

NEWSPAPERMEN

Hugh Cudlipp, Cecil Harmsworth King
and the Glory Days of Fleet Street

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PIMLICO

CONTENTS

Harmsworth and King family trees	vi
Preface	ix
Prologue	i
I. Heavy Baggage	3
II. A Legacy of Uncles	24
III. The Hard Ascent of Cecil King	54
IV. The Effortless Rise of Hugh Cudlipp	81
V. Cudlipp and Mr King	117
VI. Two Wars	152
VII. Bart's Revenge	187
VIII. The Eagle and the Lark	224
IX. His Uncle's Nephew	268
X. The Influence of Ruth	303
XI. The Reluctant Assassin	355
XII. Lord Cudlipp and Mr King	394
Epilogue	443
Notes and Sources	452
Index	475

CHAPTER I

Heavy Baggage

THEIR PATHS FIRST CROSSED IN JUNE 1935, WHEN PERCY CUDLIPP, Editor of the *Evening Standard*, advised his precocious young brother to answer a mysterious classified advertisement for a 'bright assistant features editor with ideas, able to take charge.' 'I can still remember opening a letter from Hugh Cudlipp,' recollected King decades later. '... He was twenty-one but had by then seven years experience of journalism.'²

King was thirty-four, a middle-ranking executive and no journalist, but from childhood he had been determined to become a force in the world of newspapers that had brought his uncles riches, titles, fame and power: 'My first contact as a boy with Fleet Street was standing behind Northcliffe's chair while he was presented with a bust of himself by the fathers of the various chapels.'³ Hubert Kinsman Cudlipp had never heard of Fleet Street when, as a boy intent on early escape from the boredom of Howard Gardens Secondary School in Cardiff, he listened agog to Percy's tales of scandals, crimes and free cinema tickets and determined to become a journalist too.⁴

Cudlipp's family baggage was light. Sturdily rooted in Cardiff, straightforwardly Welsh to the core, with his younger sister and two elder brothers he was reared in a lower-middle-class area of three-up, two-down terraces. His big rosy-cheeked father, Willie, an amiable commercial traveller in eggs and bacon, traversed the Welsh valleys 'with his order book and umbrella, a new carnation in his button-hole'.⁵ Bessie Amelia Kinsman, his wife and the neighbourhood enter-tainer, passed on to her youngest son in abundance her talents as a

raconteur, mimic and gossip – ‘the life and soul of the party without the aid of gin in a street where there were no parties’;⁶ against stiff competition, Hugh (as Hubert renamed himself in adolescence) was to be the life and soul of another street – Fleet Street – which lacked neither gin nor parties.

Cecil King’s baggage was as heavy as the trunks and tin boxes that accompanied paternal and maternal ancestors across the seas. First, there was the matter of his nationality and allegiances. He tended to describe himself as Irish, yet the preceding two generations of Irish Kings had made their careers in India as servants of the British Empire. Although Grandfather Henry King, born in Drogheda, County Louth, in 1830, was an enthusiastic proponent of Irish Home Rule,⁷ he prospered in the Indian Medical Service. He and his wife, Sophie Eccleston (of Irish parentage, but a New Yorker by birth and upbringing), retired to Dublin in 1884, by which time their elder son, Lucas White, had already completed eight years in the Indian Civil Service. Their second son, also Henry, would end his career as a Lieutenant-Colonel in the 33rd Punjabis, and their elder daughter, Magdalene, lived in India too as wife to a civil servant.

Cecil’s maternal grandmother, Geraldine Maffett, was of a solid Ulster-Scots background, but Alfred Harmsworth, whom she married in her home city of Dublin, was English, and they moved to London after a few years and raised their family there. Cecil himself was born in London and soon taken to India, spent most of his first two years there and then returned to London, accompanied by two ayahs, his mother (Irish-born and London-reared) and three of his six siblings; taken to live in Dublin in 1905, he was educated mainly in England, where he made his career.

Both Cudlipp and King inherited brains in abundance, but King’s came with intellectual baggage and heavy expectations: the Cudlippo cared as little about their ancestry as the Kings cared much. Cecil’s paternal great-great-grandfather was a bookseller and publisher; his great-grandfather, Luke White, a classics graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, became a headmaster; and Grandfather Henry had been a prize-winning classics scholar before studying medicine. With a trace of the perverseness that was to distinguish his grandson, Henry served the Empire but refused to stand up for ‘God Save the Queen’.⁸ His son Lucas White, Cecil’s father, was the intellec-

tual star of the family: head boy and a prize-winner at school, at Trinity he shone in logic, classics, Persian, Arabic and Hindustani, took a BA and LLB and came high in the Indian Civil Service examination; later he was to reach proficiency in Biluchi, Pushtu and Russian. That family track-record was to weigh heavily on Cecil at school and university.

