

A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters, by Barbara Pym. Edited by Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym. Vintage Books: A Division of Random House. New York: 1985.

1936

Oswestry [Pym's home town]

16 July

I remember how hard we were working this time last week. Henry, Mr B. and I in the flat. I was, I suppose, at this moment typing Chapter III (Dramatic Bibliography), all that complicated stuff about the 1680 Catalogue, which I didn't very well understand. Certainly I know that it was dawn before Henry took me home and several birds had started to sing. The last day of all I worked all through the night - with two hours sleep in Henry's bed. He had slept between nine and eleven. And at about six o'clock in the morning, I tucked him up in an armchair with a rug, while I went through one of the copies marking in notes. Without me he couldn't have done the thing at all. I can say this, knowing that it is true-. Between seven and nine, or thereabouts, he dictated the last pages of the chapter on the Account. I have been given a taste of how lovely things could be with Henry - and before I had often guessed and imagined it, but never known.

17 July

Henry will be back in Oxford today and I shan't be at the flat to make tea for him. I can't help hoping that he will realise this, but naturally he will only look upon it as a fact, it will have no sentimental significance. I am now on the 6th chapter of my second novel [Civil to Strangers, unpublished] and am intending to get on with it as fast as possible.

Addressed to Robert Liddell but also intended for the Harveys with whom he was staying in Stockholm
Oswestry

12 January 1940

The influence of Miss Compton-Burnett is very powerful once it takes a hold, isn't it? For a time there seems to be no point in writing any other way, indeed, there seems not to *be* any other way, but I have found that it passes (like so much in this life) and I have now got back to my own way, such as it is. But purified and strengthened, as after a *rich* spiritual experience, or a shattering love affair. I'm afraid I never had the former, unless one can say that they are the same thing. Somehow I do not believe one can.

To Henry and Elsie Harvey in Stockholm [As this letter was going to Sweden, a neutral country, it had to be written in guarded terms as it would be censored]

The Coppice,
Leigh Woods,
Bristol.

2 July 1942

Jock [Robert Liddell] wrote very cheerfully and seemed to be busy teaching Greeks, lecturing in the University of Alexandria, teaching Latin in the British Evening Institute and also running a Literary Society, with lectures on Gerard Manley Hopkins, Compton-Burnett and even Mr Huxley (against his will, he said).

. . . But there won't be a new Compton-Burnett for another year I suppose. It is depressing to go round the bookshops and find how little there is that one really wants to buy. I hate reading books about the war - I get quite enough of the war in my job - and so in bed at night I read Jane Austen and Byron and Anthony à Wood.

In 1944 she was posted to Naples where social activity was even more hectic:

In the evening went to a party at Admiral Morse's villa, quite enjoyable but I am never at my ease there, feeling Jane Eyre-ish and socially unsuccessful. Danced with Flagg and Astley-Jones, both doing their stuff - charm etc. How artificial it all is. I wonder if they feel it.

16 November

Party in Maclaine Clarke's flat. Didn't feel like going - sticky beginning but not bad afterwards with Cypher boys. . . . Isn't there an Italian saying about there being no greater misery than to remember past' happiness when you are unhappy? Not that one could apply it exactly, but there were *other* parties and *other* people. Once upon a time. And other conversations.

In 1946 Barbara started to work with Daryll Forde, Professor of Anthropology at University College, London, and Director of the International African Institute. He was a brilliant, often impatient and difficult man, but with great energy, efficiency and enthusiasm, who had, immediately after the war, revitalised the Institute, founded in 1926 by Lord Lugard for the study of African languages and culture.

Barbara was his Assistant Editor on the Institute's journal Africa and on the series of Ethnographic and Linguistic Surveys of Africa. She also helped to edit volumes of Seminar papers and prepared for press the various monographs published by the Institute. She was a capable and conscientious editor but had no real interest in Africa as such, being far more fascinated by the anthropologists and the linguists than by the subjects they were studying. She created a comic world around them, embroidering the few facts she knew about the various authors and reviewers into a splendid fantasy so that it was often difficult to remember what was real and what was not. ('I couldn't ask W if his Mother was better because I couldn't remember if we'd invented her.') She was quick to pick out the ridiculous phrase (anthropological and, especially, linguistic studies are very rich in these) thereby making what would have been a tedious task of proof-reading or editing a constant delight to those who worked with her.

Giddiness continually hurls my goat to the ground.

The hyenas have broken the beer strainers of the women.

Travel with a bicycle in the rainy season is not easy.

