

# The Autobiography

“Carry me along, Taddy, like you done through the toy fair.” The words are James Joyce’s, but the experience was mine, drawn from the well of distant recall in the course of a dinner-table discussion: how far back can memory reach?

It was night, we were walking along the acetylene-lighted, dusty “midway” of the Jefferson County Fair, on the outskirts of Louisville Kentucky. I was perched on my tall young father’s broad shoulders, my legs dangling onto his chest, hands clasping his head. Was Mother with us? Were there two older children walking beside us? Was there a younger sister or a new baby at home? Perhaps, indeed, probably, but I have no recollection of their existence at that time. Dazzled by the lights, the noisy crowds, the garish booths lining each side of the road, with the broad night sky above and, beneath me, my father’s safe shoulders, I was unaware of everything but my own bliss. Joyce used my “ride” in a minor key, at the very end of *Finnegans Wake*, when the approach of night was leading him to seek again the warmest, surest haven he had known, that of his own father, his “mad-feary” father’s unswerving love.

Today, with my eightieth birthday well behind me, other happy things float up to the surface. All-pervading is the colour red: the short red-brick walk, freshly reddened every Saturday, that led from the sidewalk across the lawn to the front door; the fragrant, deep-red roses on the bush that bordered this walk; the large sprawling red buildings that composed the Manual Training School, corner Brook and Oak Streets, opposite the red brick house in which, in 1893—the year of what was termed “the great panic”—I was born. As a big girl, shall we say some ten to twelve years old, I knew that if, for sentimental reasons, you wanted the “Manual” team to win the football match, you wore a white chrysanthemum pinned to your coat, from which hung to your skirt hem, two long red satin streamers.

There were other colours: deep blue Concord grapes hanging from the “grape barber” that arched over the kitchen walk; the dark shade cast on the mossy bricks by the grape leaves; the bright pink of a peach-tree in bloom; the iridescent glow of the corner arc-light underneath which, on summer evenings, we

ran and shouted after the street-cars that screeched around the corner. In early spring, in a friendly neighbour's back-yard, if you knew where to look, there were, too, tiny white and pale yellow violets.

These neighbours, a middle-aged, childless couple named Pirtle, had the rare gift of communicating normally and as between equals with young children. They neither scolded nor patronized, and unlike the jocular grocer across the way, they never teased. Escape from what I already sensed to be a somewhat crowded, autocratically run base to the intelligent serenity of "the Pirtles," a serenity I still identify with the white and yellow violets in the damp corner of their back-yard, had a calming effect on the frustrations that accompanied my position of "middle" child. One might ask: who composed the crowd? Who were the autocrats? Actually, the crowd was my own nuclear family: two parents and then three girls and two boys, with a period of ten years between the eldest and the youngest. A medium-sized family, really, when one recalls that my paternal grandfather had eighteen children, divided equally between two wives. However, if we add to the nuclearites a young uncle, Mother's brother William Carr, and a grandmother, Mrs. Cornelia Peake McDonald, I am inclined to think that my impression of being pressed for breathing space, at least the kind I needed, may not have been entirely unfounded. For the house was surely not very large.

The autocrats, as was typical of the time in the southern United States, were women: two white, Mother and Grandmother, and one black, Viney, whose terrorist rule covered not only the kitchen and pantry, which was her rightful domain, but also the cellar and entire back-yard, to which I was usually relegated. I did make an occasional escape, regularly sanctioned however by spanking—Mother preferred the slipper—and at times by a more distressing form of punishment (how I wept!) which consisted in being sent to bed without supper, while out-of-doors, children played and shouted under the arc-light, without me. The slipper, I believe, was for less serious misdemeanors, and there was no uncertainty as to who would wield it; Father never touched any of us otherwise than affectionately.

The senior autocrat, his mother, let the flak from her papal bulls fall as it would on young and old, male and female, black and white alike. She knew better, even than "that vulgarian Noah Webster"—correct pronunciation and spelling were subjects of frequent controversy—she held the tables of the law in her hand, no deviation would be tolerated. Indeed I recall a sudden sense of weightless terror when one day, during family prayers, after she had directed a sharp reprimand at us kneeling miscreants, I heard Father say firmly: "Mother, you raised your children as you thought best, I shall do the same with mine." No, the house did not come a-tumbling down like the walls of Jericho, but I asked myself

why this had not happened. Here were Zeus and Athena in disagreement before us and, worse still, about us. Would things ever be the same again?<sup>1</sup>

Actually, Uncle Will, who was in his late twenties, not yet married, gay and debonair, was an amiable addition to the household. I recall one incident concerning him that is typical of the accidental, aleatory nature of the impressions a child's mind retains. Why one rather than another? Mystery.

