

An American Victorian

by ROBERT HILLYER

MY AUNT, Marion Couthouy Smith, was of a class and generation whose virtues have been so derided and whose weaknesses so exaggerated that I shall attempt an unbiased portrait of her. Her dominant quality was courage — frequently a misguided courage. Directed at prejudice or injudicious enthusiasm, it sometimes led her into absurdity; but it also held together a life which without it would have been merely the fragments scattered by disappointment.

She was a poet, often a fine poet, whose work was widely published and admired at the turn of the century; but, as her powers were reaching their peak, modes suddenly changed, and she lived to see her name dwindle to almost nothing. She was brought up in prosperity and died in "reduced circumstances." Her range of sympathy brought her friendships of the deepest kind, but the central love she could so richly bestow remained unasked for. It was, she said in a poem, "one of the unwanted treasures of the world."

The damming of this sluiceway dispersed her energies so that she was capable of tender understanding and freakish notions. When I was a young man newly returned from the War, I happened to remark that the Belgians were detested by the other Allies. "I will not stay in the same room with a pro-German," she exclaimed and walked out. At the end of her life, when she was too weak to move from her chair, I asked her if she was bored. "No, never," she said quietly. "I watch the elevated trains all day and think about the people riding in them. New trains come every few minutes." Of these two anecdotes, the first, I fancy, will seem the more characteristic to a modern reader, yet, without the first, the second could not possibly have been. They both sprang from a characteristically intense projection into the unknown lives that compose humanity.

II

THE ELDEST of three daughters, she was born in Philadelphia in 1853. Her father was a businessman; her mother, Maria Williams, was a frail and dreamy woman from Boston, whose natural piety found its outlet in the new ritualistic movement in the Episcopal Church. She passed on this enthusiasm to her daughter Marion, who for many years, when the High Church party was still unfashionable and ridiculed, fought its battles with all the ardor of her spirit. Gradually as time went on, her strict observance of detail relaxed somewhat, but always she would return again and again to the contemplation of mysteries which to her were no mysteries at all but clear lights piercing the nooks and crannies of uneventful days. And increasingly she had need for such lights.

She must have been gawky as a girl. She was very tall, yet at no period of her life was her weight more than a hundred pounds. Her walk was eccentric: she toed out at a prodigious angle, flinging her feet forward at each step as if to catch herself from immediate collapse. I remember from early childhood seeing Aunt Marion walk across one of the gratings above the subway. A swift draught sent her skirt and petticoats zooming upward, and there she stood, precariously swaying on two long spindles. It was my initiation into the mystery of the female limb. But her thinness was not the gauntness we associate with the New England old maid. We thought of it as a sort of elegant fragility.

In her presence one was most conscious of her face. It was strange, at times almost strangely beautiful. Her nose was paper-thin and enormously high-bridged, her mouth quick and timid; her hair was jet-black and remained so to her death. Her eyes, dark and lively, ruled her personality.

Our mother we defied or obeyed according to

THE FORUM

her own mood; Aunt Ella we alternately bullied and babied; Aunt Marion was a Presence, and, although we could and did unlock our hearts to her (for sometimes she seemed best to understand them), nevertheless we looked to our rhetoric when we did so. "Hurry up!" I shouted to my sister. A calm voice drifted from Aunt Marion's room, where in the hot summer afternoon the Venetian blinds were drawn and one could hear the rustle of a palm-leaf fan. "I hope you always will," she said. "I should hate to think you were hurrying down."

Exactitude of phrase was a passion with her, yet she much preferred the German language to the French — until the War. Some time before the War, when I was away at school, I must have written the letter that called forth this response:

Just a word of sage advice while I think of it — apropos of your letter. I advise you not to be *anti*-anything, except what is wrong or useless, and not to have any strong national prejudices. They deprive us of the heritage of life which comes to us from all the races. Though I happen to prefer the German language and literature, as being more poetic and more emotional — as the French is more graceful and exact — still I greatly admire the French people. They are the artists, the adventurers, and primarily the scientists. But every nation has its faults and also "les qualités de ses défauts," and each has contributed something fine to the world. . . . This is just a suggestion.

Alas, a year or two later the coming of war forced Aunt Marion to a complete reshaping of lifelong loyalties. Up to that time she had delighted in singing German lieder, accompanying herself on the piano. She had a low voice that strained to thinness on the high notes, but we children enjoyed her music.

