

# TOLKIEN

## *A biography*

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*Illustrated with photographs*



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# *Birmingham*

When the first state of shock was over, Mabel Tolkien knew that she must make decisions. She and the two boys could not stay for ever in her parents' crowded little suburban villa; yet she scarcely had the resources to establish an independent household. For all his hard work and conscientious saving, Arthur had only amassed a modest sum of capital which was chiefly invested in Bonanza Mines, and though the dividend was high it would not bring her an income of more than thirty shillings a week, scarcely sufficient to maintain herself and two children even at the lowest standard of living. There was also the question of the boys' education. Probably she could manage this herself for some years, for she knew Latin, French, and German, and could paint, draw, and play the piano. Later when Ronald and Hilary were old enough they must take the entrance examination for King Edward's School, Birmingham, which Arthur had attended and which was the best grammar school in the city. Meanwhile she must find cheap accommodation that she could rent. There were plenty of lodgings to be had in Birmingham, but the boys needed fresh air and the countryside, a home that could make them happy despite their poverty. She began to search through the advertisements.

Ronald, now in his fifth year, was slowly adjusting to life under his grandparents' roof. He had almost forgotten his father, whom he would soon come to regard as belonging to an almost legendary past. The change from Bloemfontein to Birmingham had confused him, and sometimes he expected to see the verandah of Bank House jutting out from his grandparents' home in Ashfield Road; but as the weeks passed and memories of South Africa began to fade, he

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took more notice of the adults around him. His Uncle Willie and his Aunt Jane were still living at home, and there was also a lodger, a sandy-haired insurance clerk who sat on the stairs singing 'Polly-Wolly-Doodle' to the accompaniment of a banjo, and making eyes at Jane. The family thought him common, and they were horrified when she became engaged to him. Ronald secretly longed for a banjo.

In the evening his grandfather would return from a day spent tramping the streets of Birmingham and cajoling orders for Jeyes Fluid from shopkeepers and factory managers. John Suffield had a long beard and seemed very old. He was sixty-three, and he vowed that he would live to be a hundred. A very jolly man, he did not seem to object to earning his living as a commercial traveller, even though he had once managed his own drapery shop in the city centre. Sometimes he would take a sheet of paper and a pen with an extra fine nib. Then he would draw a circle around a sixpence, and in this little space would write in fine copperplate the words of the entire Lord's Prayer. His ancestors had been engravers and plate-makers, which was perhaps why he had inherited this skill; he would talk with pride about how King William IV had given the family a coat of arms because they did fine work for him, and how Lord Suffield was a distant relative (which was not true).

So it was that Ronald began to learn the ways of the Suffield family. He came to feel far closer to them than to the family of his dead father. His Tolkien grandfather lived only a little way up the road, and sometimes Ronald was taken to see him; but John Benjamin Tolkien was eighty-nine and had been badly shaken by his son's death. Six months after Arthur died, the old man was in his own grave, and another of the boy's links with the Tolkiens was severed.

There was, however, Ronald's Aunt Grace, his father's younger sister, who told him stories of the Tolkien ancestors; stories which sounded improbable but which were, said Aunt Grace, firmly based on fact. She alleged that the family name had originally been 'von Hohenzollern', for they had emanated from the Hohenzollern district of the Holy Roman Empire. A certain George von Hohenzollern had, she said, fought on the side of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria at the Siege of Vienna in 1529. He had shown great daring in leading an unofficial raid against the Turks and capturing the

Sultan's standard. This (said Aunt Grace) was why he was given the nickname *Tollkühn*, 'foolhardy'; and the name stuck. The family was also supposed to have connections with France and to have intermarried with the nobility in that country, where they acquired a French version of their nickname, *du Téméraire*. Opinion differed among the Tolkiens as to why and when their ancestors had come to England. The more prosaic said it was in 1756 to escape the Prussian invasion of Saxony, where they had lands. Aunt Grace preferred the more romantic (if implausible) story of how one of the *du Téméraires* had fled across the Channel in 1794 to escape the guillotine, apparently then assuming a form of the old name, 'Tolkien'. This gentleman was reputedly an accomplished harpsichordist and clock-repairer. Certainly the story – typical of the kind of tale that middle-class families tell about their origins – gave colour to the presence of Tolkiens in London at the beginning of the nineteenth century, making their living as clock and watch manufacturers and piano-makers. And it was as a piano-maker and music-seller that John Benjamin Tolkien, Arthur's father, had come to Birmingham and set up business some years later.

