

Marjorie Nicolson

Phattie Morris

Curiously enough, the Nova Scotian town that is most vivid in my memory is one in which I never lived and which I recall only vaguely from an occasional visit—Windsor, in Hants County, on the Avon River. And the person I remember best is a girl I never knew, Lissie Morris. Everyone in Windsor knew Lissie, though they might not have recognized that spelling of her name for she was christened just plain “Lizzie.” No fancy “Elizabeth” for her mother, a woman, I suspect, who had no poetry in her soul. The boys and girls of Windsor, however, usually called her not “Lizzie” or even “Liz” but “Fatty.” Never was she to escape that nickname, though during the period when she loftily changed her *zeds* to *esses*, hoping that later acquaintance might think her name at least “Melissa,” she also strove for elegance in her nickname and became, as she remained all her life to intimate friends, “Phattie Morris.”

A little butterball was Phattie, sometimes during her most buxom periods almost as broad as she was tall—or rather short, for while she insisted that she stood exactly five feet, she always exaggerated. She did not mind her nickname, which, indeed, was given her more in love than laughter, for in that happy Saturn’s reign such fatness was not held a stain! Calories were as unknown to her as vitamins. She did not brood upon her plumpness and develop complexes and inhibitions. She had no presage that in time to come fat youngsters would often turn out psychological problems. I remember that shortly after I went to Smith College in 1927-8, the community was electrified when a trusted bank-teller absconded with the funds and was tried for grand larceny, at which time a psychiatrist made a strong plea for him, insisting that the theft went back to a deep-seated neurosis because the teller had had “a fat childhood.” On that basis Phattie Morris had every right to rob the Bank of England, but she never did, nor did she worry much about her figure. Those were days of curves, when “fellows,” as her generation called them, liked their girls to exist in three dimensions, rather than functionally stark and modernistic.

In spite of her plumpness—perhaps because of it—there is no question in my mind that Phattie was the prettiest girl in Windsor. There were more beautiful girls whom she occasionally envied, tall girls, lithe as willow wands, graceful and supple, and there was one handsome girl she never envied at all, since for all her classical beauty she was icily regular, splendidly null. Phattie was neither handsome nor beautiful, yet never, I think, was there a girl so pretty. She was not peaches and cream. Her cheeks, which she had inherited from her Scottish forebears, were the glowing red of wild strawberries that seem somehow sweeter and more succulent as they ripen in the brief Canadian spring than any other berries that ever melted in one's mouth. Her cream was a rich country lustre, completely unknown to city-dwellers who associate cream with bottles. Never did Phattie need make-up. God had given her brilliance, in attempts to imitate which later girls turned to Schiaparelli or Hudnut. All her colors were intense—the deep, dark brown of her hair that grew so luxuriantly that it hung to her knees until impatiently she cut it off, radical that she was in her generation. As if to add to the God's plenty with which her Maker had endowed her, her mouth was that adornment for which modern girls strive and fail with their lipsticks—the true, the perfect Cupid's bow.

"*La donna e mobile.*" I never hear that phrase without thinking of another kind of mobility, that of Phattie's face. She was to wrinkle early—a fact that never ceased to distress her—because she gave her facial muscles no rest, as indeed she never learned to rest any part of her overactive self. She talked and laughed, always, with her whole face, hands, body. Devoted though I am to Milton, I have never really liked his calm, cool, composed, dispassionate angels, across whose faces runs no play of expression. There were little criss-cross lines in Phattie's fine skin ever since I can remember the woman she became, but no one except herself ever noticed them, or, if they did, recognized them for what they were—lines of laughter. Always I seem to remember young Phattie laughing. Indeed, those boys and girls of Windsor eternally flit across my inward eye like *L'Allegro's* companions, with their

Quips and Cranks and wanton Wiles,
Nods and Becks and wreathed Smiles.

As in "*L'Allegro*," the central character, who gives unity to the whole, is "Laughter holding both his sides." How they loved to laugh, those boys and girls of Windsor, how they exulted in their quips and cranks and wanton wiles, the tricks they played upon each other and upon their

elders, tales of which once sounded so daring to my childish ears, memories of which, when I now pick up a paper to read still another account of a youthful crime, seem like the innocence of the Age of Gold.

How shall I bring her back, this girl I never knew, of whom I know so much? Shall I tell you about her vanity—she was very vain—and describe her on one of the many occasions when she deliberately bought shoes much too small, and hobbled upon them for a whole season (Scots did not throw away shoes merely because they hurt), never thinking of a future when she was to suffer for half a century from feet as tortured as those of any Chinese woman? Shall I remember her in that hammock, swung between two apple trees near a grape-arbor in the Acadian Valley, where she used to lie, reading whatever in her day passed for novels, eating grapes or apples, or, best of all, chocolates sent by her “beaus,” piling on the poundage, secure in the belief of her happy generation that overweight was neither a sin nor a social misdemeanor? Shall I describe her singing in the choir, or taking a leading part in *Patience*, or playing the organ in church on Sunday, at first an old cottage organ, later a real pipe organ, pumped by the village idiot?* Or shall I confess that she was always a flirt, and describe her to you first on an evening in her teens, when she and one of her chums were doing their best to impress a male student of King’s College who had temporarily captured their hearts? Perhaps that will do for a start, since it tells a great deal about Phattie.

