

**By the same author:**

*Brighter Bondage* Chatto & Windus 1935

*Vagabondage* Chatto & Windus 1941

*China Mending & Restoration* by C.S.M. Parsons & F.H. Curl, Faber & Faber  
1963

# CENTURY STORY

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Foreword by Sir Anthony Parsons

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frustration. Thus Betty got a place at Bedford College, then in the sublime setting of Regent's Park in London, and obtained her degree in English before resuming a teaching career. Meanwhile, from a copy of the RIBA handbook I gleaned that the gateway to the profession was a five-year course at the London School of Architecture, plus living in London.

The odds seemed in favour of the husband.

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Thus I continued my carefree life but with a feeling of excitement ahead, as if the spirit of adventure were in the offing and had brushed me with its wing. There were, after all, other irons in the fire: born into the age of the automobile, I had grown up with the automobile, had gathered from the Stellite the principle on which it worked though not how the power was conveyed to the road wheels. At the Guildford Technical School, then in the town, an evening session on the auto-cycle engine was about to be given, for which, at my behest, my mother paid a modest fee.

I was the only woman present, and possibly the best-educated of those attending the class. So, when it came to the examination, I was the best able to explain my meaning, and was very surprised to obtain a marking of 99 per cent.

Soon after, a paragraph appeared in *The Times* telling of a Women's Engineering Society that had been inaugurated under the auspices of Lady Parsons, wife of the inventor of the turbine, and Lady Shelley Rolls. The idea was to encourage an interest in engineering among women, and an address was given in London for anyone interested.

My mother and I went to a modest top-floor office, to find a young secretary, Caroline Haslett, no less. There were few indications then of the eminence this secretary would later attain. She described a technical college at Loughborough, in Leicestershire, which had trained and employed women in the war on munitions, and was still prepared to hold a few places open for women in their diploma courses starting in the autumn. The first year would be concentrated on general engineering and the following two years one could specialize in civil, electrical or automobile engineering according to choice. Classes would run concurrently with practical work in workshops, foundry and drawing-office.

I had been balked in doing munitions, I yearned to go through those workshops; what if I transferred my interest from building houses to building cars? Loughborough, at that time a technical college, appeared to require no certificate of entry, no matriculation; one started at shop-floor level, and having obtained the diploma one could surely secure promising employment. We knew, being distantly related to Sir Charles Parsons, that his daughter Rachel had trained as a nautical architect and had made a

Thus, being a minor, I had no money, only a tremendous creative urge. I wanted to write, for writing was almost a disease in the Parsons family. Betty was the first to publish a short, beautifully written novel of penetrating observation, of which more later. I expressed myself in badly spelt, long profuse letters, in stories that never got published, sentimental verses, and thoughts committed to paper. I also used drawing and painting for expressing myself, even the piano, though daily practice at school had all but extinguished my enthusiasm. To the piano I told my sorrows and joys, for I had the house to myself for long periods, but on the intrusion of an audience I at once became self-conscious and stopped playing.

A further enthusiasm, kept secret in the workshop, was inspired by volumes of the *Country Gentlemen's Estate Book* found in the bookshelves at Scole. These gave architectural plans of buildings and even layouts of property, and under their instruction I designed house, stables and grounds of the sort of estate of which I hoped some day to be the chatelaine. I even made up a selection of families with which I might populate it, though of the husband there was no preconception. The planned estate had a strong resemblance to Scole.

This designing of houses left me with a strong urge to be an architect, but architecture had barely recovered from its stagnation during the war. It was doubtful at this stage that I could have been articled to an architectural firm, and in any case it was not the moment to seek financial help.

Betty had reached her majority with a twenty-first birthday party in London, and now, from the Indian Military, had £16 quarterly till marriage or death. Yet she would never make much out of teaching till she had a degree. Places at universities were filling rapidly in the wake of the war, and there would soon be none left. The family was already too occupied trying to find the means for sending Betty to college.