I came into the down-stairs sitting-room, usually reserved for formal visits. In the middle of the room stood a couch—this was already anomalous—and on the couch, all I could see were layers of shaking blankets. “It’s Uncle Will,” someone explained, “Uncle Will has a chill.” My delight in the rhyme stemmed further curiosity. “Uncle Will had a chill,” and what it meant was no matter. I tiptoed out.

Another memory of Uncle Will is very clear. The date was 1898, and the United States was launching upon what was to be its first foreign imperialist adventure, the Spanish-American War (not however its first imperialist crime—ask the Navahos or the Iroquois, or the Cherokees . . .). Somehow I had picked up the words and tune of the popular song that was to be the “Tipperary” of that war. Uncle Will lifted me onto the table. “Come on, Maria, sing it for us. Sing ‘Good-bye my Blue-Bell.’” Was I proud? And did I sing it *con gusto*? For you who surely never heard it, here it is in all its trite sadness:

“Good-bye my Bluebell, Farewell to you.  
Just let me look into your eyes so blue.  
Mid campfires gleaming, mid shot and shell,  
I shall be dreaming of my own Bluebell.”

Where have all the Bluebells gone? It is not entirely impossible that here and there across the country, may still be found today an occasional nonagenarian who could answer “present” to that roll-call. Most of them, however, after a life of undisturbed confidence in the “manifest destiny” of their country, must have entered into final peace at some time between the smashing victory of 1945 and the brumous non-victory of Pan-Mun-Jon, in 1953. May those whose soldier sweethearts were the first to fall in the odious cause of empire have found reunion in heaven!; 1784 men lost their lives during the hardly four months of actual fighting.

1. But I cannot treat lightly, confining her to my own worm’s-eye impressions, the reality of Cornelia Peake McDonald, whose eventful, at times harsh and heroic life spanned eighty-seven critical years—1822 to 1909—of the nation’s history.

“Remember the Maine!” How can we forget it?<sup>2</sup>



Still set in the first cocoon another scene comes to mind. I was playing alone and intently in the back-yard sand-box. Viney appeared in the kitchen door and with unusual solemnity said that Mother had ordered me to come upstairs. What had I done now?

To my embarrassment—children don’t like to see adults cry—I realized that Mother had been crying. An open telegram lay on her table. So it was not something I had done. I waited. “Your grandfather is dead. I must go to Roanoke for his funeral. You will do what you are told while I am gone.” “Yes’m.” My grandfather, who was that? Dead. What was that? This was my first contact with death as well as my first and only recollection of Colonel George Watson Carr, grandson of Dabney Carr, who married his friend Thomas Jefferson’s sister, Martha. As I grew older I learned that Col. Carr had been a violent, tyrannical man, that he loved his dogs and horses better than he loved his children, that after their mother died, he married his children’s governess, which had been considered a *mésalliance*. When a half-sister, Sally, was born, the three remaining children (a sister, Alice, died young) had divided their time between the homes of two maternal aunts, in Charlottesville and on a remote country estate called “The Barons.” Maria, for whom I was named, and whose ring I still wear, married and died in childbirth. So as adults there had remained only Mother and Uncle Will. Of course there was the half-sister, “poor Sally.” But she was considered to be something of a catastrophe and cruelty being frequent in those to whom life has been cruel, she was never really accepted as anything but a less-than-half-sister. When I recall the grudging hospitality shown those lonely Siamese twins, Aunt Sally and her poor little mother who, sadly enough, had a speech defect which made her the butt of uncharitable imitation on the part of us savages, I can only be

2. Commenting on the territorial aggrandizement that the war settlement gave the United States, and the often cruel treatment that the American military inflicted on the Filipinos, Mark Twain wrote: . . . Only when a republic’s life is in danger should a man uphold his government when it is in the wrong. There is no other time.

