ONE

Nothing like it had ever been seen in No. 10 Downing Street before. There were gasps from the smartly dressed audience, their chairs pushed back against the panelled walls, as the young woman, in a flimsy dress of diaphanous chiffon, a garland of flowers round her dark hair, her feet and legs bare, glided into the grand drawing room. They watched transfixed as, with graceful, swaying movements of arms and torso, she began her 'nymph' dance to Mendelssohn's 'Spring Song'.

For this was the famous Maud Allan, whose daring 'Salome' performance topped the bill at the Palace Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. Her finale, carrying on a platter a wax model of St John the Baptist's head to which she gave a lingering and sensual kiss on the lips, was a sensation – not least for the way she was dressed.

'The dancer has her breasts covered with two closely fitting shields; these cover the nipple & part, not all of each breast. Except for necklaces & a few ornamental looking cords to holding the breast shields in position the body is completely naked to a level with the points of the hips,' salivated one newspaper, adding that 'no shoes, stockings, or drawers are worn'.

So daring was Maud's dancing that the Manchester authorities had banned her entire show. The young P.G. Wodehouse was moved by this to write a ditty on the subject (sung to a popular tune):

There's a girl who can dance in a way
That astonishes people, they say.
They see her Salome,
And gasp out, 'Well, blow me!
That's pretty remarkable, eh?'
The name of this damsel is Maud,
She's succeeded at home and abroad;

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But the hawk-eyed committee
Of Manchester city
Are not among those who applaud.

That afternoon in 1908 Maud was performing her sensational dance in Downing Street at the invitation of her friend Margot Asquith, whose husband, H.H. Asquith, had become Prime Minister a few weeks earlier. In that era, when convention ruled and scandal attached itself like a burr to anyone stepping outside the norm, inviting a young woman, banned for obscenity in one of Britain's major cities, to dance half naked within the residence of the Prime Minister was a daring thing for even Margot to do.

But then, Margot was no ordinary Prime Minister's wife – nor, in his way, was Asquith an ordinary Prime Minister.

As 1912 opened, it seemed as if the golden Edwardian summer would stretch on for ever. Even a different monarch had done little more than make the Court a duller and less licentious place. The sense of entitlement in the upper classes was almost palpable. For as long as most people could remember, the British Empire had been the greatest power on the globe. The South African War, so far away, had lasted a mere two years and had barely impinged on the consciousness of many, let alone modified the style of living of the grandest Edwardians. It seemed that nothing ever would – could – alter this.

But Britain was on the cusp of social and political changes that would irrevocably affect national life. Many came from government; many from those it ruled – and these would produce a new kind of government that responded to the wishes of the people rather than the decisions of a privileged elite, and a new kind of politician, not only aware of this 'people power' but able to harness it.

At the heart of government was its best-known family: the Prime Minister, Herbert Henry Asquith, who had helped to bring about some of these changes but would in turn be their victim; his wife Margot, an extraordinary figure in her own right; their two children and Asquith's own five children by his first wife. Three others were almost as family: the Prime Minister's two Private Secretaries, Maurice ('Bongie') Bonham Carter and Edwin Montagu, and his daughter Violet's best friend, the Hon. Venetia Stanley. Within months, all of them would be linked in an emotional cat's cradle.

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No. 10 Downing Street was the official residence of the Prime Minister and his family but Asquith and his wife, the former Margot Tennant, lived in an ambiance that we would hardly recognise. Security was virtually non-existent. To modern eyes, the thought that any determined person could simply stride through the front door seems almost unbelievable. As Margot recorded in her diary: 'I never knew what prevented anyone coming into this house at any moment: some would say after lunching with us that nothing had.'

These luncheon parties had been given almost daily by Margot since the Asquiths' marriage seventeen years earlier; they were preferred to dinners by Asquith, who did not enjoy all-male conversations except in the House and disliked the custom of women leaving the men to their port and retiring to the drawing room. What he liked in the evening was having a few friends to dinner, with general conversation followed by several rubbers of bridge.

On most days the Downing Street dining table would be surrounded by a mixed collection of guests: Members of Parliament, young women, perhaps one or two of the Asquith sons, Violet, women friends of Margot and literati like Robbie Ross (Oscar Wilde's literary executor and his lover) or Eddie Marsh – arts patron, civil servant, friend to poets and Private Secretary to Winston Churchill.

