

44

BERKELEY

SQUARE

A commentary by Lord Kinross

Illustrated by Adrian Daintrey

LONDON MCMLXII



WILLIAM HENRY FORTESCUE, EARL OF CLERMONT, K.P.

From the original by Hudson in the possession of Lord Clermont, 1864

BERKELEY SQUARE was born in the purple, starting life as the most aristocratic address in mid-Georgian London. Planned towards the end of the seventeenth century, as part of a scheme to preserve open spaces, it was built some forty years later on land taken from the spacious gardens of Devonshire House. The east side of it has now lost all traces of the eighteenth century. But here along the west side a row of large houses survives which are, in terms of urban architecture, as grand and dignified as any the Georgian Age can show. It was here that, in 1740, Lady Isabella Finch took a plot of land and commissioned William Kent, the architect of Devonshire House itself, to build a house on it.

That house is today the Clermont Club—No. 44 Berkeley Square.

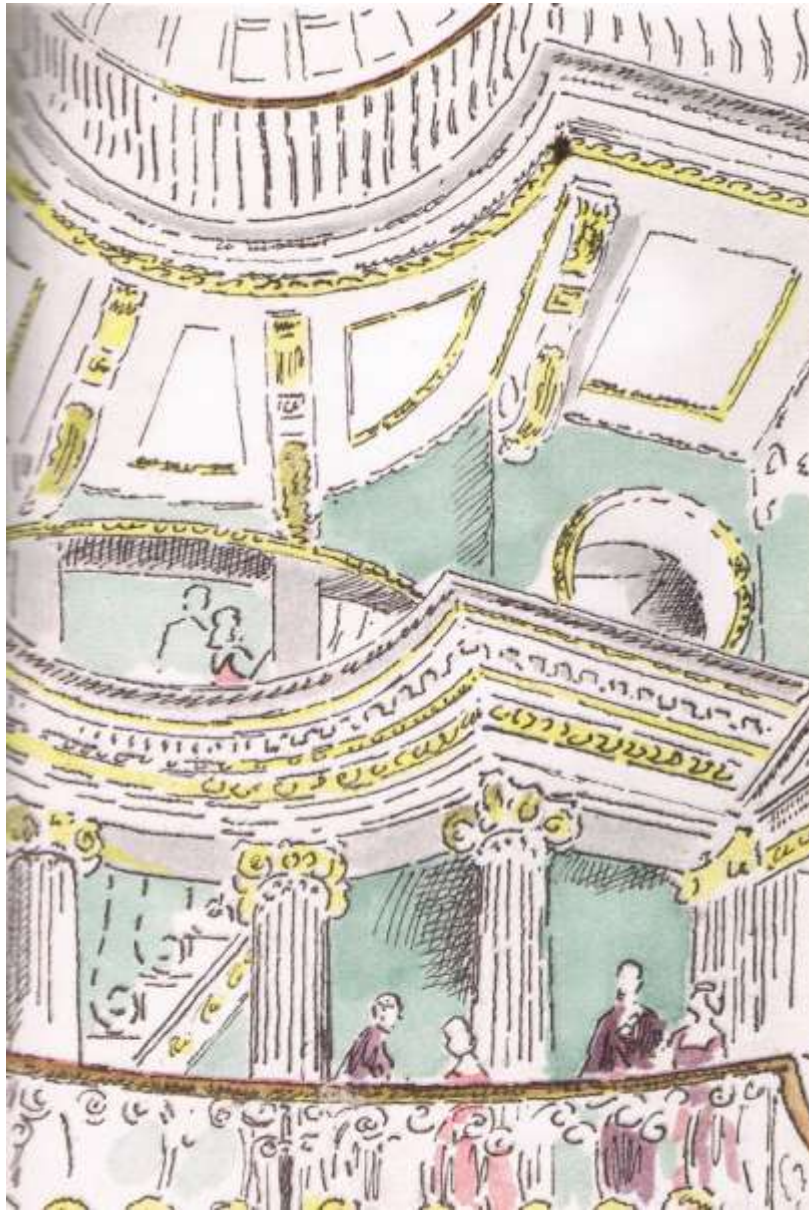
Lady Isabella Finch was the seventh daughter of the seventh Earl of Winchilsea. This was a family of remarkably dusky hue, whose members became known as the 'dark funereal Finches'. Of his seventh Lordship Horace Walpole, himself a resident of Berkeley Square, wrote that he 'was of so dark a complexion and so slovenly in dress that he was called the Chimney Sweeper'. His daughters inherited this complexion. During a period of drought Walpole jested that the gardens of Strawberry Hill had become 'browner than

Lady Bell Finch'. She was, however, a shade lighter than her sister, the Marchioness of Rockingham, who became known as 'the sable dame'.