The means came, from a heroic and unexpected quarter. Muriel, now in Cologne, had arranged in the hour of departure that her small financial legacy from her father should be used for this purpose. Defrauded herself of a university career, she was determined her niece should not suffer the same

considerable contribution to the war effort in her father's firm. I saw myself designing car engines, car bodies. . . . Little I knew.

My going to a man's college created some stir among the family, and my mother confessed she didn't believe I would have been allowed to do this had my father been alive. However, I did not go alone. Among the Anglo-Indian families scattered around us was one very similar to our own. A widowed Mrs Travers, on the death of her husband in the Gurkhas, had come home to bear a third daughter in the house of her widowed mother, where she continued to live, not a mile from Capel House. Mrs Travers very much favoured her elder two daughters, but the youngest had none of their graces, was excessively shy, with all the awkwardness attendant, and she even surpassed me in bad spelling. Escape from her home to ours was a joy to Dorothea, if not always to me as I was maddened that everything I did was copied by her. Later we got on better, sharing many interests, particularly camping, when I might with benefit have copied Dorothea, who was a budding cook. There was no anxiety if we went camping on the Downs in those days, though I was often a disturbing element in the households of more cosseted friends, taking them long walks and failing to return till dark.

Mrs Travers appeared to have infinite faith in Grace, not only in sending her daughters to the same schools but, on hearing of the Loughborough scheme, agreeing to Dorothea going also. And Loughborough revealed the root cause of Dorothea's idiosyncracies for, as we moved into the realms of higher mathematics, it was found that she was a brilliant mathematician.

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We arrived at Loughborough in the autumn of 1919 to find another female student, Patience Erskine, intent on studying chemistry, and a pupil from Downe House, a school against which Crofton was wont to play lacrosse, generally getting beaten. It had been arranged that we three – known as lady engineers – should board with the local schoolmistress.

Shortly after, into hostels arranged for them, came a horde of young men, lately demobilized and eligible for a Government grant towards the study of engineering, though to many the grant was more interesting than the occupation. Of students, therefore, there were about three hundred men and three women, but more women were to join later.

Our trouser overalls excited much attention, but we were forced to wear terrible caps in the machine shops on account of the dangerous belting from the overhead drive. Few machines were then electrically driven. We also learnt there were pockets of antipathy against us for barging in on men's preserves, but there was no evidence of this when we met the dissenters. In fact we were at all times treated with the greatest respect.

If the students paid respect, not so the landladies; Loughborough was then a small parochial-minded town, and we were looked on with the utmost suspicion, thought to be abandoned even before we came. The schoolmistress soon found us too much, and fixed us up with a nice old body who fed and housed us generously, but a postcard sent to Patience by her mother: 'Darling, I can't bear to think of you pigging it in filthy lodgings in Loughborough', was not unnaturally our undoing. We were out on our ears before the end of the week, and suffered thereafter a painful series of short anchorages, until Patience took refuge with a friend she had made at the golf club, and I answered an advertisement and went to see a clergyman's widow who had rooms to let at reasonable price. Her greeting: 'I've heard all about you people' was not promising. The interview improved, however; she would take Dorothea and me on approval for a month, and in fact we stayed with Mrs Abbott for the rest of the time we were at college, and she proved a very kind friend. There was a piano in our sitting-room to which I told my secret heart, unaware that when I played, Mrs Abbott would sit on the stairs in the hall to listen. Had I known I could not have played a note, but this was not revealed till departure.

The college workshops were certainly more inspiring than the lectures, which were a sad contrast to those at the Guildford Technical School, which Dorothea and I had attended before coming to Loughborough, fearful of being behind the men students. In fact we found ourselves slightly ahead, and their carefree attitude towards homework was infectious. Our dedicated ardour began to wane, with time given to diversions: the college dramatic society, walking the country, Nottingham theatre, and I decided to teach myself to swim.

Swimming-baths had been mostly closed down in the war, so I had had little chance of learning an art to which far less importance was then given. The Loughborough swimming-bath was handy and almost deserted in the hours reserved for women, but I had barely taught myself breast-stroke when the college took over the baths for an afternoon gymkhana. As there were only two female entrants for a ladies' race, I was persuaded to enter, but on hearing I had only just learned to swim they gave me such an extravagant advantage that I won it. There was a good deal of laughter when I received a small silver cup.

