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Introduction

THE GRAND JAS cemetery lies to the north of the Riviera resort of Cannes, the nine-hectare site bounded by the road to the perfume-making town of Grasse.

A brief but stiffish uphill climb brings the curious and the grieving to the entrance of the Protestant portion of the 150-year-old cemetery. The stone pillars supporting the stern iron gates bear the legend ‘I believe in the resurrection of the dead’ in both French and English.

Inside is a roll call of the famous, the well known and the simply anonymous who were drawn from around the world to make Cannes their home – and their final resting place. The English Square, known also as the *cimetière anglais*, is dominated by a statue of Henry Brougham, who turned Cannes from a sleepy fishing village into the resort town it is today. Laid to rest among the quiet rows are sculptors, singers, pioneer pilots, dukes, soldiers – including two holders of the Victoria Cross, the United Kingdom’s highest military honour – and Peter Carl Fabergé of the Russian jewellery family, whose eggs crusted with diamonds, rubies, sapphires and other gems were gobbled up by the last Russian czar. There is a Nobel Prize winner – French biochemist Jacques Monod – a rhyme of poets, including the Irish bard William Bonaparte-Wyse and writer Klaus Mann, son of *Death in Venice* author Thomas, as well as the ballerina Olga Khokhlova, Pablo Picasso’s first wife.

There are lesser lights, too. Those originally from Camden Town in north London, for example, or Victoria in Australia, and,

beneath a stand of cypress trees, ones from Hyde Park in upper New York State. While the Americans are well outnumbered by the British, this grave, with its badly discoloured headstone, intrigues. What an extraordinary story the marble slab covers over, of the three silent inhabitants who lie beneath. It is the grave of Herman Livingston Rogers, his first wife, Katherine Moore, and his second wife, Lucy, or Marie Lucie Catherine as she styled herself in later life. The inscriptions on the gravestone state that the first wife was 'beloved', the second 'devoted' – but what of the third woman, who also loved this wealthy Renaissance man who counted princes and presidents in his circle? She was born in a wooden shack in a mountain holiday resort and named Bessie Wallis Warfield. This woman from Baltimore married a Navy pilot, a shipping broker and a king. She deeply touched the lives of all three occupants of this particular plot in Grand Jas – and many more beyond. Though one man gave up the English throne for her, it was Herman Livingston Rogers whom she called 'the love of my life'.

Herman was Bessie's best friend, her companion, her advisor, and her surrogate husband. Just days before she married her royal suitor, a man who had prostrated himself and his kingdom in order to win her hand, it is believed that she offered to have Herman's child.

Bessie Wallis Warfield was an unlikely seductress, apparently more interested in cooking than coitus, her heart under careful control. Nor was this woman who caused so much chaos and commotion in the British constitution and in the hearts of men much to look at – raw-boned, square-jawed, outsize hands, and a rasping voice that some found irritating. Yet she enticed men into her orbit, be they single, married, gay or straight. Women, too, were fascinated by her style and her chutzpah.

Wallis was capable of love, passion and desire – but not always with the men she married. She liked to say that hers was a simple

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story. It was nothing of the kind. Wallis was an endlessly complex and intriguing woman, beguiling, infuriating. There is no plaque outside her Baltimore home at 212 East Biddle Street in once fashionable Mount Vernon, but there are those who believe she should be remembered with a statue on the famously unoccupied fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in central London for saving the British from her pro-Nazi royal husband at a critical moment in their island saga as they faced Hitler's eager battalions, war-weary and alone. This is the story of a most extraordinary woman who, single-handed, changed the history of the British royal family and arguably the destiny of the British people.

CHAPTER ONE

‘All is Love’



UNKEMPT, UNRULY AND UNTIDY, Miss Minerva Buckner was hardly a model teacher. She ignored school bells, bath schedules and timetables. While she had a brilliant mind and had travelled extensively around Europe, she was feared for her violent temper and mordant wit. The lazy, the slow and the stupid dreaded her classes, where she taught in French and German. ‘Miss Buckner went on like a crazy person. I want to come home,’ one of her pupils wrote plaintively to her mother.

