

Anecdotalage

Recollections from a life well spent

[Sample]

Preface

It is a warm summer evening, and the sun hangs lazily above the horizon, seemingly loath to leave us. The tower, solitary reminder that the Château d’Alogny was once a fortress, casts long shadows across the terrace. The empty bottles ranged along the table stand mute testimony to the fact that we have dined long and well.

Here at home in France we are among friends — old friends — and as always the conversation is brisk and volatile, flitting easily from topic to topic, like a butterfly exploring blossoms, pausing briefly to sip nectar here, before moving on to draw more deeply elsewhere.

A passing remark is all it takes. Suddenly, a Proustian beam of remembrance penetrates the darkness, and in the accumulated debris that clutters the closet of memory, lights upon some dormant image that has long lain undisturbed. Released from its bondage of forgetfulness by the delicate kiss of a fine vintage, another story surfaces — and then another still. “Oh, you should write that down” I hear. Evidently the story has found its mark

Friends sometimes comment that I seem to have led an interesting life, which may be true, even though to me it has seemed perfectly normal — but I am heavily outnumbered in this opinion. Only I am aware of the burden of lost opportunities, the dreams of what might have been, and the embarrassing moments of inadequacy that weigh silently upon my conscience.

My dear Aunt Dorothy, fairy godmother and periodic financial ambulance, herself an indefatigable world traveller, had urged me to commit my adventures to paper when I first returned from Africa many years ago. As her one hundredth birthday approached I started to write in the hope she might still enjoy hearing about them — and those that followed. Almost fifty pages had been committed to its memory by the time my laptop was stolen, and I never had the heart to start over again before she finally passed on at 102.

I hesitate to call the writings here assembled an autobiography, for it is not a proper (nor even an improper) record my life, but merely a jumble of scenes and events, recalled haphazardly before the Lethe of dotage finally overwhelms me — and all is forever lost.

Years ago, in the Garden of the Hesperides, I stood on the banks of the Lethe as it ran deep underground through a cavern in Libya. Here I strained to catch a glimpse of Charon as he ferried the damned across the river of forgetfulness on their journey to Hades, — but without success. I may not have seen Charon, and did not encounter three-headed Cerberus, but I did bring back a new species of blind white

crayfish, *Typhlocaris lethe*, as evidence that, like Hercules, I too had returned safely from my journey to the underworld.

Only the reader can judge whether these jottings hint at a more-than-ordinary life.

Chapter One Childhood

I have been fortunate in having my childhood unusually well chronicled. This came about because in the early summer of 1940, when five years old, I crossed the Atlantic Ocean as a refugee and lived for the war years with an American foster family. The discovery, some sixty years later, of the complete correspondence that passed between my mother in war-torn Oxford and my foster mother in tranquil Connecticut, further supplemented by some thirty letters that I myself had dictated, opened a vivid and unparalleled window onto my life at that time.

Collected and edited under the title “*Safe Keeping – Echoes from a Vanished World*”, the story of these war years has already been told (if not yet published), but some of the highlights may be worth repeating here.

As the spectre of German invasion loomed large over Britain, the countries of western Europe having fallen in quick succession before the might of Hitler’s armies, an invitation had arrived from Yale¹ offering hospitality to Oxford university children. Just one month later a party of 105 children set sail from Liverpool bound for New Haven by way of Canada.

“I want to go home.” My plaintive five-year-old voice was barely audible above the howling wind and the columns of spray ricocheting across the deck, yet it expressed the sentiments of most, if not all the passengers on board — and brought my mother close to tears.

The old Cunard liner *SS Antonia* was four days out of Liverpool bound for Canada, battling heavy weather several hundred miles to the West of Ireland. In those far-off days, before aircraft routinely made the journey in a few hours, the sea passage to the New World could be long and arduous. Rough transatlantic crossings were always frightening — and memories of the *Titanic* disaster, barely thirty years earlier, were still fresh. Fear showed on many faces. But it was not simple, primitive fear at nature’s wrath, but fear borne of the knowledge of a threat more real and sinister — a hidden menace lurking somewhere beneath the waves.