When the War came, everything German went by the board, and Aunt Marion ceased to sing. As an intolerant youngster, I found these tactics ridiculous if not outrageous but now I know that she went to extremes lest any fragment of the old pattern remain to corrupt or weaken the new one. It was a reshaping of

many of life's emphases. I begin to understand the wrench of such a turnabout when one is in one's sixties.

But she was of a generation which, contrary to post-Freud opinion, readjusted itself much more gracefully than ours. And I have always been glad that she never quite realized the uselessness of her sacrifice. The cynical outcome of the War found her in late old age, when no pattern, except a general interest in people who ride in elevated railways, needed any further sustaining. She was spared a last disappointment.

III

HER GENERATION, like all the generations of men, was disappointed, but its courage she shared to the full. She loved the excitement and clatter of the growing new world, the sparkle of great cities, the industrial developments which, however sordid they may now appear, seemed to her hopeful mind the creation of sheer genius. When her father moved the household to New York, she was entranced with the sounds and sights, the whistles of outgoing steamers, the skyscrapers (the World Building was the newest marvel). Most of all she loved the people, whom she saw as always

marching forward: the altruistic and thoroughly honest businessman, the happy laborer — America in the new dawn which Whitman sang, although, as she rightfully observed, he sang sentimentally.

But my grandfather's lungs were weak. He must live in the "country," and he chose a New Jersey suburb for his home. There Aunt Marion remained for forty years — long after her father's death and her mother's — impeded by one thing or another from regaining the lost Jerusalem. She went back and forth between the suburb and the city and consoled herself with viewing from the ferryboat the new towers piercing ever higher into the sky, glory on glory.

At last, when most of her friends in the suburb had died, when her nieces and nephews

Tenement

*Down
an alley
there's a tree
that grew
before the
houses grew,
shutting off
views of a
woodland where
liberty was,
and light
and air.*

*The tree
belongs
to the
people still,
from a
rented
window-sill.*

Alfred Kreymborg

AN AMERICAN VICTORIAN

had grown up and scattered to their own devices and all the pet rabbits, Brer Rabbit, Sis Bun, Binnie, and the rest were mere memories, Aunt Marion and Aunt Ella packed up and moved to New York. "I hate relics!" she had always declared, so there was little clutter. A few letters from Theodore Roosevelt and his sister, a note from Cardinal Mercier, and one or two family archives were the only "relics" she bothered to take.

This was about 1920. Aunt Ella was sixty-two, Aunt Marion, sixty-seven. For twelve years they followed a ceaseless round of activities, and, to the not unfriendly inhabitants of Morningside Heights, the two "old-fashioned" ladies became familiar and cherished figures.

They knew when the drug clerk's baby was to be born and spent hours choosing their gift. They knew what marks their landlady's son was getting in college. The colored elevator boy, they discovered, was a young man of ambition and attainments, who sang in the African Church. And one Sunday evening they repaired to the African Church to hear his choir and returned full of excited admiration for the musical accomplishments of the boy in particular and the race in general.

True, they had their disillusionments. They forgave the young girl next door her flamboyant lipstick, because times had changed and she was a thoughtful girl, but when they discovered she entertained male guests overnight they became reticent in her regard.

And there was the Serbian sculptor whom Aunt Marion introduced to people who might help him. She was convinced of his genius — until she discovered that he was trying to determine her exact income.

But on the whole the disappointments were few and the rewards many. My own faith in the human race is strengthened when I remember the motley variety of uptown New Yorkers in whom the Aunts put their trust and how seldom they were disappointed.

Nearly every day they attended concerts, meetings of poetry clubs, lectures, luncheons at the Roosevelt Association, publishers' teas — but I grow faint at contemplating the many things they did. Aunt Marion's health had always been precarious. As a pedestrian, she had always seemed out of her element, except in a parlor. In the street she walked vaguely. But now her endurance was astonish-

ing. Aided by a cane and accompanied by Aunt Ella, she seemed almost to stride, though uncertainly, to her destination. They penetrated the most remote corners of the city, looking for the carefree youth they had never known; and, wherever youth invited them, there they were to be found, savoring to the full this Indian summer of their days.

