



# The Death of an Owl

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*with*

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# I

## OXFORD AND AFTER

# I

## Autumn, 1981

As we bent our heads in prayer I glanced down and saw that beads of dew, left by the wet grass at the side of the churchyard path, where I had strayed for a moment to look at an old tombstone, glistened on my polished black shoes. The shoes were new; as was the dark grey suit I now wore, purchased in anticipation of my going up to Oxford in a few months' time. The decision to buy the suit had been brought forward a little due to the importance of the occasion: the memorial service for my Uncle Roland.

Roland Fryerne was my father's older brother. From this day on, my father would become head of our rather eccentric and dispersed family. If he chose to, he would be entitled to call himself 'Charles Fryerne of Fryerne Court': a feudal title dating back to the fifteenth century to which the family – if nobody else – attached great importance. Roland, genealogist and historian, had been cremated earlier in the day. The urn containing his ashes, no doubt still warm, nestled on a table garlanded with lilies, whose heavy scent filled the church. I felt no particular grief at my uncle's death. I had hardly known him, as we had lived abroad for many years. My uncle had visited us once in New York, when I was all too young to remember, and half a dozen times in Lausanne, where we had lived for most of my life so far. He had not

been at ease with children; or perhaps I had not been at ease with uncles.

Now my father's employers had transferred him to a position in Head Office in west London. 'Putting me out to grass,' my father told my mother. At the time I had no idea what the phrase meant, but I was captivated by the idea of my father standing in a paddock and kneeling down now and then to munch the fresh pasture. I could see his grey head and his broad pinstriped back directly in front of me now. My elderly mother stood beside him, wearing a formal high-necked dress of midnight blue. If you met my parents for the first time you would judge them as elegant if somewhat chilly, and I am not sure that further acquaintance would have modified this impression. They were very private. They had none of the bonhomie that some expatriates displayed on returning home to England – a form of insecurity as the newcomers struggled to rediscover their place in the social order, unconscious of the fact that 'society' was changing so fast they might as well have just stepped out of a time machine.

My father always took a perverse pride in describing his line as late developers, of which I was a prime example, not having been born until both my parents were well into their forties. They had been slow to marry, late to parenthood and now it seemed doubtful whether they would make anything of their retirement. But they were Fryernes and therefore had long ago chosen obscurity over insecurity as their distinguishing feature.

In Lausanne we had lived quietly, but all my parents' friends were comfortably off and so, I assumed, were we. Their social circle consisted of bankers, diplomats, or senior employees of organisations such as the United Nations and the Red Cross. Not merely a late child but an only one,

the much older children of these professionals were my few friends; their mothers were my mother's friends. Cocktail parties and dinners were infrequent and discreet. Dances were occasionally arranged for the younger generation – evenings of extreme dullness and great propriety.

Amongst the three of us, though, we had fun whenever my father had some time off. Long walks in the hills above Evian in the early summer, amongst the alpine flowers and the remainder of that year's snow; sailing on Lake Geneva where we kept a small boat in one of the marinas; weeks spent in a rented villa in Menton, on the Côte d'Azur; and of course, skiing once the snow came.

I was already missing the shores of Lake Geneva. What I had seen of England so far did not encourage me to think life in west London would be much of a substitute for the life I had left behind. The prospect of going to university and mingling with a host of people who had all been at school together did not appeal either. I could speak three languages already, and the International Lycée I had attended had given me as good an education as you could wish for, but nobody I knew was going to Oxford. Those of my friends and contemporaries who had felt the need for further education had obtained places at Harvard, Princeton, the Sorbonne, Padua, Tübingen – even Cambridge. Already they resembled embryos of the successful Eurocrats or bankers they would no doubt one day become. If I was an embryo of anything, I didn't have any idea what it might be. I didn't really know what I believed in and I faced the future with a certain sense of dread.