When he began his career, all Hugh Cudlipp had to live up to was the steady progress of his brothers Percy and Reg along the provincial newspaper route to Fleet Street. Cecil King had the Harmsworths – the newspaper magnates Uncle Alfred (Viscount Northcliffe) and Uncle Harold (Viscount Rothermere) – and for good measure, in public life, his godfather, Uncle Cecil (MP and later Lord Harmsworth), and his Uncle Leicester (baronet and MP). More important, though, were the two men's contrasting upbringings: King emerged from privilege, coldness and tragedy an emotional cripple, who gazed like a contemptuous outsider at his fellow man and who could achieve intimacy only through sex. Cudlipp was not just clubbable; there was almost no one in the universe with whom he could not get on. Even Cecil King.

'I was born on 20 February 1901 at Poynters Hall, Totteridge, an eighteenth-century house of no distinction, now pulled down.' A very Cecil opening to his memoirs – factual, precise and dismissive. Yet his sister Enid remembers it as 'charming',⁹ while a cousin described it as 'a fine old house . . . a Queen Anne mansion with thirty-five acres laid out by "Capability" Brown'.¹⁰ Poynters belonged to his redoubtable Grandmother Harmsworth, who, as Geraldine Maffett, had married imprudently for love and fun. One of ten children of a prosperous land agent with a reputation for harshness, she was auburn-haired, plump and attractive, but with a will of steel, formidable strength of character and such uncompromising Ulster-Scots values as implacable integrity and disconcerting candour and forthrightness. 'She always said she had excellent health, but poor spirits,' wrote her granddaughter Enid, who lived with her for long periods as a child and young adult. 'She had a tremendous fund of good sense and good judgement and though [she was] nervous, I have never met anyone who could give such a formidable impression of unchanging strength, deep affection and earthy

wisdom. She was a rock to which all her family clung, especially her sons. They loved and revered her to the end far more than their wives.¹¹

Geraldine Maffett was twenty-six when in 1862 she met the twenty-five-year old Londoner, Alfred Harmsworth, son of a green-grocer-turned-merchant and now a master at Dublin's Royal Hibernian Military School. He was handsome, charming, clever and amusing: his wife used to remark that he was the brains and she the ballast.

Ballast was certainly required, for Geraldine was fecund and Alfred Harmsworth was poor. It was her idea that he better himself by becoming a barrister: in 1864, the year of their marriage, although he remained in Dublin, he was admitted as a student of the Middle Temple in London.¹² Three years later, having reason to believe the Fenians were targeting Harmsworth, they bundled their babies (also named Alfred and Geraldine) into blankets and left their home outside Dublin, staying successively with Ulster-Scots relatives in Dublin, Armagh and Belfast before settling in London: 'Geraldine Harmsworth left her native land with anything but a heavy heart,' said one family biography. 'Loyal in sentiment to her Ulster connections, she had no great love for Ireland, holding the over-simplified view that the North was constructive and the South destructive.'

After two years and two more children, Alfred Harmsworth was called to the bar. Although he had great ability, he was too amiable, easygoing, convivial and fond of drink to be a success in a profession that required drive and application. He was given the odd brief and did a bit of devilling, but he preferred artistic and literary company to work; he published the occasional mediocre poem or story and in 1868 founded the Sylvan Debating Club, where he was the outstanding speaker. His family (of their fourteen children, eight sons and three daughters survived) lived in poverty, their homes increasingly down-market and their creditors ever angrier. Though they kept up appearances and managed to keep a maid, as a provider Harmsworth was a failure. Yet he was so lovable, and his sense of humour so pervasive, that his wife still adored him and his family forgave him; his tough daughter, Cecil's mother Geraldine, seems to have loved him more uncritically than she ever loved anyone else. It was a devastating blow to his family when, in

1889, at the age of fifty-two, Harmsworth followed in his father's footsteps by dying of cirrhosis of the liver;* without him, home was dreary.