IV

AUNT MARION began to publish again and even to make a second name for herself. Many thought that a talented young poetess was entering the scene. One of her new poems, which won the prize in Miss Monroe's magazine, *Poetry*, was as follows:

The trees that lean over water,
Living enchanted days,
I have known them on quiet farmlands,
I have seen them on golden bays;
Dreaming in calm, cold twilights,
Musing in noonday suns —
There are trees that lean over water
Wherever the water runs.

There is nothing in days or seasons
These rapt trees ever know;
The only world for their dwelling
Is the crystal world below,
They are deaf to the wind's alluring,
They are dumb through its stormy song;
They answer only the water
That whispers and glides along.

The trees that lean over water,
They miss the untroubled sky;
They lose its fathomless splendor
As the starry march goes by;
In their own boughs entangled
They view the eternal suns —
There are trees that lean over water
Wherever the water runs.

"I thought of adding a fourth stanza," she said, "explaining what the trees represent, but I decided that we are past the age of the 'Water Fowl' and that an explanation would not be quite modern."

Later she wrote:

I have yielded to modernism enough to try to avoid stiffness, and it is most amusing that I have been criticized twice for faults of technique by ultra-conservative individuals, who didn't know I relaxed purposely. A friend of mine criticized me to Harold Pulsifer for changing the number of beats in the closing line of the poem I enclose. The funny part was that she supposed I didn't know what I was doing. Another woman who saw my things thought me a very *promising young poet* and wanted to teach me versification. (I had published a free-verse poem — unrhymed but markedly rhythmical.) She said she

THE FORUM

loved to help young poets. I told her I never wrote *carelessly* — that whatever faults she found were committed purposely. But I liked her reply, which came late. She said, "I did get you wrong, didn't I?" . . .

There is too much of me in this letter but plenty of you in my heart.

These revived laurels pleased her, especially as she was addressed by so many of the young who thought her a contemporary. A radical Greenwich Village publisher invited her to read as guest of honor at one of his literary evenings. The Aunts were delighted and sallied forth. They found themselves in a basement bookshop, lighted by candles and crowded with the usual vociferous, slightly intoxicated bards of the 1920's, each with sheaf of poems and shock of hair. The host, who had doubtless expected to welcome a young woman, fell back a pace when he was confronted by two affable old ladies with sweeping skirts, complete assurance, and gay hearts. They had the time of their lives. The Aunts read "old-fashioned" poems; the company read "new-fashioned" poems; there was a friendly exchange of ideas, tempered by kindness and benevolence on both sides.

That evening had a sequel. The host, who published one of those little magazines which came and went in such quick succession, requested a sonnet from Aunt Marion. Elated with her evening in Bohemia, she gave him the sonnet but some time later, on second thought, decided to look into his magazine. The magazines of Greenwich Village and their contents have for so long been less than a memory that I have not now the faintest notion of what Aunt Marion read on that occasion. But she summoned a taxi and whirled downtown to retrieve her poem.

By daylight, the shop was mean and squalid; a dead fly floated in a half-consumed highball, and two policemen stared at a tall old lady in black who meandered determinedly down the three basement steps and flung back the door. She was quite unself-conscious.

I called on Mr. — last Monday and obtained his word of honor that he wouldn't publish my sonnet. So I gave it to the *Outlook*. I don't believe he knows where it is! He looked puzzled. He said, "Well, it's all right if you have a copy and will accept my promise not to publish it. The magazine has not been issued for four months, but it would have been in the number now made up, only I couldn't lay my hand on it." I'm glad of it. . . .

Personally, I don't dislike him. Of course he opened fire on me at once but he swore he didn't want to quarrel. I said I didn't want to quarrel or even to argue, because it was useless. He fulminated, of course, and his eyes glittered wildly — he is a deluded fanatic rather than a merciless "red." Somehow, I was rather sorry for him. He said enough to me to get him deported, though he disclaimed murder and violence. He claims as Bolshevistic nearly the whole literary world, and I just told him that so far as that was true it didn't impress me, for I didn't care about art and literature in comparison with truth and humanity. We had it pretty hot, though without insults — as the worst he called me was a stand-patter, and said Emma Goldman was worth a hundred of us or something like that. I said I was sorry to see a young man so deluded — which I suppose was intensely provoking. . . .