King’s College is an old foundation established in 1790, but Phattie and the other Windsor girls were less concerned with its past than with its present, since every year it brought to Windsor an influx of young men on whom the local maidens doted. Eying them from afar, they chose what their daughters were to call their “heart throbs,” to whom they laid blatant suit, though always in most decorous ways. Having discovered a new Adonis, Phattie and her chum set themselves to impress him. Since he was a college student, he should be responsive to literature. Phattie, never a literary student and with the most unstable

*It is only just to say that when, rereading an early version of these words, I looked up casually to ask Phattie what finally became of the village idiot, she replied sternly: “You can call Billy an idiot if you must, I suppose. Lots of people did. But he could recite more Bible stories than anyone except the minister. He did all the errands for the town, as there were no telephones then, and he gave every cent he ever earned to his mother. Billy was a nice boy, even if he had been dropped on his head when he was a baby.” “What became of him?” I again asked idly. “He was stoned to death just for fun by some ‘Christian’ boys who were not supposed to be idiots,” replied Phattie tersely. Windsor, as I have suggested, was an epitome of the world.

memory in the world, set herself grimly to learn poetry. Having observed him from a distance and worked out his daily program, the girls managed upon every conceivable and inconceivable occasion to set themselves in his path, until the young collegian must have been heartily sick of these lovelorn adolescents. Upon a winter's evening, sparkling but bitter cold, as winter nights were in Nova Scotia, they arranged to meet him, now passing their idol with quick steps, now falling behind, but always close enough so that he might hear their conversation and be impressed by the fact that, instead of talking silly schoolgirl nonsense, they lisped in numbers, for the numbers came. I regret that I cannot spot the quotation Phattie had chosen as her great thought for the evening, but I do remember as much of it as she ever knew:

I am not cold, though I may seem to be
Unfeeling, hard and passionless as night.

"I am not cold," declaimed Phattie in that lively voice of hers, the carrying powers of which often brought her into trouble. "I am not cold"—with passionate over-and-under-tones, as, running a little in her tight shoes, she breathlessly passed the adored. And then her tricky memory failed her, or perhaps her emotions overcame her. Raising her voice in desperation, hoping that by beginning again she might be given back her memory, she chanted, "I am not cold. . . !" The reiteration was too much for the King's College student who turned upon his heel abruptly: "Well, if you're not, you ought to be," the voice of common-sense cut across romance, "for it's ten below zero, and I'd advise you youngsters to get home where you belong!" That was one of Phattie's few failures. Ordinarily, like the Canadian "Mounties," those Windsor girls got their man!

But Phattie did not waste many of her evenings that way, for winter evenings were too much fun in Nova Scotia. Since I have an allusive memory, I somehow get those boys and girls of Windsor mixed up in my mind with the youths of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, which is strange since I am sure that Phattie never read *The Prelude* and would not have cared for it if she had. Yet when she used to tell her little daughter about those evenings when they raced down the hills on bobsleds, or drove in sleighs with jingling bells across the snows to oyster stews, most of all when they skated on the pond with bonfires blazing along the shore, she was an unconscious poet, suggesting the same vivid memories of twilight evenings on the ice:

In the frosty season, when the sun
 Was set, and visible for many a mile,
 The cottage windows blazed through twilight gloom,

a happy time it was indeed for all of them; for Phattie "it was the time of rapture," for Phattie loved to skate. With the boys and girls of Windsor she

wheeled about,
 Proud and exulting, like an untired horse
 That cares not for his home.

I am sure that Wordsworth never fell down as Phattie often did, cracking the ice, rising in laughter to skate and fall and rise and laugh again. Yet awkward as she was, she felt, as did the slender poet, something of the rhythm of the universe, which the young often catch first of all when skating.

There was a very different Phattie who appeared in stories as I grew older, who lived a different life. Phattie's mother was an invalid, who suffered from a progressive arthritic condition called in her day "bone rheumatism," probably the ultimate result of many sea-voyages she had made with her husband, the Captain, during which she had more than once been shipwrecked. Even in Phattie's early youth, long before her mother finally became bedridden, there were periods when it was too difficult to have an active youngster about the house, and so Phattie was taken to sea by her father. All in all, she spent more than half her youth on sailing ships, and was, I suppose, one of the last English women of our time who remembers a way of life much more common in her mother's generation.