Alfred senior died on Alfred junior's twenty-fourth birthday. 'It will be a bit of a struggle to keep the family in its place,' wrote Alfred to one of his brothers, 'but we will do it and we must make our folk powerful and prosperous, where the father would have loved to have seen us . . . We must all set to work to make the mother's life the happiest possible.' Young Alfred had eventually been forgiven for impregnating the maid when he was sixteen – an indiscretion that had caused his horrified parents to turn him out of the house. By then he had already become a journalist; before his father died, he had married above him and founded *Answers*, his first paper, geared towards those who, Alfred explained, had been 'taught to read but not to think'.

The most handsome of a handsome family, with blue eyes and golden hair, Alfred was a brilliant journalist, his natural instinct as an observer honed by years of looking at and listening to the world around him. He was also daring, driven and inspirational. His brother Harold, prudent and Midas-like with money, agreed to leave the Civil Service and look after the finances. Leicester, Cecil and Hildebrand joined shortly afterwards and even their clever but indolent sister Geraldine worked hard at typing, research and the odd article. Other papers followed and within a couple of years the family was prosperous; within a couple more they were rich.

But before the Harmsworths became famous, Geraldine's life was turned upside-down. In the spring of 1890, while on a visit to a Maffett relative in Dublin, she was introduced to Lucas White King – at thirty-three, ten years her senior and convalescing after an illness that had followed a stay of nine months in Moscow learning Russian. She fell instantly for this handsome, fair-haired, blue-eyed, widely travelled, serious man, and he just as quickly for this slim, striking woman with huge brown eyes, dark gold hair and perfect skin. They had met

* That is the accepted story, though according to an obituary of Geraldine Harmsworth in *Truth*, Alfred Harmsworth lost his common-law practice and was attending Clerkenwell Sessions 'to receive his "soup" having got cancer of the throat; his voice was almost inaudible in court'.

only five times when he had to leave for Europe, but they conducted a passionate correspondence and were engaged by June. He came briefly back to London and was a hit with the Harmsworths, who found him as nice as he was socially desirable; in February 1891, bearing a splendid trousseau for which Alfred had paid £250,* Geraldine arrived in Karachi and married Lucas King the following day. She sent a telegram to her mother: 'Married Dot [her nickname]'.

The danger signals were already evident. King, who had been separated from his India-based parents at the age of eight and reared in Ireland with relatives, was emotionally needy, sentimental and short on humour. His wife – from a family where argument and teasing were the stuff of everyday life – was confident and self-possessed, and even in the early days found it difficult to give him the reassurance he constantly craved. King used his abilities to the full, was a brave, just and industrious colonial officer and had a huge range of interests (archaeology, antiquities, anthropology, coins, flora, fauna, folklore, geography, linguistics and big-game hunting are just a sample), which he pursued with dedication. Geraldine was bone-idle: the piano she had brought from London was unplayed; although encouraged to write, she managed only a couple of articles; and nothing came of her promise to be involved in his hobbies and not just be a housekeeper ('I must be far more than that – I must be your chum as well'¹⁵). But she enjoyed the social life as a memsahib and took instantly to the pleasures of having everything done by servants. She had considerable managerial ability; throughout her life, in several different locations in India as in Ireland, England and Scotland, her houses were efficiently run and she had no trouble keeping servants.

King continued to rise steadily through the ranks, respected for his political acumen, his coolness in the face of danger and his conscientiousness, while Geraldine adapted easily to her improving social position. But the rise of her siblings was on a far more dizzying scale. During Geraldine's first visit home after five years in India, Alfred launched the *Daily Mail*. On the morning of 4 May 1896, the day of the first issue, as the family sat round in a circle looking at copies of

* About £16,000 today.

the paper, he kissed the top of his mother's head and said, 'It's either bankruptcy or Berkeley Square.'¹⁴ The Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, was one of those who sent a congratulatory telegram, though in private (in a reference to Thackeray's *Pendennis*, who started a newspaper 'by gentlemen for gentlemen') he described the *Daily Mail* as 'a newspaper produced by officeboys for officeboys'.¹⁵ That, of course, was its strength.

