

SIR EDWARD GREY'S

A little over a hundred years ago, on the small German island of Borkum in the North Sea off Emden, a boarding house was built. Some years later it was given the name 'Constance'. The name was one result of an unusual family story, only recently uncovered following extensive research in Germany and England. It brings together a leading British Liberal statesman, his brother, his sister, a surveyor's daughter, her mother, her governess and her piano teacher.

Hans-Joachim Heller tells the story of Sir Edward Grey's German love-child.



The 'Constance' boarding house, Borkum, in 1914.

When the Liberals came to office in 1892, thirty-year-old Sir Edward Grey (later the 1st Viscount Grey of Fallodon, born on 25 April 1862) became a junior minister at the Foreign Office in London. Already well known as a talented politician in his home county of Northumberland, Grey had become MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1885. Gladstone, the grand old man of the Liberal Party, predicted a great future for a young man with aristocratic connections who had been educated at Winchester and Balliol College, Oxford.

Grey's wife Dorothy was a proud and hard woman who

cared little for politics and disliked London society. She remained in their little cottage on the River Itchen near Winchester during the greater part of Sir Edward's time as a government minister. Dorothy did not like children and did not wish to have any of her own. Although married, Dorothy refused to have a sexual relationship with her husband, and has been described as 'ultra-virginal' before her marriage. The union of Dorothy and Grey appears to have been founded on a common love of nature which expressed itself in observation and conversation about the natural world. They kept a diary devoted to these observations. Edward Grey also wrote a book on fly-fishing.

GERMAN LOVE-CHILD

Grey was not only a lover of nature but also a jolly, sociable and sporting man and so it is hardly surprising that he was not satisfied by this 'marriage blanc' (to use the French term for such an arrangement). It was rumoured that he had had love affairs in London. His absences from the Foreign Office were noted at the time. Thus he became acquainted with Florence Annie Slee, seven years his junior. She was the daughter of a respectable auctioneer and surveyor, Charles Edward Slee, who lived at Streatham on the southern borders of London. His estate agency, Slee, Son & Carden, was in Hatton Garden in the City. Founded in 1858, it is still there today.

A love-child is born

Sir Edward and Florence's relationship soon blossomed into love, and after about a year she became pregnant. What were they to do? Should Edward Grey abandon his political career and his good reputation? Would Florence and their illegitimate child be thrown out by her family?

The pregnancy and the birth must be kept quiet; they would not want their love-child to grow up with the shame of bastardy hanging over his or her future. The two seem to have conceived a carefully considered plan, shared with few people inside their families. The arrangement was carried out with the help of two German

ladies employed by the Slee family for many years as governess and piano teacher. Their names were Miss Dorothea Thomas and Miss Sophie List. At that time they were both about thirty-five years old.

First, a secret marriage ceremony was held in an unlicensed chapel in London. At the time it was not too difficult to find a man in holy orders with no benefice who would be pleased to augment his income with a 'marriage fee'. Charles Grey, the youngest brother of Edward, was to be the sham husband of Florence. He was twenty years old – four years younger than Florence – and not yet of age. Charles was probably already planning to go to Africa once he had completed his education, joining another Grey – Edward's brother George – who was a successful colonial administrator. George must have been idolised by Charles. In 1891, when he was then twenty-four years old, George had visited Fallodon Hall and told tales of big game hunting and African exploration.

Witnesses to the marriage were Florence's mother Ellen Slee, whose husband had recently died, and probably Miss Thomas. The marriage was not legal because the chapel was not licensed; it is not in the General Register Office indexes. Soon afterwards Florence went to Germany for several months so that family

friends and relations should not observe her developing pregnancy. She was accompanied by Miss Thomas, a familiar figure from her parents' home. She had known Florence from childhood and was her confidante. If the birth took place in Germany there was little chance that news of it would reach England.

Florence's child, named Dorcas Winifred Grey, was born on 1 March 1894 in Bremen, home town of Miss Sophie List, where she knew a midwife. On the German birth certificate of a girl known as Winifred Grey, her parents are described as 'The British Officer Charles Grey and his wife Florence Annie Slee, both of London'. It is interesting that Florence Slee's child was registered as a Grey and this may be evidence of the intensity of Edward Grey's love for Florence. This registration also meant that there was no documentary evidence that Florence had had a child out of wedlock.

A few weeks after the delivery Florence returned to London. The little girl remained with Miss Thomas and Miss List in Germany.

Winifred Grey grows up

It must have been hard for Florence to abandon her newborn daughter to guardians in a foreign country. She may have thought that this would be a temporary arrangement. Why did

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they choose the small island of Borkum as a place to bring her up? Borkum is situated nearest to England and the same waves lap against English and German shores. Why was the child called Dorcas, which means 'gazelle' in Greek? Perhaps it might mean 'Winifred, the little gazelle, jumped away from the large English island to the tiny island of Borkum and surely will return'. This sad separation was almost inevitable, given the double standards of the day.

The next year, in 1895, the two 'aunts' – which is what Winifred called Miss Thomas and Miss List for the whole of her life – took lodgings on Borkum, a well-known seaside resort. They were able to live there, and to educate Winifred Grey, thanks to a good pension provided by her parents in England.