Two of the most regular guests, so much so that they became part of the close family circle, were Bongie and Montagu, in 1912 aged respectively thirty-two and thirty-three. Bongie had been at Balliol with Asquith's two eldest sons, Raymond and Beb, through whom he had met Violet during her coming-out year in 1905; shortly thereafter he had become her father's Private Secretary. Montagu had been elected as MP for Chesterton in 1906, spotted by Asquith as a rising young politician and co-opted to work for him.

Asquith, who often had no idea who would be there until he walked in from the Cabinet Room, would preside benignly at these gatherings – although sometimes he had a brisk way with bores, generally cutting them off short before they were launched into full flood. 'I don't know whether you are aware, Mr Asquith,' began one rash luncheon guest, 'that under the American constitution . . .' Sensing a tedious monologue, the Asquith guillotine came down. 'The worst in the world, of course,' interjected the Prime Minister

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immediately, removing the sting by warmly ushering the visitor into the next room to join the rest of the group.

Asquith's political career and most of the family well-being were reliant on his wife's wealth: when he became Prime Minister in 1908 his income had dropped to the ministerial salary of £5,000. He was now sixty (he was born on 12 September 1852). He had fallen in love wth his first wife, Helen Melland, the daughter of a Manchester doctor, when he was only eighteen and they married when they were little more than boy and girl. Their five children were Raymond, Herbert ('Beb'), Arthur ('Oc'), Violet and Cyril ('Cys'); in 1912 aged respectively thirty-four, thirty-one, twenty-nine, twenty-five and twenty-two.

Unlike most of the men in Margot's circle, who were Eton alumni from aristocratic or upper-middle-class families, her husband came from a Yorkshire mercantile and Congregational background and had been educated at the City of London School, which he left at eighteen having won a classical scholarship to Balliol. Four years later he was awarded the Craven Scholarship and became President of the Oxford Union, then as now a breeding ground for politicians.

Shortly after graduating he was elected a Fellow of Balliol, and read for the Bar, to which he was called in 1876. His ability to assimilate facts almost instantaneously, combine widely differing strands of reasoning into one cohesive whole and then present this as a compelling argument, coupled with his habit of working until three every morning, led quickly to success at the Bar and, later, to his mastery of the House of Commons, which he entered in July 1886, becoming Home Secretary only six years later. His gift of lucidity was such that it was said that he could drive a Roman road through any subject, while the calm assurance of his manner underlined the authority that emanated from him in debate.

Winston Churchill – when President of the Board of Trade, his first post as a Cabinet minister in the Asquith Government – described him to the diarist and Egyptologist Wilfrid Scawen Blunt as 'a very simple-minded man, very ingenuous, but he has a wonderful talent for work, and the clearest possible head for business. He will sit up playing bridge and drinking late at night, and yet in the morning he will come to his office or the House and enter into the most complicated business with his head entirely clear and work

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on for six or seven hours. He will attend committees and give full attention to every point of discussion, and draft amendments in his perfectly clear handwriting without altering a word, clause after clause, and he is far and away the best speaker in the House.'

He was good company. The German Ambassador, Prince Lichnowsky, accurately summed up the impression he made. 'A jovial *bon viveur*, fond of the ladies, especially the young and pretty ones, he is partial to cheerful society and good cooking . . . Formerly a well-known barrister with a large income, and for a number of years in Parliament, then a minister under Mr Gladstone, a pacifist like his friend Grey,* and favouring an understanding with Germany, he handled all questions with the cheery calm and assurance of an experienced man of business, whose good health and excellent nerves had been steeled by devotion to the game of golf.'

Asquith who, according to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, had lived during his first marriage in a 'small house in Hampstead with a garden behind where they kept chickens . . . and went in and out to his chambers daily on the top of an omnibus,' had had no trouble adjusting to Margot's infinitely grander life when they married, taking to rich food and – especially – drink rather than the simpler fare he had been used to, and relishing after-dinner bridge and the conversation of beautiful women rather than the everydayness of family life.

The Prime Minister's zest for enjoyment, noted Lichnowsky, was shared by his wife. Other than this Margot, about to celebrate her forty-eighth birthday, was not like her husband in any way. In an age of languid, marmoreal beauties, she was slim, with an excellent figure, active and fit from days spent roaming the wild countryside round Glen, the Tennants' Scottish home and, later, in the hunting field. Her strong points physically were an abundance of dark brown hair, a pearly complexion, dark eyes and unquenchable vitality, but it was her original and charismatic personality that made the over-riding impression. At the age of only nineteen she had been viewed by many as the most distinctive young woman in London. When she was still unknown, Lord Pembroke, placed beside her at a dinner party and later to fall in love with her, had scribbled a note to his hostess asking, 'Who is this girl with the red heels?'