As a result of her curious childhood Phattie's own formal education was scrappy enough. A few terms spent in Windsor schools; then a year or two years away from home, with weeks and months on shipboard, her only companions the sailors and Addie, wife of the Negro cook, who took care of the little girl. Then perhaps a short stay in a foreign school, usually in London or Liverpool, sometimes on the continent, where the mistresses were undoubtedly perplexed by the youngster's precocity in some subjects, her complete lack of knowledge of others. Then off again to the continent, the Near East, or South America, and home again to Windsor for perhaps a term of schooling. Phattie herself always regretted her lack of formal education, and during later adolescent years when she was back in Windsor nursing her mother, she tried to compensate by

taking lessons in Latin and French from King's College professors who occasionally advertised "courses for young ladies," which I suspect, from her descriptions, they taught with their left hands.

But if she had little conventional education, she more than made up for some of the subjects she missed. She knew geography as her daughter was never to know it, knew it intimately and from experience. There were few continental ports she had not explored, and with her father she often travelled inland into European countries. She knew strange seas, other than the Atlantic and the Pacific. Indeed, did not the sailors tell her solemnly that her glowing red cheeks were the result of their having dipped her into the Red Sea when she went to India? Through her vivid memories I came to know not only India but the magnificent harbor of Rio and other South American ports my own eyes have never seen. She remembered exotic lands and islands that were only names in books to me. She knew from first-hand experience that in the tropics bananas grew "upside-down," not as I had seen them in the New York greengrocer's, downside-up. She knew great architecture and pictures at an age when I myself had never seen even reproductions of them. During long weeks and months at sea, she read incessantly, so that many classics were here intimate friends. You could not catch her on Dickens and Thackeray and George Eliot. Most of all, she knew *people*, people of many lands and races and classes, from common seaman to aristocrat. As truly as Tennyson's "Ulysses," she could say:

on shore, and when
Thro' scudding drifts, the rainy Hyades
Vext the dim sea. . . .
Much have I seen and known; cities of men,
And manners, climates, councils, governments.

From varied experiences she had learned at first hand the meaning of such words as "courage" and "patience," "justice" and "fairness," "truth" and "honor." What is a "liberal" education? We may disagree on the *means*, but if Phattie's education did not show the *ends* for which we strive, then I have been using that abused term incorrectly all my life.

Even apart from her unusual training in the school of life, Phattie Morris must have a place in any reminiscence of my own educational experiences, for she was an important part of all my early education. With the superb egocentricity of childhood, I took for granted that my mother's extraordinary adventures were designed merely to store up in her memory tales through which she opened new worlds of the imagina-

tion to her children. As I have listened to discussions of modern education, forced upon me for many years, and realized the extent to which the school and the teacher today seem to have become entirely responsible (and blameworthy) for the whole education of the child, I often wonder what has happened to the happy family life some of us used to know, when one's father read aloud in the evening, and one's mother ended a perfect day of childhood with bedtime stories. I am sure the hair of some modern psychologists would stand on end like quills upon the fretful porpentine if they could hear the blood-and-thunder tales our mother often told us at night. One trouble with many psychologists is that they have learned their lessons only out of books. They did not have the luck to have Phattie Morris for a mother!

Hers were not all bedtime stores, by any manner of means. When we were very young, before school days had begun, we used to dog her steps from room to room, demanding "stories" as we went. Best of all, I sometimes thought, were the "kitchen stories" she used to tell when she was making cookies for hungry little appetites, and particularly tales that seemed a natural accompaniment to a deep pot of seething fat from which she turned out doughnuts (not, I beg of you, "fried cakes"!) by the dozen while two round-eyed children sat by, voraciously eating the "holes." (That statement will be cryptic only to the unfortunate whose mothers never made doughnuts and so do not understand how children ate the holes.)

As a story-teller, she was a "natural." Incapable of expressing herself on paper, for her pen always lagged behind her teeming brain and the niceties of sentence structure and exact punctuation were to "hir unknowe," she was a genius when it came to the spoken word. She deserves a place with oral tale-tellers of old, who in sagas and eddas have transmitted the romance of the past from one generation to another. Oh, of course she brought us up on Mother Goose and fairy tales, scrupulous to hand on to her children the goodly traditions of childhood. But we knew very early in life that Jack and the Beanstalk and Snow White, good enough in their way, palled beside a better kind of story. When she repeated such written tales, she was cramped by "authority"—not to mention the letter-perfect memories of her children—but when she let herself go, never was there a more vivid, more vital story-teller. Intimately as we came to know all the tales of her youth, they were always fresh and new each time she told them. Looking back to them in days when I first began to study Greek epic and Greek drama, I realized something that I had difficulty in explaining to my

non-classical students—that there may indeed be artistic suspense even in tales of which the audience knows the end from the beginning. The plots of Aeschylus and Sophocles and Euripides were familiar to every member of a Greek audience, as my mother's plots were familiar to us. Yet somehow there was always suspense, as there must be in any tale told by a real artist. I can still feel the catch in my breath, the lump in my throat, the awe and wonder over the strangeness of the familiar as my mother told her thrice-told tales.