Barbara always said that she was glad that she could never be a 'full-time novelist' and that she had to earn her living some other way. It was fortunate that she was able to do so in a world as rich in comic material as the I.A.I. Because the Institute was classed as a charity, salaries were very low indeed and Barbara was lucky that she was able to share a home with Hilary, separated from her husband in 1946 and now a BBC producer. Since 1946 they had lived together in great amity (as they did for the rest of her life), thus making the fictional situation of Some Tame Gazelle, projected all those years ago, come true. They lived first in a flat in Pimlico (the setting for Excellent Woman) and then in Barnes (the suburb in Less Than Angles and No Fond Return of Love).

108 Cambridge Street

5 June 1946

My Dear Henry,

I have so much news that I had better just fling it at you in Compton-Burnett style. Hilary and her husband have separated and my father has married again and given us a very nice stepmother of suitable age and a dear brother and sister, whom I have not met. . . . Hilary is happier without her husband - who was nice but much too cold and intellectual and logical to live with. They were not really madly in love when they married but it seemed a good thing, and of course lots of marriages of that kind turn out very well. But personally I would prefer the other thing, even if it wore off, as I am told it does.

Maybe I shall be able to keep my illusions as it doesn't look as if I shall ever get married.

I am turning into an anthropologist as I now have a job at the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures, which I like very much. I work for dear Professor Daryll Forde, who is brilliant, has great charm but no manners, and is altogether the kind of person I ought to work for!

1948

Mission meeting. Prayers are difficult when choir practice interrupts them - the organist making jokes. We pray for streets. 'Warwick Square', says the vicar, his tone seeming to gain in fullness.

In the vestry I look round with frank interest - two rows of chairs, a grand piano. An assortment of vases and bowls, a small brass crucifix in need of cleaning, rolls of Mission posters.

The conversation - the bishop's letter is feeble, a pity says the vicar. People are so indifferent. Somebody suggests a procession, but people from the pubs might join in.

Worshipping in a Victorian church (St Gabriel's, Warwick Square) - no nice monuments round the walls, but the brass tablets and the atmosphere of Victorian piety is in its way just as comforting.

The new vicar calling - saying a prayer with housewives in their aprons - or the fear that he might.

The electricity man comes - he has to duck among the swinging wet stockings and knickers, but the expression of his serious rather worried blue eyes does not change. He sings in the choir.

In 1949 Jonathan Cape accepted Some Tame Gazelle, now revised for the third time. It was published in 1950 and had a general critical success. 'Delightfully amusing,' wrote one critic in The Guardian, 'but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell.' Between 1950 and 1961 six of her novels were published by Cape: Some Tame Gazelle, 1950; Excellent Women, 1952; Jane and Prudence, 1953; Less Than Angels, 1955; A Glass of Blessings, 1958; and No Fond Return of Love, 1961. They were praised by the critics, enjoyed a modest financial success and delighted an ever-growing circle of admirers and enthusiasts. Excellent Women, the most generally popular, was a Book Society Choice and was subsequently serialised in the BBC's Woman's Hour.

Whitsun 1949

Bristol revisited.

... The angry, umbraged and hurt postcards coming from the Oxford anthropologists: 'There seems to be no indication that I should get a copy'.

It is the only occasion when one really wants a husband - in a pub with uncongenial company and the feeling of not belonging.

St Michael's Church, Minehead. Morning. Women are doing the flowers - huge dahlias. It smells of floor polish rather than incense. Old screen and font with stone figures (one partially restored?)

Sunday 27 November

... Veronica had a relative who 'passed over'. She was heard at a seance, saying in an unmistakable voice that she was 'bitterly disappointed'.

January 1950. Broomhall Lodge [staying with friends].

Fasting before midnight mass. 'Fr X told us to fast for 2 hours.' 'Oh but Fr Y told us 3 hours.' 'I only had a very light meal myself, just a boiled egg and some tea and I did eat a little fruit, but it was over by 7.45 at the latest, so really I was fasting for 4¼ hours.'

To Henry Harvey in Goitingen

47 Nassau Road Barnes S.W.13

1 May 1950

Dear Henry,

Here is a copy of my book [*Some Tame Gazelle*] - published today- with the author's compliments. I don't know if it will amuse you but hope that perhaps it may. Please don't notice all the places where I ought to have put commas - I am only too conscious of my shortcomings. There haven't been any reviews yet. It doesn't seem fair that people should have the power to criticise it!

I haven't put any embarrassing inscription, so you can give it to somebody as a birthday present. I should never know.

Hope you are well,

With love – Barbara

Such was her dedicated professionalism that even in the 17 years when her novels were not published, even when it seemed unlikely that she would ever be published again, she still made notes for novels and recorded observations. In a way these notebooks were her most precious possession, the real raw material of her writing.