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Alma Mater

James Adam's death at the early age of forty-seven left Barbara's mother, Adela, the family breadwinner with three children under sixteen. There was also a new home to find. Emmanuel House belonged to Emmanuel College, and it was needed for the next incumbent of James Adam's post as Senior Tutor. Sometime between November 1907 and February 1908 – only weeks after James's death¹ – the family moved to a house on the edge of town. Number twenty-one (later renumbered twenty-nine) Barton Road lies on what is today a busy road leading from Barton village into the centre of Cambridge. Barbara described it as, 'a tall, ugly house with a basement and three stories above'.² Although its fussy red-brick façade lacked aesthetic appeal, it hid capacious accommodation. Barbara inhabited a bedroom with The Pie on the top floor of the house, a location that fuelled the fears she had throughout her childhood of some great conflagration that would end everything forever. It was usual then for middle-class girls to sleep either with nannies or mothers until well into their teens or later; writer Naomi Mitchison, born the same year as Barbara, slept in her mother's bedroom while an undergraduate at Oxford,³ and Lynda Grier, born in 1880, shared a room with her mother until she was a forty-year-old Professor of Economics.⁴

As Gwen Raverat put it in her book about her own Cambridge childhood, 'For nearly seventy years, the English middle classes were locked up in a great fortress of unreality and pretence; and no one who has not been brought up inside the fortress can guess how thick the walls were, or how little of the sky outside could be seen through the loopholes'.⁵ In the years between her father's death and the end of the First World War, these walls largely protected Barbara from the world outside upper-middle-class Cambridge. But the sky outside was full of dark clouds: the massing clouds of war and death. Before she was twenty, death at home and death abroad would rob Barbara of three more of the people to whom she was closest. These encounters with mortality left legendary scars, and helped to precipitate a tendency to depression and self-containment which lasted her entire life. But it

was also during these years that Barbara rehearsed her parents' particular dream for her – that she would become a first-rate classical scholar. The story played out during this process encapsulates many of the central motifs of the evolution of women's education in Britain.

After the death of her husband, Adela expanded her own teaching duties by adding sessions at two other women's colleges – Newnham in Cambridge, where for some years she was Director of Studies in Classics, and Bedford in London, where for a term she replaced the Greek lecturer – to her duties at Girton, where she had been teaching Classics for seventeen years; and she went on educating Barbara at home. Middle- and upper-class families at the time, even those who could have afforded to send their daughters to school, believed that keeping them at home was much better suited to the female role in society.⁶ Aristocratic parents boasted that, 'We do not send our daughters away to school', and a particular theory abounded 'that day schools for girls were Bad'.⁷ In Cambridge, Margaret Cole, four years older than Barbara, went to a little private school run by Mrs Berry, wife of a don at King's, with her two brothers, mornings only.⁸ Somewhat strangely, Naomi Mitchison, another daughter of academic parents, attended a boys' school, the Dragon School in Oxford (it took the occasional girl) with her brother, but was pulled out and confined to the care of a governess at home when she reached puberty.⁹ The long-lived doctrine of men's and women's separate spheres carried with it the sociobiology of female inferiority, according to which women's main function was reproduction, and anything that interfered with this – which was more or less everything else, and certainly education – had to be regarded with grave suspicion.

The routine of Adela's lessons every morning (Adela must have been *very* busy), and listening to her recitation of Walter Scott novels on Sundays, was unvarying and not very enlivening for someone with Barbara's appetite for learning. In the school holidays, with two boisterous brothers around, life was a good deal more exciting; they played bicycle polo in the back garden, and there were interesting guests at lunch. And then the Almighty seemed to have been half-listening to Barbara's lavatorial prayers, or Adela felt she could not carry Barbara's education further, or the supply of local children to be taught alongside Barbara dried up – the reason did not matter very much: the point was that Barbara was allowed to go to school for the first time. At the age of thirteen a new world opened up. Adela's choice for her daughter was the Perse School for girls, an institution with a respectable history as an offshoot of the much better known Perse School for boys, which had been founded in 1618 on a Cambridge site belonging to the Augustinian Friars: the site was given the name it still has today – Free School Lane. The girls' version of the Perse School opened its doors in January 1881, with twenty-eight pupils.¹⁰ It came,

like many others, in the aftermath of the mounting attention given by campaigning women to the appalling neglect of girls' and women's education. In 1867, the Report of the Schools Inquiry Commission had identified the cardinal faults of existing educational provision for girls as: 'Want of thoroughness and foundation; slovenliness and showy superficiality; inattention to rudiments; undue time given to accomplishments, and these not taught intelligently or in any scientific manner; want of organisation'.¹¹ The girls' high school movement, of which the Perse School was a part, was very much about providing real intellectual training for middle-class girls, not simply 'finishing' them as decorative embellishments, or equipping them to be the mothers and helpers of men. The strength of the movement was reinforced by the increasingly recognized reality of the unmarried middle-class woman who needed to earn her own living.¹²

