



The Strettell Sisters

Ightham Mote: its role in their lives and loves



"I adore a moat,"
said Isabel.

[Isabel Archer in *The
Portrait of a Lady* by
Henry James (1881)]



Ties that Bind



- “There were very special ties between Mrs. Palmer and my family, for it was she who had cared for my brother when he had been sent to Colorado by his physicians, and my sister Alma had been a guest at her home in ‘The Garden of the Gods’ during her visit to America. Therefore when the Palmers settled in England, Ightham Mote became a kind of second home to us and our children.”
- **Taken from:** Carr, Alice Vansittart Strettell, 1926. *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*. Edited by Eve Adam. London: Hutchinson, p.120.

Christmas 1887



- “Christmas was a real Yuletide in the fine old wainscoted hall and library, where Joe [Alice Strettell’s husband, Joseph Comyns Carr] was always ready for the revel, as he was for the outdoor sports with his own children and those of the house. There were games in the beautiful old quadrangle and fishing feats from the bridges that lead across the moat to the bowling-green beyond...”
- **Christmas at Ightham Mote in 1887, taken from:** Mrs Comyns Carr, *J. Comyns Carr. Stray Memories*. By his Wife. London: Macmillan & Co., 1920.

A Gilded Circle



Ightham Mote



South Kensington/Chelsea



1. The Sisters' Story



“Love is a plaintive song,
Sung by a suffering maid,
Telling a tale of wrong,
Telling of hope betrayed;
Tuned to each changing note...”

Gilbert & Sullivan: *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride* (1881), Act II: Solo by Patience, a Dairy Maid. [**Inset:** Leonora Braham, as Patience, in the 1881 première at the Opéra Comique].

The Sisters

- **Alice Laura Vansittart** (1850-1927), born Taplow, Bucks; **Alma Gertrude Vansittart** (1853/5-1939), born Genoa, Piedmont;
- Brother: Arthur E. Vansittart (1845-1882): unmarried;
- Mother: Laura Strettell (*née* Vansittart-Neale) (1816-1899) [right]; Father: Rev. Alfred Baker Strettell (1817-1904), Curate, Taplow, Bucks. M. 1844.



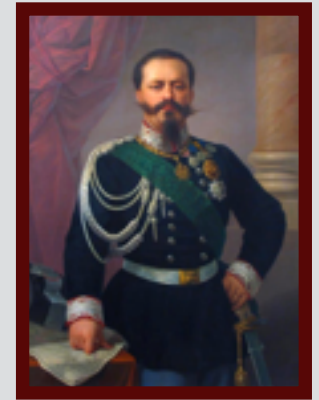


Royal Lineage

- Nieces in the fourteenth generation of King Richard III of England (1452-1485). Laura Vansittart-Neale's mother, Ann, sister of Barbara Spooner who married the abolitionist, William Wilberforce, was a niece in the twelfth generation;
- Matrilineal descendants of Cecily Neville, Duchess of York (1415-1495) [above], Richard's mother. The mitochondrial DNA descent by which the remains of Richard III were identified in 2013 passes through the Spooner girls' mother, Barbara Gough-Calthorpe (1746-1826), the sister of the first Lord Calthorpe.



Genoa



- In 1851, Mr Strettell accepted a post as British consular chaplain in Genoa, then in Piedmont (Kingdom of Sardinia) under the House of Savoy, a position he held until 1874, and where Alma was born;
- The family witnessed Italian unification at first hand. In 1862, from the balcony of the Consulate, they watched Giuseppe Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel II (I of a United Italy) [above right], and Emperor Napoleon III process through Genoa. That evening, their mother attended the Royal Ball, wearing, according to Alice, a crinoline with “... spreading skirts of blue gauze garlanded with tiny rosebuds...”

Alice Learns to Sew

- At 15, Alice was sent home to England to attend boarding school in Brighton. In the holidays, she was often cared for by Ann Vansittart-Neale, “a saintly but evangelically minded grandmother”;
- “Many were the long Sundays I spent at the pretty satin sandalled feet of my grandmother as she sat by the green verandahed window of her drawing room. In her cap of fluted tulle, tied under her chin with a ribbon, she taught me the Catechism and some terrifying hymns. **Many, too, were the long dull afternoons and evenings I spent sewing**, or reading the Bible, until at nine o’clock the old butler appeared and my grandmother said, ‘Bring in Prayers’.”