“This republic’s life is not in peril. The nation has sold its honor for a phrase: ‘My country right or wrong.’ It has swung itself loose from its safe anchorage and is drifting, its helm in pirate hands. . . . We cannot withdraw from this sordid raid because to grant peace to those little people upon their terms—independence—would dishonor us. You have flung away Adams’ phrase. . . . He said, ‘An inglorious peace is better than a dishonorable war.’ You have planted a seed, and it will grow . . .” (Mark Twain, in *Letters from the Earth*, Harper and Row, New York. c. 1906)

ashamed that not one of us seems to have had the minimum natural empathy that would have attenuated this pattern of exclusion. The fact is, however, that “poor Sally” was so humorless, so neurotic, that her visits, which always heightened Mother’s nervous tension, came to be dreaded by us all. The dénouement was to come much later. When she was well over 60 a telegram signed by a neighbor, brought the news that she had hung herself in the attic of the Maine cottage that had been her home for many years.



Ours being a very large family “connection”—I once counted over fifty first-cousins—a constant game of visiting musical-chairs was in progress among us children to acquaint us with our kith and kin not only in Louisville but throughout the Kentucky-Virginia-Tennessee triangle. I was sent to visit Uncle Hunter McDonald’s family at their summer cabin near Nashville, as well as Father’s sister, Aunt Nell, in Henderson, Kentucky. Here there were six children. One of the six was rather seriously retarded. But he was treated with the same gaiety and affection as the others, and whatever may have been their original distress over his condition, there was no trace of it.

Another visit, and a very exciting one it was, was to Uncle Will and his beautiful—even though “Yankee”—bride, a luminous brunette whom I remember almost exclusively in a many-ruffled white muslin dress, her glossy black hair piled high on top of her head, and wearing a wide yellow sash that hung to her skirt-hem in back.

At his father’s death, Uncle Will had decided to invest his inheritance in the noble pursuit of “gentleman farming,” and had immediately acquired all the trappings to go with it: a “gentleman’s” home and farm-lands in Virginia, a beautiful young wife, thorough-bred horses, dogs and cattle, the required number of black retainers to keep all this in style. Alas, the inheritance had not been inexhaustible and by the time several babies had been added to the other responsibilities, this dream farm had to be abandoned for more realistic surroundings. As long as it lasted, however, I remember that every Christmas we received from Uncle Will a barrel of “Albemarle pippins” and a Collie pup. The pup usually ran away—always a source of tears—and the delicious apples were rapidly eaten. Uncle Will himself is still tenderly remembered.

Returning to this visit, my mind’s cinema sees the romantic young couple climbing into a smart two-seated “trap,” to which was hitched a sleek bay, held by a brown stable-boy who, although a little older than I, was also my frequent companion, there being no other children about.

One day, tired of playing, we came to rest beside a narrow grass-bordered stream, hardly two feet wide and fed from a nearby spring. My initiation into

what for me was the mystery of structural difference, although it never went beyond the ludic context, has nevertheless by virtue, I suppose, of its explosive potential, three quarters of a century later, not been forgotten.

He sat on one bank, I on the other; the water between us was deep. We looked across at each other and smiled. But soon my eyes were drawn irresistibly from his face to something that he was showing me. What was it? A little chipmunk, perhaps? But why did he keep it there in his trousers? I stared, fascinated; the bright-eyed little creature seemed to be gazing back at me across the water, its owner dreamily smiling. Since I had never seen one like it, I still remember it.



Quite evidently, Mother's<sup>3</sup> had been a bleak postwar childhood. One of the aunts, Aunt Letty, was married to an overbearing Frenchman, Dr. Francis Sorel. (The adjective was Mother's). I was taken to visit this childless couple as a little girl. I even kissed the old gentleman's cheek, reluctantly however, for it looked stubbly and his smile was less than warm.