While I cannot recall uttering the words that so fueled my mother’s distress, the occasion itself is etched vividly into my archive of early memories. It was Friday, July 12th, 1940, and the convoy that had escorted us from the mouth of the Mersey² was about to return to sea duties elsewhere. Suddenly alarms sounded, and we were rushed on deck to our lifeboat station — starboard side aft. The life-jackets, which we had been firmly instructed never to be without, were now donned in earnest. As we — my mother, two sisters and I — huddled together cold and bewildered, we learned that we were under attack from a German U-boat.

I was too young to experience the fear and foreboding that must have gripped the grown-ups. I recall only the intense excitement of the moment, preserved as an

¹ Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut.

² The River Mersey at Liverpool

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indelible mental image of the wake of a torpedo passing just a few feet under our stern — and of the heavy, ponderous explosions of depth charges dropped by our escorting Royal Navy Destroyers.”

“It was in the galleys of the *SS Antonia* that one of my cherished childhood beliefs would be shattered — although it was not the first to be undermined and lost. Disillusion had initially come to me when I saw Father Christmas, or Santa Claus, smoking a cigarette in the street. It was not the cigarette that concerned me, but the fact that there were two of him, chatting together.”

“The cramped cabin provided few opportunities for play. Even the spacious hallway into which it opened was not much better, for it was blocked with massive wooden crates, rumored to contain gold bullion destined for Fort Knox. Thus I was forced to find my own amusements — whenever I could escape my poor mother’s anxious gaze. It had struck me that the open ocean would be a splendid place for fishing. A ball of string and a bent pin were quickly procured — I don’t recall exactly how, so it couldn’t have been a great challenge. But bait — that was something else!

So it was that I found myself in the *Antonia’s* spacious galley. Clearly the chef would be the proper person to approach on such a quest. But horror of horrors! Like the multiple Santas, there were at least twenty people in the galley, all wearing the tall hat that I had believed to be the chef’s unique badge of office.

Despite my shattered illusions, I persevered in my mission, and was soon rewarded with a large piece of meat. Of this I am certain, for the rotted remains of it would eventually attract attention and be discovered by my mother many weeks later in my raincoat pocket, packed away with winter clothes in my trunk during the heat of the New England summer.

It is dusk before I can escape my mother’s vigilance. Warily I creep towards the foredeck, anxious that no one see me, for this is forbidden territory. Carefully I reach under the rail and lower my baited line over the ship’s side, never doubting that the morning will bring a noble catch.

Early next day, before anyone else is awake, I dress quickly and slip out of the cabin. The ship seems deserted — only the dull throbbing of the engines follow me as I move cautiously, level by level upwards. I am soon on deck, fighting a chill ocean wind. The ever-shifting grey-green Atlantic swell, dotted with lines of foam, vanishes into the light mist that surrounds us. Nobody sees me as I move towards the *Antonia’s* bow — and nobody would have known what had happened if I were to disappear overboard.

My line is still where I had left it the previous evening, firmly tied to a convenient stanchion. I start to pull it in, but something is holding it back — I must have caught something huge. Curious, I peer over the rail. However, the ship’s side curves back sharply beneath me and the waterline remains hidden.

A cold fear still knots my stomach, and chills run down my spine each time I re-live the scene. The image refuses to fade. A small boy is on the outside of the ship’s port-side rail, hanging on by his left hand. Facing aft, he leans out as far as possible above the cold, swirling waters, straining for a glimpse of the waterline.

I discover in dismay that my line no longer reaches the water, that no great fish is holding it taut. Impossibly tangled and knotted, it now clings firmly to the ship’s side, snagged on some protruding piece of metal. Disappointed, I realise that fishing is a lost cause. The details of that mid-ocean expedition will remain a secret for over forty years — my mother forever spared the worst of it.”

