

URSULA VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

It was 1962 and I had just come back from Cameroon, racked with every kind of fever that the White Man's Grave could confer. Let out on parole from the Hospital for Tropical Diseases I went to call on Ursula at 69, to catch up and exchange gossip; we had been in touch all through my time abroad – it was shortly after she had been out to Ghana – and she was intrigued by my traveller's tales. Tea graduated to chamberizette – at that time one of Ursula's favourite tipples, a strawberry pink vermouth, with a liberal spike of gin 'to taste' – and it was dusk when I finally left, slightly unsteadily, with the lights of Gloucester Crescent just coming up. As she came down the garden path with me, she said casually 'I don't suppose you'd like to come to live here?' And so began one of the richest and most precious times of my life.

I had got to know her five years or so earlier: that never-to-be-forgotten long weekend when she and RVW were down at Ashmansworth staying with the Finzis. For some reason we clicked almost immediately: her enthusiasm and easy laughter quickly disarming any shyness I might have had. We used to talk about poetry and all sorts of things. She was so open; and – as I was to experience again and again throughout our long, loving friendship – unstinting and uniquely imaginative and thoughtful in her generosity. In kind as well as in feeling: soon after Ralph died, she passed on to me his copy of Forsythe's 'Orchestration'. Her little note said: 'This was always on Ralph's table, and I like the idea of you having it so much – there must be something comforting in using, so sharing, a book with someone who has wrestled with the same sort of dragons for years. I feel I'm handing over a book of good spells to you, and that for you, the magic will work'.

Generous, too, in friends: all those remarkable individuals – Ursula's world – to whom I became attached in turn: Betty Maconchy and her husband Billy; the Hornsteins; Jean Stewart; and of course Gill (Sir Gilmour Jenkins), who often used the house as a *pied à terre* . People were always passing through. When I first came on the scene – 'The Lodger' – she was in the throes of completing her biography of RVW, and I used to help out with the typing – she was an erratic typist! – and proof-reading. Subsequently Imogen Holst became a regular visitor when they collaborated on 'Heirs and Rebels'. Strange encounters: Canetti turning up on his bicycle in the middle of supper and wolfing down an omelette; going to take tea with the birdman, Ludwig Koch, and his wife Lottie; and the whole Bennie Hermann circus – the recording of his opera 'Wuthering Heights' – when we all lost a stone or two. And then those wonderful parties...

It was a life of exuberance; but I remember too those quiet hours at the end of the day when we'd get together in the study upstairs: she in her peignoir, smoking her endless cheroots, as we sipped jasmine tea and swapped reports of our doings: some deep talk as well, cats sharing in the harmony and stillness.

Later I got married from 69 – Joy Finzi and Howard Ferguson among the tiny crew of witnesses. Later still, 66 became my refuge and she my rock during the long final illness of my brother, when I was trailing backwards and forwards to the Royal Middlesex – the door always open, and a stiff whisky to hand at all hours of the day or night.

So many of us are now bereft: quite simply Ursula was irreplaceable.

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(published in Vaughan Williams Society Journal, December 2007)

