

## R. Mayne, Script for Bloomsbury Winterval

### Introduction

I've chosen a letter Vanessa Bell wrote on Monday 27 December 1915, during the holiday period at Garsington Manor. She's still in the middle of the celebrations, describing them as they unfold, while already casting her amused eye back over the days just passed.

Several familiar Bloomsbury figures were gathered there as guests of Ottoline Morrell, in what was always a wonderfully theatrical household. I always enjoy the way little moments of movement crop up in Bloomsbury writing, so Vanessa's description of Ottoline dancing with such gusto — dissolving what she calls the "stiffness" that can settle when different groups unexpectedly find themselves sharing the same social space — particularly delighted me.

There's also a charade, *The Life and Death of Lytton*, performed with great confidence by the children. And in the midst of it all, Vanessa slips in one of her affectionate, quietly observant comments about Virginia, which I'll leave her to deliver in her own words.

So here is Vanessa Bell, writing to Roger Fry in the heart of a lively Garsington winter.

*My dear Roger,*

*I had your letter here this morning. I'm afraid you sound rather depressed. Will it cheer you up to think that I've been working a good deal at your writing case since I've been here, which you can look upon as a supplementary Christmas present? If you take the niceness of presents as meaning amount of affection, you ought at any rate to take this as meaning a good deal in intention, but of course it may be a failure! However, the wools are lovely, so we must hope for the best.*

*There is a large party here — ourselves and the children, Maynard, Lytton, Maria, J. M. Murry, whom I like much better than I did at first, Ottoline, Philip, their Julian, and the Swiss governess. We have had a Christmas tree and a dance and rather a good charade, *The Life and Death of Lytton*, in which the children acted and were perfectly charming. Quentin, in bed as the baby Lytton, with horn spectacles on, acted most skilfully. He is quite at home on the stage. Ottoline is really amazing in some ways. She has all the servants in to see the acting, and they are perfectly happy and enjoy it thoroughly; and the dance, to which they and the villagers came, was a great success. Ottoline danced with great spirit and set them all going, twirling about with the kitchen maid, so that there was none of that awful stiffness that generally comes with mixed classes. I suppose it's her aristocratic tradition that makes her able to do it. She was rather cross the first day — I don't know why, but I think she was tired with all the preparations. At the Christmas tree every child — about fifty of them — had a separate present. But yesterday she was more amiable. Philip is fairly contented, though I think terrified of bankruptcy, and makes ineffectual attempts to economise by dividing one and a quarter chicken between nine grown-ups and three children! The house is crammed with objects — little boxes and tables and cushions. It will be an odd change to go to Asheham on Tuesday, though of course Virginia does rather the same thing as Ottoline in some ways, on a minor and shabbier scale. We played the poetry game last night, much*

*against my and Lytton's wishes, and as we knew it would, it turned out to be too indecent for the company — at least so Maynard thought.*

*On the whole it has been quite good fun here, but I shall be ready to leave tomorrow. The children have enjoyed it enormously and had almost too much excitement, but will go on to a quiet week at Seend. It has been as different from that as anything could be. Maria tells me (pen given out) that you have asked her to Guildford, but she seemed to think Ottoline wanted her to stay here. She is much happier at Newnham than she was, I think, and looks much better, though not so pretty. She'll get too fat, I expect.*

*Backgammon has been started. Maynard seems to be a genius at it and beats them all. There is a very pretty old French table they play at, and I think one might get people to sit and play while one painted them, as they sit fairly quiet for hours.*

*I go to Asheham tomorrow, so will you write there.*

*Your V.*

### Conclusion

What I love about this letter is the immediacy of it; Vanessa writing with the holiday still unfolding around her, catching the house in full motion. You sense the energy of the days just past: the dancing, the children's excitement, the makeshift theatricals, and her unmistakably amused clarity as she watches it all unfold. And her remark about Virginia — affectionate, and lightly touching on the difference in their means and circumstances — offers a glimpse of their sisterly closeness, with Virginia momentarily present in Vanessa's thoughts. It's an atmosphere I thought would suit this evening beautifully.

Wishing everyone a very warm and peaceful winter season, whether you're celebrating Christmas or simply enjoying the quieter, reflective days at the end of the year.