There was one exception. Bessie Wallis Warfield loved Miss Buckner’s classes and adored the somewhat doughy and gangling teacher with a haphazard appreciation of personal hygiene. Miss Buckner was her first love, the besotted teenage schoolgirl sitting at her feet in the wooded grounds of Oldfields girls’ boarding school as she read the love poetry of Arthur Rimbaud and Rainer Maria Rilke.

*You who never arrived
in my arms, Beloved, who were lost
from the start*

Indeed, the line from Rilke’s ‘You Who Never Arrived’ could have been the theme for Wallis’s hopeless juvenile enchantment.

Wallis saved her pocket money to buy Miss Buckner presents, on one occasion giving her an enormous fern from a florist in Baltimore, an hour's steam train journey away through the heavily wooded Maryland countryside.

Wallis later recalled: 'She was very appreciative. She was a very ugly woman but a very nice one. I took a great fancy to her. I had a huge crush.'

Wallis was not the only one vying for the attentions of the firmly unmarried Miss Buckner, an outsize personality with the reputation for telling 'mildly improper' anecdotes. In the polite language of the day, her 'boon companion' was fellow teacher 'Miss Alie' McMurrin, the two ladies feeding birds in the woods around Glencoe and going for gentle nature rambles together where they looked for the 'earliest spring flowers'.

Wallis was fickle with her heart: she also fell madly in love with the ravishing if firm Charlotte Noland, who ran a summer camp for young girls called Burrland. Wallis spent long dreamy days and hot Virginia nights mooning over the svelte, athletic horsewoman and basketball player. In a phrase that could be culled from a modern erotic novel, she described the rangy Miss Noland as a woman with a 'mixture of gay, deft teasing and a drill sergeant's sternness'. She recalled: 'I had a terrible crush on Miss Charlotte, of course I don't know any girl who hasn't who ever came in contact with her.' She was speaking no less than the truth.

WHEN THE DIVINE Miss Noland, who later founded Foxcroft girls' school in Virginia, paid a brief visit to see her sister at Oldfields all-girls school, half the pupils swooned away. As Wallis's great friend Mary Kirk, who was more than half in love with Wallis herself, wrote to her mother: 'By the time she [Miss Noland] is ready to go back, a dozen girls will have developed a crush, Wallis is already that way and terrifically wild with excitement.' All the more so

when Miss Noland, who later became co-master of the Middleburg Hunt, invited Wallis and Mary for a ride in her new car, stopping at a country store for refreshments. On another occasion in the summer of 1913, she and Wallis, now seventeen, went for a 'tiny little' ride together. Such was their intimacy that the boyish Wallis was permitted to call Miss Noland 'Lotty', the teasing sexual ambiguity of their relationship never fully expressed – nor, presumably, resolved. This friendship may have made Mary just a little jealous, and she innocently confessed to her mother, 'I cannot help thinking about Wallis all the time.'

That said, Wallis's passion for Lotty was well balanced by a crush on Lotty's brother Philip, who was more than twenty years Wallis's senior. Much to the irritation of her mother, Alice Warfield, Wallis spent days wailing and sobbing because he left her love unrequited, never responding to her ardent missives.

Her schooldays were little different from those of many pubescent young girls cloistered in the febrile hothouse atmosphere of a remote all-girls school where passion and emotion were heightened, and every tiny event treated as high drama. When Wallis sang 'Dear delightful women, how I simply love them all' at a concert, she was crooning from her heart. Older pupils exploited the mooning behaviour of juniors ruthlessly. For example, when Wallis, a school newbie, and another girl were vying for the affection of a senior girl, Wallis was told that she would be chosen only if she bought her gifts or gave her money.

In the top-floor dormitory which she shared with Mary Kirk, whom Wallis described as a 'beautiful little partridge', the two whispered confidences late into the night. However, the chatter between Wallis and the red-haired daughter of America's oldest silversmith was often interrupted by an irate teacher. Their giggly gossip centred upon other girls, their teachers and people they knew. It was not long, though, before their conversational agenda