Her range was remarkable. She had a story for every mood. There was no domestic tragedy or comedy for which there had not been a parallel in Windsor. That little town became in my mind an epitome of the world. Modern sophisticated readers laugh at Agatha Christie's "Miss Marple," who seldom ventured beyond the tiny English village in which she lived, yet who was able by mere analogy to solve crimes that baffled Scotland Yard, because she knew intimately one village and all the men and women in it. My mother could have solved the same problems for the same reason. There was no situation for which she could not find a Windsor, parallel from which to point a moral or adorn a tale. Windsor will always remain to me, as Thrums to Sentimental Tommy and his sisten Elspeth, the most remarkable of towns, unique among all places in the world.

"Tell about the Little Hero of Windsor!" we would command, and there would come a loved story of the Avon River with its mysterious ebb and flow, "the highest tide in the world," our mother would boast, a river that became curiously confused in my childish imagination with poems of Kipling or Matthew Arnold, which perhaps our father had read aloud earlier in the evening. Sometimes in my mind, as the mighty waters from the Basin of Minas swirled into that mud-bottomed river, where proud ships listed helplessly when the tides were out, the dawn came up like thunder out of China 'cross the Bay. Sometimes the Avon seemed rather the home of the Forsaken Merman, waters where in my fancy

the wild white horses play,
Champ and chafe and toss in the spray,

echoing the forlorn cry, "Children dear, was it yesterday?" The story of Willy Francis, the little hero of Windsor, was not a remarkable one, but after all he *was* our cousin—or our mother's cousin, which was mysteriously the same thing—and he had leaped into the breach in that strange river and dared the quicksands to save a child who had lingered too long playing on the forbidden river bed.

Windsor was a place of heroism and comedy, also a place of tragedy and melodrama. "I just love meller-drammer," declared a maid I once had, "and the mellerer it is, the better!" There was plenty of "meller-drammer" in Phattie's tales. I *suppose* the Great Fire of London was more devastating, though, even in Pepys' vivid account, it will never seem to me quite so dramatic and spectacular as the Great Fire of Windsor; and the tolling of the bells for the dead in the Plague of 1665 echoes confusedly in my memory with the sound of bells that tolled for the dozens of children who died during the plague of "black diphtheria" in a later fearful *annus mirabilis* in Windsor, Nova Scotia. The Avon River could be cruel as well as romantic, for it claimed the life of my grandfather's younger brother, who, after a three years' voyage, had returned to his young wife and the child he had seen only once. Reaching Windsor just too late for the one daily train that ran to Avondale, he impatiently started to make the rest of the trip on foot. Since the tide was out, he walked along the river bed, because that was the shortest way home. But, alas, he had forgotten a place of treachery; one misstep, and the ravenous quicksand sucked him down ferociously, and so Uncle James never came home to the wife and little son who sat watching for him at the window.

As I look back, I can see that there was usually a touch of melodrama in most of Phattie's tales, even in those that started out to be merely placid or reminiscent or sad. "Tell about your mother, Mum," we would say on occasion, though this was not one of our "most favourite" stories. Somehow I remained a little in awe of the grandmother I never saw. There were materials for romance in that story, to be sure, for, like many captain's wives of her generation, our dead grandmother had sailed the seven seas with her husband, though I suspect her instincts had been for the quiet cloistered life of a small town. As I study the oil painting made more than a century ago, the only picture of her I have ever seen, she does not seem to belong to the family I know. Very different in appearance from her pretty harumscarum daughter, she seems, as indeed she was in her ancestry, a patrician and an aristocrat. I surmise in her many strains other than undoubted British blue blood. I know there was one Huguenot ancestor; I suspect from her portrait that Spanish grandees may have gone into her making. But I never knew her well, because her daughter remembered her clearly only during long years of invalidism.