* Sir Edward Grey, Britain's Foreign Secretary.

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Socially, she cared little for conventions she found meaningless. As a young girl she had scandalised London Society by ignoring the iron but unspoken law of chaperonage – even, to the horror of the older generation, travelling alone by train. More than anything else, though, it was her extraordinary frankness that surprised, fascinated, appealed and sometimes appalled. It was, as Desmond MacCarthy wrote, a 'dangerous, graceless, disconcerting, invigorating, merciless, shameless, lovable candour'. What other young woman of twenty-two would have dared say to Lord Randolph Churchill after his sudden, surprise resignation as Chancellor of the Exchequer, 'I am afraid you resigned more out of temper than conviction, Lord Randolph'? In an era of frozen gentility, her speciality was going too far. Together with her wit, brilliance, warmth and penchant for entertaining, it was a quality that ran like an electric current through Society.

Margot was the eleventh of twelve children (though four died young). She was inseparable from her younger sister Laura until Laura, who married in 1885, died a year later in childbirth. She also had three half-sisters: after the death of her mother Emma in 1895 her father had remarried in 1898 at the age of seventy-five a young woman of thirty, Marguerite Miles, who had caught his eye when they were both dining with Lord Burnham, owner of the *Daily Telegraph*. They went on to have three daughters.

Thanks to her upbringing in this big, sociable family she had none of the usual maidenly hesitation or reserve when talking to men – if she liked one he would be asked to one of the large and agreeable luncheon parties at her father's London house.

By the time she was twenty-five this frank and open approach had made her the close friend of most of the leading intellectual and social figures of the day, who wrote to her, sent her books, flowers, love letters and poems. Oscar Wilde dedicated his short story 'The Star Child'* to her, she enjoyed *tête à têtes* with Gladstone (who also wrote a poem to her), she danced in a scarlet frock and black lace petticoat for an enchanted officers' mess and Harry Cust, editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and lover of numerous Society women, declared: 'In spite of the sores and the bores and the flaws in it/My own life's the better for small bits of yours in it.'

* From *A House of Pomegranates*, published in 1891.

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Aged only twenty-two she had suffered a damaging blow to her appearance that could have caused her a miserable loss of confidence. On an April day in 1886, as her diary records at the time: 'I was riding down a green slope in Gloucestershire while the Beaufort hounds were scattered below vainly trying to pick up the scent; they were on a stale line and the result had been general confusion. It was a hot day and the woods were full of primroses. The air was humming with birds and insects, nature wore an expectant look, and all the hedgerows sparkled with the spangles of spring.'

Margot rode down to a gap in a fence that divided her from the others, kicked her horse over it and woke up in a nearby cottage with a tremendous headache. She had been concussed: a branch had caught her in the face, her nose and upper lip were badly torn and her nose broken. The doctor who was sent for stitched her up without anaesthetic (chloroform, then) as there was no time to fetch it; and her nose remained crooked (by the time she eventually gave up hunting, in 1905, she had broken both collarbones, several ribs, both kneecaps and dislocated her jaw).

Without conventional beauty, she pinned her faith on style and elegance – all her life her clothes would be beautiful and expensive, with the simplicity that comes from perfect cut, emphasised by overtones of drama. They gave her pleasure and confidence, they were her armour against the all-powerful sway of the beauties and, as she once said: 'Clothes are the first thing that catch the eye.' It was this ethos that made her say to her three young half-sisters, who found her lightning mind and outspoken tongue intimidating: 'Oh darlings, you dress like parsons' daughters. Can't you be more chic?'

When she married Asquith, Margot faced the formidable prospect of becoming stepmother to five children – five children for whom their dead mother had created a close family circle with herself at the centre. As her friend Benjamin Jowett, the Balliol scholar and tutor, theologian and Platonist, wrote to her: 'The real doubt about the affair is the family; will you consider this and talk it over with your mother? The other day you were at a masqued ball, as you told me – a few months hence you will have, or rather may be having, the care of five children, with all the ailments and miseries and disagreeables of children and not your own, although you will have to be a mother to them, and this state of things will last during the greater part of your life.'

