

#88

15 Chesham Street,

LONDON, S.W., 1894-1906.

My dear Grandchildren,

There are only eleven of you at present, but we are all so widely scattered that it seems unlikely that we can all get together soon; and even if we could I rather doubt whether you would have the time or patience to listen to this story of my childhood and boyhood in England. So perhaps some day you will feel like reading it - I hope so.

As you should know, my father, John Ridgely Carter, your great grandfather, was for over sixteen years in the United States Diplomatic Service, most of this time attached to the American Embassy in London. His first post in 1894 was as Private Secretary to Mr. William Bryant who came from Baltimore, as did my father. His later chiefs were Mr. Joseph H. Choate and Mr. Whitelaw Reid, both very distinguished ambassadors.

Our house in Chesham Street was in Belgravia - not as fashionable as Mayfair but convenient to my father's office in the U.S. Chancery, then at 123 Victoria Street, and not far south of Hyde Park which was my daily playground. The house had a bright green door and was four stories high above the basement and I lived on the top or nursery floor. When we first moved in there were few "amenities", though eventually we built a bathroom on stilts above the kitchen skylight.

The basement was below street level and distinctly dank: it contained the kitchen, scullery and pantry where one of the footmen slept in the sink to guard the "silver vault". The rest of the house I thought beautiful and certainly my parents entertained in it on what seemed to me a lavish scale as I peeped over the bannisters to see the guests arrive - a butler and two footmen seemed to me almost regal, as indeed they would be nowadays.

The London climate - especially in winter - was literally appalling: rain, mist, thick yellow fogs fed by millions of little coal fires in every house. I can't say that I enjoyed London during those years as there was so little for a small boy to do. Almost every day my faithful Luxembourg governess, Gui, would march me across to the Serpentine in Hyde Park to sail my boat - it was small as I had to carry it but I was very proud of its ability to sail clear across that big pond.

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A weekly event which I disliked thoroughly was our visit to the South Kensington Natural History Museum. The Museum itself was of sickly yellow brick, and the smell of vague preservatives inside it used to nauseate me and, as a final straw, to get there we had to walk by the flamboyant "Albert Memorial" which I have always hated.

This makes a gloomy picture but there were certain highlights or "treats" which I used to look forward to tremendously. First and foremost was a weekly trip to Ranelagh Club where my father was a member - it must be a good eight miles from Chesham Street and my mother's rented "Victoria" took at least an hour to get there over the Hammersmith Bridge, but it was well worth it for it seemed Heaven to me with its great 18th Century Club House, its Golf Course and above all its pond where I could row around among the islands. I remember a disastrous moment when I was rowing by the tee of the difficult "water hole" I spied my handsome father in his smart scarlet golf coat about to drive and could not resist the temptation to call my adoring presence to his attention with of course disastrous results.

Those Ranelagh outings must have been a real sacrifice to my parents for besides the half sovereign entrance fee, the poor tired horse after 16 miles on the road was "through for the day". Incidentally, the "Victoria" was one of my mother's real luxuries for it enabled her to make her endless round of diplomatic calls with the second footman dressed up in a fine cockaded top-hat to ride on the box with the coachman and deposit calling cards. I always accepted my mother's invitations to accompany her on these trips in spite of the danger of long waits if the visitors were unexpectedly "at home". The leather upholstery and mudguards of the "Victoria" had a very special smell which I enjoyed.

Victorian London, in spite of its grim climate, still retained a great deal of Eighteenth Century elegance. Especially during the "season" in June, the great houses, mostly in Mayfair, were opened and gorgeous landaus with their white-wigged coachmen and footmen and perfectly matched horses drove around Hyde Park in stately perfection. No Rolls-Royce that will ever be designed could compare in sheer beauty with these carriages.

When we first moved there Chesham Street was unpaved except with Macadam or gravel which lead to an immense amount of mud when it rained. Every street crossing therefore had its "crossing sweeper" whose standard tip was one penny. Transportation was by Handsome Cab, "Four Wheeler" or horse bus, and finally the "underground". We usually managed to avoid

the latter for as the trains were drawn by steam engines, the resulting sulphurous atmosphere was almost unbearable. As a boy in bed at night I could easily identify the various "clap clops" of the horses' hooves - the sharp snappy cadence of the fast Handsones, the much slower one of the "four wheelers" and finally the quick staccato one of the butcher boys' dog-cart. These hoof noises led to a curious practice on the streets: in case of serious illness in one of the richer houses the whole block would be covered with fresh straw to deaden the sound. Naturally the freshness of the straw would last only a few days, after which the soggy mass all had to be raked up again.