Alma the Linguist

- By contrast, Alice's sister, Alma, grew up in Italy with strong literary and linguistic interests. She was described as having a light and merry temperament, and she became fluent in a number of European languages;
- Her career was to take her in a very different direction from that of her sister, and she became an accomplished literary translator and writer. Her 1887 volume of translations of *Spanish & Italian Folk-Songs* (London: Macmillan) included illustrations by John Singer Sargent, who had also been born in Italy and was a good linguist. With Sargent, she shared a love of Wagner, and they were renowned for playing piano duets for hours at a time.

Alma Translates

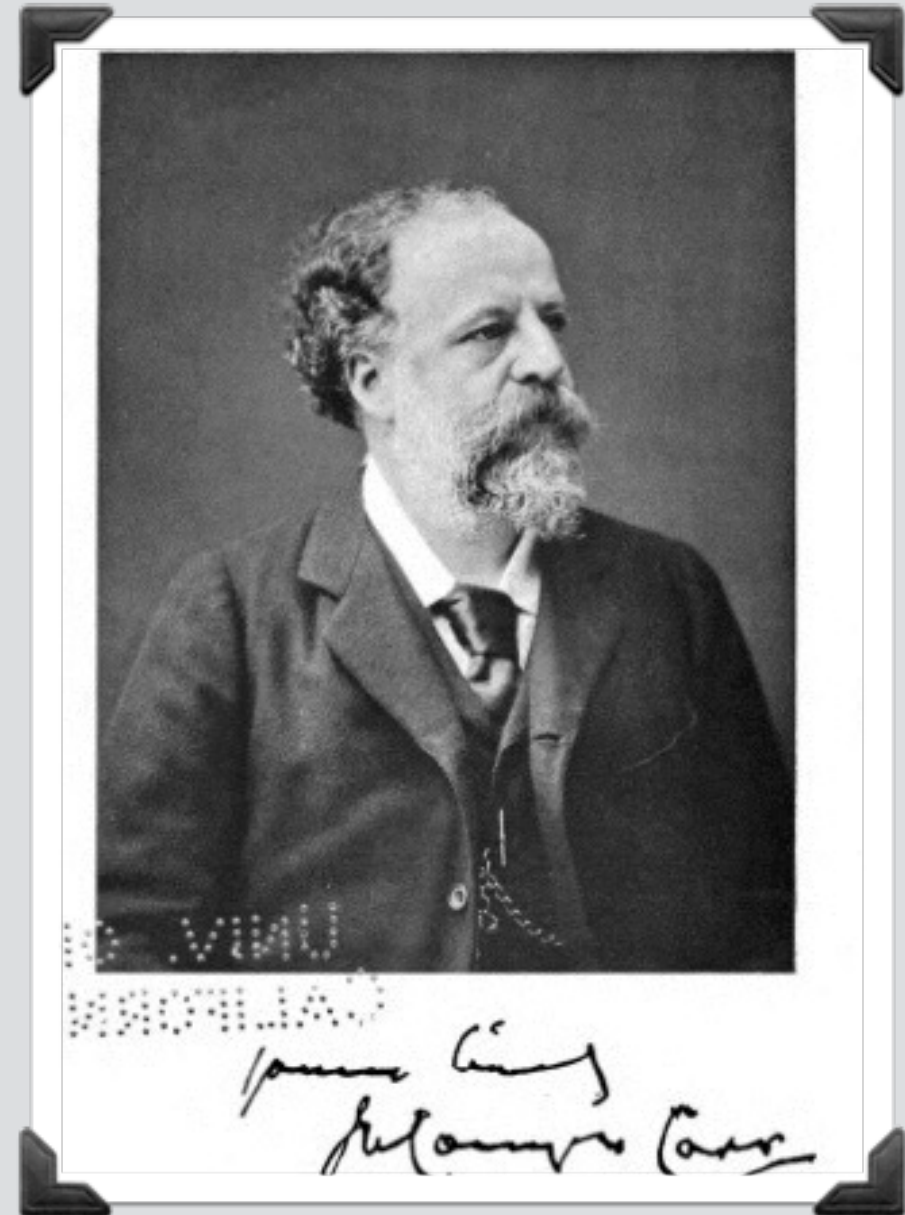


“Beware of black old cats, with evil
faces;
Yet more, of kittens white and soft be
wary:
My sweetheart was just such a little fairy,
And yet she well-nigh scratched my heart
to pieces.”