When her second daughter was born, many years after the first who inherited her mother's dignity and dark handsomeness, she was already too old and perhaps even then too ill, to play with her child as our young

mother played with us. Reserved, distant, aloof, she dutifully saw that her younger daughter had everything a child needed, but particularly she saw to it that she had discipline. Every morning in those early days, before Phattie could run laughing off to school, the youngster must sweep down the steep hall stairs, taking out each stair-rod, brushing every inch of thick carpet. There was no dust in Windsor; there was never any dirt in my grandmother's house. Those stairs needed no such scrupulous attention, but in her mother's Puritanical mind, Lizzie did! From the bed on which she lived out the last years of her life (a bed carried down to the sitting room against her sense of decorum), the invalid supervised her household. As time went on, the "creeping paralysis," as they used to call it, made her more and more helpless until, when her daughter was old enough to return from travelling to take over the main care of her mother, my grandmother could move no muscles in her body except those of her neck. Yet with all the pain—and it must have been intense—never a word of complaint crossed the lips that even in her early portrait seem sealed against the world. "It is God's will; His will be done." A strange and vengeful God, He seemed to me, who could torture a woman whose life had been blameless, who believed and trusted Him as she did. For my grandmother was an intensely religious woman, who had been "converted" from the Anglicanism in which she had been brought up to stern Nova Scotian Methodism that denied so many human instincts and seemed to place a premium upon sacrifice and suffering. "Whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth!" There was fervor, even exultation in that phrase as Puritan women like my grandmother used it, as it had been used by those early martyrs, the Quaker women, who seemed to exult in their sufferings which proved them chosen vessels. My grandmother, I think, believed that she was of the "chosen," chosen to bear the Divine Wrath, the prick of One who came to bring not peace but a sword. With such sadistic Puritanism I had no sympathy even as a child, though it never ceased to awe me.

But there was another aspect of my grandmother's religion that fascinated me. When later I came to know and envy a little girl who was the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter and was born with a caul on her head, I replied boastfully to her boastings: "Well, anyway, my grandmother had second sight!" So, indeed, she had, though her Puritanism was disturbed, even ashamed of that mysterious "gift," which I suspect smacked too much of mysticism for her comfort. It is curious how often that power—whatever it is—appears among Gaels, who seem otherwise the epitome of common sense. Looking into the

glowing coals in the grate, or more often at a picture of one of my grandfather's ships over the mantelpiece, my grandmother would call her daughter from work or play. "Lizzie," she would bid abruptly, "write this down. Your cousin has just fallen from the mast on your father's ship; he is not dead but he is badly injured." The matter was never further discussed, for the invalid refused to talk about her strange power. Always Lizzie wrote it down, and always the vision proved correct, for when the armada limped into port some months later, the captain's log proved conclusively that the accident had happened at the time and under the circumstances seen by the invalid. Curious, I used to think, that she seldom saw happy things. Hers were, with a few exceptions, sombre visions of battle, murder or sudden death.

No, these stories were not our favourites, yet they enthralled us, holding children from play. But, "Tell about Grandfather, Mum!" These were the most familiar, the most romantic, the most exciting tales of all. It is one of the great regrets of my life—bad timing again on my part—that I never saw Captain John Morris, who died just before I was born. He would chuckle at the idea of being a character in a story, I think, for he paid no attention to "book learning," having run away from home when he was eleven years old to serve in Her Majesty's Navy in the very slight capacity of cabin boy. All his life he followed the sea, working his way up until he was, as Phattie first remembers him, a captain, commanding some of the vessels of which he superintended the building during periods he spent ashore. It was a lucrative business, Nova Scotian shipbuilding in those early days, and until Robert Fulton's tea-kettle put an end to it and the efficiency of steam destroyed forever the dipping beauty of sail, Captain Morris was a "warm man."

Generous to a fault—he supported a whole host of less provident relatives—and always affectionate to the little daughter he so often took with him on his voyages, he was nevertheless a martinet in some ways. He had the true Scottish horror of debt. Upon the only occasion in her young life that young Phattie ever ventured to charge a purchase she had made in a Windsor store where the Captain's credit was good for any amount, she was sent back to return the trifle she had bought. "I never borrowed a cent and I never owed a cent." That was his motto and the family was held to it strictly. You paid as you went in the Morris family and if you had not the money ready at the moment, you went without. The Captain was a precisian, too, about order; "a place for everything and everything in its place," whether on the ship, where order is essential to safety, or in the home. And he who had lived by bells all his life

was adamant about time. When he retired from the sea and lived at home with Phattie as his housekeeper, she had her troubles. Laughing and talking with those boys and girls of Windsor, who felt themselves lords of both space and time, she would suddenly realize by a conditioned reflex that it was almost the hour for the Captain to come home to dinner. What bustling activity went on then, the whole crowd falling over one another to get the table laid, in the false hope of persuading the Captain that dinner was just around the corner!

Good husband and kind father, he nevertheless remained the Captain who gave orders and spoke his mind with the utmost frankness. When those boys of Windsor, not to mention the juniors and seniors at King's College, became Phattie's suitors, she had her moments of acute embarrassment. If the knocker sounded on a wild winter's night, with a snowstorm raging outside, the Captain would stride to the front door, throw it open, and glaring at a gangling youth, growl: "It's not fit for a dog to be out! Anybody who has a home ought to stay in it!" It must have taken all the courage those brave young men possessed to venture to "call," even though, I suspect, they realized that the Captain's bark was much more ferocious than his bite. Yet to their credit—or the credit of Phattie's charms—be it said that not even the loudest barking of the watching dog kept the long line of suitors away from the house where Captain Morris and his pretty daughter lived.