The curriculum of 'Perse Girls' (as it was known) when Barbara went included 'Christian religious education'; geography; history; English grammar, composition and literature; Latin, French and German; 'one or more branches of Natural Science'; mathematics; needlework; 'Domestic Economy and Laws of Health'; drawing; music; and 'Drill, or other physical exercises'.¹³ In its early decades, the school was not highly regarded by Cambridge parents.¹⁴ An unfavourable report by the Board of Education in 1907 persuaded the school's managers that a new young headmistress was needed with the focus necessary to improve academic standards. One of those who made this decision was Barbara's own mother, Adela. She had been co-opted as a Perse Girls' School manager representing Girton College in 1907, and she went on to become Honorary Secretary of the Perse Governors for twenty-four years until her death in 1944. In the first twenty years of her service to the school, Adela managed to attend eighty-two out of ninety-two Governors' meetings; no wonder the Governors wanted to place on record their 'high appreciation' of her 'valuable services'.¹⁵ Surprisingly, since she was otherwise a cautious mother, Adela took a risk in sending Barbara to Perse Girls; not only were there questions about academic standards, but numbers were falling: from 217 in 1904, the school roll had dropped to 146 in 1908.¹⁶ Perhaps Adela was confident that things would improve, or perhaps she wanted to convince other parents that Perse Girls was a worthy place, or perhaps she got reduced fees for Barbara, which helped with her straitened financial circumstances. The new headmistress was one Bertha Lucy Kennett, a Girton-trained mathematician. She was paid partly on a capitation basis – a basic salary of two hundred pounds a year plus additions calculated according to the number and age of her pupils. Whether it was this scheme that worked, or Miss Kennett's brilliant teaching and advanced administrative ability, by 1911, the year after Barbara joined, the school inspectors

reported an improvement in standards, and the Perse School for Girls was added to the list of those designated as 'efficient' by the Board of Education.¹⁷

But did Barbara know, and if she did know would she have cared, about any of this? 'Equipped with my unbecoming school hat with its black and blue ribbon and the school crest of a pelican plucking its breast for its young, I embarked, full of joyful anticipations upon my new life.'¹⁸ So efficient had been Adela's own education of her, that Barbara was placed in a form ahead of her age; she began to learn science, and to play netball and tennis, and she acquired a lifelong distaste for Shakespeare. She was a diligent student, repeatedly winning prizes in Classics, Greek and English Literature; playing a leading part in the Perse Girls' School Debating Society; and helping to found its Literary Club. She took her school certificate in the summer of 1913: Latin, Greek, elementary mathematics (with algebra and geometry), German, English, and Scripture. Her proficiency as a well-behaved student was evidenced by the reference Bertha Lucy Kennett wrote for her:

My colleagues on the Staff and I have been greatly impressed by her powers of mind and character. Miss Adam is an exceedingly able student who could scarcely fail to do brilliantly at any subject in which she might elect to specialize. She possesses, moreover, the perseverance and steadiness of aim not always associated with brilliancy of intellect. I desire, as Headmistress, to pay a special tribute to Miss Adam's helpful influence in School. Her loyalty to the School, her reliability and her unselfish acceptance of her responsibility as a member of the Upper Sixth Form have been beyond praise.¹⁹

Most importantly, Barbara was very happy at Perse Girls.²⁰ The school offered her the opportunity to make friends. In her autobiography, she singled out two for different reasons. The first, Dorothy Russell, was one of those all-round stars who cause epidemics of envy among their fellows: she was Secretary of the Natural Science Club; winner of the Science prize; Vice-President of the Debating Club; Captain of the first netball team; editor of the school magazine; and Head Girl. At the age of fourteen, when Barbara first met her, Dorothy had decided to become a doctor, and to specialize in research. This was remarkable at a time when medicine had only just begun to entertain the idea of women doctors, and also because Dorothy did not have the advantage of a resourceful and supportive family – she had been orphaned at the age of eight and sent from Australia to live with her aunt and uncle in a mournful rectory outside Cambridge. When Dorothy Russell left Girton, she entered the London Hospital in 1919, the year after women were first admitted as medical students, and she went on to become Professor of Morbid Anatomy there, write a textbook on brain tumours, and acquire an international

reputation in pathology and neuropathology. Not the least remarkable fact about her was that she charged two friends after her death to make it known that all her life she had suffered from epilepsy; such a disability was therefore no bar to achievement in professional life.²¹ Barbara's second close friend at Perse Girls, Helen Grant, another 'exceptionally gifted and beautiful girl', was not so fortunate. She complained of internal pains one day at school, which Barbara and Dorothy assumed must be appendicitis, but after two operations performed at home (as they were in those days), she died of cancer at the age of fifteen. Barbara saw her, in a scene of 'deep serenity'²² a few days before she died.