*[Alma Strettell, from her translation of
Heinrich Heine's poem: “Hüt Dich, mein
Freund, vor grimmen Teufelsfratsen”.]*

Alice: Marriage

- 1873, Dresden:
married art and drama
critic, Joseph Comyns
Carr (1849-1916)
[right];
- Champion of the Pre-
Raphaelites; co-
directed the Grosvenor
Gallery; founded the
New Gallery on
Regent Street in 1888,
where 'The
Portrait' (Elsie) was first
shown in 1891.

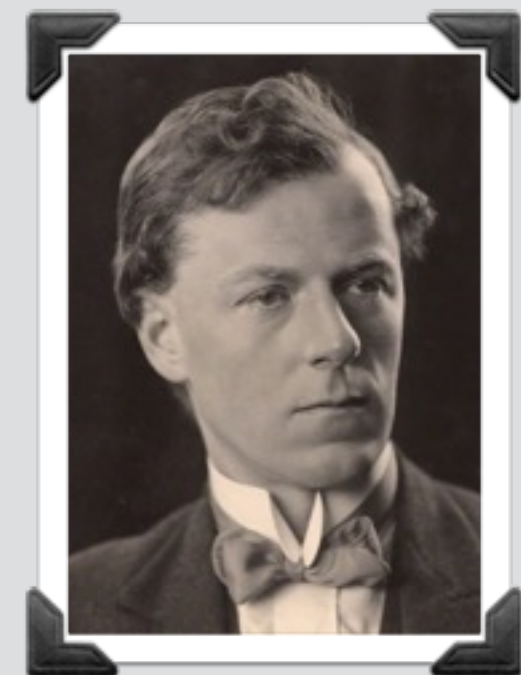


Wedding Dress

- “My father, however, naturally wanted to ‘finish us off’ in the English Church, and I remember my shyness when I saw the uninvited crowd which had assembled there I was told afterwards to see what a high-art wedding dress would be like! Joe declared that they expected it to be scanty; if so they must have been disappointed that the folds of my soft brocade, fashioned after my artist sister-in-law’s design and approved by my husband, were much more ample than was the mode of the day...”
- **Taken from:** Mrs Comyns Carr, *J. Comyns Carr. Stray Memories.* By his Wife. London: Macmillan & Co., 1920.