The Tolkiens always liked to tell stories that gave a romantic colouring to their origins; but whatever the truth of those stories the family was at the time of Ronald's childhood entirely English in character and appearance, indistinguishable from thousands of other middle-class tradespeople who populated the Birmingham suburbs. In any case Ronald was more interested in his mother's family. He soon developed a strong affection for the Suffields and for what they represented. He discovered that though the family was now to be found chiefly in Birmingham, its origins were in the quiet Worcestershire town of Evesham, where Suffields had lived for many generations. Being in a sense a homeless child – for his journey from South Africa and the wanderings that now began gave him a sense of rootlessness – he held on to this concept of Evesham in particular and the whole West Midland area in general as being his true home. He once wrote: 'Though a Tolkien by name, I am a Suffield by tastes, talents and upbringing.' And of Worcestershire he said: 'Any corner of that county (however fair or squalid) is in an undefineable way "home" to me, as no other part of the world is.'

By the summer of 1896 Mabel Tolkien had found somewhere

cheap enough for herself and the children to live independently, and they moved out of Birmingham to the hamlet of Sarehole, a mile or so beyond the southern edge of the city. The effect of this move on Ronald was deep and permanent. Just at the age when his imagination was opening out, he found himself in the English countryside.

The house they came to was 5 Gracewell, a semi-detached brick cottage at the end of a row. Mabel Tolkien had rented it from a local landowner. Outside the gate the road ran up a hill into Moseley village and thence on towards Birmingham. In the other direction it led towards Stratford-upon-Avon. But traffic was limited to the occasional farm cart or tradesman's wagon, and it was easy to forget the city that was so near.

Over the road a meadow led to the River Cole, little more than a broad stream, and upon this stood Sarehole Mill, an old brick building with a tall chimney. Corn had been ground here for three centuries, but times were changing. A steam-engine had been installed to provide power when the river was low, and now the mill's chief work was the grinding of bones to make manure. Yet the water still tumbled over the sluice and rushed beneath the great wheel, while inside the building everything was covered with a fine white dust. Hilary Tolkien was only two and a half, but soon he was accompanying his elder brother on expeditions across the meadow to the mill, where they would stare through the fence at the water-wheel turning in its dark cavern, or run round to the yard where the sacks were swung down on to a waiting cart. Sometimes they would venture through the gate and gaze into an open doorway, where they could see the great leather belts and pulleys and shafts, and the men at work. There were two millers, father and son. The old man had a black beard, but it was the son who frightened the boys with his white dusty clothes and sharp-eyed face. Ronald named him 'the White Ogre'. When he yelled at them to clear off they would scamper away from the yard, and run round to a place behind the mill where there was a silent pool with swans swimming on it. At the foot of the pool the dark waters suddenly plunged over the sluice to the great wheel below: a dangerous and exciting place.

Not far from Sarehole Mill, a little way up the hill towards Moseley, was a deep tree-lined sandpit that became another favourite haunt for the boys. Indeed, explorations could be made

in many directions, though there were hazards. An old farmer who once chased Ronald for picking mushrooms was given the nickname 'the Black Ogre' by the boys. Such delicious terrors were the essence of those days at Sarchole, here recalled (nearly eighty years later) by Hilary Tolkien:

'We spent lovely summers just picking flowers and trespassing. The Black Ogre used to take people's shoes and stockings from the bank where they'd left them to paddle, and run away with them, make them go and ask for them. And then he'd thrash them! The White Ogre wasn't quite so bad. But in order to get to the place where we used to blackberry (called the Dell) we had to go through the white one's land, and he didn't like us very much because the path was narrow through his field, and we traipsed off after corn-cockles and other pretty things. My mother got us lunch to have in this lovely place, but when she arrived she made a deep voice, and we both ran!'

There were few houses at Sarchole beside the row of cottages where the Tolkiens lived, but Hall Green village was only a little distance away down a lane and across a ford. Ronald and Hilary would sometimes buy sweets from an old woman with no teeth who kept a stall there. Gradually they made friends with the local children. This was not easy, for their own middle-class accents, long hair and pinafores were the subject of mockery, while they in their turn were unused to the Warwickshire dialect and the rough ways of the country boys. But they began to pick up something of the local vocabulary, adopting dialect words into their own speech: 'chawl' for a cheek of pork, 'miskin' for dustbin, 'pikelet' for crumpet, and 'gamgee' for cotton wool. This last owed its origins to a Dr Gamgee, a Birmingham man who had invented 'gamgee-tissue', a surgical dressing made from cotton wool. His name had become a household term in the district.

