



0. TRAGEDY STRIKES - Story Preface

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Arthur Llewelyn Davies, father of the five boys who inspired J.M. Barrie to write "Peter Pan," died at Egerton House in Berkhamsted—the family's home between 1904 and 1907—on the 19th of April, 1907. Image maintained by Berkhamsted Local History and Museum Society (which is cared-for by the Dacorum Heritage Trust).

Arthur Llewelyn Davies was a terrific father. His wife and boys adored him. He had more patience with the children than Sylvia had. By the late spring of 1906, he was a respected lawyer.

There was one issue, however, that the handsome Arthur could not manage without help. He had developed a "slight swelling" on the side of his face. Following the advice of his dentist, Arthur visited a medical specialist. He was told he needed surgery.

At first, Arthur believed there was "no ground for anxiety," expecting to recover quickly. By the 2nd of June, 1906, he knew otherwise.

In a letter to his sister Margaret (who was a good friend of Virginia Woolf), he gave his family the unfavorable diagnosis:

I am sorry to say that I have bad news. The swelling in my face turns out on investigation not to be an abscess, as was hoped, but a growth. It is of a very serious kind, called sarcoma, and requires a grave operation...I am afraid it means removing half the upper jaw and palate...Poor Sylvia!

I have told her everything except the name of the disease and the details of the operations...After the operation I shall be incapacitated for about 6 weeks, and unable to speak properly for 3 or 4 months - there will always be an impediment in my speech. I think of our future and the boys.

(Quoted in *JM Barrie and the Lost Boys*, page 134.)

In fact, the illness was much worse than Arthur thought. Crompton Llewelyn Davies, Arthur's younger brother (who, according to Bertrand Russell's Autobiography, "drafted the treaty of peace that established Irish self-government, though this was never publicly known"), wrote their father:

They removed his cheek bone - apparently had intended to do so all along...His courage and serenity was so great that it gave others courage, I felt - and instead of requiring help he seemed able to give it. (Quoted in *JM Barrie and the Lost Boys*, page 135.)

James Barrie immediately helped the family. Arthur appreciated all the time and attention. In letters to his sister Margaret, he no longer called Barrie "Sylvia's friend" but referred to him as "Jimmy." While in the hospital, Arthur wrote to Peter: "Don't you think Mr. Barrie is a very good friend to all of us?"

Not only did Barrie cancel other plans, he paid for the best care and treatment money could buy at the time. It wasn't enough for Arthur. A friend - Dolly Ponsonby - observed that:

It gives one a terrible twinge to see him with his poor maimed face, & always escaping from people.

By September of 1906, the now-inoperable cancer had spread to another part of his face. Arthur wrote to his father:

I can see the end to what I may have to endure, but she [Sylvia] at present seems to face the prospect of endless misery, & only sees that she must go on for the sake of the boys. I can foresee a not unhappy life for her in the future, with the boys growing up round her, but she cannot now see this. (Lost Boys, page 145.)

In fact, Sylvia herself became ill with cancer about two years after Arthur's April 19, 1907 death. In the fall of 1909, she collapsed on the stairs of her home. The boys would not grow up around her, as their father had hoped.

Peter, then thirteen, later recalled what occurred when the doctor was summoned to examine his mother:

I happened to be about...and Mary Hodgson [the children's nanny], red-faced and agitated, tended her and shooed me away, not before I had received an impression of direness and fatality, and a sense of shocked misery and half-comprehending desolation, which has remained with me ever since. (Quoted in Lost Boys, page 181.)

A specialist diagnosed cancer which was "too close to the heart to operate." Years later Mary wrote to Peter, emphasizing certain points:

It was impressed on me that your Mother - on no account - was to talk about her illness to me & that at all costs she must not know how ill she was. Life was to go on as usual and the Boys were just to be told Mother had to stay in bed and rest for a long time. (Quoted in Lost Boys, page 182.)

It's hard to fool a child, however. Gerald du Maurier recalled seeing his nephew Michael, then nine, doing homework with tears rolling down his face. Nico, only six while his Mum was dying, remembered (while in his 70s) that she was lying down much of the time.

Emma du Maurier, Sylvia's widowed mother, came to help. She described the situation to her daughter May:

She seems glad I have come and hopes I can stay and of course I shall, but you can imagine what I feel...When Sylvia heard the doctor was to sleep here (for we all think it a great mistake if he didn't) she was angry and then began to cry, and said "I believe I am very ill," so you can imagine how dreadful that was. (Quoted in Lost Boys, pages 187-188.)

By the summer of 1910, Sylvia knew she was dying. She expressed her wishes for the boys and for her own burial:

I do not wish any of my dear boys to look at me when I am dead - it is a great mistake I think - let them remember me at my best & when I could look at them - that must have been the best time always because I love them so utterly...I will be cremated & buried with my Arthur at Hampstead next to beloved Papa...I do not want any of my boys to go to my funeral, nor do I want it made into a long gloomy day for them. (Quoted in Lost Boys, page 189.)

Denis Mackail, a family friend, later recalled the day Sylvia died:

...as she lay there in bed, [she] asked for a hand-mirror. She looked in it, and laid it down. 'Don't let the boys see me again.' (Quoted in Lost Boys, page 190.)

On August 27, 1910, Sylvia breathed her last. Her five boys were now orphans. What would happen to them?

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Media Stream



Egerton House - Home of Llewelyn Davies Family

The once-famous English country house was located in Berkhamsted (northwest of London). The Llewelyn-Davies' family lived here between 1904 and 1907. Arthur died in this house on the 19th of April, 1907.

The centuries-old Elizabethan manor house was demolished in 1937, about the year that this photograph was taken. Today a movie theatre (Berkhamsted Rex Cinema) occupies the site of the former Davies home.

Click on the image for a better view.

Image of Egerton House maintained by Berkhamsted Local History and Museum Society, cared for by the Dacorum Heritage Trust.

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Davies Family Photo

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Davies with the Children

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

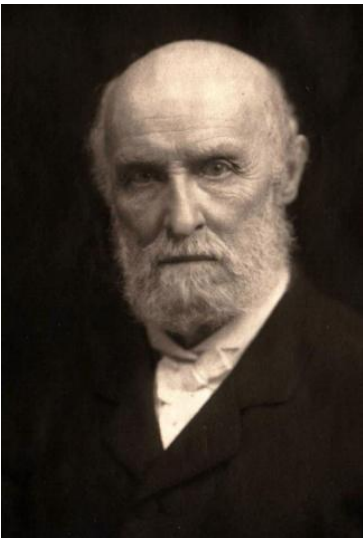
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Bertrand Russell

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John Llewellyn Davies

Image online, courtesy [St. George In-The-East website](#).

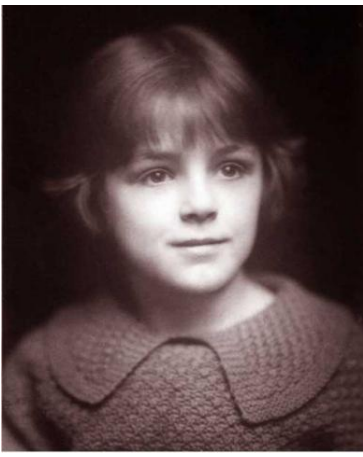
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Mary Hodgson

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Michael Llewelyn Davies

Image online, courtesy jmbarrie.co.uk website.

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Emma du Maurier

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Hamstead Grave Site - Llewelyn Davies

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Nico Llewelyn Davies as a Young Boy

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Peter Llewelyn Davies at Thirteen

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Photo of Nico in his Later Years

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