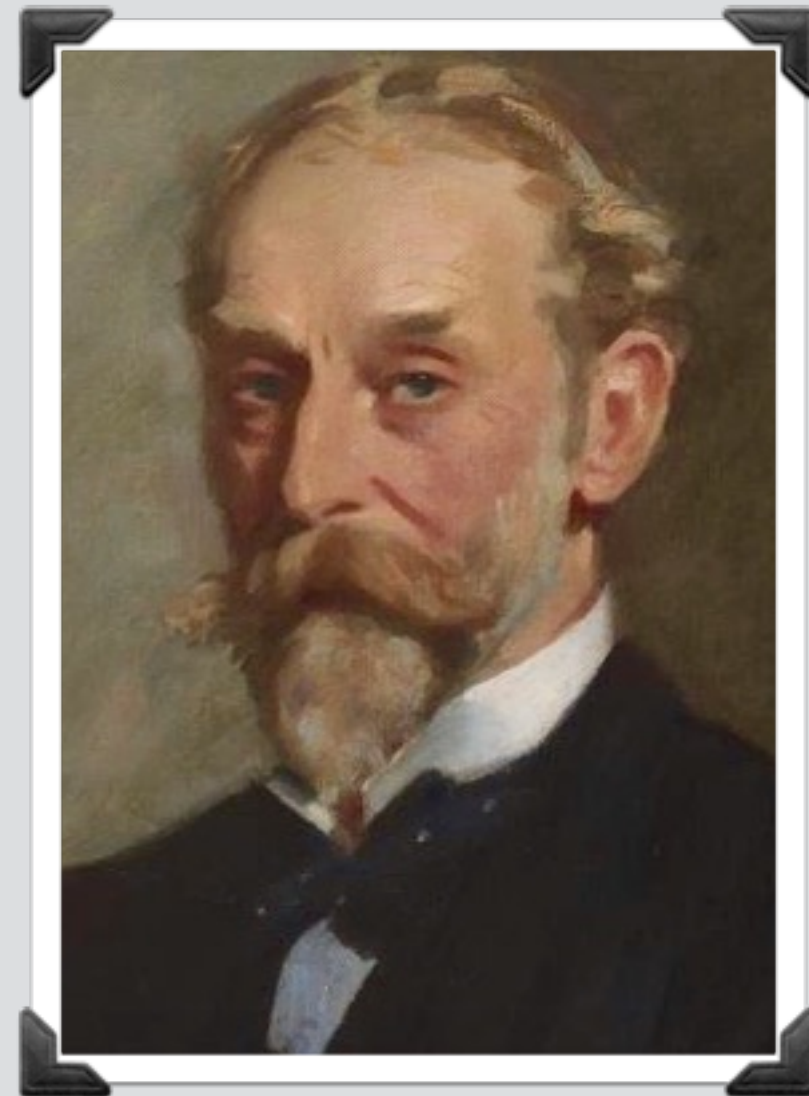
Alice: Children

- Philip [right top, by Edward Burne-Jones, 1882];
- Dorothy ('Dolly' or 'Doll') (1878-1918), friend of 'Dos' Palmer; committed suicide by drowning in a pond;
- (Sir) Arthur (1882-1965), a barrister who in 1923 became Liberal MP for Islington East [right bottom];
- They all played hide-and-seek and fished at Ightham Mote with the Palmer girls.



Alma: Marriage

- 1890: married Lawrence Alexander Harrison (nicknamed 'Peter') (1866-1937), English artist and collector; friend of Sargent, Steer, and Tonks; Elsie Palmer's first lover, who then took her younger sister, Dorothy ('Dos'), as his lifelong mistress.



Lawrence 'Peter' Alexander Harrison by Wilfrid Gabriel de Glehn.

Alma: Children

- Margaret Harrison;
- Sylvia Harrison (1896-1989), by John Singer Sargent, 1913 [right]: “The shawl in which I was painted was kept in Sargent's studio, & I think he painted quite a number of people in it...”