I haven't seen Maeterlinck and probably shall not, but he seems to be acting in a very unsatisfactory manner. Nothing he can do, however, would change my affection for his book *Wisdom and Destiny*, which made it possible, years ago, for me to endure a most uninteresting life.

V

FROM THE CORE of this uninteresting life, her interests uncoiled in myriad places, probably because her affections had not been allowed to concentrate on a single person. I say "allowed," and, from what my childish ears could gain of past history, the word is just.

My grandfather was determined that his daughters should not marry. He was not the unyielding martinet we have lately seen depicted as Mr. Barrett: he had no objections to parties and dances and evening calls; but I surmise, as I gaze at his picture, which shows a humorous-eyed, red-bearded, and dogmatic male of a dogmatically male period, that a mere hint from him sufficed in lieu of a stern decision. At any rate, it sufficed for two of his daughters.

The youngest was a martinet in her own right and his especial favorite. She always had her way; otherwise I should not be writing at this moment. Indeed, it was she who sketched in for me, laughing, I fear, more than weeping, the shipwreck of romance in the parlor of the house on the corner of Sixteenth and Spruce Streets, in Philadelphia.

Aunt Marion must have been about twenty-two. She was betrothed to a Mr. Coolidge of Boston, and apparently my grandfather consented. Somehow he contrived to delay the marriage. No one knew what his objections were, even when he was challenged to state them. The engagement dragged on for several

AN AMERICAN VICTORIAN

years, until Aunt Marion, taking matters into her own hands, dismissed her lover for his own good and forever. To the end of her days, Will Coolidge sounded like a wistful name.

Aunt Ella's Will Chittick was disposed of for no other reason, as far as I have ever learned, than that he made atrocious puns. One still lingers in my memory:

Marmalade me in the street,
Plum pie landed on my feet.

Of course, I dare say that the perpetrator of such lines would be a fit husband for nobody and I may add that he was guilty of pinning a towel around the loins of a Venus of Milo. (Roughhousing in the 'seventies.) And so my Aunt Ella also took a name to the grave with her.

But my mother's Jim Hillyer was different. My grandfather, who never could deny anything to his pet, made no objection. He merely requested a delay so that Lily could accompany him to Bermuda while he recovered from galloping consumption. On his return to New York, he became aware that he had not accomplished this feat and he decreed, therefore, that the wedding should take place at his deathbed in the old Fifth Avenue Hotel. It will be seen that Victorian courage had its countervices of tyranny and morbidness — but how well the sensible Victorians overcame them!

VI

SO THE AUNTS were content to be merely godmothers to their sister's offspring. They lived through other people, on the whole, much more happily than most can live through themselves. Aunt Ella, at once sentimental and practical, made a thousand friends whom she alternately dismayed in prosperity and salvaged in adversity. Aunt Marion went her own way, reticent, scornful, and inarticulately devoted. She had two extremes where her sympathy or her hatred could be counted on — the very large or the very small. The middle things never seemed to her worth bothering about. She always maintained that our whole civilization was framed to prop up the mediocre and that the successful of the world were left as unfriended as were the helpless. Hence, she was devoted to Theodore Roosevelt and to rabbits.

Her pets were unorthodox. For dogs and cats she showed a toleration mellowed only by

grudging response to the children's demand for admiration. "As cats go," she would remark, "Dumpty is charming. Indeed, if I could ever bring myself to like a cat, I'm sure I'd choose Dumpty." Or, "Paddy is a very intelligent dog; he knows that I don't want to be bothered with him."

She had a succession of rabbits. Brer Rabbit and Sis Bun were the ancestors of a long dynasty. Rabbits she liked because, although apparently the meekest of creatures, they would stamp their feet at her and defy her when she displeased them. "None of your fawning animals for me! Sis Bun is the fiercest thing I've ever encountered, except human beings. Watch her now; she'd bite me if I gave her a chance." When Aunt Marion was informed that Brer Rabbit had devoured his offspring, she was mildly surprised and commented on the tedium of an unrelieved diet of lettuce.

After the Aunts moved to their New York apartment, someone had the happy notion of presenting them with a chameleon. Shamkins was a lizard of the most extraordinary perceptions. According to Aunt Marion his wits were at least as agile as his body, which, in the presence of a fly, showed lightninglike ferocity. She entered with absorption into the spirit of the hunt and stood motionless before the window-pane while Shamkins, crouched on her wrist, stalked his prey.