There were many evidences of appalling poverty, usually combined with drunkenness in London at that time. One practice which depressed me especially was the "cab runners". I remember one night we arrived from Norfolk at Liverpool Street Station - at the East End of London - a good four miles from our home. As we had several trunks, we took a "four wheeler" with the trunks on top. As soon as we started from the station three decrepit-looking men started running after us and kept behind us all the way to Chesham Street, where they demanded the privilege of carrying our heavy trunks up the four flights to our rooms. The standard rate for this gruelling work was one shilling per trunk. When I told our butler how sorry I was for these men he answered "don't worry, Master Shirley, they went straight to the corner pub and are quite 'appy by now."

For many years I went to a kindergarten school on South Audley Street, just off Grosvenor Square and across the street from Goode's famous china shop. As it was quite a long way off I usually took the Blue Horse Bus on Sloane Street going up Knightsbridge and Park Lane - the fare was two pence. If it was raining, however, the butler would whistle twice for a Handsome. This was much quicker and pleasanter but cost one and six. I liked my school and was always glad to get there early, for the first scholar to arrive was allowed to choose the morning hymn - my choice was always "There is a Green Hill Far Away".

We studied a great deal of English History - mostly wars in Ireland and Scotland, which we were called on to illustrate in crayons. My masterpieces, which I still have, were "The Massacre at Glencoe" and the "Siege of Londonderry".

Once a week we were taken out by "Underground" to the "country" to play football. Our playing field was dominated by the forbidding walls of Wormwood Scrubbs prison, where I believe all female convicts are still incarcerated!

Chesham Street had two great advantages in my mind. As it was on the way from Chelsea Barracks to Hyde Park, every

morning a Battalion of the Guards would march down our street on their way to drill in the Park. They had a wonderfully shrill Fife and Drum Corps with a huge bass drum which I could hear a mile away. My favorite demi-gods were the officers who walked stiffly along the side-walk in long frogged frock-coats carrying their swords.

Another thrill for me was the "German Band" which would play every Friday evening in the street. This band had enormous brass instruments and played German military marches - interspersed with some Wagner. Their only recompense took the form of pennies thrown from windows which could not have netted them much.

One family drama still stands out vividly in my mind. My parents and I were sitting cozily in the back parlor after dinner, when the butler rushed in and announced: "The Austrian Ambassadors is on the telephone and wishes to know whether she can still expect Mr. & Mrs. Carter to dinner." The ensuing panic terrified me. My poor mother turned scarlet in the face and cried "ginger" - a true sign of her emotion. I can't remember but I think they made the dinner, which was just around the corner - but half-an-hour late, a real disaster for young diplomats!

Another diplomatic tragedy arose from the fact that my father, owing to his knowledge of British Court "red tape", was assigned the horrendous task of arranging for young American ladies to be "presented at Court". The quota for these fortunate girls was very limited and the lists had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain months in advance. One year, as the Fates would have it, a very important American Senator - I think he was Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee - arrived in London with his two beautiful daughters a week before the "Court". He suggested to our Ambassador, Mr. Choate, in no uncertain terms that he wished his girls to be "presented". Mr. Choate summoned my father in this emergency. Father had to explain that this was quite impossible at such a late date. The "list" had been filled for weeks and no changes in it could be made. Mr. Choate in desperation even appealed to the Foreign Secretary - but all to no avail. Here father made his great mistake; he went to call on the furious Senator and offered him complimentary tickets to visit the Royal Stables at Buckingham Palace.

On his return to Washington the Senator is rumored to have suggested that my father be fired but Mr. Choate saved him.

My mother was a small gentle and very dainty lady with great strength of character. When my father first met her in Newport she had carrot-red hair and I always remember her as blonde with large blue eyes. She really ran our family with great firmness and tact.

My father, on the other hand, was much easier-going with immense charm and the most polite manners I have ever known. He was extremely good-looking with very fine aquiline features and coal-black hair and a heavy black moustache. In London diplomatic circles he was known as "handsome Jack" and everyone adored him.