Ten years later, in 1904, Florence must have become convinced that she was never going to get her child back. Edward Grey may also have been interested in closing the door on his old love affair. Winifred's two guardians on Borkum now received a single sum of several thousand gold marks from the Greys, enabling them to buy a boarding house built in about 1900. They renamed the house 'Constance'. The name honoured Constance Mary Grey, the sister of Sir Edward. She had helped to bring about a satisfactory solution to the problem of Edward and Florence's child. Constance was then thirty-two years old; in later life she was a Justice of the Peace in Shropshire.

The story of the true descent of Winifred and the financing of the house in Borkum remained a secret. Beyond her birth and baptism certificates there is no further documentary evidence. Several hints are dropped in old letters from friends and relatives in Germany, but the two 'aunts' never gave anything away. They had promised to keep quiet, and they did. They let it be known that Winifred was the child of a young British officer who had gone to

Far left, from top: Sir Edward Grey in 1894; his sister, Constance Grey, in 1890; his brother, Charles, in 1900. Left, from top: Florence Slee, in about 1893; Dorcas Winifred Grey, in 1913; Hans-Joachim Heller, in 1989 (note the Edward Grey nose!)

Africa with his wife. As a result the parents could not bring up their own child and they later died after contracting a tropical disease.

Charles Grey, Winifred's 'official' father, spent his adult life, like his elder brother George, largely in Africa as an explorer and administrator. He became well known as a big game hunter. About 1920 he lost his left arm after being attacked by a lion. Fearless and daring, he did not give up hunting and in 1928 was killed by a wounded buffalo. George had already been killed – by a lion – in 1911. Both were unmarried and without children.

Miss Thomas and Miss List had managed the boarding house 'Constance' since 1905. They brought up little Winifred as their own child – severely, but with loving hearts. She was treated as if she had come from one of the best families. Until Winifred went to school they only spoke English to her. Once a year, in wintertime, they visited London and the homes of Florence Slee and other friends, so Florence could see her child growing up in her early years.

A good education

Thanks to money from England, Winifred got a good middle-class education. She went to the recently established private school in Borkum until she was seventeen and had piano, violin and singing lessons. She went in for sports at the Borkum Sports Club. After that she was trained as a kindergarten teacher and leader at the Froebel College in Magdeburg. Following her final examinations she took a post as a governess in the family of a dispensing chemist.

When Winifred was twenty years old she went to London with Miss List, but on her return all her friends were astonished that she did not report anything of her experiences there. What had happened? It seems most likely that she had been told the truth about her unmarried English parents, their liaison and the

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sham marriage with a substitute. The news must have been an extraordinary shock for a young woman.

Winifred never talked about this journey and her English descent as long as she lived – hence my speculation as to what really happened. Nor was she ever again in contact with her relatives in London. When the First World War began she was engaged as a children's nurse by the Bethanien Christian Institution. Borkum had become a fortress out of bounds to an Englishwoman, an enemy. For that reason, and because she had other troubles with the police over her nationality, in 1916 Miss Thomas adopted her.

Winifred was of age and now able to decide things for herself. The adoption by her 'aunt' was an opportunity to break finally with her disgraceful origins and the false statements on her birth and baptism certificates. She became Winifred Thomas, a real German. In November 1918 it became obvious that there would be no seaside visitors for quite a while and, as many women were now working, Winifred founded her own kindergarten at 'Constance'. In 1927 she became part-owner of the house which she later inherited from the 'aunts'. Miss List died in 1934, Miss Thomas in 1936. The house was sold in 1939 and the proceeds from its sale were eaten up by devaluation at the end of the Second World War.

The 'aunts' were keen to secure a husband for Winifred who was of noble birth or, at the very least, from a wealthy bourgeois background. They had no success in this endeavour. In their opinion, no one on Borkum was suitable as a husband for Winifred; indeed, they weren't fit to tie her bootlaces. As a result, Winifred married late, in 1930. Her groom was Captain Rudolf Heller, head of the military recreation home on Borkum. Soon afterwards they moved to Berlin, where Winifred survived the Second World War with her two sons.

Winifred Heller was widowed in 1944 and she died in 1977. In

her later years she was very glad of her four grandchildren.

An unlucky man

Sir Edward Grey's affair with Florence Slee remained a secret in both Germany and England. He was able to continue his political career untainted by scandal. Sir Edward became a very capable Foreign Secretary, in office for an extraordinarily long time, from 1905 to 1916. Yet despite his best efforts he was not able to prevent the outbreak of the First World War. Grey was honoured for his political achievements before his resignation in December 1916. In July 1916 he had been made an earl, altered to a viscountcy at his request. His monumental political memoirs, *Twenty-five Years 1892–1916*, were published in both Great Britain and Germany.

Grey was remarkably unlucky in his private life. To add to the misfortune of his illegitimate child and the early death of a brother to whom he was deeply attached, his wife Dorothy died in 1906 after an accident with a dog cart. Fallodon Hall burned down in April 1917. His cottage in the Itchen valley also burned down. Grey married again in 1922, but his wife Pamela died just six years later. In 1915 his sight began to fail and by 1919 he was unable to read; he was blind for the last ten years of his life. He died, 'childless', in 1933 at Fallodon Hall in Northumberland, which had been rebuilt.

Grey's old love, Florence Slee, did not remarry. Instead she spent much of her life supervising the household of her two brothers, London estate agents. Florence died in 1957. On her death certificate she is described as a 'spinster'.

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