A year later Alfred was in Berkeley Square, but well before that he had bought a fine town house for his mother in Marble Arch.* It was from there that – magnificent in yellow satin – Geraldine left in her mother's carriage with her mother's liveried servants to be presented at court – 'bending low to kiss Queen Victoria's tiny, puffy, purple hand with rings embedded in her fingers'.¹⁶

By then the Kings had three children: Elinor Mary Kathleen, known as Nora, Sheila Geraldine and Lucas Henry St Aubyn. Enid Madeleine, born in 1897, was the fourth to be born in India, but the Kings were back in England for the birth of the ten-pound¹⁷ child who would be Cecil, two months after a Harmsworth Christmas that netted Geraldine enough money to buy herself *inter alia* a mink cape, a sable muff and a diamond brooch.

The putative godfather, Cecil Harmsworth, wrote:

My dearest Dotkin . . . Much love and thanks to you & Lucas for the honour you intend me in regard to the name of the latest arrival. I need not tell you how greatly the idea pleases me – but you won't mind my saying that it would be more in accordance with the wisdom of the serpent to name the young man after the head of the house. Of my most affectionate regard for all your scions of the race you may assure yourself – but in the rough and tumble of life sympathy & affection are not the most useful things. Nor do I know that Alfred's love for a god-child would be smaller than mine . . .¹⁸

Alfred had no legitimate children, and Leicester and Cecil had each given his name to their eldest sons (Cecil's Alfred had died in 1899),

* 2 Great Cumberland Place, where the Cumberland Hotel now stands.

but Geraldine stuck to her decision, though paying obeisance to the family in giving Cecil Harmsworth as a second name. So fair as to be almost white-haired, he was nicknamed Snowball.

The three eldest children were sent to be looked after and educated in what Enid, who was sent there subsequently, described as 'a sort of home from home' in Wiltshire;¹⁹ Enid and Cecil were taken to Lahore. The following March they moved to Simla for the hot season, and here Geraldine reached the social heights of Anglo-Indian society in a whirl of 'dinner parties, balls, dances, lunch and tennis parties . . . races and gymkhanas . . . polo, cricket and tennis tournaments [and] amateur dramatics'.²⁰ She was basking in the glory of her husband, whose courage and ability had brought him promotion and honour: he was made Companion of the Star of India at a ceremony to which he drove with the Viceroy and the Maharajah of Patiala 'in a State carriage of solid silver through lines of elephants covered with red and gold embroideries and carrying howdahs of silver and gold'.²¹

Only Geraldine knew how intensely vulnerable was the private Lucas King. 'Sweetest Heart,' said a typical letter from the field. 'Two of your dear letters today came together & none yesterday. You must always write to me in the morning Sweet as I pine for my darling's letters.'²² 'This is a long letter for your short one, darling,' he wrote a few months later. 'I think she cares for him a little now and then but no woman can love like a man, sweetheart. With worlds of tenderest love and a storm of kisses from your ever devoted Boysha.'²³

In Simla, Geraldine became an intimate of Mary, the rich and beautiful young American wife of the new Viceroy, Lord Curzon. Enid remembered 'dancing classes at Vice Regal Lodge, and rows of tiger skins on a vast polished floor, and stools made out of elephants' feet lined with red velvet.' Geraldine's great deprivation was that the arrival of her twins caused her to miss the Coronation Durbar – designed successfully by Curzon to be the greatest event of its kind ever seen in India. Brother Alfred wrote in December 1902 from the Paris Ritz to congratulate her:

My dearest Dot

The time for my annual screed is come & I recline comfortably before an excellent wood fire in my beloved Paris this

biting cold winter day to tell you, amidst all your oriental magnificence, bearer peons, chokedars, marlis (is that it?) & the rest of them not to forget your good & increasing brother left behind in Europe . . .

We left the dear Mother very well & happy, not a day older I think, a very wonderful old lady indeed with the modest demand for 'more freeholds' for an Xmas and birthday gift . . . Kiss the little niece for me & select nice names for the twins.²⁴

The female twin was unremarkably named Sophie Geraldine after her grandmothers; she would be known as Chirrie (after the Urdu for 'little bird'). The male was christened Alfred Curzon White, and though he was given a lowly uncle as godfather (St John, the seventh son, known as 'Bonch'), his godmother was Lady Curzon; he would be known as Bob.