Barbara's reaction to adolescence included the voracious reading of poetry, and books on religion and mysticism. Several poems published in *The Persean Magazine* – 'To the Moon on a Cloudy Night', 'Soul-Wanderings' and 'The Orphan' – testify to Barbara's absorption in matters of the soul.²³ On her seventeenth birthday, she announced her intention of 'putting her hair up', an artifice of femininity customary at the time; Adela considered it too soon, but Barbara did it anyway. During this period after James Adam's death, Adela was occupied, not only with her own extended teaching engagements, but with tidying up for publication his unpublished lectures and essays, and promoting his ideas about the value of a classical education in her own papers and publications, although rather stretching the point beyond where James would have taken it, in recommending that Classics students should broaden their interests to study the links between the classical texts and more modern European literature.²⁴ Her work shows that she was a considerable scholar in her own right, but her ambitions outstripped her circumstances. In 1920, Adela applied for the Cassel Fellowship at Girton with a major programme of research and writing, which included a history of the expansion of studies at the University of Cambridge since 1850, the links between classical literature and medieval Italian comedy, and a non-technical handbook on classical metres. Although the Council awarded her the Fellowship, she never had enough time to finish these projects.²⁵ But the links with Europe were already made in practice; in the autumn of 1909, the family went to Austria, where Barbara (aged twelve) proved herself an excellent walker, managing twenty miles a day, and proving her superiority to Neil and Arthur by knowing a fair amount of German.²⁶ In the long hot summer of 1911, they went to Jersey, where they saw the portrait of their ancestor Charles William Le Geyt. Aunts Juliet and Fanny took them to Italy, to the Dolomites and then to Venice, Verona and Florence. The Pie was not allowed to come on these foreign holidays, which Barbara minded, though whether The Pie did or not, we do not know. At home, the house in Barton Road was enlivened by boarders (presumably taken in for the money), and Barbara was

much impressed by one in particular, Rosalind Mendl, an especially beautiful young woman who scorned Barbara's childish clothes and introduced her to the world of alcoholic parties.²⁷ According to a later correspondence with Margaret Cole,²⁸ Rosalind was actually Vera Rosalind Mendel, a student of medieval and modern languages at Girton just before Barbara in 1913–6. She later married the poet, book designer and founder of the Nonesuch Press, Francis Meynell, but the zest for life she displayed in Barton Road eventually evaporated: after leading a colourful life with Francis and various other men, she committed suicide during the Second World War.²⁹

Aunts, and especially maiden aunts (a 'most admirable species'³⁰) were a feature of many Victorian and Edwardian childhoods. The two who featured most in Barbara's childhood, her mother's sisters, Fanny Kensington and Juliet Mylne, helped not just with holidays but with many other aspects of the Adam family life. They were both women of character and public accomplishment with strong connections to the movement for women's education, and they must have been convincing models of energy and public service for the young Barbara. Aunt Juliet had been married briefly at the age of twenty-eight to a well-off barrister, John Eltham Mylne, who had the misfortune to die less than a year after their marriage. Like so many of those attached to the Adam/Kensington family, Mylne was a great protagonist in the field of women's education. As Honorary Secretary of an organization called the Ladies' Educational Association, he had helped to open the doors of London University to women in 1878, a full forty-two and seventy years before the same landmarks in Oxford and Cambridge respectively.³¹ The Ladies' Educational Association – of which there were branches in Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, London, Sheffield and Newcastle – sponsored external courses of lectures given by university staff for 'ladies' over seventeen barred from university admission.³² Mylne's other service to the Adam/Kensington family was his premature death, which left Aunt Juliet a widow of considerable independent means. Barbara tells the story of Mylne's death in her autobiography: he died supposedly of consumption, although the family suspected he might have been killed by the cure to which he was subjected – a sea voyage to Australia. The cure was prescribed by a fashionable London physician, Sir Andrew Clark, a man of somewhat peculiar clinical habits – when he could not diagnose an illness, he would follow a patient home and study their 'moral surroundings'.³³ In fact, John Eltham Mylne's death certificate specifies 'Phthisis pulmonalis [tuberculosis] several years' as the cause of death, so exposure to the oceanic elements probably did not have the dramatic effect imagined by the family. His will, a lengthy seven-page document worthy of a barrister, bequeathed his young widow a substantial amount of money and other material assets – wines, liquors, linen, watches, jewellery, books

and pictures. When Juliet herself died in 1923, she left money to Adela and to both Barbara and Neil. Barbara's portion provided an income of £100 a year which her socialist principles forced her to give away, although she never disposed of the capital.³⁴ More of Mylne's wealth was to come Barbara's way after Adela's own death. Aunt Juliet never remarried, but she was a JP, a Poor Law Guardian, Chairman of the Paddington Board of Guardians, an Alderman of the Metropolitan Borough of Paddington, an active member of the Women's Local Government Society, and one of the first women elected as a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1892.³⁵ She, Fanny and Adela were all great travellers.

