

London calling...

By Constance Scrafield

In the heady days of my London life, living in the midst of it, with enough money in my pockets to more or less suit myself, in a city full of charm and adventure and not crazy expensive the way it is now, it was great entertainment to eat in elegant restaurants and be a member of various interesting clubs.

By a club in London, we used to mean an exclusive place to eat, meet friends or invite guests.

There was tremendous fun ? for me, anyway, to observe ? when ladies decided to protest outside gentleman's clubs, making a fuss about wanting the right to join those. I couldn't imagine anything duller for a lady with a good mind than to join a gentleman's club with all those desperately boring conversations about the distance between destinations or golf strokes, the weather.... Nor were these gentlemen being served by nearly naked ladies. Oh no, they were very stuffy sorts of establishments, gentlemen being served by quite particularly butler- proper serving men. Just read your P.G. Woodhouse and you'll get the idea.

Once though, I was invited to lunch at the Athena Club (gentlemen only) by one of the most wonderful people I ever had the good fortune to eventually call a friend. I was accompanied by his equally wonderful wife.

They were Sydney and Myra Heaven and the only truly successful marriage I ever witnessed.

On the ground floor of the Athena Club was the foyer; off to one side was Charles Dickens' writing desk. It is a simple affair, a bank of slots for papers with small drawers for nibs and the like.

The dining room in which members were permitted to entertain their ladies: wives, colleagues, friends, was on the lower ground floor, a solid, comfortable room, pleasantly lit. We were escorted to a table where our host awaited us and gentlemen waiters stood by to hold our chairs for us while we sat.

Sydney Heaven stood up to greet us, shaking my hand as he towered over me, lean, bald, deep intelligence gleaming from him; humour glowing like a halo ? fantastic, love immediately.

The menus we were offered to peruse listed the choices of the house but there were no prices, which I considered very civilized. One was invited to lunch, to have anything one fancied without having to note the cost to one's host.

We talked about many subjects. At the time, I was into the third month of publishing my children's magazine, Kids' Own World, and, with the travel page, this month to Greece, there was a history or mythology section.

I commented, ?I'm reading Robert Graves' Greek Mythology and I'm having such a good time reading it that it's hard to settle down and write something.?

Sydney studied me for a few seconds and remarked approvingly, ?Robert Graves is the foremost authority on Greek mythology.?

Funny what seals people to each other as friends, isn't it?

Now, the clubs to which I actually paid a fee and belonged were all co-ed, as it were.

In the St. James' Club in Park Place, Mayfield, one frequently noted famous faces from the ?silver screen?. No hob-nobbing, dear; they were not celebrities, just people wanting to dine with their own crowd.

The Wig and Pen Club, on the Strand, obviously was for me too. Situated across from the Law Courts: the Old Bailey, it was home to journalists primarily, hence the name. Crushingly, the last time I was in London earlier this year, I learned the Wig and Pen, a club established in 1625, one of the only buildings to survive the great fire of London, 1666, had been closed after the relocation of newspapers from adjacent Fleet Street to the Docklands.

Years ago was a time when, as I dashed into the Wig and Pen, as I walked across the threshold of the bar room, the bar keeper had a glass of my favourite Scotch on the bar by the time I traversed the floor.

Gosh, here I am babbling on, only wanting to dodge all the crud in the news these days. However, word of Hugh Hefner dying at the age of 91 ? this is what inspired my choice of subject while we (you and I) are taking a break from our current global realities and their alternatives...

While in London, I belonged to the Playboy Club. As soon as I discovered it wasn't a men-only club, I had to join if only to have the card. And it was fun.

Kidding around and laughing at the bar, rolling the dice or playing a little blackjack at the tables; men dressed not quite in tuxedos but, still, suits, shirts ties. Ladies glamorous.

Nice food, nicely served.

Well, well. It was a time of my life that was filled with interesting people and good times --? more high flying, perhaps, but not entirely different from now!