Mabel soon began to educate her sons, and they could have had no better teacher – nor she an apter pupil than Ronald, who could read by the time he was four and had soon learnt to write proficiently. His mother's own handwriting was delightfully unconventional. Having acquired the skill of penmanship from her father, she chose an upright and elaborate style, ornamenting her capitals with delicate curls. Ronald soon began to practise a hand that was, though different from his mother's, to become equally elegant and idiosyncratic. But his favourite lessons were those that

Latin, French

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concerned languages. Early in his Sarehole days his mother introduced him to the rudiments of Latin, and this delighted him. He was just as interested in the sounds and shapes of the words as in their meanings, and she began to realise that he had a special aptitude for language. She began to teach him French. He liked this much less, not for any particular reason; but the sounds did not please him as much as the sounds of Latin and English. She also tried to interest him in playing the piano, but without success. It seemed rather as if words took the place of music for him, and that he enjoyed listening to them, reading them, and reciting them, almost regardless of what they meant.

He was good at drawing too, particularly when the subject was a landscape or a tree. His mother taught him a great deal of botany, and he responded to this and soon became very knowledgeable. But again he was more interested in the shape and feel of a plant than in its botanical details. This was especially true of trees. And though he liked drawing trees he liked most of all to be *with* trees. He would climb them, lean against them, even talk to them. It saddened him to discover that not everyone shared his feelings towards them. One incident in particular remained in his memory: 'There was a willow hanging over the mill-pool and I learned to climb it. It belonged to a butcher on the Stratford Road, I think. One day they cut it down. They didn't do anything with it: the log just lay there. I never forgot that.'

Outside the school-room hours his mother gave him plenty of story-books. He was amused by *Alice in Wonderland*, though he had no desire to have adventures like Alice. He did not enjoy *Treasure Island*, nor the stories of Hans Andersen, nor *The Pied Piper*. But he liked Red Indian stories and longed to shoot with a bow and arrow. He was even more pleased by the 'Curdie' books of George Macdonald, which were set in a remote kingdom where misshapen and malevolent goblins lurked beneath the mountains. The Arthurian legends also excited him. But most of all he found delight in the Fairy Books of Andrew Lang, especially the *Red Fairy Book*, for tucked away in its closing pages was the best story he had ever read. This was the tale of Sigurd who slew the dragon Fafnir: a strange and powerful tale set in the nameless North. Whenever he read it Ronald found it absorbing. 'I desired dragons with a profound desire,' he said long afterwards. 'Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood. But the

world that contained even the imagination of Fafnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril.'

Nor was he content merely to *read* about dragons. When he was about seven he began to compose his own story about a dragon. 'I remember nothing about it except a philological fact,' he recalled. 'My mother said nothing about the dragon, but pointed out that one could not say "a green great dragon", but had to say "a great green dragon". I wondered why, and still do. The fact that I remember this is possibly significant, as I do not think I ever tried to write a story again for many years, and was taken up with language.'

The seasons passed at Sarchole. Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was celebrated and the college on top of the hill in Moseley was illuminated with coloured lights. Somehow Mabel managed to feed and clothe the boys on her meagre income, eked out with occasional help from Tolkien or Suffield relatives. Hilary grew to look more and more like his father, while Ronald developed the long thin face of the Suffields. Occasionally a strange dream came to trouble him: a great wave towering up and advancing ineluctably over the trees and green fields, poised to engulf him and all around him. The dream was to recur for many years. Later he came to think of it as 'my Atlantis complex'. But usually his sleep was undisturbed, and through the daily worries of the family's poverty-stricken existence there shone his love for his mother and for the Sarchole countryside, a place for adventure and solace. He revelled in his surroundings with a desperate enjoyment, perhaps sensing that one day this paradise would be lost. And so it was, all too soon.

Christianity had played an increasingly important part in Mabel Tolkien's life since her husband's death, and each Sunday she had taken the boys on a long walk to a 'high' Anglican church. Then one Sunday Ronald and Hilary found that they were going by strange roads to a different place of worship: St Anne's, Alcester Street, in the slums near the centre of Birmingham. It was a Roman Catholic church.

Mabel had been thinking for some time about becoming a Catholic. Nor did she take this step alone. Her sister May Incedon had returned from South Africa, now with two children, leaving her husband Walter to follow when he had completed his business. Unknown to him she too had decided to become a Catholic. During the spring of 1900 May and Mabel received instruction at St



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Anne's, and in June of the same year they were received into the Church of Rome.