King received the Coronation (Durbar) medal, but he was becoming increasingly desperate to get out of the Indian Civil Service and into academia. 'His strenuous official duties in the Punjab, Mysore, Waziristan, Kohat and elsewhere,' it was later observed, 'did not prevent him from following with conspicuous success his natural inclinations for, and applying his aptitude to, archaeological, historical, linguistic and numismatic study':²⁵ he was the author of *The History and Coinage of the Baraksai Dynasty of Afghanistan*, *The History and Coinage of Malwa* and *A Monography on the Orakzai Country and Clans (N.W. Frontier)* and in 1896 had acquired a doctorate from Trinity. Tired of endless travel across vast tracts of inhospitable territory, King was anxious to have a proper home where the whole family could live together; Geraldine, on the other hand, later told Enid that she wept into her trunk when packing to leave India for the last time.²⁶

Money was no obstacle: Geraldine received from Alfred (now a baronet) an allowance of £2,000^{*} a year, and opposite Poynters was the Old House, which their mother owned and would make available to the Kings. In March 1903 Geraldine left India for good with Enid, Cecil and the twins.

* About £120,000 today.

'My earliest recollections are of Totteridge,' wrote Cecil King:

— my very first is of being held by Nurse Dunch, who gripped my nose while pouring medicine down my necessarily open mouth.

I can remember getting my woollen gloves dirty on the pram wheel in which I was being pushed: Aunt Christabel's wedding to Percy Burton: receiving a sovereign from Uncle Alfred [Northcliffe] when he became a peer in 1905: going home from a children's party given by Uncle Harold [later Lord Rothermere] and Aunt Lil in such dense fog that the footman had to walk in front with one of the carriage lamps to light the way. Finally, I can remember a visit to Elmwood, Northcliffe's place in Thanet, where there was a boat from an Arctic expedition Northcliffe had financed, and an alligator in the hothouse.²⁷

They were in Totteridge for two years, during which time Lucas King was home for nine months. He had always been popular with the Harmsworths and Alfred was as munificent as ever, giving his brother-in-law a cheque for £500 to spend as he liked: King rented a house and shooting in Aberdeenshire, beginning an association with Aboyne and its surroundings that lasted until his death. He returned reluctantly to India as Commissioner of Rawalpindi: 'I hate the idea of India more and more every day so find me a nice home, sweetie, and *home* I will come in October,' he wrote in April 1904.²⁸ 'I must stick it till then, I suppose. Darling Pet life is absolutely worthless without your sweet presence.'

'In my vast experience,' wrote King's Lahore language teacher, 'I have never come across any other Officer who has taken such interest in Oriental studies and has attained such proficiency as Mr White King. He can write and speak these languages with great facility, and in my opinion is well fitted to lecture in any or all of them.'²⁹

Back in Totteridge in October, King applied for the chair of Arabic, Persian and Hindustani at Trinity College, Dublin;³⁰ his appointment was announced the following March and he retired from the Indian Civil Service on a pension of £1,000* per annum. While the parents

* About £60,000 today.

set up house in Dublin, the children went to Uncle Alfred's country house for the summer and were there introduced to their governess, Miss Amy Matthews, BA. 'Tiny, grey-haired, plain and indomitable,'³¹ said Enid; and in maturity even Cecil spoke well of her: 'a strict disciplinarian and an excellent teacher. What we learned from her we really learned.'³² She was to spend eight years with the Kings, teaching all the children except the eldest son (known when very young as Aubyn, but now called Luke), who had been at prep school in England from 1903.

Judging by the precocity of the letters Cecil wrote at three-and-a-half, Miss Matthews wasted no time. One of the earliest demonstrated the curiosity that was to distinguish him intellectually:

Dear Mum

I shall be so glad to come and see my new nursery will it be pretty. was the big ship rolling about that you and Daddy went on. I am waiting to come to Ireland. I want to unpack our toy box. did a big ship carry all our things. shall I play with Enid every night downstairs. We are all quite well. Love and kisses From Snowy xxxxxxxxxxxx³³

He wrote again the day they set off for Roebuck Hall, four miles from the centre of Dublin, this time exhibiting the honesty that was to be one of his most memorable characteristics:

We are going to Ireland to-day in a big ship, We are in the Billiard Room, Today. I hope That The sea won't Be rough, and That we won't be ill.

I wrote That This letter nearly all myself.

We are all good.

Snowy.

Sheila helped me³⁴

('I remember arriving in Ireland,' recalled the adult Cecil, '... it was pouring with rain.'³⁵)

Set in eleven acres, the house, said Enid, was 'solid and square, late Georgian and built of stone painted cream with a slate roof and granite portico. It was uncompromising, ungraceful'.³⁶ The furnish-