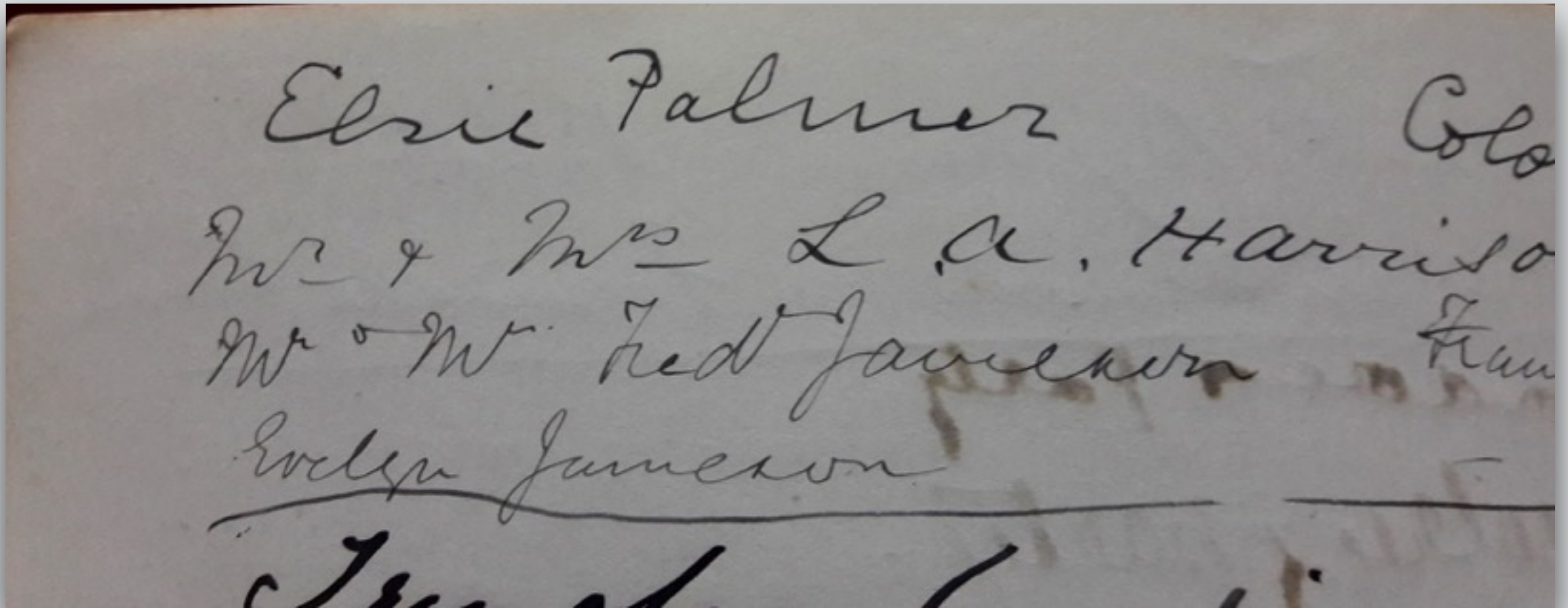


2. Alma Betrayed



*And Elsie
Betrayed*

Passionate Affairs 1



Beginnings? December 7, 1894: Elsie revisits Ightham Mote with Lawrence Alexander Harrison ('Peter') and his wife, Elsie's 'Auntie Alma'.

Passionate Affairs 2

- In late-October 1894, 'Peter' Harrison had already sent Elsie what is called a 'questionable letter'. He is 6 years older than Elsie, but 15 years younger than his wife, Alma;
- Slowly, this letter blossoms into a dramatic affair: "that burning time" when "I touched the sky ...and lost myself in you", he writes to Elsie in 1903;
- "My dearest, I love & love you - let me say it." ***And what about Alma?*** "I am with her & yet far away at the same time, for I belong to you."

Passionate Affairs 3

- *Enter Leo Myers, 9 years younger than Elsie:* “I think of you always, always, and of that walk and everything.” (31 December, 1901);
- “You must know, you do know, who is the true Princess.-“ (Feb/March, 1902);
- “I cannot think you intended it [Elsie’s letter] should make me as unhappy as it has. ‘The simplicity of this friendship’. Oh, dear Elsie, it sounds if you are mocking me.’ (March 6, 1902).

Judgement of 'Peter'



The three Palmer young women sketched by Lawrence 'Peter' Harrison at Glen Eyrie. To whom will he finally give the golden apple?

