

## **A personal memoir of Elsa Herkomer**

*Extracts from*

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**Note:** Elsa Anna Iole Herkomer (“Aunt Elsa”) was the daughter of the artist Sir Hubert von Herkomer. She firstly married Dr Donald Harvey Attfield – son of Professor John Attfield – in 1899. Donald served as a medical officer in Egypt before returning to England to become Medical Officer of Health for Watford. After his death in 1908, Elsa returned to Egypt and married Charles MacDonald, the “Uncle Charles” mentioned in these delightful extracts, which begin around the year 1924.

*From Chapter 6: The Nineteen Twenties*  
*Pages 27-29*

At this point it is time to mention Aunt Elsa. Aunt Elsa was not a real aunt but she had joined my mother and aunt for lessons with their German governess in their childhood. She was the same age. I have already mentioned Professor Herkomer who ran the famous Art School in Bushey. The Professor married three times and by his second wife he had a son, Siegfried, and a daughter, Elsa. After this wife, Lulu, died, he married again, causing something of a scandal because the third wife was the sister of Lulu, an alliance forbidden by the church. Aunt Elsa always maintained that their stepmother neglected them, putting all her energy into the students and the school. In fact, she claimed they would have fared very badly indeed if my grandmother had not taken pity on them, fed them odd meals and suggested that they share her children’s governess. It was because of this that Aunt Elsa considered my mother was the nearest she ever had to a sister – my own Aunt Beresford and Elsa were less allied.

And so it was that throughout my childhood Egyptian cotton arrived to be made into dresses for me and every summer Aunt Elsa and her husband, Uncle Charles, came to spend some of their leave from Egypt staying with us. This was not always pure pleasure for my mother. Aunt Elsa, like her father, the Professor, was eccentric. We had other eccentric aunts, real ones, from Ireland, but Aunt Elsa’s eccentricity was very noticeable, in fact embarrassing. She always held strong views and voiced them wherever she was. The most tiresome quirk in these visits was Aunt Elsa taking over the kitchen, which she did on arrival. Owing to the climate of Egypt and the difference between Egyptian and English stomachs, she brought back a rule that all vegetables must be washed in permanganate of potash before being cooked. She forgot, as she took control, that Albert’s vegetables were beyond reproach, grown in good honest London clay and that none of us suffered from the home cooking. You can imagine the nightmare this became to my mother as she explained the complications to Ellen, our cook, who became grumpy and offended and apt to give notice.

And so it was a terrible shock on the day I walked into the house, having left school for good, to hear (almost amidst my mother’s greeting) that Aunt Elsa had invited me to spend a few days with her in London. Uncle Charles would be away visiting his relations. To my consternation my mother had agreed that I should accept.

I was stunned with alarm. The reason for my mother's decision was twofold: one very deep and real reason was sympathy: poor Aunt Elsa and Uncle Charles had lost a very sweet little daughter a year before, which devastated us all. Another reason, I suspected, was my mother's desperation at the chaos in the house. So it was that I found myself for several terrifying days, the first of the summer holidays, staying at a very grand hotel, the Mostyn, somewhere near the back of Selfridges in London.

It was indeed a grand hotel: I was a very young and inexperienced seventeen: the decorum of the dining room was awe inspiring: the hushed voices of the diners (other than my aunt's imperial tones), the immaculate starched table cloths sculptured to the sizeable tables with napkins made to look like water lilies and the supercilious head waiter in his white tie and tails, a true monarch of his realm, bending over Aunt Elsa while he and she studied the menu. At the very first meal my worst apprehension was fulfilled – Aunt Elsa took the head waiter under her wing, explaining just how she wanted her meal cooked, almost threatening to show the chef in his own kitchen her methods. At this point I felt the apparent silent ears of the other diners had somehow become focussed on our table.

To me Aunt Elsa was kindness itself – everything was arranged for my entertainment. At the same time she could not resist giving me some tuition in how to get my own way in public and my first lesson was at Selfridges. We were in a department that dealt with tropical kit – Empire days. We very soon had the staff of the whole floor in attendance while Aunt E explained how she wanted a parasol lined in green against the glare of the desert sun. Suddenly she demanded a chair. Now Selfridges had just gone over to the American idea and had done away with those nice chairs against the counter once found in English shops when you could do your choosing blissfully sitting down. So persuasive was Aunt Elsa that eventually a huge wooden office armchair was brought down from Gordon Selfridges's own office upon which she sat like King Canute regarding the rising tide of amused shoppers, who now gathered round us. It was impossible for me to try and pretend I was one of them as Aunt Elsa called to me to open a parasol and walk round with it so that she could judge its suitability.

We went to two theatres, which was fun, and to the nearby Wallace Collection. There was one difficulty when out and about, which seemed to me to be very tedious. Aunt E did not trust the hygiene of any public convenience – loos now – and so we had to take a taxi back to the hotel when we wanted to relieve ourselves.

In the evenings after dinner, we went out dancing – “Whom shall we dance with?” I asked, fearing that we would have to dance with each other. “No worry on that score”, said Aunt E with a mischievous look and when we arrived at the Mayfair Hotel Ballroom, I think it was, a beautifully dressed young man, in white tie and tails like the head waiter, greeted us. “Good evening, Madam”, and Aunt Elsa introduced me to Marcus, our hired partner, a gigolo.