The memorial service drew to a close. We shuffled out of our pews and processed behind the vicar out into the fresh air. I was standing beside my mother and, unaccountably,

took her hand. ‘Don’t cling,’ she said, but not unkindly. I let go. The congregation had broken up into small groups who were chatting and enjoying the autumn sunshine after the chilly gloom of the church interior. I turned and studied the view around me. A suburban road separated two very different worlds. Behind me was the ancient church of St Mary’s-Without, a building of Norman origin, set in its own island of green and bounded by a copse of trees. A different landscape lay on the opposite side. I had seen the sign on our arrival: the road was called Fryerne Way. Behind me I heard my father say, ‘And that is Fryerne Court Estate.’

I turned and recognised Bradford Fryerne, a distant American cousin who appeared able to drop everything and cross the Atlantic at a moment’s notice in order to attend family gatherings of this kind. He had been a near neighbour in New York.

‘Wow,’ he said.

I gazed at the rows of detached houses, each with its own pocket-handkerchief-size front garden, off-road parking and garage. The few cars that were parked there at this time of day all seemed new or nearly new: Rovers, Jaguars and the occasional sports car. I could see nothing that warranted a ‘wow’.

‘No trace of the old family home, then?’ asked Bradford.

‘No,’ said my father with relish. ‘Not a brick. Not a chimney pot. There was no nonsense about listed buildings in those days. They got a wrecking ball in and flattened the lot.’

For a while longer we studied the housing estate. I had always imagined that the original Fryerne Court might at least have survived in the curve of an ivy-covered archway, or perhaps the remains of a kitchen garden or hothouse; a weed-shrouded knot garden. I had no excuse for such

fantasies; my father had always assured me that nothing remained of the old house. It seemed as if Bradford had cherished a similar dream, for he stared at the row of houses as if at any moment he expected a veil to be pulled aside and the ghost of Fryerne Court to emerge like Camelot from the shining mist.

Once the memorial service was over the plan was for us all to make our way to the Fryerne Arms a mile or so away. We had passed this pub, draped in banners advertising ‘All You Can Eat Carvery!’, on our way to the church. It had been selected for the sentimental associations of its name rather than for any practical consideration. The fake-Tudor, half-timbered exterior and the fibreglass reproduction of our family crest attached to a pole in front of the pub were not inviting. The noise of car doors slamming stirred my father from his thoughts: reminiscences of Uncle Roland for his after-lunch speech; worries about his new job, or his new house.

‘Lunch,’ he said with a shudder. We moved off to join my mother.

My Uncle Roland’s work as an historian had produced various short essays, published in architectural journals, of interest mainly to specialists in the design of church roofs. Later in life he took it upon himself to write *A History of the Fryernes of Fryerne Court*, which began with the events of Bosworth Field in 1485. The Charles Fryerne of the day had distinguished himself during the course of the battle – it was not clear how – and had earned the gratitude of Henry Tudor. In an untypical and unhistorical way, Roland had allowed himself to speculate as to what those services might have been. Rescuing the colours? Diverting an axeman from

attacking the future king? No firm conclusion was reached, but it was a fact that the services had led to a grant of land on the edge of the South Downs. A few decades later the accumulated rents were sufficient to finance the building of a house, which became known as Fryerne Court. At first it was a simple, graceful structure with leaded roofs and mullioned windows and high chimney stacks. As the original Tudor building was added to by successive generations of Fryernes, it lost its purity of conception and form, and its domestic scale, and became a large and uncomfortable-looking house with a surfeit of tack rooms, stable yards and grooms' cottages. It also became too expensive to run on the income from farm rents, which had supported it quite comfortably for the first two hundred years of its existence.

Twenty-five years before he embarked on the project, someone had tipped off Uncle Roland that an oil painting of the original Tudor house was coming up for auction at Christie's. He bought it. A colour plate of this picture was reproduced on the dust jacket of his book. He also possessed a black and white photograph taken in 1920 of the much-enlarged building that was pulled down soon afterwards. This was reproduced as the frontispiece. My father believed that it was the oil painting that had originally inspired Roland to undertake his final, and greatest, project. The resulting self-published tome was the crowning achievement of my uncle's life.