But I seem to remember Captain Morris best not in those later days of retirement but during the many years he sailed the seas. There was no country reached by water that he did not know. From port to port he went with his romantic freight,

a cargo of ivory,
And apes and peacocks,
Sandalwood, cedarwood, and sweet white wine.

For a year, two years, three years, he would be absent from home, returning ultimately with shawls from India, bales of silk from China, the thirteen silk dresses that hung in my invalid grandmother's closet, and those mysterious conch shells I used to hold to my childish ears to hear the surge and thunder of the seas over which my grandfather had sailed.

I am so sorry for the millions of children whose mothers never went to sea! Literature came alive to me early in youth because so much of it seemed to have been written about my mother and her father. How often have I started off with them on one of their voyages—an imaginary journey to me, but real enough to them—saying to myself,

The ship was cheered, the harbour cleared,
 Merrily did we drop
 Below the kirk, below the hill,
 Below the lighthouse top.

"It was the schooner Hesperus, and she sailed the wintry sea." I knew all about that, for was not the captain in my mind my own grandfather who "had taken his little daughter to bear him company"? As for the wreck of the Hesperus, I knew all that was to be known about wrecks, for, so far as I can recall, all my Scottish ancestors on both sides of the family arrived in Nova Scotia as a result of wrecks in strange places. Like flotsam and jetsam they drifted in with the tide. All my life I have heard the call of the sea:

I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
 Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied.

Even in metropolitan New York I found myself a dwelling-place on the Hudson—which, after all, is a tidal river—where I could look out of my window at ships and sea gulls and, when the wind and tide were right, almost smell the salt. The sea is in my blood. Always I have felt the "calling" of those who go down to the sea in ships, and in church used to sing with fervor that made it almost poetry that hymn, the import of which I understood so well,

O, listen when we cry to Thee
 For those in peril on the sea.

Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, when I first discovered it, seemed to me not a play but a transcript of life. And on those occasions when, crossing the Atlantic, I have watched burials at sea, I have experienced none of the horror felt by my landlubber friends. To me that is the cleanest, most decent, most fitting of all ends for a far traveller.

Literature came alive to me in childhood. So did geography. So did history—even American history of which I knew little in my Canadian days, when Montcalm and Wolfe were much more familiar to me than George Washington and Ulysses S. Grant. Was not my grandfather commander of the very last ship that sailed out of Charleston Harbor on that dramatic day in 1861? Did he not hear with his own ears the firing of the guns on Fort Sumter, echoes of which during my Canadian childhood were so involved with "the shot heard round the world" that in my American youth I dared take issue with a teacher who insisted that

the shot heard round the world was fired in placid Concord, Massachusetts, not in the harbour of Charleston, as I had been brought up to believe.

Yet exciting as was that tale of the American Civil War, we children in youth realized that our mother knew it only at second hand, and we preferred dramas of the sea in which she had played a part, tales more fascinating to us than *Moby Dick*. We could see our mother as a little girl on the deck of a full-rigged ship, learning to splice rope and make ingenious sailors' knots, the art of which she tried without success to teach her awkward daughter. We could hear the voices of the sailors singing their sea-chanteys, with expurgated versions of which she sang her children to sleep. Long before we ever heard of vitamins, we knew that lemons protected sailors from scurvy, that plague of long sea-voyages, for our grandfather always carried barrels of lemons and saw to it that sailors took them, with or without grog. During two World Wars, I read of spectacular surgical operations performed at sea, often by amateurs. In the Second World War, I found myself somewhat supercilious about such operations, since the amateurs had the benefit of radio communication. My grandfather, like every sea-captain worth his salt, was a surgeon without benefit of college or university. He could set bones. More than once he successfully amputated an arm or leg smashed beyond repair. There were no anaesthetics on boats in those days. Usually the amateur surgeon mercifully plied his patient with rum or whiskey until the patient was past caring. We were proud of our grandfather when he acted as surgeon, but still more proud of the story our mother used to tell of an occasion when a real surgeon cut open the Captain's back to remove a tumor (which, from my mother's graphic description, I visualized as an exaggerated centipede). Stoic as he was, the Captain refused the temporary Lethe of alcohol and went through that painful operation completely conscious and with never a groan.