Barbara's favourite aunt, Fanny – she is Fanny on her birth certificate, but she also used the name Frances – was the liveliest of the trio. In the 1870s, when in her early twenties, she did voluntary social work in London (a common occupation for upper-middle-class women at the time) and otherwise led a jolly social life with dances, theatricals, picnics and cruises in a friend's yacht.³⁶ She became Secretary to England's first institution of higher education for women, Bedford College, a place where her niece Barbara would eventually become a professor. During this period, she featured in a somewhat salacious story about a relationship between a married ageing Oxford scholar called Mark Pattison, and a young woman, Meta Bradley. Pattison was an ordained priest and rector of Lincoln College, Oxford. An 'emotionally castrated man',³⁷ he married late in life a woman who was said to refuse him sex. On the plus side, he played a role in organizing lectures for women in the 1870s when Oxford was still resistant to the idea. But he is remembered most vividly for being an inveterate womanizer, enjoying the company of young women, and especially that of Meta and Meta's constant companion, Fanny Kensington, whom for a while he picked as a possible ideal companion. It is a strange semi-erotic Victorian drama in which the outlines of what actually happened cannot really be determined. The final perversity is that Pattison had the misfortune to be treated by the same doctor as had sent John Eltham Mylne on his last fatal voyage; in Pattison's case, when the local doctor said there was not a ghost of a chance of his getting better, Sir Andrew Clark advised a trip to Colorado.³⁸

Adela was therefore not alone in managing her household: she had her sisters Juliet and Fanny to help her. They would have participated in plans for Barbara's future. It was decided that she would leave school in 1914, spend a few months in Germany living with a family to improve her German, and then apply for entry to Girton College as a Classics scholar in October 1915. The middle part of this plan was doomed, in view of what happened to the world in the summer of 1914. On the day Britain declared war, Barbara was staying with Dorothy Russell in the countryside outside Cambridge. On her way home, she met crowds cheering in the streets.

'Little though the word "war" conveyed to me at this stage,' she observed in her autobiography, 'I knew enough to recognize that theirs was an emotion that I would never share.'³⁹ By this time, her brothers Neil and Arthur were both at university. Neil, at Trinity College, Cambridge, had acquired a double first in natural sciences, and was established on his path to becoming a distinguished physical chemist and a world leader in quantitative surface chemistry.⁴⁰ Arthur had entered Balliol College, Oxford, with the Senior Balliol Classical Scholarship, much, presumably, to Adela's joy. He had given a very able speech in the Union in favour of women's suffrage, but had also become acutely aware of social inequality and interested in 'socialist schemes of betterment'. Like many male students, he served in the Officer Training Corps which, when War broke out, inquired whether 'in the event of a general mobilization', he would be interested in a Commission. Once he had overcome the obstacle of his poor eyesight by finding a doctor prepared to test him in his spectacles, Arthur joined the 1st Battalion of the Cambridgeshire Regiment. During the early months of the War, the Battalion was stationed in Suffolk and Cambridgeshire. By April 1915, Arthur was writing to a friend in France, 'The voice of Oxford, as is inevitable, grows fainter as the clouds fall deeper. Surely warfare is a damnable business, and it gets worse'.⁴¹ In mid-June, Adela and Barbara met Arthur on the Fleam Dyke in Lincolnshire, 'marvellously beautiful with summer flowers', and at home in Cambridge he played Bach preludes and sang Italian songs – like Adela, he was a very accomplished musician. After dark, and despite the War, he engaged in his favourite habit of running up and down the Barton Road, a ghostly figure in a white jersey and shorts accompanied by Barbara on a bicycle.⁴²

Barbara's other brother, Neil, escaped the terrors to which Arthur was exposed by being a scientist whose services to his country were judged more useful at home than in the trenches. After starting some biochemistry research on muscle protein, he was posted to the Royal Naval Air Service at Farnborough, later at Kingsnorth, in Kent, where he was put to work on the construction of non-rigid airships.⁴³ For a short time, the general gloom and doom of war was relieved when Neil fell in love with a mathematician colleague at Kingsnorth, Winifred Wright. They were married in London in June 1916. Arthur, now in France, was unable to get leave to attend the wedding, so he ate his piece of the wedding cake in the mud and stench of the trenches. Soon after his marriage, Neil had what was called in those days 'a nervous breakdown'; the reasons probably had something to do with guilt about not being on active service in the War, and he was also without work.⁴⁴ He and Winifred, who was now pregnant with their first child, returned to live in Barton Road. Neil was very depressed, and Winifred and Adela did not get on – Adela was beastly to her, and The Pie was violently prejudiced against

the new mother and her methods of childrearing. Baby Jean was born in Barton Road in May 1917. Barbara remembered it as a harrowing time, with all of them wrapped in anxiety about Arthur's fate in France, about what was wrong with Neil, and why baby Jean was so difficult; Barbara acted as mediator, through it all continuing, diligently like the dutiful daughter she was still trying to be, to perfect her knowledge of dead languages.⁴⁵