He and my mother were devoted to each other, so much so that when my mother died ten years before he did, he really lost most of his interest in life, although he maintained his gallant and charming front until the very end.

My sister Mildred who is five years older than I am used to fascinate me as a boy and tease me to death. She still does both. She was a really beautiful debutante in London and I can still remember my boyish pride when I watched her leaving Chesham Street for a big ball with her very special butterfly tulle sleeves.

As a matter of fact during most of my years in London I saw very little of Mildred as she was attending "Boarding School" in Tarrytown near Philadelphia. She did, however, come for the summer vacations and was particularly critical and scornful of my poor mother's "seaside" homes. I especially remember one summer when we were spending a month in a particularly dreary hotel in Felixstowe, the Felix Hotel, which had a "palm court" where an orchestra played at tea-time. Mildred had been invited to a big houseparty at one of the great English country houses. She was of course very keen to go but was not allowed to as my parents had learnt that one of Mildred's beaux, of whom they did not approve, was to be a guest. Mildred was furious and decided in retaliation not to speak directly to either of my parents, so that during all those dreary weeks at the Felix Hotel all communications had to pass through me thus: "Bunny, please tell my mother that I won't be swimming this afternoon as it's too cold, so that I'll take a walk along the beach and will come back after tea as I don't want to listen to that horrible orchestra".

This, of course, proved quite a strain on my poor family, but Mildred kept it up relentlessly for all that month.

SUMMERS

These must have always represented a horribly difficult problem for my poor mother for she wanted us if possible to be by the sea "for the air", yet not too far from London for my father to be able to commute for week-ends with golf. In my mind, English "seaside" places are almost all hopelessly dreary, mostly with shingle beaches and concrete "esplanades". We literally tried everything - Sheringham in Norfolk, Felixstowe in Suffolk, Walmer in Kent, Sandwich in Kent, with its wonderful Golf Course but not much else except much rain.

Apart from two wonderful summers we spent with my Uncle Pat and Aunt Camilla Morgan on the Thousand Islands, the summers I enjoyed most were two we spent at North Berwick in Scotland. It was here that I took my first golf lessons with Ben Sayers, a white bearded old veteran who made me my first set of golf clubs. That was in the year 1900, and I have played that damn game steadily ever since, but I never seem to get much better as the years go by. North Berwick is beautifully located on the Firth of Forth, not far from Edinburgh. It has its own small mountain "The Law" and a great rock called "Bass Rock" just off shore where millions of seagulls nest.

One summer we rented a charming cottage called "Ferry Farm" on the Norfolk Broads, where my parents' great friends the Lewis Chanlers had a house nearby. Their son Stuyve, who is still a great friend of mine, used to spend long happy days exploring the lakes and waterways in "our own Catboat". The Broad were fine for us boys but not so good for my poor father's weekends, for after a long train trip from London we had to fetch him at the nearest station ten miles away in a pony cart.

WIXENFORD.

Finally at the age of nine came the dread time for me to go to "Boarding School". Wixenford was a very good "private school" near Wokingham in Berkshire. It had been built on unusually luxurious lines by a grey-bearded old eccentric called Arnold, who was still its headmaster when I arrived. Its equipment included an indoor swimming pool, a magnificent gymnasium, a squash racquets court and two fives-courts.

We were the envy of two similar schools in the neighborhood which we used to visit for cricket and football matches.

When my parents first deposited me at school I had only just abandoned my "sailer suits" and governess but the agony of those first few days, the misery of which I know are still well remembered by your Uncles Shirley and David, was greatly helped by the fact that my friend Stuyve Chanler had already spent a term at Wixenford so that I was put in charge of him.

Later we two Americans were joined by four others: Junius Morgan, Vincent Astor and your cousins Carey and Hewitt Morgan. We were very proud of Hewitt as he almost immediately developed into an outstanding athlete, especially at squash racquets of which he became school champion. He was later national U.S. champion. Chanler and I spent several very pleasant vacations with Junius Morgan at his father's beautiful estate north of London, Aldenham Abbey.