It was lovely to dance with Marcus, but difficult to talk to him. He always began the evening with “How's your auntie tonight?” after which conversation languished, as I was too intent following his steps. Aunt E insisted that I danced first, then I would sit out at our table and watch as she whirled energetically around the ballroom taking Marcus with her. She wore a wig – very unusual in those days, but as she said, it saved many tedious hours at the hairdresser – and the wig used to become a little tippety before she sank exhausted

down as the band stopped. I would try surreptitiously to straighten it for her.

Looking back, I think I was too inhibited to enjoy the extraordinary experience and in my ridiculous adolescent way I was thankful that there was no one from my school there to witness me dancing with a gigolo who was really very nice and earning an honest living giving fun to two odd lonely women.

Aunt Elsa came into my life again in the far distant future.

*From Chapter 37: The Villa Betaana*  
*Pages 178-179*

It is time that Aunt Elsa came back into the story. ... By this time Uncle Charles had retired from Egypt and, in order to avoid the English winters, he and Aunt Elsa had built themselves a house in the south of France at Cagnes-sur-Mer. I have described how my mother and I visited them there in 1938.

Before I was married, or even thought seriously to do so, I came home one Saturday from London for the weekend. My mother told me that Aunt Elsa was in the garden and that the last Lady Herkomer, her second stepmother (the 'wicked' one), had died and was being buried in the churchyard just over the hedge from our garden. She stressed that Aunt Elsa was particularly anxious to see me as soon as possible so, with a certain amount of trepidation, down the garden path I went. And there she was looking very pensive and walking slowly up and down the path that ran parallel to the churchyard next door.

"Here you are," she began. "This is a solemn occasion in my life. You know that my stepmother Lady Herkomer has died and is being buried at this moment," to which I assented. "Well," she went on "I owe her nothing and do not wish to be present but I like to think my own thoughts in the peace of this garden." This I understood

"Now you know that your mother was the nearest I ever had to a sister and that due to your grandmother's kindness my brother and I grew up otherwise we would have starved". This I pondered about. "That being so," she went on, "I wish after Uncle Charles's death that you should be my heir." I was flummoxed. "Now my reason is this – your mother and I are of similar age so that we may die at about the same time – double death duties would impoverish any legacy I leave. You will never let your mother starve, that is for sure. So you will treat your mother as the owner of the villa until her death and after that it will be for you and your husband, if you have one, to enjoy. On this subject she became emphatic, "I beseech you to be careful – always make yourself comfortable in life." This filled me with alarm – I was already mixed up with Tom and doubted if comfort was on the menu should he and I ever marry – adventure was not in Aunt Elsa's vocabulary for living. However I managed to mumble my gratitude as best I could, feeling very unworthy, uneasy and self-conscious.

About a year later Tom and I did decide to marry. Aunt Elsa came for annual visit and I took him to have lunch with her at Bushey Hall Hotel where, this time, she was staying. I was a little apprehensive: Tom was not a conventional person, but then nor was Aunt Elsa.

We started rather shyly then suddenly he won hands down when the waiter placed a plate before her: the gravy sauce was in danger of overflowing but Tom took a knife and balanced the plate safely before the waiter returned to be admonished. "He is resourceful and I like that," said Aunt E, and I heaved a sigh of relief. After that she always referred to him as the Admiral.

As regards the Villa Betaana ever belonging to my mother and myself we somehow could not imagine it. The person who thoroughly enjoyed the idea was my brother, Pat, who foresaw many happy holidays for all of us down the years to come.

We married, and then in 1938 my mother and I, as I have said, paid a visit to the Villa. It was near to the sea, overlooked the Nice Golf Course on which the famous and notorious played, watched from the balcony by Aunt Elsa. It was a stone's throw from the sea where Aunt Elsa took her morning dip – it had a nice garden. It also had two Italian servants who kept the place immaculate. I still did not believe the dream.

In the summer of 1939 Aunt Elsa and Uncle Charles were on their usual visit to England and spent a night in Calais en route. An unexpected tragedy now struck. Poor Aunt Elsa was discovered sitting peacefully in front of an open window while Uncle Charles was below enjoying an evening sundown drink. He returned to find that she had suffered a heart attack and apparently died peacefully in the soft evening light.

Inconsolable, Uncle Charles came on alone. She was buried next to her father in Bushey Churchyard and, unavoidably and ironically, next to her stepmother. Uncle Charles never returned to France or to the villa at Cagnes. He had nieces in Wales and remained with them and was there when war broke out. He missed a terrible ordeal for elderly compatriots who fled from the south of France in a collier in the utmost discomfort for the rather spoilt wealthy aged.

He used to write to me telling me where I would be able to find things when the time came. The war and family life engulfed me completely so it was still hard to take things in, and anyway Uncle Charles was alive.

In 1942 I was standing in the hall of a house where we were then living in Bath when I read a telegram telling me of Uncle Charles's death. One day later everything around me was reduced to rubble as the Luftwaffe blitzed Bath and left us homeless.

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