Mother recalled that as a "young lady" she had had the temerity to invite one of her callers at "The Barons" to stay for supper, on an evening when the main dish was oysters, no doubt the giant variety to be found in nearby Chesapeake Bay. Innocently enough, the young man, finding the oysters over-large, cut them with his dinner knife. This gesture, for Dr. Sorel, was so inexcusable that after the guest had left he ordered Mother never again to invite that "vulgarian" to his house; in any case he probably considered the entire United States to be a slough of vulgarity, but then what had brought him there?<sup>4</sup> Like Col. George Watson Carr, this great uncle, my first Frenchman, soon faded from my consciousness, except for the fact that my eldest sister was named Letitia Sorel, and as I grew older this name evoked France, where I was destined to spend the greater part of my adult life.<sup>5</sup>

3. Born 1860 in Roanoke, Virginia, [she] married Donald McDonald of Winchester, Virginia in 1888. I surmise that she had loved someone else very deeply. But this secret she kept to herself and no trace of it remained after her death in 1935. Her album of girlhood photographs contained a number of photographs of young men, all respectfully inscribed to "Miss Betsy Carr."

4. According to a plan of the Watts family graveyard, Dr. Sorel outlived Letitia Watts by sixteen years. May he never again have been subjected to the offensive spectacle of a Virginia yokel cutting oysters.

5. After over two centuries in the new world, I was the first, in either my mother's or my father's family to return to live in the world from which their ancestors had sprung. For my Mother, this choice of mine was all but treasonable and she decided that, after her death,

Mother's other aunt, the former Alice Watts, who married twice, had a household that consisted of "my child, your children, our children and my sister's children," which left little for the last named, a situation they recalled with some bitterness. The widow of Judge William Robertson of Charlottesville, at the time I visited there Aunt Alice was still living in her large antebellum house which, for many years, had seen no repair and little domestic service. The house was also the home of three of the first batch of Mother's septuagenarian Robertson cousins, of whom there remained two old ladies: cousin Betty, almost blind, tiny, bent double and saintly, with a black mustache and a permanent crochet needle in her hand; and cousin Lucy, somewhat younger and slightly but harmlessly mad. Her eyes gleamed whenever the conversation assumed a gay or mundane character, when it turned perchance to Byron, or to "Mr. Addison and Mr. Steele." One day she asked me if I had noticed how many crazy people there were in Charlottesville. "I'm crazy too," she commented, "but I meet lots of others," was her frequent observation as she recounted her adventures during her daily streetcar rides. Mother pointed out to me a few doors away, on the same street, the house of a family who had solved the problem of their mad member in a most original manner. Like the other houses on that street this one was set far back from the carriage road surrounded by a vast lawn planted with tall old trees, which made it possible for their lunatic to be aired in a comfortable, screened cage, from where he could watch the passing scene at a safe distance. How friendly and humane! Nobody was "put away," the tie with home was not broken; this illness was like any other. It too needed love and security.

The third member of Aunt Alice's household, cousin Edward, I heard and sensed, but never saw. He was rumored to be ill with *locomotor ataxia* (a disease not to be mentioned before a young girl), so the sound of his shuffling steps in the hall, or occasional little cries of distress and pain, were the only signs of his presence that reached me except for the discreet comings and goings of a black man-servant designated for his care. "Poor Edward," as he was usually referred to, was probably one of many life-long victims—no penicillin—of the "wild oats" tradition that at one time was all but obligatory among self-respecting young bloods at the University of Virginia.

Another witness to those roaring years was the three-storey, long-closed, round brick structure that stood behind the big house—it was still touchingly referred to as "the boy's house"—and was by then entirely overgrown, even the door,

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none of the so-called "family heirlooms" would come to me, since I lived "abroad." And how prescient was this decision! Through circumstances that I shall describe later, we actually did, during the Second World War, lose the greater part of all our possessions in Paris.

with tough, old ivy. According to legend, this had been the haven in which the wildest orgies could be slept off unmolested and unlectured, since none but concerned males were allowed access; particularly was what went on there *not* the affair of the ladies of the house who, I was told, had preferred it that way.

These oddities notwithstanding, on the surface, life in Aunt Alice's house reflected her own serene, dignified personality. At 7 o'clock she was downstairs, fully dressed, her soft white hair becomingly combed, usually at her desk, since this was the hour when she wrote to her many absent relatives: already, the day before, the addressed envelopes of the letters she planned to write the next morning lay in a neat pile, awaiting their contents. After breakfast, she put on a wide apron, and herself washed the preceding day's table silver in large pans of hot water brought to the dining room from the outdoor kitchen. The motives for this ritual were never actually formulated, but the imagination can find a certain number. On wintry days there was always a pleasant coal fire in the grate—sufficient in any case to warm the calves of your legs—, and in season, there were flowers or branches in the vases.