Passionate Affairs 4

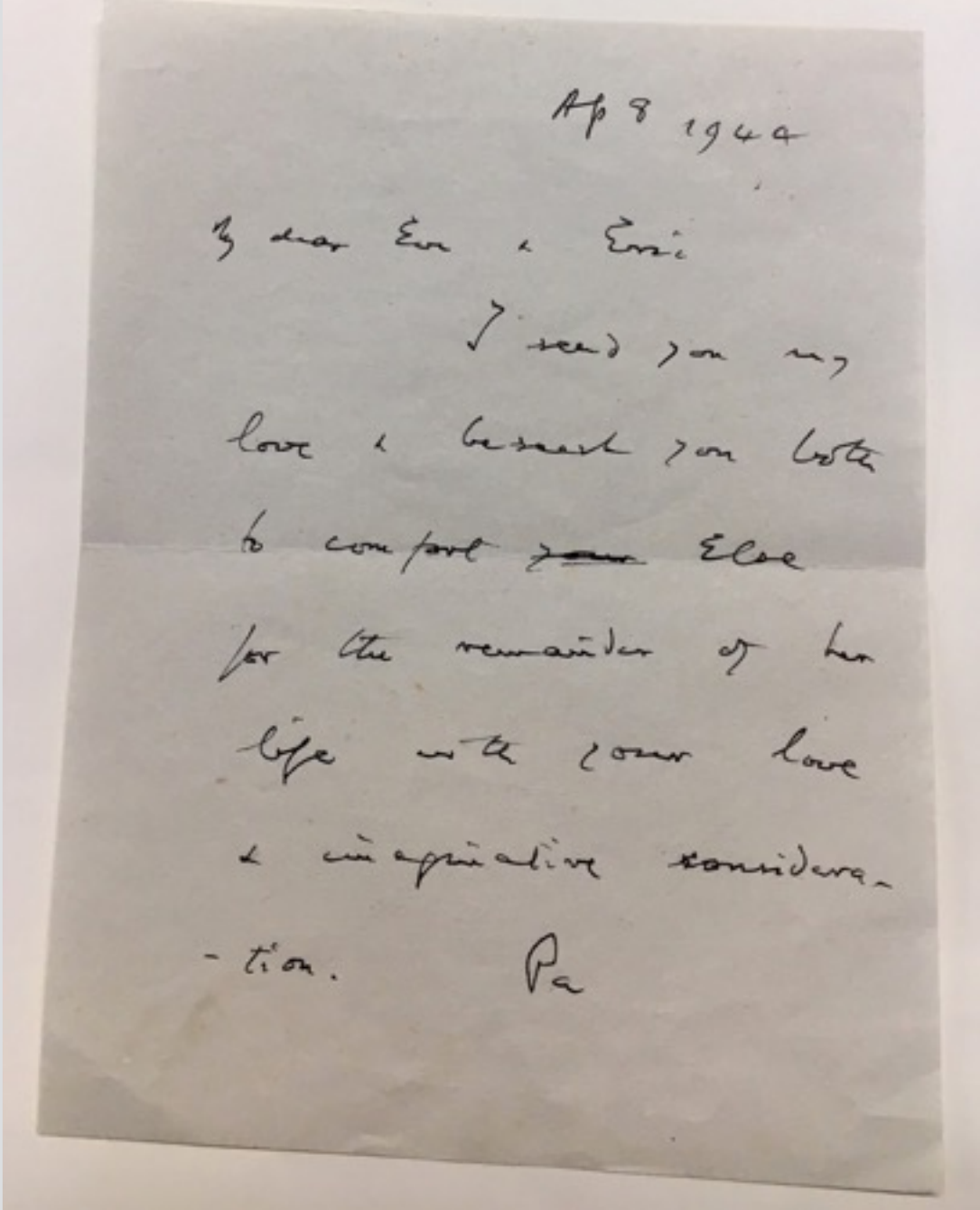
- *Enter the 23-year old Dorothy, 'Dos', Elsie's younger sister:* 'Peter' suddenly in a letter to Elsie refers to 'Dos' as his "standard". Elsie takes deep offence;
- 'Peter' then, with great cruelty, gloats on her "delicious lines of throat and neck. Ah! Elsie you haven't got her now...";
- His letters to Elsie cease; 'Dos' becomes his life-long mistress, and she sets up home in Chelsea. His grandson recalls 'Dos' arriving at their London home, on Christmas Eve, in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce, to collect him and his sister to take them to Harrods to buy their Christmas presents.

Passionate Affairs 5

- ***Back to Leo Myers:*** “O my beloved Else, how I want you. This waiting is utterly damnable. I love you. I love you. Leo.” (8.30 pm, Sunday, January 12, 1908);
- They marry at Glen Eyrie, Colorado Springs, on the evening of January 20, 1908: Elsie is 35, Leo 26. Elsie’s dramatic wedding dress is a long brown wrap covered with large metal buckles. A thousand cords hold tiny bronze animals, criss-crossing the outfit, like a Medieval coat of mail. *The New York Times* headline declared: “Bride’s Wrap of Bronze”.

Suicide

- On 7/8 April, 1944, Leo committed suicide taking an overdose of 'Veronal' ('Barbital' or barbitone), the first commercially-available barbiturate. His suicide note to his two daughters is extant in the Library and Archives of Eton College.



Ap 8 1944

My dear Eva & Essie

I send you my
love & beseech you both
to comfort your Elsie
for the remainder of her
life with your love
& imaginative considera-
-tion. Pa

Letter, dated November 22, 1943, from Leo Myers to his wife, Elsie Palmer Myers, forewarning her that he will commit suicide in the near future. He did so on April 7, 1944.

Original of letter in Eton College Library and Archive: accessed and transcribed by Philip Stott, 18/01/2018

[Page 1]

Nov 22 1943

My angel, it is true that since telling you about my longing for death and getting such a brave response from you, I feel much better in spirits.

But [*word crossed out*] my sense of being brought to a climax (when I shall have to commit suicide) remains.

The luminal¹ has helped me in my acute attacks of nervous

[Page 2]

anxiety & fear. But my normal & enduring level of mental pain remains bad. I feel so utterly weary of life.

If and when I kill myself you must not think that I am ending this period of life by an arbitrary act. You must look upon it as being ended by a bodily and mental state over which I can no longer exercise control.

[Page 3]

My body is ill in many ways, my vital energies are gone, my life but a painful flicker.

How I have loved these years of closeness together! You have been everything to me. And kept me alive.

I trust & pray that a new & happy period may open for you - of added close-ness to children &

[Page 4]

grandchildren (as well as to Dos.)