On quiet nights in Cambridge, the distant rumble of guns in Belgium and France could be heard. The War was confidently expected to be short and sharp. Then it became clear that it would not be over by Christmas; men began to be killed, 'really killed so that we would never see them again';⁴⁶ long columns of the dead and wounded began to appear daily in *The Times*.⁴⁷ Barbara did volunteer office work in a military hospital and then helped in a military canteen, and it seemed increasingly absurd to her that she should be spending her time studying dead civilizations, when the only living civilization she knew was crashing about her ears. So she pleaded with Adela to be allowed to study economics, or at least history. A compromise of sorts was reached. Barbara would attend some lectures in economics while preparing for her classical scholarship at Girton; she would then read Classics for three years, following this with a year's study in economics. The restrained account of these negotiations in Barbara's autobiography belies what was probably an awful row, since it challenged the heart of Adela's view of Barbara's future life. Barbara was destined for a career in the moribund, but safe, world of classical literature and scholarship – that world which James Adam had believed so essential a form of both intellectual and moral training.

The new, negotiated plan once in place, Barbara lost no time in making it work; she went to see the Director of Economics at Newnham College, Lynda Grier – she who still shared a room with her mother – and Grier set her to read the works of Alfred Marshall. Barbara read and annotated every line of Marshall's *The Economics of Industry* and his much bigger *Principles of Economics*, so immensely relieved to have escaped Greek and Latin that she ignored any further irrelevancies to the problems of civilization this new subject might have contained.⁴⁸

Barbara left her economics books temporarily behind and went to Girton in October 1915, armed with a Classics scholarship. Arthur came home from France for a week, and they spent much companionable time together. One afternoon he poured out his concerns to her about the prevalence of venereal disease among the men under his command; familiar from his letters with the blood and squalor of trench warfare, this was something Barbara had never considered. But they also talked of other things. She was his little sister, and he had watched over her babyhood and her early attempts at learning, and now he was finding how much

they had in common in terms of attitudes to war, and what one ought to do with one's life. Later he would write to her from France: 'I think you know that I want some day to go and live in a poor part of London, and see what it is all really like; and I have prayed that it might happen, and that you would possibly be able to come too; and if this war ever stops whilst I am alive (which I have come to doubt very much), perhaps it may yet; but at least, if I am killed, I will now have mentioned the idea to you'.⁴⁹

Barbara Adam joined fifty-five other new students who entered Girton in 1915. She left no account of her own induction into Girton life, but Lily Baron, a medical student, who arrived at about the same time, wrote her recollections of arriving at Girton:

I travelled up by train sedately clad in a tweed costume, the skirt carefully covering my calves, a felt hat and kid gloves. In my trunk I had another hat, my best one, and a pair of white gloves for wearing on Sundays when I went calling. I also had a dinner dress – I adored it – to wear during the week for Hall, and a ball dress for Saturday dances in College, where, despite the absence of men (except those officially engaged to students), the evening was a formal one ... At Girton, in my day, there were strict rules of protocol. You had to wait to be addressed by a student senior to you; the use of Christian names was forbidden unless the person had 'propped' – that is, proposed. The magic formula 'May I prop?' gave you permission to use the Christian name, and how honoured you as a fresher felt if a third-year student 'propped' to you. ... We were not admitted as members of the University and any lecturer could refuse us permission to attend his course. I used to attend some chemistry lectures where the front two rows were filled by women from Girton and Newnham. Each morning the Professor sternly said 'Good Morning, Gentlemen!'.⁵⁰

Like the Perse School for Girls, Girton College has a starred entry in the history of women's education. It owed its existence to Emily Davies – dainty, small, obstinate and highly conventional, rather like Queen Victoria, and possessed of considerable administrative and networking skills, a woman utterly intransigent in the pursuit of her vision of a New Jerusalem for women.⁵¹ Her New Jerusalem was about allowing women exactly the same access to the same education as men; she rejected completely the other idea, fashionable at the time, that women needed a separate education: it was even proposed at one stage that Oxford and Cambridge should together sponsor a special women's university.⁵² Girton College also had the status of an Adam/Kensington family institution; it was a home from home. Adela maintained a connection with Girton from 1882 until her death in 1944: first as a student, then, after 1890, as a lecturer and/or governor, and Honorary Treasurer

of a Fund set up in 1912 in memory of Frances Buss to help poor students.⁵³ Her sister Fanny trod the same path as Adela from Bedford College in London to Girton in Cambridge, though in a different capacity. At Bedford College, Fanny worked as Secretary and then, in 1882, Emily Davies recruited her for the equivalent post at Girton, which she kept for fifteen years: 'Pre-twentieth century students recall with admiration the letters and handwriting of Frances Kensington, and her tactful sympathy in interviews'.⁵⁴ For part of her time at Girton, Fanny was also Bursar, and then a member of the Executive Committee and a Governor, and, with Adela, she was a trustee of the Frances Buss Loan Fund.