Immediately the wrath of their family fell upon them. Their father John Suffield had been brought up at a Methodist school, and was now a Unitarian. That his daughter should turn papist was to him an outrage beyond belief. May's husband, Walter Incedon, considered himself to be a pillar of his local Anglican church, and for May to associate with Rome was simply out of the question. Returning to Birmingham he forbade her to enter a Catholic church again, and she had to obey him; though for consolation—or was it revenge?—she turned to spiritualism.

Walter Incedon had provided a little financial help for Mabel Tolkien since Arthur's death. But now there would be no more money from that source. Instead Mabel would have to face hostility from Walter and from other members of her family, not to mention the Tolkiens, many of whom were Baptists and strongly opposed to Catholicism. The strain that this induced, coupled with the additional financial hardship, did no good to her health; but nothing would shake her loyalty to her new faith, and against all opposition she began to instruct Ronald and Hilary in the Catholic religion.

Meanwhile it was time for Ronald to be sent to school. In the autumn of 1899 at the age of seven he took the entrance examination for King Edward's, his father's old school. He failed to obtain a place, for his mother had probably been too easy-going in her teaching. But a year later he took the examination again and passed, entering King Edward's in September 1900. A Tolkien uncle who was uncharacteristically well-disposed towards Mabel paid the fees, which then amounted to twelve pounds per annum. The school was in the centre of Birmingham, four miles from Sarehole, and for the first few weeks Ronald had to walk much of the way, for his mother could not afford the train fare and the trams did not run as far as his home. Clearly this could not continue, and regretfully Mabel decided that their days in the country would have to end. She found a house to rent in Moseley, nearer the centre of the city and on the tram route, and late in 1900 she and the boys packed their belongings and left the cottage where they had been so happy for four years. 'Four years,' wrote Ronald Tolkien, looking back in old age, 'but the longest-seeming and most formative part of my life.'

King Edward's School could scarcely be missed by a traveller arriving in Birmingham on the London & North Western Railway, for it rose majestically above the subterranean smoke and steam of New Street Station. Resembling the dining-hall of a rich Oxford college, it was a heavy and soot-blackened essay in Victorian gothic by Barry, architect of the rebuilt Houses of Parliament.<sup>1</sup> The school, founded by Edward VI, was generously endowed, and the governors had been able to open branch-schools in many of the poorer parts of the city. But the educational standard of King Edward's itself, the 'High School', was still unrivalled in Birmingham, and many of the hundreds of boys who sat on worn benches construing their Caesar while the railway engines whistled below went on to win awards at the major universities.

By 1900 King Edward's had almost outgrown its buildings and was cramped, crowded, and noisy. It presented a daunting prospect to a boy who had been brought up in a quiet country village, and not surprisingly Ronald Tolkien spent much of his first term absent from school because of ill health. But gradually he became accustomed to the rough-and-tumble and the noise, and indeed soon grew to like it, settling down happily to the routine of school, although he did not as yet show any outstanding aptitude in class-work.

Meanwhile, home life was very different from what he had known at Sarehole. His mother had rented a small house on the main road in the suburb of Moseley, and the view from the windows was a sad contrast to the Warwickshire countryside: trams struggling up the hill, the drab faces of passers-by, and in the distance the smoking factory chimneys of Sparkbrook and Small Heath. To Ronald the Moseley house remained in memory as 'dreadful'. And no sooner had they settled than they had to move: the house was to be demolished to make room for a fire-station. Mabel found a villa less than a mile away in a terrace row behind King's Heath Station. They were now not far from her parents' home, but what had dictated her choice was the presence in the road of the new Roman Catholic church of St Dunstan, corrugated outside and pitch-pine within.

Ronald was still desperately forlorn at being severed from the Sarehole countryside, but he found some comfort in his new home.

<sup>1</sup>Barry's building was demolished after the school had moved to new premises in the nineteen-thirties.

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The King's Heath house backed on to a railway line, and life was punctuated by the roar of trains and the shunting of trucks in the nearby coal-yard. Yet the railway cutting had grass slopes, and here he discovered flowers and plants. And something else attracted his attention: the curious names on the coal-trucks in the sidings below, odd names which he did not know how to pronounce but which had a strange appeal to him. So it came about that by pondering over *Nantyglo*, *Senghenydd*, *Blaen-Rhondda*, *Penrhiwceiber*, and *Tredegar*, he discovered the existence of the Welsh language.

