

Flossie Flowers Revealed?

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One of the many fascinating aspects of the Great War novels of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight* is the new social world opened up to Temporary Officer and Gentleman, Phillip Maddison, and none more so than his exploits in war-time London. Williamson's recollection and realisation of this period of high life in the capital of a country at war, the breakdown of taboos and almost free intermingling of social classes and the sights and sounds of famous London places such as the Café Royal, where at the next table might be a well known actor, writer or artist, make enthralling reading.

In this context, as elsewhere in all the novels, some readers dislike the mixture of reality and disguise in characters and places, and some are compelled to seek to unravel the clues and unmask the characters. I have never felt any undue compulsion to do this, although occasionally a flash of unsought intuition has revealed the truth of a character or place. Perhaps one of these revelations came recently.

Although Third Ypres, or the Battle of Passchendaele, and to a lesser extent the Battle of Messines, dominate the novel, *Love and the Loveless*, I have always been intrigued by the two episodes where, while on leave in London, Phillip was introduced to, and stayed at Flowers' Hotel. He first goes there, just before Christmas 1916, with 'All Weather Jack' Hobart, and has a brief affair with the remarkable Sasha — who seems to be all things to all men; from mother to lover, and wife of a crippled husband. He is fascinated by the mixture of high class hotel, mixed with a Bohemian side liked by the (to Phillip) somewhat awesome figure of the owner, Miss Flossie Flowers, sometime member of the Gaiety chorus and Monte Carlo courtesan, who occasionally held 'court' to her more favoured and extreme guests, in her finery, "behind a painted face with gummed-on eyelashes and brows and wig of auburn hair . . ." While some of her more incredible guests 'performed', caviar and 'wine' — always Champagne — was dispensed in liberal manner against a haphazard method of payment — the drink taken perhaps from the 'bin' of a wealthy client or by random addition to sundry bills rendered to the unsuspecting of her clientele. Conversely, the more unbridled scenes are tempered by the incumbents of the Smoking Room, with its atmosphere of 'cremated cigars, bald heads, chubby cheeks, and moustaches like the tips of gulls' wings' belonging to many senior Army and Navy officers. No wonder that Phillip was bewildered and somewhat in awe of the place and its owner whose refined and genteel talk would revert to her (Cockney) origins when roused or angry.

His second visit takes place over the New Year of 1916/17, this time with his great friend (Major) Harold 'Spectre' West, after they have both survived Third Ypres. Once more we meet the beautiful Sasha, who Phillip fears is trying to seduce 'Westy', and characters as diverse as the beautiful girl and her male companion who quote from Keat's *Endymion* to each other; the foppish trapeze act artiste Bobby, in kilted dress as Bonnie Prince Charlie who is made to swing an indecent 360° circle round a lamp-post ladder bar. Again Flossie Flowers is distributing 'wine' seemingly gratuitously until sometime later Phillip, and presumably others, receive large bills for "Cocktails and Wine". A fascinating scene of what must, even for war-time London, have been an unusual establishment.

All this was suddenly brought to mind recently when reading from Humphrey Carpenter's book, *The Brideshead Generation* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, September 1989, £17.95), where he writes of an 'after hours' London establishment much frequented by party-goers of the 1920s, the Cavendish Hotel in Jermyn Street, just off Piccadilly, close

to Regent Street, Pall Mall, The Mall, and Whitehall. In the novel Phillip, leaving Flowers' early in the morning after his first visit, walks down Whitehall and along the Embankment to Vauxhall Bridge. Carpenter goes on to recall how Anthony Powell knew of the place from his father who recalled it with some awe and hinted at orgies, though to gain a drink there at any time it was necessary to be known and approved of by the owner, Mrs Rosa Lewis. Life at the Cavendish revolved around her and her first floor drawing room or salon (an underground bunker at Flowers'), where such various occupants as pink-faced Guards ensigns might be seen, with perhaps Augustus John drinking in a corner.

Rosa Lewis, described in the Twenties as "Tall, stately, white-haired . . . formidable to a degree", and as speaking an ancient and long-forgotten form of Cockney, was born into a tradesman's London family in 1867. By the age of 12 she was in service. Later, as a cook she was 'noticed' by Augustus Lumley, who looked after the future Edward VII's sexual interests which included taking a house at Eaton Terrace and arranging for Rosa to be married to one Excelsior Lewis, butler. The suggestion that Rosa herself became a royal mistress has never been proved, but soon bored with her life she became a freelance caterer, and in 1902 bought the Cavendish. Thus far her life differs totally from that of Flossie Flowers, but she was soon described by her guests, whom she bullied, as running "a naughty nursery" where Nanny provided Champagne and girls rather than toys. At the Cavendish "a bottle of wine" always meant Champagne and it was paid for by the simple system of putting it on the bills of whomever Rosa felt the most affluent guest present which caused a sense of perpetual anxiety amongst her guests, and occasional embarrassment. Cyril Connolly recalls attending a wedding reception for Lord Antrim in 1934, when Rosa called out, "'ere's the man wot owes me money, Bobbie give 'im a writ.'" Yet for guests she thought hard-up she would stand a bottle. Some described the place as being done up like a decayed country manor; others that it existed in an almost surrealist state and dimension where normal life was turned upside down. In Rosa's company it seemed people lost their own identity and acquired someone else's, and she herself gave the air of moving in a dream, often confusing people's identities, "I won't have that tart coming in here chasing after young So-and-So," she once observed of a highly respectable lady from the Midlands.

Without doubt the Cavendish acquired a 'reputation'; a suite was reserved for Edward VII as King, and she provided 'companionship' for Edwardian aristocrats and other gentlemen, and was not averse to homosexuals. During the First World War she provided 'comforts' for those on leave, but never it was said, professionals. Thus Phillip and Sasha at Flowers' perhaps?

I think there is little doubt that Flossie Flowers and Rosa Lewis were one and the same person. Despite Williamson's disguises, there are too many similarities to be coincidental between the two women and their establishments.

It is also rather nice to know that, although he was never a regular habitué of the Cavendish, Evelyn Waugh did go there occasionally with others of his circle, and accurately drew Rosa as "Lottie Crump", in *Vile Bodies*.

Hidden by fictional disguise for so long, it is perhaps fitting that this rather remarkable woman at last appears in her own right.