On one of these Charlottesville visits, I accompanied Mother on a pilgrimage to the former home of Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, a few miles above the town. After many years of neglect on the part of absent owners, the place had been bought by a New Yorker, a Mr. Levey, who was known to be in residence. This news had incited Mother, whose ancestor-worship was positively Confucian, to write for permission "to visit the graves of her great-grandparents, the former Martha Jefferson and her husband Dabney Carr," to whom Jefferson had extended eternal hospitality. Mother feared—and her fears were amply justified—that the near century during which Monticello had gone more or less untended would have left the small plot of informally hallowed ground (the graves were just beside the house as I remember) in a state of neglect.

There was great hilarity among the old cousins when Mr. Levey replied with a cordial invitation to lunch for us both. Imagine going to lunch with that vulgar Yankee—he could not be otherwise—and of all places, at Monticello! Cousin Betty, ever the gentle Christian, conceded that he might be a kind, good man, nevertheless. But crazy Lucy's eyes beamed with ironic intensity: "You'll eat on gold plates!" she prophesied, gloating. I have no recollection of gold plates, merely of an excellent lunch, presided by a pleasant, knowledgeable host, who afterwards allowed Mother to rake the earth and redress the sunken grave-stones to her heart's content, while I wandered through the garden. Stupidly enough, I did not listen to the decisions taken, so I have no idea as I write this whether Martha and Dabney are still there (I'm inclined to think that they are), or whether they have been removed to a more discreet hereafter. What they should have, it seems to me, is peace. But no doubt the status of "National Shrine," to which

Monticello has since been raised, hardly makes for that. And the thousands of tourists who, after visiting the University, contemplating Jefferson's beautiful rotunda and "snake-wall," while listening to the guide's lurid account of Edgar Allan Poe's brief and dissolute stay among those patinated bricks would, I guess, have little respect for the repose of two such minor figures as Martha and Dabney. But I'm anticipating.

In the early days of the new century people in the defeated South were still generally sad and poor, life was disorganized, often hard. Mother used to say that, as a child, she had thought that a long bleak crepe veil was the badge of a grown woman. And this in spite of the fact that neither Roanoke where she was born, nor Charlottesville, where she spent most of her youth, had seen any actual fighting. Indeed, I am not entirely sure that Col. Carr, who was a West-Pointer, took any active part in the Civil War, which had so tragically marked the lives of my father's family. But the McDonalds lived in Winchester, Virginia, which was in the path of the armies.

Col. Angus McDonald, my other grandfather, although well over military age in 1861 (he was born in 1799), insisted on taking an active command, was captured and died, shortly after his release from prison, of the ill treatment he had received, according to witnesses. However incredibly, he had firmly believed in the future of the Confederacy: "With our slaves," he told his wife, "we'll become the most prosperous country in the world: both England and France are on our side. People will have cotton." According to Grandmother's diary, he was buried with full military honours (Confederate, of course), his coffin wrapped "in the folds of the stars and bars," as the old lady sentimentally described the scene. That the Federal command, having captured this doughty old rebel, should have felt no compunction about imprisoning him, appears only too logical, even though he was over 60 at the time!

I should perhaps apologize for this backward digression from the Spanish-American to the Civil War. When I was a child the South was not yet entirely on its feet; each year the "Confederate Reunion" brought together a less numerous group of garrulous, one-armed, one-legged old veterans; people with money were necessarily of "carpet-bagger," "yankee" origin; black-garbed ladies of "gentle" birth were still filling their over-large, run-down houses with boarders, while their daughters were emptying the chamber-pots. Here, of course, I am speaking principally of Virginia; Kentucky had been a divided state and neither the disaster nor the sense of defeat and resentment were comparable. But my parents had not moved to Kentucky until after their marriage. Like Jefferson, who, when questioned as to the original home of his family, replied that he had "never heard them speak of any place but Virginia," they too felt and talked as Virginians. And for men and women with this background, even as late as 1914,

the word “war” inevitably gave back echoes of 1861–1865, with its aftermath of loss and decay.