Later in childhood he went on a railway journey to Wales, and as the station names flashed past him he knew that here were words more appealing to him than any he had yet encountered, a language that was old and yet alive. He asked for information about it, but the only Welsh books that could be found for him were incomprehensible. Yet however brief and tantalising the glimpse, he had caught sight of another linguistic world.

Meanwhile his mother was becoming restless. She did not like the King's Heath house and she had discovered that she did not like St Dunstan's Church. So she began to search around, and once again she took the boys on long Sunday walks in search of a place of worship that appealed to her. Soon she discovered the Birmingham Oratory, a large church in the suburb of Edgbaston that was looked after by a community of priests. Surely she would find a friend and a sympathetic confessor among them? What was more, attached to the Oratory and under the direction of its clergy was the Grammar School of St Philip, where the fees were lower than King Edward's and where her sons could receive a Catholic education. And (a deciding factor) there was a house to let next door to the school. So, early in 1902, she and the boys moved from King's Heath to Edgbaston, and Ronald and Hilary, now aged ten and eight, were enrolled at St Philip's School.

The Birmingham Oratory had been established in 1849 by John Henry Newman, then a recent convert to the Catholic faith. Within its walls he had spent the last four decades of his life, dying there in 1890. Newman's spirit still presided over the high-ceilinged rooms of the Oratory House in the Hagley Road, and in 1902 the community still included many priests who had been his friends and had served under him. One of these was Father Francis Xavier Morgan, then aged forty-three, who shortly after the Tolkiens

moved into the district took over the duties of parish priest and came to call. In him Mabel soon found not only a sympathetic priest but a valuable friend. Half Welsh and half Anglo-Spanish (his mother's family were prominent in the sherry trade), Francis Morgan was not a man of great intellect, but he had an immense fund of kindness and humour and a flamboyance that was often attributed to his Spanish connections. Indeed he was a very noisy man, loud and affectionate, embarrassing to small children at first but hugely lovable when they got to know him. He soon became an indispensable part of the Tolkien household.

Without his friendship, life for Mabel and her sons would have shown scant improvement on the previous two years. They were living at 26 Oliver Road, a house that was only one degree better than a slum. Around them were mean side-streets. St Philip's School was only a step from their front door, but its bare brick classrooms were a poor substitute for the gothic splendours of King Edward's, and its academic standard was correspondingly lower. Soon Ronald had outpaced his class-mates, and Mabel realised that St Philip's could not provide the education that he needed. So she removed him, and once again undertook his tuition herself: with much success, for some months later he won a Foundation Scholarship to King Edward's and returned there in the autumn of 1903. Hilary too had been removed from St Philip's, but he had so far failed to pass the entrance examination to King Edward's; 'not my fault,' his mother wrote to a relative, 'or that he didn't know the things; but he is so dreamy and slow at writing.' For the time being she continued to teach the younger boy at home.

On his return to King Edward's, Ronald was placed in the Sixth Class, about half way up the school. He was now learning Greek. Of his first contact with this language he later wrote: 'The fluidity of Greek, punctuated by hardness, and with its surface glitter captivated me. But part of the attraction was antiquity and alien remoteness (from me): it did not touch home.' In charge of the Sixth Class was an energetic man named George Brewerton, one of the few assistant masters at the school who specialised in the teaching of English literature. This subject scarcely featured in the curriculum, and when taught it was confined chiefly to a study of Shakespeare's plays, which Ronald soon found that he 'disliked cordially'. In later years he especially remembered 'the bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use

made in Shakespeare of the coming of "Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill": I longed to devise a setting by which the trees might really march to war.' But if Shakespeare failed to please him there was other meat more suited to his taste. By inclination his form-master Brewerton was a medievalist. Always a fierce teacher, he demanded that his pupils should use the plain old words of the English language. If a boy employed the term 'manure' Brewerton would roar out: 'Manure? Call it muck! Say it three times! *Muck, muck, muck!*' He encouraged his pupils to read Chaucer, and he recited the *Canterbury Tales* to them in the original Middle English. To Ronald Tolkien's ears this was a revelation, and he determined to learn more about the history of the language.