Fortitude was a virtue not confined to the Captain. His little daughter learned courage the hard way. "Tell about your crooked finger, Mum!" we used to demand, and picking up her right hand we would look curiously at the strange index finger that grew askew. Our grandfather was an excellent captain, but as a child psychologist he left something to be desired. Upon her first trip with him, when she was little more than an infant, he had sternly enjoined her under no circumstances to put her fingers near doors which on a rolling ship slam only too abruptly. As well tell a child not to put beans in her nose—a pastime that would probably seldom occur to any child. Quite naturally the little girl ex-

perimented upon a hinged door. The shop rolled, the door slammed, and the end of a childish finger was cleanly and completely cut off. More terrified of the sure punishment she knew would come from her parent than of the agony of the moment, the little girl uttered not one word or whimper. She simply leaned down, picked up her missing finger-end from the floor, tied it on with a rag—undoubtedly a dirty rag—and stoically bore the pain. The superb health of childhood triumphed over the laws of hygiene, and only a very crooked index finger remained to tell the tale she used to tell her children. *You* may have the boy who stood on the burning deck (very foolishly, I always thought). *My Casabianca* is a little girl who went through pain and the perils of sea with a courage equal to that of her father, who had known what it meant to go down with his ship.

I could go on indefinitely with Phattie's tales, which are much more vivid in my memory than are the *Arabian Nights*. After all, during the years of our childhood, she told us stories on more than one thousand and one nights, tales of "moving accidents by flood," and "hair-breadth 'scapes'." You would be wearied far sooner than I if I tried to recapture all those stories that so inflamed my young imagination. I shall tell you only one more—I warn you that it is a long one, but to us it was the climax of them all, as it marked the climax of Phattie's seafaring youth. So filled with almost incredible adventure is that saga of the sea that I did not depend entirely on my own memory in retelling it, but went to authority. When I began this tale, Phattie was still alive—very much alive, indeed—and during a weekend I spent with her celebrating her eightieth birthday and the fifty-seventh anniversary of her marriage, I made her write down for me some of her recollections in tranquillity. At first she demurred. "I write so badly," she said apologetically, she who talked so well in the style of *Purchas his Pilgrimage*, of Coryat in his *Crudities*, even of Captain Lemuel Gulliver. At last, however, she did write it down, so that I shall tell the last of her tales in part from my second-hand childhood recollection, in part from the vivid memories of one of the last women of this century who grew up on sailing ships.

Phattie was just sixteen when this most "mellerdramatic" of all her adventures occurred. She and her father had left Nova Scotia on the four-master *Hannah Morris*, named for my mother's older sister. "We had had a wonderful trip crossing to Antwerp, only twenty-eight days," noted my mother, who lived to see Puck put a girdle round the earth in little more than forty minutes. It had all been great fun, that visit to the continent, for many Canadian ships were "in," and there had been plen-

ty of social life for the wives and daughters. Phattie and her father had visited the field of Waterloo, had gone in to Paris, but better yet, Phattie on a bet—she loved bets—had climbed all the steps leading to the four-hundred foot spire of Antwerp Cathedral, where the organ-master had let her play the chimes.

At last the time came for departure. "Antwerp has a wonderful harbor," she notes, "and twenty-two of us started out together." Remember that, you landlubbers—twenty-two proud sailing ships from the four quarters of the globe started out together one autumn morning in 1883. At first the omens were auspicious:

The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free.

Phattie put it more literally: "We got through the straits of Dover and were going with a fair wind when all at once a storm came up."

And now the storm blast came, and he
Was tyrannous and strong;
He struck with his o'ertaking wings
And chased us south along.

They were off the Isle of Wight when the storm, the worst my grandfather ever remembered, burst with fury. All sails were furled. Ropes were strung from fore to aft for the sailors to cling to. Two men were lashed to the wheel. Alone in their cabin the wife of the Negro cook and the young daughter of the skipper waited for commands both of them had long learned to obey instantly. On two occasions the Captain fought his way to them, the first time to tell them that he was putting overside a boat in which they were to take off with three sailors. "Put on your warmest clothes," he ordered, "but don't try to take anything else." Within thirty minutes the second mate came to report that the boat had been smashed to pieces in the seas. "There is no chance of launching another," he said and added sombrely, "We are doomed!"

Once more during the long night watch the Captain appeared for a moment. "Get down on your knees and pray," he commanded, "I haven't time." Probably they did, for both Addie and the youngster had had a strict upbringing in Puritan churches, but my mother remembers less the prayers than the music of that strange night. "Addie had a concertina," she recalls, "and a lovely Negro voice, and she played and we sang hymns all night long."

With the dawn the storm died almost as suddenly as it had arisen, "as storms so often do," comments my mother, a true philosopher. Addie and Phattie went up on deck to look out over a sultry ocean on which the *Hannah Morris* rode alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea. Of those twenty-two gallant ships that only yesterday had set out proudly from Antwerp Harbor, one only was destined to come home to port. The *Hannah Morris* still rode the waves. But her adventures had only begun.