The history of my ancestors, as related by Uncle Roland, was one of many small deeds and no great ones. The narrative sections of the work were brief, but undoubtedly dull out of all proportion to their length. The book was garnished with numerous genealogical tables, with headings such as 'The Fryernes of New South Wales'. Bibliographies, indices

and extensive footnotes filled the rest of its pages.

Indeed the Fryernes had achieved a kind of obscurity so comprehensive as to be rather unusual in its way: not a single politician nor bishop nor general nor nabob graced our ranks. For the most part we lived out our lives quietly, most of us within our means, troubling nobody. The last Fryerne to live in the house itself was another Roland, my uncle's grandfather. This Roland was less dull and more ambitious than his forebears and it struck him that the family had played too modest a role in the country's affairs. He wanted a seat in Parliament and a larger house. The seat eluded him, but he went ahead with his designs to build a residence suitable for a county magnate and a man of standing. In order to finance the ambitious extensions to the original building he decided to invest in South American railway stocks, which promised spectacular results. The results were indeed spectacular, but not in the way investors had hoped. That earlier Roland clung on as long as he could in the financial wreckage that followed the South American Railway Crash, which also brought down the great banking house of Overend & Gurney and a host of other speculators, but a few years later, Fryerne Court had to be sold. My ancestor went off to die in a boarding house in Hove, ending his life racked with guilt for losing the house on his watch.

Fryerne Court was not long enjoyed by the new owners. It did duty during the First World War as a temporary nursing home and by the time it was handed back by the Army the house was in a bit of a state. There was talk about trying to convert it for use as a school, but in the end the least risky solution was simply to pull it down. After all, the new owners had hardly lived there. They had performed

no heroics at Bosworth Field. The site had development potential, but it was not until the 1950s that some developers obtained planning permission for residential housing. Then the ruins, parks, and stands of trees, so carefully landscaped over the last four hundred years, were felled, flattened, ploughed up and built over to bring into existence the desirable executive housing that was the Fryerne Court Residential Estate.

I thought about this as I sat at a narrow and overcrowded trestle table in the dining room of the Fryerne Arms, squeezed in between my mother on my left and a very large lady who said she was my cousin on my right. It was difficult to move my elbows. My father had foregone the option of the carvery and had chosen the menu for all of us. The starter was a prawn cocktail, which required only a spoon and wasn't that tricky to eat. The second course was accompanied by bowls of steamed vegetables and mounds of mashed potato, placed at random around the table. On our plates were rubbery-looking chicken breasts. I managed to get the point of my knife into mine, and a thin stream of hot, garlicky butter shot across the table and splashed on to the plate of a girl sitting opposite me. I had noticed her in church: one of the few people close to my own age, although she was probably four or five years older than me.

'Hey!'

'Sorry. I didn't expect it to do that,' I said.

'That's the trouble with chicken Kiev. Don't worry, it didn't quite make my dress.' She dabbed some of the butter from the table with her napkin.

'Is that what this is? Chicken Kiev?'

'That's what it says on the menu. Now, which one are you?'

‘I’m Charles Fryerne. Uncle Roland was my father’s older brother.’ I gestured to where my father sat by waving rather inelegantly with my fork.

‘So now your father is the Fryerne of Fryerne Court?’

I had been listening to her voice. It was rather deep and melodious and had a familiar twang.

‘He is now, I suppose. You’re from New York, aren’t you?’

‘That’s smart of you. Yes, I am.’

‘We lived in New York when I was little. A block away from Brad Fryerne on the Upper East Side.’

‘Oh, but Brad’s my uncle! I’m Caroline Woodchester.’

I looked along the table at Brad. I could see no likeness. He was tall, pear-shaped, with thinning brown hair and a big moon-like face that had once been square-jawed but whose outlines were now beginning to blur. Caroline was about my height and solidly built, with dark hair and a lively, attractive face: not by any means beautiful, but a face you looked at and didn’t forget. She watched me making comparisons and added:

‘His niece by marriage, of course.’

As Brad had worked his way through several wives, this connection was difficult to challenge, but I found myself wondering whether she wasn’t really his mistress. My expression must have been easy to read, because a look of annoyance crossed her face.