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“On arrival in New Haven our family was soon welcomed into the large, well-staffed home of Susan Bacon Keith at 310 Prospect Street. However, it being already high summer, we were immediately taken to Pine Ledge, the Keith country home in Holderness, New Hampshire, overlooking Squam Lake. Here we lived in some style until the end of the summer. Breakfast was served on the uppermost of the three verandahs that wrapped around the house, and provided stunning views across the water. Hummingbirds were our constant companions, as they squabbled over the sugar-water feeders hanging from every post. It was an idyllic setting into which thoughts of England and war rarely penetrated – at least into my five-year-old consciousness. My world became the lakeside boathouse, in which floated *Don Quixote*, the powerful motorboat that towed the aquaplane, and where lived giant *Dolomedes* spiders hunting insects over the water surface. The surrounding woods, I quickly discovered, were home to many small creatures. My favorites became the slow-moving, brilliant red salamanders hiding beneath fallen logs. I was in paradise.

Some thirty years later, when I had returned to America with my own young family, aged Susan Keith invited us back to Pine Ledge again, although she herself was no longer living there. We arrived long after dark, but soon found a pair of large stone gateposts that I knew marked the driveway. The front door was unlocked, but no lights were on. The house seemed strangely unfamiliar and did not in the least resemble my memory of it, but long years had passed, it was dark and I was tired. After putting the children to bed I started to explore. There were many books in the house, but none bore the names of either Keith or Bacon, and gradually the suspicion grew on me that this might not, in fact, be Pine Ledge after all.

It was midnight before I set off through the trees with a small flashlight. Up the road some distance, I soon discovered another pair of stone gateposts. Surreptitiously I crept along the drive, fearful of being identified as an intruder. The house was in darkness, but something distantly familiar about its silhouette in the moonlight tempted me to try the front door. It too was unlocked. Suddenly, in the feeble beam of the flashlight, past and present fused. I was back!

With considerable anxiety I returned to the sleeping family. Scenes of Goldilocks and the three bears returning to their rumped beds flashed before me as the children were bundled, half asleep, into the car. The covers were quickly smoothed to conceal our presence and, fearful lest we meet the owners in the drive, we hastily withdrew. As dawn broke the next morning, there was Squam Lake, just as I had remembered it, spread out before us, the magic in no way diluted by the passage of thirty years. I have often wondered whether the neighbours ever noticed our brief intrusion and puzzled over the identity of their mysterious nocturnal visitors.”

Like many small boys I would often find myself in trouble, more by accident rather than design, for I was what in Indonesian is called *nakal* — endearingly mischievous and naughty.. A memorable occasion was when I feared — nay was sure — that I had inadvertently killed somebody.

The journey home from school each day involved a walk from the bus stop of about a mile. The route followed a tree-lined country road before branching off across wasteland, where I had found my first praying mantis.

I had been to the circus and was very impressed by the man who threw knives and tomahawks at an attractively under-dressed young lady without hitting her. I was

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not interested in the young lady, but desperately wanted to master the art of throwing a knife with great accuracy.

The trees along the roadside provided admirable targets as I walked home, and I was quite pleased with my progress. On most attempts my knife embedded itself blade-formost in the chosen tree, and week by week my confidence grew. One day the appearance of a car in the distance prompted me to wonder about the parameters involved for hitting a moving target — a purely academic exercise, let me emphasise.

Fully intending to hit the nearest tree, I carefully judged the speed of the car and decided that if I wished to hit it, I would throw the knife.....now! My calculation proved to be unfortunately accurate. Unconsciously compensating for the car's speed, I completely missed the target tree, however, and was horrified to see my knife pass through the car's open rear window. I also caught a glimpse of someone sitting in the back seat.

In an instant there was a squeal of tires as the car skidded to an abrupt halt. Even before it stopped moving, I had turned to flee. I was not far from a new, partially-completed freeway — the Wilbur Cross Parkway — beneath which ran a network of drains and tunnels. The closest opening was in part of the system I had not explored, and in my panic I soon became disoriented underground. When I eventually found a way out, it was on the wrong side of a sizable pond quite some distance from home. Anxious for sanctuary, I decided to swim across the pond as dusk fell, and had then to creep back to the house by a circuitous route through the woods to avoid anyone seeing me.

That evening, having changed un-noticed into dry clothes, I listened with particular attention to the radio, expecting at any moment to hear reports of the unprovoked attack — and possible death — of a passing motorist or his passenger. Wracked by guilt and overcome with anxiety, I passed a desperate week until it became clear that the police were not out in force looking for me. I never did become particularly skilled at knife-throwing and have always resented the loss of my prize throwing knife after that.