Emily Davies believed that women's capacity to enjoy these new freedoms required a protected existence. For all her radical views – perhaps because of them – she considered that women students should be kept away from the distractions of the men. When it moved from its original location in a rented house in Hitchin, the College was sited in Girton village, a safe two-and-a-half miles outside Cambridge. The students' journeys into Cambridge were carefully arranged and monitored, with special horse cabs provided, and a space called the Girton Waiting Rooms in central Cambridge where they could safely pass time between lectures. In the 1880s, when Adela Kensington was an undergraduate, two of her fellow students kept their own horses, and another two scandalized the Mistress by riding on a double tricycle.⁵⁵ When bicycles became more of a general habit, Girtonians were allowed to ride only halfway, with the cabs taking them the rest.⁵⁶ Most of the Girton girls' socializing occurred within the College, and twice a year big evening parties were hosted; there was dancing in the Stanley Library, beautifully illuminated by the candles in brass candlesticks the students brought from their rooms (these were pre-electric days) which were set on the tops of the bookcases; candle grease on dresses was regarded as the distinctive mark of a Girtonian.⁵⁷ Although Girton was part of the University, like the other early women's colleges it was also a world apart, and deliberately kept so in order to conform to the mores of the time. It is a theme repeated in novels of the period: for example, Judith Earle, the innocent, home-educated central character of Rosamond Lehmann's novel *Dusty Answer*, arriving at Cambridge in 1918, senses a society of values and behaviour which is completely beyond her knowledge and experience.⁵⁸ Another of Emily Davies's precepts, for which generations of Girtonians must have been thankful (especially those used to sharing bedrooms with nannies or mothers), followed Virginia Woolf's dictum that every woman should have a room of her own. This emphasis inevitably produced economies in other areas: although Girton was built in red-brick Gothic in imitation of the men's colleges, shortage of money meant that it was some time before a quadrangle actually materialized. The grounds were not landscaped at first,

and, since women were not allowed to be seen playing sports outdoors, in winter they had to exercise inside in the gymnasium or run up and down the fortunately very lengthy corridors.⁵⁹ Girton had its own swimming pool, built as part of a large new extension in 1899–1902, and in the early 1900s the College Swimming Club had a healthy membership. It organized annual water polo matches, which were played (rather incredibly) by girls in long flowing white dresses.⁶⁰

Barbara lived in Girton for her first two years. According to Dora Russell, then Dora Black, who went there in 1912, three years before Barbara, the routine still resembled that of a boarding school.⁶¹ Facilities were quite primitive: the oil lamps and the earth closets and ‘the secret activities of the night-soil men’ were not replaced until after the War.⁶² College servants, known as gyps, filled the students’ coal scuttles and made their beds and cleaned their rooms every day except Sundays. Lily Baron recalled that many of the Girton young ladies were domestically ignorant, never having had to do for themselves things such as lighting a fire, boiling an egg, or even, in the case of one student, washing one’s own hair. The life of the gyps was remembered by one of them, Gladys Crane, as hard but happy. They were assigned their own corridors, and had nine stoves and nine rooms to do before breakfast by candlelight. They wore blue print dresses and white aprons in the morning, black dresses and white aprons in the afternoon, and big white aprons when waiting in hall at night, where there was a constant danger of slipping and dropping something on the highly polished wooden floor.⁶³ In the evenings, they took small jugs of milk to the students’ rooms:

If someone asked you to “jug” that evening (by a written invitation) you went along to your hostess’s room armed with your jug of milk. There other guests would have assembled, and there, before the fireplace, would be a row of jugs, and we drank hot chocolate during the winter evenings, and coffee when it got warmer. Over a blazing coal fire, the party-giver toasted crumpets on a brass fork, and everybody talked themselves hoarse till a warning cry rang out: “SILENCE HOURS Please”.⁶⁴

A pivotal strategy for protecting women from the misogynies of the outside world, still in place when Barbara was a student there, was the chaperone system. Men had uncontrollable passions, and women therefore had to avoid ever being alone in male company.⁶⁵ No men could be invited to one’s room in College, and no outside visits involving men could be made without a chaperone. Known locally as ‘dragons’, chaperones were either staff or retired ladies (for whom the system provided a small but reliable income).⁶⁶ Most young women took the chaperone system for granted; tactful ‘chaps’ who stayed quietly in the corner were preferred,⁶⁷ and sympathetic staff, such as the medieval historian Eileen Power, who

were willing to make a brief formal entry and then exit, were much in demand.⁶⁸ A common strategy for subverting the system was just to say that whatever man one wanted to see was a cousin: 'It was remarkable how many university men were cousins of women undergraduates'.⁶⁹ Like their social interaction, the bodies of the women students were confined: in bone corsets with tight back lacings and long skirts, and gloves and hats outside the College.⁷⁰ Margaret Cole, who went to Girton four years before Barbara, recalled being rebuked because she went cycling without a hat.⁷¹