My angel, you have been good to me all your life, & your crowning act of goodness has been to [*word crossed out*] speak to me so bravely generously & understandingly, when I told you what my mental condition was.

Your
Leo

¹ The anti-epileptic drug phenobarbital.

3. The Aesthetes



'Aesthetic dress' (**right and left**) contrasted with 'fashionable attire' (**centre**). Detail from William Powell Frith, *A Private View at the Royal Academy*, 1881.

Alice and Mr Punch

- Alice Strettell as Mrs Cimabue Brown: 'Frustrated Social Ambition: Collapse of Postlethwaite, Maudle and Mrs Cimabue Brown' by George Du Maurier, 1881. *Punch* ran a brilliant series of caricatures satirising the manners and poses of the Aesthetic Movement.



Pretentious, Nous?

- Their favourite comic opera was *Patience; or, Bunthorne's Bride*, Gilbert & Sullivan's 1881 satire on the Aesthetic Movement;
- Lillian Russell as *Patience*, at the Bijou Opera House, New York, 1882.



Medieval Art!

Patience: Act II: TRIO - the DUKE, MAJOR, and COLONEL:

“It's clear that mediaeval art alone retains its zest;
to charm and please
its devotees
we've done our little best.

We're not quite sure if all we do has the Early English ring,
but, as far as we can judge, it's something like this sort of thing:

You hold yourself like this [*attitude*];
you hold yourself like that [*attitude*];
by hook and crook
you try to look
both angular and flat [*attitude*].

We venture to expect
that what we recollect,
though but a part
of true High Art,
will have its due effect.”

Romancing Ightham Mote

- “Some of the pleasantest days of my life were passed at a beautiful old thirteenth-century house near Sevenoaks. This was Ightham mote, the scene of the original Gunpowder plot, and my hostess was Mrs. Palmer, the wife of a famous American general who, with her children, had come to seek health in England...”
- **Taken from:** Carr, Alice Vansittart Strettell, 1926. *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*. Edited by Eve Adam. London: Hutchinson, p.120.

The Oubliette?

- “It was Gordon Craig [Ellen Terry’s son] who had the glory of discovering a secret room which had lain unused since the time of the Royalist and Roundhead struggles.”;
- “Our architect friend, Frederick Jameson, spent a lot of time at Ightham, and one day he happened to remark in the presence of the...children that, judging from the spacing of the windows outside, there should be an unused room ...”
- **Taken from:** Carr, Alice Vansittart Strettell, 1926. *Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences*. Edited by Eve Adam. London: Hutchinson, p.120.

Romancing the Dress



“I had long been accustomed to supporting a certain amount of ridicule in the matter of clothes, because in the days when bustles and skin-tight dresses were the fashion, and a twenty-inch waist the aim of every self-respecting woman, my frocks followed the simple, straight line as waistless as those of today.”

[**Taken from:** Carr, Alice Vansittart Strettell, 1926. Mrs. J. Comyns Carr's Reminiscences. Edited by Eve Adam. London: Hutchinson.]

Alma Plays Bowls



Alice Remembers



- “This same Ightham Mote was the scene of many of our happiest hours. Its charming hostess [above] was a dear friend whose rare gifts of sympathy and true hospitality enabled her not only to attract to her house the brightest of spirits, but also to draw from them their best. Children, too, to whom she was a fairy godmother, were welcome as friends in their own right. Our daughter and younger son were specially dear to her in their different ways, and many was the grave, childish saying of the latter that she would repeat to the proud father...”
- **Taken from:** Mrs Comyns Carr, *J. Comyns Carr. Stray Memories*. By his Wife. London: Macmillan & Co., 1920.

“Dying of the Light”

12 December, 1916, Joe Comyns Carr: aged 67, South Kensington, cancer; buried Highgate Cemetery;

1927, Alice Strettell Comyns Carr: aged 77, South Kensington;

17 March, 1937, Lawrence ‘Peter’ Harrison; aged 70/1;

1939, Alma Strettell Harrison; aged 84/6;

7 April, 1944, Leo Myers: aged 62, suicide;

17 September, 1955: Elsie Palmer Myers: aged 82, Erwarton Suffolk;

1961, Dorothy, ‘Dos’, Palmer: aged 80/1, Chelsea.

Acknowledgments

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The End

Thank you for coming