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Margot herself was deeply worried. 'I had no reason to think I was maternal,' she wrote, 'and I was haunted by the thought that if I married him I might ruin his career' – she was aware that many of Asquith's friends thought her highly *mondaine* way of life and unfettered speech would spell disaster to this rising star of the Liberal Party. She also realised that his children would, naturally, be prejudiced against the idea of a stepmother. 'I felt I was not worthy to undertake the care and guidance of exceptionally clever children brought up in different surroundings from my own.'

When she became their stepmother she found them daunting, Raymond and Violet in particular regarding her from a position of lofty, almost disdainful intellectual superiority. 'I do not think if you had ransacked the world you could have found natures so opposite in temper, temperament, and outlook as my stepchildren when I first knew them,' she wrote.

Certainly Raymond's brilliance had never been in doubt. Aged seven, he described the discarded skin of a python seen at the zoo as 'an outworn fetter broken and cast off by its soul'; from then on his academic progress was triumphant, concluding with a slew of Oxford's glittering prizes and a first-class honours degree, after which he followed in his father's footsteps and became a barrister. A schoolboy of almost sixteen when his new stepmother flashed like a glittering dragonfly into his life, both his good looks and his aloof, rather cynical persona were already evident.

Margot had worked hard at being a good stepmother, her natural warmth penetrating even Raymond's hard outer carapace – he had become aware of the good qualities that lay beneath the ebullience that the Asquith children found so hard to take (Violet thought Margot's habit of thanking the servants after they had performed some task 'undignified' in the wife of a senior politician). When he was knocked over by a huge wave on the Aberdeenshire coastline and got up half stunned, with his face and knee streaming with blood, it was Margot who knew what to do. 'Margot is always splendid on these occasions,' he wrote to a friend. 'She took me back to the house and covered me with ice and raw beef.' And when at Oxford, he told her that if he got into any difficulty he would certainly consult her, 'for I think you know more of the world and take a saner view of it than almost anyone else'.

Her great generosity was also welcome. When Raymond wanted

to marry Katharine Horner, the daughter of Frances Horner, one of Margot's oldest friends – and Asquith's confidante in his pursuit of Margot – it was Margot who made this possible by settling £400 a year on Raymond, then a young barrister earning far too little to marry on. She also paid for the entire wedding, held from 20 Cavendish Square on 23 July 1907.

She did the same for Asquith's second son, Beb, who married Lady Cynthia Charteris in 1910 – Cynthia too adopted the habit of semi-sneering comments about Margot while blithely accepting her generosity. Cynthia, the daughter of Margot's friends Lord and Lady Elcho (later Wemyss), had been brought up in aristocratic surroundings, and her mother Mary had expected her to marry the heir to some large estate. Beb, a mere barrister from a family outside the sacred circle, was frowned on for some time, and the couple's meetings had to be in secret, until finally Cynthia's family gave way. Margot and Asquith gave Cynthia a diamond tiara as a wedding present as well as helping them financially, but though this meant they had enough to live on, and the leisure for Beb to pursue his real interest, poetry, by the standards of their friends they were poor.

It was not long before Margot won over the two youngest boys, Cys, then a lively little boy with a mop of red curls, and Oc – his father's favourite and soon Margot's. 'The reason Oc is the most loved of my stepchildren is that he is far the most human of them,' she wrote in her diary later. 'He has a rich nature and a real sense of responsibility. He is absolutely unselfish. He knows the precise value of brains and puts them in proportion. He can give up and serve others. He isn't self-enfolded . . .'

By 1912 the twenty-five-year-old Violet was the only one of Asquith's children by his first wife still living at home, and her relationship with Margot was one of the most powerful ingredients in the emotional cross-currents that would soon envelop Downing Street.

She was the closest of his first five children to her father and with her he was much more demonstrative than with his sons, allowing his natural affection to show. After the death of her mother when she was four, Asquith had had the small girl's bed brought into his own room in his London flat, and as she grew older would talk to her of his political concerns when he came in at night. Sometimes she would wake him early to continue these talks, often having to

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shake him hard as he slept deeply after a late night at the House. Several years of this night-time intimacy formed the basis of a relationship that had become almost incestuous in its closeness. The loss of her mother, the sudden, unexpected ejection from her father's bedroom after several years and the arrival of a new stepmother led to a lifelong jealousy of Margot in Violet and, in Margot, of rivalry with her stepdaughter as both sought to be the closest to Asquith.