Barbara's academic record at Girton was impeccable, and included the Agnata Butler prize in 1917 and the Therese Montefiore prize in 1919. But she did manage some fun, too. Girton had a Debating Society, a Fire Brigade, a Women's Suffrage Club, clubs for tennis, hockey, lacrosse, cricket and swimming, a Society for the Study of Little Known Literature and something called the Spontaneous Speaking Society. Barbara's name crops up in the records of the first two of these. In 1916, for instance, she proposed the motion at the Girton Debating Society, 'That it is a good thing for society that people are afraid of being peculiar'. It is not entirely clear what this meant, but Barbara opposed Cubism as being socially undesirable and deemed the desire for peculiarity the result of conceit or the wish to attract attention. Afterwards, 'B.F. Adam' was congratulated on 'the remarkable fluency with which she can speak, using notes only'.⁷² The initials 'B.F.' – Bloody Fool – were something Barbara always held against her parents.⁷³ A couple of years later, she is down as speaking about public schools, and arguing, with the logic for which she would later become famous, that the so-called evils of the Public School system were not necessarily a consequence of this, any more than the dandelions on the Girton tennis courts were a consequence of the higher education of women.⁷⁴ In 1915–7, her name appears as one of three Sub-Captains of Corps II of the Girton College Fire Brigade. This outfit came into being in 1879 after some nearby haystacks went up in flames (a large part of the grounds was rented out to local farmers to raise money). In its heyday, the Girton Fire Brigade was a prestigious society with rigorous discipline, energetic, well-attended weekly practices, and its own song, set to the music of 'John Peel'. There was a Head Captain, and a corps for each corridor, with its own Captain and Sub-Captain, and training from Captain Shaw and his men from the London Fire Brigade. Though a wise precaution, in view of all those students wandering around in the dark with candles, and obviously also a great deal of fun, it was only ever called out once, to a fire in Girton village, on the first day of the Easter vacation in 1918.⁷⁵ Those members of the fire brigade who were still in College, plus several gyps, dragged eighteen leaky hoses across ploughed fields and prickly hedges – it was an 'epoch-making occasion' – but was Barbara there?

Girton struggled, and so did women at Cambridge, for many years: it was a history of small numbers, slow gains, multiple setbacks and severe financial constraints.⁷⁶ As late as 1940, a history of Cambridge noted that hostility to the women's colleges was still almost universal. The University was to be congratulated on having the strength of mind to exclude women from full membership: 'The most serious indictment of the women students, apart from the fearsomeness of the women which those students nearly always become unless they marry quickly and forget it all, is the complete pointlessness of their being there'.⁷⁷ Cambridge University would not let women take the examinations set for men, then it would not allow them to do so on the same terms, then it was not prepared to acknowledge that the women had been successful and should have degrees. The most famous of these refusals to admit women was in the year of Barbara's birth, 1897. The door was closed, and not even half opened until 1923 when women were allowed to attend lectures by right and not simply as a privilege. They had to wait until 1926 before they could be appointed to university posts, and until 1948 to become full members of the University. All these points Barbara noted in her autobiography, but without rancour, for women at the time did not on the whole expect to be treated fairly. Adela might not have agreed with her daughter's interpretation on this point.

It is hard to imagine now how it felt to be a young woman of seventeen poised on the edge of so many new horizons for women, but stopped in your tracks by the horror of war. Despite their exposure to the brave new world of women's higher education, for Barbara and many of her contemporaries, the world also seemed to have come to an end. Naomi Mitchison, born in 1897 like Barbara, went to study science at St Anne's College, Oxford: 'It appeared, up to 1914, that one could foresee one's whole life. One would grow up, marry, have children ... live ... with a house and servants and punctual meals, and nothing would ever change. Presumably 1914 was the last year when young people thought like that'.⁷⁸ The social dynamics of the University were deeply affected by the young men's absence at the War. Women considerably outnumbered men at lectures. On a practical level, Girton responded to the War by instituting economies such as growing vegetables in the College grounds and giving over the orchard to pigs; sweeping up leaves, digging potatoes, earthing up celery, and tying carrots and onions into bundles took the place of afternoon walks and sports. Students were encouraged to work together in the library rather than in their own rooms to save coal. They walked the cold corridors with their sparse rations of bread, margarine and sugar.⁷⁹ At the beginning of Barbara's second year, in 1916, the first-year students entertained wounded soldiers. About thirty soldiers came on a bitterly cold day for a 'plentiful tea of sandwiches, sausage rolls and cake':