In all, I spent four years at Wixenford and on the whole enjoyed them very much in spite of those unheated classrooms, where we had to cower around tiny coal fires. Our favorite reading was Conan Doyle, G.A. Henty and H.G. Wells. I still

always keep a copy of Sherlock Holmes by my bedside.

I became quite a good bowler at cricket and got my "colors". I also enjoyed riding lessons in the pine woods towards Marlborough during which we were occasionally allowed to follow the local Foxhunt, rather to my terror.

CRICHEL

During my last year at school I made great friends with a very attractive boy called Gerard Sturt, the elder son of Lord Alington, who owned a beautiful place in Dorsetshire called Cricchel.

Gerard gave me such a glowing description of Cricchel at School that you can imagine my delight when he invited me to spend the next Christmas Holidays (6 weeks) with him there. It was indeed a heavenly place for boys - a beautiful Palladian house set in a huge Park, a large lake equipped with an electric punt and full of perch, a private golf course and tennis courts, horses to ride over the downs, an old gamekeeper called "Dibbin" to take us out rabbit shooting with ferrets in the warrens, and even a cricket professional from Eton to coach us in Batting.

Gerard's mother, Lady Féo Alington, had been a great beauty and still was an extremely handsome woman with great warmth of character and charm. Lord Alington was always most kind to me and after each holiday would slip a "tip" of two gold sovereigns into my hand. It used to surprise me that surrounded as he was with so many opportunities of entertainment he spent most of his day working on jig-saw puzzles.

Gerard had a younger brother, Napier, who, being two years younger than we were, we looked down on as a mere "kid". After the first war Gerard died tragically from a shrapnel wound in his spine, and Napier succeeded to the title after his father's death. There was also a fascinating younger sister Lois, then about six, whom we boys all worshipped.

It saddens me to think that these most attractive young people are all now dead.

Never in my life have I seen or imagined the luxury with which Cricchel was run and all in a most natural and apparently easy-going way.

Besides the major-domo and two butlers there were no less than twelve footmen who for dinner appeared in knee breeches and silk stockings with their hair powdered white - a most impressive sight.

The meal I enjoyed most at Cricchel was breakfast which was served in the huge sunny dining-room overlooking the lake.

Along one side of the room ran a long table lined with covered dishes kept warm by alcohol heaters. Ladies did not appear but male guests would drop in between 8.30 and 10 a.m., and what a varied feast! First there was Scotch oatmeal which was eaten standing up and strolling about, then kippered herring, finnan haddock, kedgerree, Cambridge sausages and bacon, a machine for boiling one's eggs which were always stamped with that morning's date, cold meats of all kinds, including grouse and plovers' eggs, in season, which I loved. My only trouble was to decide what I liked best, after I had raised the covers of all the dishes.

Almost every week there was a houseparty of twenty or thirty guests, including on one occasion King Edward VII and Madame Melba, the great opera singer. Lady Alington was a Yorke and her family were famed for their skill and enthusiasm for private theatricals, so that these week-ends were devoted to endless theatrical rehearsals, culminating in performances in the Town Hall at Wimbourne, the local town, and at Crichel itself. It was all great fun and a real treat for a young American boy. My last visit to Crichel was in the summer of 1906, when to my pride I was asked to bring my own servant - our diminutive second footman. Guests always brought their own valets or maids which made for quite a full house. I well remember my thrill that time on arriving at the Wimbourne station when the stationmaster bowed to me and said "the Crichel car is awaiting you, my Lord" and all because of that little footman!

Wixenford traditionally prepared its boys for Eaton, and I was headed there myself. Stuyve Chanler did go on to Eton where he had a brilliant career as he stroked the crew and was in "Pop". However, in my case, when I returned to London from Crichel in August 1906, my father drew me aside and said: "Bunny, I have just had a cable from Dr. Peabody, the headmaster of Groton School saying he has a vacancy for you. I leave it to you to choose between Eton and Groton". Without any hesitation I chose Groton, and have always been glad of my choice.

A few weeks later I landed in Boston where I was greeted by Mr. Amory Gardner, a senior master of Groton and one of the founders. As the school was not yet open Mr. Gardner took me out to Beverly Harbor where I spent a week on his beautiful schooner the "Constance". You can imagine how startling it was to a schoolboy from England that a schoolmaster should be the owner of a magnificent yacht!

Paris,
13th April, 1960.