Margot was determined to give Violet as good an education as possible – then, this meant a good governess – but what served Violet best of all was her own fierce intelligence, her literary appetite and the constant encounters with Asquith and Margot's political and literary friends. 'Happy child! You are seeing life from the stage box,' said one of them, the author Henry James.

When Violet was eighteen (in 1905), Margot took great pains over her coming-out, arranging for her father Sir Charles Tennant and his second wife Marguerite to give a ball for Violet, and Margot's niece Frances Tennant, in their large house at 40 Grosvenor Square. It was a lavish occasion: the big double drawing room, cleared for dancing, was swathed in roses, Violet's dress came from Worth and on the morning of the ball Sir Charles sent both girls a diamond necklace. Violet commented later that it made her feel conspicuous (young girls normally wore pearls).

Of Margot's own children by Asquith, only two survived. Her first pregnancy set the pattern for those that followed. Her labour was protracted, she suffered great pain, and her baby had to be sacrificed to save her life. Margot herself did not recover consciousness until the following day. For both Asquiths, the loss of this little creature, their first child together, was a profound grief. At once, Asquith wrote to his wife, immured in her room: 'Darling sweetheart and wife, I have just read for the first time your inexpressibly dear and touching love-letter written more than three weeks ago. I have resisted the temptation of opening it all this time; somehow I dared not, until all was over. But I am rewarded for my patience, for it is to me the dearest tribute that has ever been paid to me by woman or man, and I shall carry it with me as a blessing and an inspiration until I die . . .

'To me, from the first hour I knew you until now, you have been the best that I have known. I have loved and love you truly and loyally and with all my nature: and now we are more bound together

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than ever by the hopes and the fears and the loss which we have shared. God make us ever more and more to each other and help us both to do and to bear.'

Margot was so ill that word got round that she was dying. Once, Asquith opened the front door to find two of her former suitors, Peter Flower and Evan Charteris, on the doorstep. 'Henry said it was curious to see these two men who hated each other united for a moment in a common fear.' The mutual dislike was not surprising. Peter Flower, the younger brother of Lord Battersea, was Margot's first great love, whom she had met when she was nineteen. She was struck at once by his good looks and unforced elegance. Seconds later, she became aware that these were as nothing compared to the extraordinary, almost animal, grace and vitality that he exuded. But as she was quickly to learn, in marital terms – the subliminal perspective from which most single young women viewed most men in those days – he was a complete waste of time.

He was thirteen years older than Margot, and a man with an appalling reputation. Numerous husbands had threatened to horsewhip him, he borrowed money from his friends and seldom paid them back – from time to time he would disappear to India to hunt big game when creditors became too pressing or emotional affairs too difficult to handle – and he was an inveterate gambler. Nor did he have any of Margot's intellectual interests (he had never been known to read a book in his life) and he could be rude, bad-tempered and unpleasant. Yet his charm, looks and sheer masculinity made him fatally attractive to women.

To Margot, his mixture of passion, daredevilry and tender emotion was irresistible. Once he sprang across the area at the front of 40 Grosvenor Square and into the open window of the library when she did not open the door quickly enough. Once she outfaced a current mistress, the beautiful Lady Randolph Churchill. Another night, having left a ball together, they quarrelled so badly that Margot walked home by herself, to be confronted by her furious father, who asked her what she thought she was doing walking the streets alone at two in the morning in nothing but a ball dress – she had flung Peter's sheltering coat back at him. The two of them were drawn to each other like magnets but both realised the other could not – or would not – change.

Charteris (the sixth son of the tenth Earl of Wemyss) had fallen

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in love with her with little encouragement. 'Oh Margot how I loved your letter,' he wrote to her soon after they had met. 'It seemed like a break in the cloud that parting from you always makes for me . . . I leave you all all mine [love], keep it will you and be sometimes glad perhaps you've got it . . . and say you love me, ever so little.' In many ways he was a paler copy of Peter Flower, one of a type that physically attracted her, good-looking, keen on a country, sporting life, but though he was delightful company even Margot quickly realised that if they married she would soon become bored with him; nor would he have been able to stand up to her.

His love was almost abject. 'I've given you all the devotion that I had to give, accepting the fact that you only cared for me in the second degree – and now at the end of it I tell you I want you to marry me, that all my happiness and my future are involved with you, that I wish only to be in love with you and with you for the rest of life and win from you slowly the love that you have never given me . . . you have driven me more than once to petty infidelities but in not one of them have I ever forgotten or denied that I loved you more than any woman that ever has been or will be for me.'