William Kent, whose name was originally Cant, was a Yorkshire boy of humble origin, an apprentice to a house and coach-painter who, on contriving to get to Italy as an architectural student, had the good fortune to catch the eye and win the patronage of Lord Burlington, the impresario of Palladian architecture. Lady Burlington was a niece of Lord Winchilsea—hence Lady Isabella's commission. No. 44 Berkeley Square, today Kent's only surviving town house, took him three years to build. Lady Isabella moved in during 1744, when a note on the rate-book read, 'She corned in since Mich'. She was rated at £2.3.4, refused to pay on the grounds that she had not lived there for long enough, but finally compromised with a payment of 10s.

The house which she was to inhabit for a quarter of a century has changed relatively little since that day she moved into it. Outwardly it is more severe than its neighbours—one of which belonged to the Clive family and until recent times bore on its front door a brass plate engraved 'The Earl of Powis'. But its area railings and lamp support, complete with extinguishers for the link-boys'torches, have an elegant air. The entrance hall too is simple enough, with a small stair leading up to a cubby hole where the porter slept. But beyond it is revealed, with the dramatic effect of a curtain going up on a stage, an interior of contrasting splendour—whose scale indeed dictated the severity of Kent's exterior.

At the time of its construction he was working also on his architectural masterpiece, **Holkham Hall**, for the Cokes of Norfolk, later Earls of Leicester. With this, in its staircase hall



and grand saloon, it has features in common. The elaborate S-scrolls on the ironwork balustrade of the staircase are indeed almost identical with those of the great hall at Holkham, while the Ionic colonnade on the landing is that of Holkham in miniature.

Walpole pronounced this staircase 'as beautiful a piece of scenery, and considering the space, of art as can be imagined'. Classical in conception, baroque in decoration, theatrical in effect, it rises to the full height of the building, culminating in a dome whose curves match those of the curving double staircase. In Lady Isabella's time its pediments and niches were embellished with statues and busts, some of which were bequeathed to her by Kent himself.

The staircase leads up to the grand saloon, one of the finest rooms of its scale and period in London; rising to the height of two floors, with dummy windows facing the street on the second, it is conceived on the lines of the Double Cube room at Wilton. Its ceiling is coved and painted with cameos of the lives of the gods and goddesses, Jupiter presiding, in grisaille on a red ground, each framed in elaborate gilded plaster above a richly sculpted cornice and frieze. It is not known who painted them, but they represent an Italianate fashion of the time, set by Kent. The door cases are similarly carved, while the two chimney pieces are of inlaid white and Siena marbles, with a winged cherub in the centre of each.

Kent was fortunate in that his client, Lady Isabella, was a spinster, who thus needed only a single bedroom and boudoir for herself, with two bedrooms above them. This gave him scope to expand in designing the proportions of the rest of the house, which is in effect a small but sumptuous palace.

Her white-and-gold boudoir at the back is ingeniously linked with the saloon by a passage behind the staircase screen, known as 'Lady Bett's hiding place', from the fact that one of her friends, Lady Betty Germain, used it as a spy-hole when visitors were announced. Her white-and-gold bedroom, now the back drawing room, adjoins it. It was not until modern times that the exigencies of a family life made it necessary for the occupant to build on another wing in the courtyard—a wing which has now been pulled down to make room for a restaurant, designed in the form of a Chinese pagoda.

The nearest 'Lady Bell' got to marriage was a quip to the aged Lord Bath, who repaid a debt of half-a-crown to her with a message that he only wished he could give her a crown. To this she smartly replied that though he could not give her a crown he could give her a coronet, which she would readily accept. But for all her spinsterhood she entertained hospitably at 44 Berkeley Square. As Lady of the Bedchamber to Princess Amelia, a spinster aunt of George III, she had a place at Court, and it was said that the royal family paid for the ceiling in the grand saloon. It was certainly Princess Amelia who paid for a handsome equestrian statue, in the garden of the square, of her nephew King George III in the guise of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius. Of these entertainments Walpole records 'a funeral loo last night in the Great Chamber at Lady Bel Finch's, the Duke, Princess Emily and the Duchess of Bedford were there.'

