



The Parlour Maid's Pearls

by Michael Lewis

My mother owned a double strand of pearls. They were large and lustrous and she was immensely proud of them. She would define the importance of an event such as the monthly Cymdeithas meetings or a Gymanfa Ganu by saying "I put on my pearls, you know ..." and she would touch her throat where they sat so elegantly.

I thought she was a queen when she wore them.

It's extraordinary that a member of a working class family, such as mine, would possess pearls. But Mam came by them honestly: they were a gift from her employer when she was a young woman of 26 or so and leaving her employment to marry my Dad (in 1936). Mam was one of many thousands of young women who left the coal-mining valleys of South Wales to find work as servants in the great houses of the wealthy in London. They called this "going into service" and styled their employ-

ment as "in service".

Mam worked for the same titled family for about 10 years and, during that time, worked her way from the lowest ranks of servants to be a parlour maid and later a lady's maid. That put her in frequent direct contact with the family, which had consequences for me as we shall see, but it also meant that upon departure to marry she received that substantial gift of a double row of pearls.

When she put on her pearls she would often add with emphasis "... and my Grey". Her Grey was a beautifully cut and elegant gray woolen dress that fit her perfectly.

I know the combination of pearls and the Grey made her feel like a queen.

She acquired that elegant dress by a slightly different but related route. My mother's much loved younger sister, my dear Auntie Olwen, also went into service in London and also rose to high (downstairs) rank. She married the family chauffeur, my Uncle Mac (a Scot), and so they stayed in service, with the same distinguished family, for all of their long life together. Once in a while Olwen was able to snare dresses that her employer, who happened to be the same size as Mam, was sending to the charity shop.

Hence the Grey.

It's possible that Olwen was somewhat light-fingered and regularly shorted the charity shop on Mam's behalf, because my lowly home had china and glass and cutlery and linens of extraordinary amount. When we sat down to Sunday dinner in the "front" room, and on special occasions, the table groaned with salad knife and fork, fish knife and fork, dinner knife and fork, fruit knife and fork, dessert spoon and fork, butter knife, teaspoons, soup spoon, serving spoons, water glass, white and red wine glasses, dinner plate and side plate and serviette (napkin).

The wine glasses were for show and never used.

As you might imagine this was a nightmare for a small boy to navigate, but, under the tutelage of a former parlour maid and la-

somewhat startled at the dinner table by American manners. But, for the most part, though trained by a parlour maid and lady's maid to

not behave in those same civilized ways. She tried to create an island of elegance in the meager stream of life over which she had control. "Good manners cost nothing" she would say, and Dad and I were on our best behavior when she was in her pearls and Grey.

When an antiques appraiser and buyer came to our community center, Mam took her magnificent pearls, the gift to her of a titled lady, to be appraised. In a moment he said:

"Mrs. Lewis, these are painted glass beads and of little value." I never saw the pearls again, although the Grey stayed. ♦

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dy's maid to a titled family, Dad and I learned the proper behavior and rituals of formal feasting. We came to expect that others would be as familiar as we were with all this table paraphernalia.

That became a problem for me. When I came to the United States I thought American table manners were barbaric. Cutting one's food into small pieces, then switching the fork to one's right hand to eat it was like acting as one's own nanny and using the fork as a shovel an abomination; I thought only cave-men held the fork vertically to stab meat while cutting it. Keeping the fork from one course to the next, spreading butter with a dinner knife, using a dessert spoon for soup and leaving one's cutlery hig-gledy-piggledy at the end of the meal made me think all Americans were peasants.

I had never before seen milk served as a beverage with a meal.

I was shocked --- shocked!

Even now, nearly 60 years later, I can occasionally be

a titled family, I have adopted and adapted to American customs and happily (though perhaps guiltily) use a fork in my right hand and even use it as a shovel.

My mother was a hard taskmaster when it came to the world of manners because she had seen how her wealthy, educated and cultured employers behaved and saw no reason why ordinary people should not behave in those same civilized ways

I have tried to pass on some mannerly things to my grandsons. I take it as a great victory, for example, that they keep their elbows off the dinner table, take care how they reach for things and leave their knife and fork parallel at the end to signify they are done with the meal.

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Michael J. Lewis, Ph.D., is professor emeritus of brewing science at the University of California, Davis, and recipient of the UC Davis Distinguished Teaching

Award. He is a humorist whose column in the Davis Enterprise, "A Point of Brew," has been running 25 years. He lives in Davis with his wife of 59 years, Sheila.

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