When she told Evan Charteris that she was going to marry Asquith it was the end of his hopes. Frantically he wrote to her: 'I never thought in my heart that it was possible you should marry Asquith – or possible even that you should marry anyone but me – for you see you are so different to other women . . .' Nevertheless, soon after Margot turned him down, the susceptible Charteris was at the feet of Margot's friend Lady Desborough.

Margot took some time to recover from her difficult labour. Hard and miserable as the experience had been, it did not put her off the idea of more children. She came from a large family and expected to have one herself, so she did not hesitate to become pregnant again. Both Asquiths were delighted when a healthy little girl with large blue eyes arrived in February 1897. She was christened Elizabeth ('"Eli" = Hebrew for God, "Shabeth" = covenant, therefore Elizabeth means "God is my Covenant"', wrote Margot in her diary). Three years later another baby arrived – a daughter, as Margot had hoped – who lived for only seven hours, Asquith sobbing on his knees by the cradle. Again Margot was very ill; so much so that she had to be sent off to Switzerland for two months, where the fresh air, walking and skating helped her convalesce.

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Their son Anthony was born in November 1902. Almost from birth he was called Puffin, after Violet had so nicknamed him because of his prominent nose, or Honeypuffin; according to Margaret's baby book, Asquith sometimes called him Mr Puffindorf. Five years later, and in the seventh month of her pregnancy ('I dreaded more than I can describe another dead baby') Margot had her last child, a boy. Although so premature, he seemed healthy. He was wrapped in cotton wool and put in his father's dressing room to sleep, with a nurse watching; Asquith, like the doctors, happy and smiling, left Margot's room as she drifted off to sleep. Next morning she was woken by her doctors, followed by a miserable-looking Asquith. Before she could speak the senior doctor said: 'Did you hear us come down early? Your baby died at six this morning.'

Margot's grief was wild, savage and uncontrollable. This third death plunged her into a black pit of despair, a post-natal depression augmented by her physical debilitation. At best, she never ate much; when feeling ill or nervous she seemed to subsist mainly on cups of tea and occasional biscuits. She was white, exhausted, very thin and utterly miserable.

It was a time when large families were commonplace from royalty downwards; Margot herself was one of twelve children, with Asquith's five not considered in any way out of the ordinary, and few doctors then would have attempted to counsel a woman to limit the size of her family to the two or three more usual twenty years later.

However, Margot had had only two living children out of five pregnancies and five births. Each pregnancy was difficult; during them she would suffer and lose weight (of one she wrote: 'I am a very bad subject – I am so small up to now that I sometimes think it must be a bluebottle'). After the last, her emotional and physical trauma was such, and her health had become so precarious, that both Asquiths were told by the doctors that she must not have any more. Contraception was, generally speaking, in its infancy and the method most of her friends relied on, *coitus interruptus* (known in Margot's circle as 'leaving church before the sermon') was not foolproof.

There was only one thing to do, she was told: close the bedroom door. This decision spelled the end of marital relations for the Asquiths.

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TWO

Margot's first impressions of No. 10 Downing Street were unfavourable. 'I looked at the dingy exterior and wondered how we would live there,' she mused, as she sat in their car while Asquith entered to tell the mortally ill Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman that he had seen the King and accepted his invitation to form a government.

'Leaning back, I watched the evening sky reflected in the diamond panes of the Foreign Office windows, and caught a glimpse of green trees. The door opened and the Archbishop came out . . . as I reflected on the dying Prime Minister I could only hope that no sound had reached him of the crowd that had cheered his successor.'

After the Liberal landslide of 1906, with 397 Liberal MPs elected and a majority of 125 over all other parties combined, the leader of the party, Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman, had moved into No. 10 Downing Street. Asquith, as his Chancellor, could have had the use of No. 11, but he and Margot preferred to stay in the large and comfortable house in Cavendish Square that Margot's father had given them as a wedding present, decorated by Margot with what her stepdaughter Violet was later to call her 'impeccable eye'.

It was big enough to accommodate all five of the younger Asquith children and their three governesses, as well as the fourteen servants needed to run an establishment unwieldy by any standards – the kitchen and stables were in nearby Henrietta Place and the various courses for luncheon or dinner, carried in a specially heated trolley, used to rumble along a subterranean tunnel connecting the old-fashioned kitchen and the panelled dining room, while Margot's love of having friends and relations to stay meant that cans of hot water had to be carried upstairs several times a day. But it had walls frescoed by Sir James Thornhill and a beautiful staircase.

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