in Edinburgh, where he visited her. Later, Hubert resigned his commission and the couple moved to live together in London, where Connie was born on Christmas Eve. Although Hubert and Mary married shortly afterwards, it was reported that Mary, at least, did not want her parents or Hubert's family to know about the baby, because she had been born before the wedding. It is likely that the latter, in the end, did know about Connie, who may well have met Hubert's widowed mother during the visit to Dorney, as she lived in Horton.

After Connie had been left with Mrs Collie, Hubert and Mary continued with their lives. They seem to have lived in Maidenhead early in 1905, but by June 1905 they were living in Dorney Reach, in a house called Villa Etelinda which I believe is the present-day Riverdale. It was one of the houses on the riverbank newly built by Colonel Palmer for letting to upper class tenants, and Hubert and Mary may have been the first people to live there. The accommodation included a drawing room, a separate billiard room, and space for the servants – a servants' hall and two servants' bedrooms in the attic. The house was smartly furnished – oak and bamboo bookcases, a smokers' cabinet, a mahogany card table, Wilton and Axminster pile carpets, skin rugs, cane and wicker easy chairs, Italian and French bedsteads. The spacious garden plus a section of riverbank beyond the towpath completed the picture. The author Jane Dismore, who wrote the story of Hubert, Mary and Connie in her book "Princess: the early life of Queen Elizabeth II", believes Hubert named the house after the Villa Etelinda in Bordighera, Italy, owned by his uncle Claude, the 14th Earl of Strathmore.

Dorney Reach at this time comprised only five houses. Three were north of Villa Etelinda, along the river towards Maidenhead, and two of these were rented out. Then there was one house next



to the villa – Bray View (now Touchdown). Between the two, a path led to the river (not where the snicket is now routed) and the ferry over to Monkey Island. Bray View had been rented since December 1904 by Eugene Richard, the Swiss manager of the Hotel Metropole in Brighton. Hubert was sufficiently friendly with his teenage neighbour Stanley Richard to take him for a ride in his motor car. Although building work was starting on further riverside houses, the general environment was quiet and secluded. As Lt Col PDS Palmer later wrote, the early residents of Dorney Reach “*came there for complete privacy*

with a river frontage in unspoiled rural surroundings. Their spendable income was such that they could employ and get resident domestic staff and with the resulting freedom and leisure enjoy the amenities of the river. Punts, canoes, rowing boats, white flannels, straw boaters, punting races at Maidenhead Regatta and so on were the order of the day on a river unspoiled by motorboats and riverside development. The towing path was little used and one met there only friends and neighbours. Public intrusion was limited to the passage of the infrequent river steamer. A whistle brought the Monkey Island ferry to meet you when you wanted.”

Most of the residents must have had use of a motor car to get around, and Hubert had a 16 horsepower four-cylinder Argyll. Mary had been in trouble driving this in March 1905 in a narrow Surrey lane, when she hit two horses, injuring both them and their riders. One horse had to be put down. It was alleged that a witness to the accident was so incensed by seeing Hubert grinning in the passenger seat that he said he never met a gentleman who drove a motor car and that motorists were blackguards going about the lanes killing people. Hubert encountered similar doubts about the safety of motor cars after he moved to Dorney. In June 1905, he was accused of driving too fast, both up Marsh Lane near the Z-bend, where there were children playing in the road, and along the Bath Road towards Maidenhead, where there were a lot of other vehicles and bicycles. The magistrate commented that even 12mph was dangerously fast along a road where children were playing. Reportedly, Hubert was fined again, for reckless driving, following a smash at the time of Connie’s visit.

This pleasant way of life in Dorney was not to last for Hubert and Mary, who were running out of money. By May 1907 they were living in Bourne End when their first son was born, and then in Maidenhead again. On 6 June 1907, the furnishings and contents of Villa Etelinda were put up for auction. The house was rented to a new tenant from 24 June 1907. By November 1907, Hubert and Mary were living in a flat in Maida Vale, and he was working as a motor agent. The following month Hubert was declared bankrupt, having spent all his inheritance and unable to pay his creditors in the Maidenhead area. Hubert and Mary went on to have another son in 1912. Mary died in 1914. Hubert served in the First World War and afterwards remarried and had another daughter.

Meanwhile, their daughter Connie grew up in Aberdeen and went to work in a newsagents’ shop. She knew that her surname was Lyon; Harry Bain had had to obtain her birth certificate when she went to school and this named both parents. In the years after 1915, Harry began to make efforts to track them down and when she was eighteen Connie tried to contact her father, including through legal channels. He did not respond. Eventually, in 1923 Connie brought a case in the Scottish courts seeking a declaration that she was the lawful and legitimate child of Hubert and Mary



Bowes-Lyon. Public interest in the case was heightened because Hubert's cousin Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon had recently married the Duke of York – later, of course, to become the parents of Queen Elizabeth II. While Hubert failed to respond even to the court, he did not contest the case, and there was sufficient evidence for the judge to give the declaration that Connie sought. There was however no reconciliation with her father who continued to ignore her existence.

Despite the lack of contact with her birth family, Connie appears to have found happiness in her life. In 1933, after a whirlwind romance she married a Scottish tobacco planter and settled in what is now Malawi, in Africa. The small part of her life played out in Dorney remains largely unknown, just another long ago incident in our village.

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