Common sense should have told the Captain not to play further with his luck. He should have gone into Portsmouth or Land's End, the last possible ports, to replenish his water supply. Fresh water was carried in casks and since two had gone overboard during the storm, much of the ship's drinking water was lost. But, as my mother's notes add laconically, "It was a fair wind and so he risked it." Why? The reason will, I am afraid, damn my grandfather forever to a modern "labor-minded" generation. The stay in Antwerp for repairs and cargo had taken longer than he had anticipated and on this particular trip my grandfather was not sailing for himself. He was working for others and he had a curious old-fashioned conscience that made him feel that he owed more loyalty to his employers than when he was sailing for himself. In his decision not to put into an English port, he sacrificed labor to capital. Yet curiously enough his sailors—who never knew they were "slave labor"—agreed with him. Those sailors belonged to a hard-drinking, hard-thinking generation, strangely primitivistic in their attitude toward safety regulations and hours of overtime. It never occurred to them to demand the number of lifeboats required by modern maritime law. With cold common sense they were aware that if one lifeboat could not weather such a storm as they had just experienced, twelve would be no better. As for hours of labor, what was there to do on a long sea-voyage if one did not work? Old-fashioned as they were, they trusted the Captain, with whom most of them had made many a voyage. If the Captain decided against going in to Portsmouth or Land's End, theirs not to reason why. They had shipped on "for the duration," a phrase that in their minds had nothing to do with the fortunes of war but only with the perils of the sea.

All might still have gone well, had it not been for the "Rolling Forties," the dread of every captain and sailor. In the Rolling Forties, the *Hannah Morris* ran first into head winds, then into storms. She lost both spars and sails, she who had no engines to fight the persistent current. Ten days of driving storms, with sailors again lashed to the wheel, then dead calm, worse than the motion of the ocean. It was autumn, the time

of the equinox, and the *Hannah Morris* rolled and rolled, ignominious before the forces of nature. One night a mast was split in two by lightning. They had been making for Newfoundland, from which they were driven back again and again by the elements. Then they steered for the southeast, but lost their rudder, and when the calm set in, they floated impotently for days:

Day after day, day after day,
We stuck, nor breath nor motion,
As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean.

Only at this point do Phattie's notes suggest any of the panic they must all have felt, captain and crew, Addie and the youngster. "Weeks passed, I don't remember how many. We had a little hard tack to eat and a few precious canned goods, but almost no water. A cup a day it was measured out to each of us, and it all seemed so ironic—I suppose that is the word—because everywhere we looked there was water and only water!" Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink. "Water was so precious," she writes, "that of course we never washed at all. Our lips were cracked and bleeding, since the salt blew over everything."

"With throats unslaked, with black lips baked," my mother and her father and Addie and the sailors, who never uttered a word of complaint, finally, after adventures much too numerous to rehearse, limped into the Azores. "There were so many distressed ships," my mother remembers, "that we had to wait a long time for supplies from Portugal, but that did not matter, for after our experiences, the Azores seemed like an enchanted world." I like to remember that it was at this time my Puritan grandmother had one of her few happy visions. Unlike their other relatives, she had showed little concern over the long silence. When her sixteen-year-old daughter returned, her mother said affectionately: "I saw you laughing among flowers, and I knew that all was well."

In the exotic islands romance came to Phattie in the person of a young Welshman from Swansea, whom I know only as "Captain Cummings," the youngest captain whose ship had found asylum in the Azores. "He had golden hair and a curly moustache," noted my mother. Honorably, according to the laws of "courthouseye" of his generation, he made his suit to the father rather than the daughter. My mother was only sixteen and the experience of her elder sister who had eloped at that age had been a warning to Captain Morris never to let anything of the sort hap-

pen to his younger daughter. So in old-fashioned terms, he “denied the suit,” and my mother, accustomed to obeying Captain’s orders, finally set sail from the romantic islands back to bleak Nova Scotia. Yet sixty years and more after the event, she had not quite forgotten the young captain from Swansea. “When the *Hannah Morris* was finally outfitted, the natives brought bushels of oranges and pineapples and filled all our empty bunks. During the great storm Father had broken three ribs, and the first mate had broken his arm, so, since we had to have a licensed pilot as long as we were in the harbour, Captain Cummings steered the *Hannah Morris* out to sea. The second mate was sick so when the Captain left I took over. As I took the wheel, I looked back to see four Portuguese sailors rowing Captain Cummings to shore. We dipped our flags and said good-bye.”

“We had a quick trip back,” she notes—I suppose another twenty-eight days—” and the moon was often so bright that I could read on deck. I remember reading there New Year’s Eve.” A mistress of anticlimax, my mother. I did not ask her what she read, nor what she felt when again she saw the kirk and the lighthouse she had left so long ago.

O Captain, my Captain, our fearful trip is done!
The ship had weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won.
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting....
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won.

Still gallant, the full-rigged *Hannah Morris* came home to Nova Scotia and my mother returned to Windsor which she was not to leave until she married my father.