At Christmas 1903 Mabel Tolkien wrote to her mother-in-law:

My dear Mrs Tolkien,

You said you like one of the boys' drawings better than anything bought with their money so they've done these for you. Ronald has really done his splendidly this year - he has just been having quite an exhibition in Father Francis' room - he has worked hard since he broke up on December 16th, and so have I, to find fresh subjects: - I haven't been out for almost a *month* - not even to The Oratory! - but the nasty wet muggy weather is making me better and since Ronald broke up I have been able to rest in the mornings. I keep having whole *weeks* of utter sleeplessness, which added to the internal cold and sickness have made it almost impossible to go on.

I found a postal order for 2/6 which you sent the boys some time ago - a year at least - which has been mislaid. They've been in town all afternoon spending this and a little bit more on things they wanted to give. - They've done all my Xmas shopping - Ronald can match silk lining or any art shade like a true 'Parisian Modiste'. - Is it his Artist or Draper Ancestry coming out? - He is going along at a great rate at school - he knows far more Greek than I do Latin - he says he is going to do German with me these holidays - though at present I feel more like Bed.

One of the clergy, a young, merry one, is teaching Ronald to play chess - he says he has read *too* much, everything fit for a boy under fifteen, and he doesn't know any single classical thing to recommend him. Ronald is making his First Communion this Christmas - so it is a very great feast indeed to us this year. I

don't say this to vex you – only you say you like to know everything about them.

Yours always lovingly,  
Mab.

The New Year did not begin well. Ronald and Hilary were confined to bed with measles followed by whooping-cough, and in Hilary's case by pneumonia. The additional strain of nursing them proved too much for their mother, and as she feared it proved 'impossible to go on'. By April 1904 she was in hospital, and her condition was diagnosed as diabetes.

The Oliver Road house was closed, the scant furniture was stored, and the boys were sent away to relatives, Hilary to his Suffield grandparents and Ronald to Hove to stay with the family of Edwin Neave, the sandy-haired insurance clerk who was now married to his Aunt Jane. Insulin treatment was not yet available for diabetic patients, and there was much anxiety over Mabel's condition, but by the summer she had recovered sufficiently to be discharged from hospital. Clearly she must undergo a long and careful convalescence. A plan was proposed by Father Francis Morgan. At Rednal, a Worcestershire hamlet a few miles beyond the Birmingham boundary, Cardinal Newman had built a modest country house which served as a retreat for the Oratory clergy. On the edge of its grounds stood a little cottage occupied by the local postman, whose wife could let them have a bedroom and sitting-room, and could cook for them. It would be an ideal setting for recuperation, and all three of them would benefit from the renewed contact with country air. So, late in June 1904, the boys rejoined their mother and they all went to Rednal for the summer.

It was as if they had come back to Sarehole. The cottage lay on the corner of a quiet country lane, and behind it were the wooded grounds of the Oratory House with the little cemetery adjoining the chapel where the Oratory fathers and Newman himself were buried. The boys had the freedom of these grounds, and further afield they could roam the steep paths that led through the trees to the high Lickey Hill. Mrs Till the postman's wife gave them good meals, and a month later Mabel was writing on a postcard to her mother-in-law: 'Boys look *ridiculously* well compared to the weak white ghosts that met me on train 4 weeks ago!!! Hilary has got tweed suit and his first Etons today! and looks *immense*. – We've

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had perfect weather. Boys will write first wet day but what with Bilberry-gathering – Tea in Hay – Kite-flying with Fr. Francis – sketching – Tree Climbing – they've never enjoyed a holiday so much.'

Father Francis paid them many visits. He kept a dog at Rednal named 'Lord Roberts', and he used to sit on the ivy-covered verandah of the Oratory House smoking a large cherrywood pipe; 'the more remarkable', Ronald recalled, 'since he never smoked except there. Possibly my own later addiction to the Pipe derives from this.' When Father Francis was not in residence and there was no other priest staying at Rednal, Mabel and the boys would drive to mass in Bromsgrove sharing a hired carriage with Mr and Mrs Church, the gardener and caretaker for the Oratory fathers. It was an idyllic existence.

Too soon September brought the school term, and Ronald, now fit and well, had to return to King Edward's. But his mother could not yet bring herself to leave the cottage where they had been so happy, and go back to the smoke and dirt of Birmingham. So for the time being Ronald had to rise early and walk more than a mile to the station to catch a train to school. It was growing dark by the time he came home, and Hilary sometimes met him with a lamp.

Unnoticed by her sons, Mabel's condition began to deteriorate again. At the beginning of November she collapsed in a way that seemed to them sudden and terrifying. She sank into a diabetic coma, and six days later, on 14 November, with Father Francis and her sister May Incedon at her bedside in the cottage, she died.

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