After her death the house remained empty for five years and it was then acquired by a member of the Fortescue family, the first Earl of Clermont. 'Nature', according to a contemporary, Sir Nicholas. Wraxall, 'had formed his person in an elegant mould, uniting delicacy of configuration with the utmost bodily activity, the soundest constitution, and uninterrupted



health.' In Berkeley Square he maintained a table 'at once elegant and luxurious, choice in the selection of wines, and in every accompaniment of taste or opulence'. These amenities appealed to the Prince of Wales, later King George IV, who became a close friend of His Lordship and was given a standing invitation to the house. He enjoyed indeed 'the privilege of sending at his pleasure to Lord Clermont, of commanding a dinner, and naming the persons to be invited of both sexes—a permission of which his royal highness often availed himself. Once, at a shooting party in Norfolk where Lord Clermont had an estate, the Prince 'had the misfortune to wound him with small shot in several places'. He suffered however 'only a short temporary confinement' and was made soon afterwards a Gentleman of the Bedchamber. Though Lord Clermont 'wanted not refinement', his interests were largely sporting. He won the Derby with Aimwell and became known as the Father of the Turf. When, after dinner one evening, he quoted a story he had read that it was Scipio who first introduced the use of toothpicks from Spain, Horace Walpole recorded: 'I did not know so much nor that his lordship ever did read or know that Scipio was anybody but a racehorse.' Lord Clermont, however, was accustomed to quote Horace in defence of his passion for racing. This was such that his father threatened to disinherit him if he did not quit Newmarket, a threat which he chose to disregard.

He was also an excellent shot. Once in Ireland he won a wager by killing fifty brace of woodcock in a single day with a single-barrelled flint gun. Having missed every shot before breakfast from the 'kicking' of the gun, he afterwards padded his coat sleeve, on the advice of Lord Enniskillen, and within a few hours had brought down his hundredth bird.

Charles James Fox, for a while a neighbour in Berkeley Square, was one of his closest friends. Once, staying with him in Norfolk, Fox and Lord Foley lost a bet of a hundred guineas to their host. His Lordship had wagered that he would find a heifer which would eat twenty stone of turnips in twenty-four hours and found one.

The Countess of Clermont, 'an agreeable person but destitute of beauty', liked to hold court at her 'palace' in Berkeley Square, the guest braving the footpads on Hay Hill to get there. Notable among her illustrious guests were members of the French Royal family; she and her husband frequently visited the court of Versailles, where they were asked to parties given by the Duchesse de Polignac for the amusement of Marie Antoinette. His choice of the French-sounding title of Clermont was indeed attributed by some to his Francophil proclivities.

These were deplored by Walpole, who describes 'a great dinner and assembly' given in Berkeley Square for the Anglophil Duc de Chartres, afterwards Philippe Egalite: 'He came dirty, and in a frock with metal buttons enamelled in black, with birds and horses, a fashion I remember here above forty years ago. On his sleeve was a horse covering a mare, and a dog and a bitch equally conjugal. Not contented with this blackguardism, on Lady Duncannon's looking at the coat, he presented his sleeve and said, 'Voici la plus jolie: you see we may still learn from France'.

Once, at a dinner for the Prince of Wales, Lady Clermont pushed her snuffbox to the Duke of Portland across Princess Amelia (the friend of the late Lady Isabella Finch) who rebuked her: 'Pray, Madam, where did you learn that breeding? Did the Queen of France teach it to you?' At Brighton it was



*Sketch by Philip Jebb of
the new dining-room to be built in the garden*

a habit of Lady Clermont to lace her tea, `by turning up the back of the teaspoon to the liqueur bottle'.

No. 44. Berkeley Square seemed fated to be a childless house. Lord and Lady Clermont died without issue. So did his nephew and heir, the second Lord Clermont, who occupied the house for only a few years before disposing of it to Mr Charles Baring Wall MP for Guildford and later for Salisbury. Of one of Mr Wall's dinner-parties, in 1832, Greville wrote acidly: 'In the House of Commons the night before last, Ministers would have been beat on the sugar duties if Baring Wall, who had got ten people to dinner, had chosen to go down in time.' After his death the house was acquired successively by the fourth Marquess of Bath and Sir Philip Burrell M P. It then passed into the Clark family, who lived in it for three generations. Its last private occupant was Mr Charles Darner Clark, who occupied it until 1959.

Berkeley Square has always smiled upon gamblers. Beau Brummell in particular had reason to bless it. At five o'clock one summer's morning in 1813 he was walking home through the square when his eye was caught by something glittering in the gutter. He stooped down and picked up a crooked six-pence. `Here is a harbinger of good luck', he remarked to his companion. He took the coin home and before going to bed drilled a hole in it and fastened it to his watchchain. From that moment onwards the tide of his fortunes, both at the tables and on the racecourse, turned for the better.



Staircase with S Scrolls



Ceiling from Staircase



Dining Room



Lounge



Corner with Portrait