“My return journey to England in the spring of 1944 would prove memorable indeed. I was one of about thirty small boys travelling on a new Royal Navy aircraft carrier from New York to the Clydeside port of Greenock. We had been placed in the care of a young officer, who clearly had no understanding of children and how to handle them. With earnest solemnity we were instructed exactly what, and what not, we would be permitted to do; where, and where not, we might go on board. It was made abundantly clear that any transgression would be met with dire retribution.

To a mischievous nine-year-old this was a challenge too good to pass up. There were lamentably few parts of the ship to which we might legitimately go — naturally they were the least interesting. Over the course of the voyage there would be very few compartments on that carrier with which I did not become intimately familiar. In retrospect, it proved excellent training for a later incarnation, when I became a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm during my two years of National Service.

The engine room, where I was made welcome by the stokers and other denizens of the ship's nether world, was naturally a prime destination. To someone already fascinated by mechanical devices, it became a source of endless pleasure and delight.

The greatest prize, however, was to gain access to the hanger deck, an area from which we were quite specifically banned. Terrible punishments were threatened to those who ignored the ban, but the beatings I received never outweighed the delights to be found there — except once! I had gained entry to a Grumman Avenger in the

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hangar, and after spending some time in the cockpit, made my way up into the machine gun blister above. Once inside, a small metal flap could be pulled up to form a floor. After about twenty minutes of shooting down imaginary German aircraft it was time to leave. However, I was quite unable to find the catch that would release the metal flap beneath me. Try as I might, there was no escape, and so I remained trapped in mounting apprehension.

After what seemed an eternity, the hangar deck suddenly sprang to life. To my horror I could see planes being rolled onto the elevator and taken up to the flight deck. This was not a possible consequence of my disobedience that had ever crossed my mind, and was beyond imagination. In due course, my plane too was lifted into the daylight, without anybody noticing my presence. Only when the rightful occupant tried to enter, in preparation for the sortie about to take off, was one very frightened little boy discovered.

The punishment that this episode attracted is one of the few beatings, out of a very considerable total, of which I have specific recollection, for the pain endured for several days in the form of extensive bruising. But there then followed the most wonderful Divine Intervention.

The mess deck where we ate had long tables running athwart ship. The sea was calm and the wooden partitions that divided up the tables in rough weather were not in use. The officer responsible for my discomfort was seated at the head of the table, and I was seated painfully close to him on his right side. Suddenly, without warning, the ship made a violent change of course, heeling over sharply to port. In disbelief I watched as the entire contents of the table started to move, gathering speed as plates, glasses, cutlery and water pitchers swept down to engulf my nemesis. As food and table settings poured into his lap, he overbalanced backwards, to vanish beneath a mountain of wet, gooey debris. In that moment I knew that I had God on my side.

The crossing had taken almost three weeks when we finally disembarked in Greenock. By the time we boarded the packed train to London, night had fallen, and as there were no vacant seats, we were forced to stand in the corridor. My only memory of that long nocturnal journey was of being surrounded by friendly soldiers and sailors, who plied us constantly with cigarettes, asking all the time about life in America. No doubt I obliged with a suitably embellished fantasy.

The long letter from Gacie³, detailing for my mother my normal routines, by some happy stroke of fate would not arrive in Oxford until several weeks after me. As rightly predicted, I took full advantage of this opening so happily offered. After arriving home I was put into the bath and thoroughly scrubbed to remove the ingrained dirt of the journey — and the strong smell of tobacco. Clean, indeed polished, I was left in the nursery while my mother went to the kitchen to get me supper. When she returned, I was neatly clad in pyjamas and dressing gown, riding on the rocking horse — and smoking the cigarette that I swore I always had before retiring.

My mother was placed in a difficult situation. Much as she had to exercise some restraint and discipline, she was also very conscious of the need to humour me through this difficult transition, where so much was new and strange. By being too strict, she might risk alienating my affection. Without the knowledge of my normal

³ My American foster mother

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routine in America, she was prey to my wildest flights of fancy, at a time when I had but limited regard for the truth.”