All the First Year helped to wait on them, and some sat at the tables and talked to them. There was also music at intervals, chiefly trios, by violin, cello and piano. Tea finished up with crackers, and then all the soldiers sat round in arm-chairs and smoked ... There were songs and a recitation, and also a toy symphony, which seemed to amuse them very much. Some of the men performed themselves, which part of the programme probably pleased them most. They were able to stay about two hours and a half, and when they were at last obliged to go at 5.30, the hostesses and the guests cheered one another lustily, and both seemed quite satisfied that they had spent a successful afternoon.⁸⁰

The unreality of the Girton teas for wounded soldiers must have impressed itself on Barbara when the unimaginable (what had always been imagined, because so ultimately feared) actually happened. Her brother Arthur had been in France, with spells of leave, since June 1915. On 1 July 1916, the Battle of the Somme was launched; during the four-and-half months it lasted, some 1,120,000 men, 420,000 of them British, became casualties of war – killed, wounded, taken prisoner, or missing in action; the advance of seven miles that was accomplished by the British and their allies cost 1.4 casualties for every inch.⁸¹ A major new offensive, the British Army's final attempt to force a breakthrough, began on 15 September, with the battle of Flers-Courcelette. Eleven divisions attacked over a ten-mile front. On the night of September 15–16, a party from 'A Company' of Arthur's battalion was sent to bomb a German post on the left bank of the river Ancre. The second-in-command, Lieutenant Shaw, was to do the bombing, and Arthur was to stay near the portable bridge which they had thrown across the river, and wait with a covering party for Shaw's return. Shaw and his party were unable to carry out their mission and Arthur ordered them all to retire. The two officers followed the men towards their trenches. Then, for some reason, Shaw and Arthur turned back, and both were wounded. The adjutant, Captain Sir Guy Butlin, went out with a stretcher and bearers to rescue them. He found Shaw, who was lying close under the German wire, about twenty yards behind Arthur, bound up his wounds, sent back one man for help and was then hit himself, as was the remaining bearer, who was just able to crawl back. 'Heroic efforts' were made all night long to rescue the three officers, but they were never found. Shaw turned up in hospital, where he died later that month. But no evidence was ever found of what happened to Arthur Adam and Guy Butlin.⁸²

Arthur, aged twenty-two, is recorded as having died on 16 September, although it was not until eleven months later that *The Times* reported that he had officially been declared killed.⁸³ According to Barbara's autobiography, several years later

a grave was found marked with Arthur's name. His official memorial lies today with 1,423 others in the War Cemetery in the village of Achiet-le-Grand, nineteen kilometres south of Arras. The cemetery, like all of those that pepper the now quiet but suspiciously uneven chalk uplands of northern France, was constructed after the Armistice when hundreds of graves were moved from the battlefields around Achiet. Arthur's is the last in a row, by a wall, under a large old tree; there are rows and rows of pure white graves cast from the same uniform marble, evenly spaced, geometrically planted with flowering shrubs. In the spring, red roses and purple aubretia are in bloom, and the entrance to the cemetery is draped in white wisteria; the only sounds, apart from that of the man mowing between the graves, is the ringing of the church bell and legendary birdsong. There is a manufactured realism to these cemeteries. The order on the ground is not necessarily matched by order underneath. Many bodies were in bits and the bits are buried in a mass grave. That is what war does: it breaks people and societies up.

'Awake and Sing ye that Dwell in Dust' is inscribed on the front of Arthur's grave, no doubt chosen by Adela, who with his death had lost her favourite child, and who entered a prolonged period of mourning for him: 'She could talk about nothing else but him for years, and Neil and Barbara were forgotten'. Arthur was a genius and a saint; by comparison Neil and Barbara were both second-class citizens.⁸⁴ In the immediate aftermath of Arthur's death, Adela was preoccupied with the fact that the War Office, the Red Cross, and the other agencies trying to trace him referred to him as 'Lieutenant Adam', whereas he had in fact been Acting Captain. The impact on the family included Great Aunt Margaret reputedly dropping down dead with shock.⁸⁵ Adela wrote an effusively affectionate book about him: *Arthur Innes Adam 1894–1916*. The book is mainly based on the letters he wrote to her, but it also contains her memories and her pride at his achievements. You can see why she loved him so much: he used colons in his essays before he was six, and when he went to the front he took with him the Greek Testament, *The Iliad*, Virgil, Plato's *Republic* and *The Shaving of Shagpat*, a fantasy novel by George Meredith. The fair hair and complexion of his childhood never left him; 'his men' called him 'Parson Snowy' on account of his tendency to exhortations and his flaxen head.⁸⁶

Minus a brother, Barbara went back into residence at Girton at the beginning of October. But her life had already changed in another way: she had met Jack Wootton.