There was no direct practical work on car engines at the college, only a large working model of a diesel engine. Among the students there was much tuning of motor cycle engines for the rallies we constantly attended. Dorothea had bought a motor cycle and side-car, which much facilitated our transport but failed dismally on test hills. Dorothea was to come in to her own, however, in Mathematics.

As taught in Guildford, Mathematics had seemed child's play, but at Loughborough we were all getting thoroughly bemused over Higher



Mathematics. The classroom in which we assembled was apt to be very warm and the tutor often came in, chalked up the problem on the board, gave us an outline of how to tackle it, and then walked out and left us to it. He had not been gone long before half the class followed suit, sitting outside smoking in the shade. One student said he had gone to the cinema. Dorothea remained, solving the problem, and in due course all returned and got from her various stages of the solution, but were wary enough not all to give the same answer.

I was lucky to get her coaching in Mathematics when it came to the exams, and in view of our many diversions we both had to do intensive last-minute study. It was crucial to get that diploma, and with greater attention I am sure we could have got firsts. As it was we eventually each got second-class diplomas, which in fact was all that was necessary.

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It is fair to say that, whereas I had brought light into Dorothea's early life, the situation was now reversed. She was never financially cramped, as I was, and by 1920 had abandoned the motor cycle for an oil-cooled Morgan two-seater, in which one lay almost prone, not a yard from ground level and, since both of us had the same type of complexion, it burnt the skin off our noses as vehemently as had the unshielded motor cycle. In return it gave us a lot of useful knowledge.

By this time a car was no longer a sacred possession looked after and driven by a chauffeur, but Ford had not yet made cars available to the majority, so it was still a privileged minority who toured Britain at the wheel, an advantage I would not have enjoyed but for Dorothea. In the summer vacation we went on long camping tours.

True, not everyone set out to test themselves as rashly as we did. Until we learnt better, we viewed the hills and dales of the Lake District, for instance, on a par with the gentler slopes of Surrey, and when a sign proclaimed a route as impassable for motorists we invariably took it, and were luckier than we deserved. One such track started sloping steeply downward and disappeared in a spread of stones that began descending with us. We were in scree, and it was pure luck that the slope eased off before pitching down further, giving us an angle of escape.

Wrynose Pass, then a wet mountain track, gave us our first experience of wheel slip, and only by pushing our groundsheet under the wheels did we advance in spurts, the groundsheet being ejected downhill after each spurt. However, we reached Cockley Beck, then a lone farmhouse, where the occupants didn't know what to charge for the eggs and milk we bought from them. We little guessed we were the vanguard of a scourge which would later destroy large sections of that wild and lovely country; campers

were then so few they were not looked on as an intrusion, and not charged for their welcome presence.

Those tours taught us to carry spare petrol, to mend punctures, to read maps and pack luggage intelligently; signposts were still confined to fingerposts right on the road junctions. Nearly all roads were now tarred for the impending motor traffic, which was as yet so sparse we could enjoy miles of empty roadway.

In fact, for the life I was presently to lead, these camping tours were more use to me than being taught Economics at the College, or how to measure the viscosity of oil. We learnt through our mistakes. Cars were then dependent on gravity feed, thus in country with steep gradients it was important to park a car so that petrol could flow to the carburettor. We learnt this one morning when there was not much petrol in the tank, and we had no spare.

Before going to Loughborough, I had never been north of London except to Norfolk or Scotland. Leicestershire I could see was ideal hunting country, but it compared ill, in my opinion, with the wooded hills of Surrey and Sussex. Now, having seen a far greater extent of England, I began to feel by taking up automobile engineering I had shut myself into the industrial areas, whereas I yearned for the architecture, the landscape and the way of life in the great beyond. Nevertheless it was Loughborough that was to bring me my first adventure, and to impress my later employers.