## Chapter II

Just when the move took place I am not quite sure. One thing I do remember, however, is that the new century which was ushered in with much rhetorical fanfare<sup>6</sup> found us living in St. James Court, a greener, more spacious cocoon in which, unlike the tight corner at “Brook and Oak,” a child could be given wide range and complete liberty, the occasional horse-drawn vehicles constituting no threat. Hop-scotch, catchers, statues, hi-spy, farmer-in-the-well, Miss-Jenny-Anne-Jones, cop-’n-robbers, not forgetting tree-climbing, rafter-walking, winter-sledding, a four-passenger goat-wagon and a wee Shetland pony. . . . for years filled the nearly four hours of afternoon freedom that the 8:30 to 1:30 school day made possible.

In 1900 there were still many building sites for sale in St. James Court—about 15, I should think—and games on the vacant lots, plus the thrill of playing in houses still under construction (I was a sure-footed rafter-walker) lent pioneer zest to life in the new neighbourhood.

“The Court” stretched North-South from Magnolia Street to Hill Street, both of which led to zones of different but equally intense enjoyment. Just beyond Hill Street, which was always sweetly redolent of a nearby tobacco factory, there was a livery-stable whose friendly boss allowed us to visit the horses in their stalls; while at the other end, Magnolia Street bordered on a small public park with giant trees, and slopes for sledding, that had recently been presented to the city by the owners, a branch of the Wilmington Dupont family, some of whom still lived in the park.

The former Meta Dupont, who was now a widow with three children: Greta, about my age, Alfred and Arthur Coleman, made her home with her sister, Miss Zara Dupont, “Miss Sadie” to us. Both women seemed to live entirely for the three fatherless children and their house was a place we loved to go to. I recall the weekly dancing classes with Miss Sadie at the piano, accompanying us in the Lancers—tatatah, ta-tah, ta-tah (remember?)—the Virginia reel and many of the square dances that are again so popular in the United States. The lemonade that followed was particularly appreciated.

The Coleman family later moved into the Court and the old house was razed. Here as before, the children had a large playground and even a long, low

6. It was to be the “century of the child” prophesied by the, at that time, well-known Scandinavian writer, Ellen Key.

playhouse, both of which were enjoyed by all the neighbourhood children who gathered there to play ball, croquet, tennis and an endless game we called “horse-show.” This involved imitation by two-legged humans of the paces performed for exhibition by four-legged animals, an accomplishment for which some of us were more talented than others. Blue, red, white and yellow ribbons were seriously awarded by a jury of experts and we neighed and stamped our feet realistically while awaiting their decisions.

As I recall, my own talents in this line were limited to the canter and trot, while Greta Coleman was herself so convinced that she was a horse, that she was able to add to these basic paces the much more intricate “rack,” which is a combined trot and canter, with “all four feet being off ground together at once,” to quote my eminently serious Oxford dictionary. I regret that I have no photograph of Greta performing this act of levitation but I recall that she won most of the blue ribbons with it.

A great adventure was the purchase with our own pocket-money of a rickety old horse marked for the stockyards, whom we baptised “Charity” and vowed to restore to health and happiness. The brushing and currying of Charity’s poor, mangy coat, care of his stall, water-bucket and feed-bag, proved to be the source of never-ending activity and interest. These were also the kinds of responsibility that very soon only appealed to a few true believers, which eliminated rough older boys, such as Donald [Jolas’s older brother] and his gang of cynical robber-barons, and allowed us to pursue our dream of total rehabilitation for Charity, untaunted and in peace.

After a few weeks, although nothing could hide those protruding ribs, to our indulgent eyes, Charity seemed to be as ready as he ever would be for a test of the results of our pedagogical methods: we would hitch him to the “trap” and judge, in action, his improvement; a very ambitious project that required both manpower and method.

For the trap had long been in disuse as also the harness, which required mending, cleaning, rubbing and polishing, in addition to preparing Charity himself for the event.

As I reconstruct the Charity episode, I have the impression that we worked not only days but weeks—months?—to prepare for this apotheosis. And above all I see myself as having been of little faith. Indeed, but for Greta, who dismissed with contempt all doubts and objections, I fear that the project might have fallen through. But Greta was not only the eldest, she was also a Dupont; she it was who had had the vision, it would, it must, succeed.

And what’s more, it did succeed. That is, after having been sponged, curried and brushed beyond all recognition, Charity was actually hitched to a by now immaculately clean trap, his harness rubbed and shining. He made the trip along