‘So what do you think of all this nonsense?’ she said, somewhat abruptly.

‘Nonsense?’

‘The gathering of the clans. Talking about a house that was pulled down sixty years ago. Inheriting a title that doesn’t entitle you to anything. Except maybe being teased?’

I didn’t like the idea that anyone should mock my father.

Still less did I believe that anyone would dare. I bent my head over my plate and struggled for a moment with my chicken Kiev. Brad's niece was nettled by my silence.

'I certainly won't be tricked into coming to one of these shows again. I'm only over here to see about getting on a course for a year or two and to escape from home for a while.'

'Your uncle seems to like coming to family gatherings,' I replied.

'Too much money and not enough to do.'

Looking up the table I saw my father hunting through his pockets, probably trying to find the notes for his speech. I turned back to Caroline.

'Well, to each his own, I suppose,' I said rather grandly, hoping to bring our prickly conversation to an end.

After a few moment's silence she said, 'Boy, was that a pompous remark.'

'I didn't mean to be pompous,' I apologised. Nor had I. I didn't want to quarrel with anyone, least of all this girl who would probably have been good fun if I had met her on a less trying occasion.

A look came into her eyes, an expression of pure mischief. She leaned forward a little so that only I could hear her words.

'Let's find a room upstairs before the speeches begin. There will be speeches, won't there? There always are when you English get together.'

'A room? What do we need a room for?'

I was mystified, but only for a moment. She mouthed, rather than spoke, the next words, but her meaning was unmistakable.

'Sex, of course.'

‘What?’

I could feel the blood rising in my cheeks and my mouth fell open. I saw that Caroline was trying not to laugh, delighted with the effect her words had produced.

‘It might be fun,’ she added. ‘God knows anything would be better than sitting here a moment longer.’

She rose from her chair and, not knowing what else to do, I began to struggle upright as well. This caught the attention of my mother who, until then, had been deep in conversation with her neighbour on her left.

‘Where are you going?’ she asked me, tugging at my sleeve.

‘We thought we’d go and get some fresh air, Mrs Fryerne, and maybe Charles could keep me company while I smoke a cigarette. I’m dying for one but I don’t want to light up while people are still eating.’

‘Well, Charles can’t go,’ said my mother. ‘It would be most inconsiderate of him to leave just as his father is about to make a speech. His father is head of the family now, you know.’ These last few words were spoken with emphasis, as if she expected to exert her influence over Caroline as well as me.

‘Thanks, Mrs F,’ replied Caroline in a breezy manner. ‘All the same, I think I’ll sit this one out.’ She turned and headed for the door, threading her way between the tables.

At the precise moment she left, someone tinged a glass with a knife and my father stood up. Clutching a sheaf of notes, he studied them intently for a few long moments until his audience began to fidget and worry that he had the wrong piece of paper in his hands: a laundry list, for example. Then he began, his speech slow and measured.

‘I cannot say how much comfort it gives me to see how many of you have made the effort to come here on this day.

Some of you have travelled great distances to be here: from New York, from Aberdeen, from the Solomon Islands . . .’

‘What a very ill-mannered young lady,’ my mother hissed in my ear. I did not react.

‘From Santiago in Chile, from Saint Helier in Jersey, from Loughborough in the Midlands . . .’ said my father, continuing his eclectic selection from the points of origin of the guests.

But I was further away than the Solomon Islands. In my imagination I was outside the dining room. I was walking up the narrow flight of stairs to the first floor of the pub, a few moments behind Caroline so that we would not be seen ascending the steps together. Then we arrived on a landing. I took hold of her hand. In my imagination it was cool and firm and not trembling as mine was. Together we tried the door-handles of several rooms until we found one that was unlocked. We peered cautiously in. There was nobody inside. The single bed was neatly made and had an eiderdown on top. Caroline pulled off the eiderdown and sat down, pulling me beside her on to the edge of the bed.

‘Now then, Charles, here’s what we do.’

At the head of the table, my father was just beginning to get into his stride.