In our second year another 'lady engineer' joined us, her approach to her objective rather different from ours. Verena Holmes had gained a footing in the engineering world through munition work, and had clung on in the drawing office of the firm she had worked for, the only safe refuge from the unions intent on ousting all women munition workers. She was now seeking to gain a B.Sc. (Eng.), a singular honour at that time for a woman, and she had come to the College to get wider technical experience.

Her career was one of single-minded, indomitable purpose, leading eventually to high honours and position, but we then knew her as a tall good-looking student who joined the existing female trio every day at lunch in a modest restaurant, and who occasionally joined Dorothea and me at our lodgings, along with some of the male students, all putting the world to rights. She was so young in spirit and so in tune with our ideas that we got the impression she was contemporary in age.

For me she became a lifelong friend, but it was not for a number of years that I confessed to her what I had done in her interest – so I had thought – in that year of 1920. A visit to a coalmine had been offered to our section, and those interested had to put down their names and their year of birth, though why the latter I cannot think unless the staff wanted to know the ages of their female students. When Dorothea, Patience and I came to sign, all born at the start of the century, we saw Verena's signature against 1888.

We were dumbfounded. Over *thirty*? One leg in the grave! She must have meant 1898. I adroitly altered it for her.

Summer 1922 we took our final exams, but the significance of the diploma seemed to have faded with the increasing shortage of engineering jobs. It was imperative to obtain it, however, but my mind was continually deflected by the shattering news earlier in the year of Uncle Dick's death. I knew he had not been well all winter, but I had never expected this.

I kept thinking of the previous summer when I had been given a house party for my twenty-first birthday, every spare bedroom at Scole Lodge, Thorpe Parva and the gate cottage filled with our guests, to whom we had given a home-made play, a tennis tournament and a dance. If this had troubled Uncle Dick he certainly had not shown it, out most of the day, sometimes watching the tennis and then seated at the end of the long dining-table – at that time in the hall, since the dining-room was then a ballroom. Soon after dancing began, he would slope off to his study and thereafter to bed.

He had been so anxious that I should get that diploma and now he would never know that I did. The news of his death bowled me over with grief and apprehension, and I was quite unable to attend the afternoon lecture. I wanted to be alone with my thoughts, shared only with Mrs Abbott's piano.

## 1919–1923

### WILD GEESE

The venture of the *Wild Goose* emanated from the poor prospect of employment, and from the experience of a student, David Laurence David. In his teens he had sailed the southern seas in trading ships until the war landed him in fighting vessels, in one of which he was torpedoed in the North Sea. Rescued after some hours in the water, he recovered from pneumonia in hospital, where he managed to write a book which was later published.

This background had added considerable weight to his assurance that there was a profitable living to be obtained in the South Sea Islands in French possession, since the French granted settlement rights to people of any nationality who would clear and cultivate these islands. A dozen or so men, provided they had their own ship, could trade very handsomely with Tahiti or other islands, if independent of the French trading vessels which otherwise held down the market prices. He had made friends with such men and still got news of them.

David, son of a Welsh schoolmaster, was extremely well read. He was also an ardent Socialist, with Communist sympathies, the natural outcome of living in Merthyr Tydfil, in the proximity of the Rhondda Valley, and the Cyfarthfa Iron Works. Cyfarthfa's stagnant machinery was a memorial of the great strike, when the iron-master had closed down the whole works in revenge and starved out the valley. That ironmaster was a Crawshay, and Uncle Dick believed him to have been a distant relative.

David had grown up, therefore, in a climate of political argument and was extremely adroit at it, so it was inevitable before long that I would receive its full force, with my Empire background and disreputable connections. I, of course, had no expertise in defence.

Yet David was also a romantic, and in spite of his revulsion for all I stood for, he seemed to pursue my company. And how could I resist one who had sailed before the mast, who wrote *books* and got them published, and who, when not talking politics, had a nice sense of humour and a touch of the Welsh lilt in his speech? I had worked through a number of innocent friendships with the students, and this was equally innocent but seemed to arouse general interest, yet somehow I could never quite return the feelings that David appeared to have for me.