Since the life term of chameleons is about two years, there was a succession of them. The death of each was marked by a funeral cortege to the park, where the Aunts would lay the little creature in a shallow grave and commend his personality to Abraham's bosom. On the way home, they would stop and buy another chameleon.

Like the Living Buddha, as soon as the soul fled the deceased, it entered into the body of the new one. How many Shamkins there were I cannot tell, but the last one was the minute murderer of Aunt Ella.

The Aunts were all packed to go away for the summer and were waiting for my sister-in-law to drive them to the station. Aunt Marion, who had always been vague about time, decided that Shamkins must be growing restive in his little traveling cage. So she thought she should let him run about while they were waiting. She opened the door, the chameleon darted

THE FORUM

to a far corner of the room, and the telephone rang. The automobile had arrived, and they had just time to catch the train. "Oh, Marion!" her sister cried and dived after the elusive lizard. He was too quick for her. She pursued for a moment, collapsed, and never rose again. Not till after her death did we realize how unobtrusively necessary she had been in Aunt Marion's existence.

"One grows too old for tears and one grows too old for art," Aunt Marion said and sat for a year, contemplating the bustling change she would have so loved when she was young but which now she could no longer understand. She published one more sonnet, "On Silent Wings":

There is a flock of weary birds, that go
Not south, but westward, with the dying days;
They fly in silence through the twilight ways,
Sounding no call of joy, no cry of woe.
One after one, like some thin river's flow,
The line goes on, athwart the morning rays,
Through the clear noonday, or the stormy haze,
Still winging toward oblivion, mute and slow.
No eyes shall follow them with kindling sight,
And none shall know the seas where they are tossed,
When their spent pinions shall at last be furled

From the long striving of their hopeless flight;
For these are love denied, and friendship lost.
And all the unwanted treasures of the world.

Modern psychology would be glib in disintegrating such a life into its component frustrations. But the life, the person had a fierce integrity. Somewhere between material causes and spiritual effects lies a vast margin of doubt, where speculation alone can play its uncertain light. That is why, perhaps, we are unable to understand the Victorians. We venture to explain all things. Yet the gaiety, the highheartedness, the essential toleration in a life such as I have sketched are utterly inexplicable unless we concede something to the doctrine of will. Life was "uninteresting"; many experiences were conjectural not only to action but even to the imagination; there were circumscriptions beyond which one did not go; but the ultimate was a spiritual success to which neurasthenia of the modern type would be completely alien.

I suppose that is why the Victorians are so much abused. They survived, and calmly survived, this ordeal by Earth which seems to have baffled their successors.



The Dance of Youth

Propaganda from the Left

by DAVID ALLAN ROSS



Drawings by Eve Salisbury

Courtesy New Dance League

IN ALMOST every large city in the United States groups of earnest young women are getting together to study the modern dance. The significance of this is both artistic and social, for the modern dance, as it is now developing here, resembles the average stage dance with which American audiences are familiar as a book by Stuart Chase resembles a romantic potboiler novel.

The modern dance — a loose, indefinite term, but there is no other — is not what professional dancers call a routine; nor is it such a sugary, sentimental confection as ballet masters love. It is a new, immensely vivid and effective means of expression, and in America its field has become that of political and social idealism. To say that it is already sweeping the country would perhaps be an overstatement, for it has not yet achieved wide audiences. But to say that to the modern young woman — and, often, young man — who is keenly aware of and interested in the new concepts of social progress but has lacked an effective means of presenting her ideology, it opens up a dazzling field of activity which she is avidly seizing upon — that is a statement of fact.

The modern dance as it exists now was founded by Mary Wigman in Germany. In its earliest form it was consciously grotesque, and was classed by even comparative liberals with *Ulysses*, the *Nude Descending the Stairs*, and the *Ballet Mécanique*. An art curiosity of questionable intrinsic worth, one suspected that it would begin and end with Wigman. It did not.

Wigman herself progressed. Her art emigrated to America and progressed still further. Today there is no reason in the world for not regarding it as a native dance form. The foremost American interpreter, Martha Graham, has made it entirely her own, and from her rather than from Wigman stems the present tide. Other American dancers, many of them Graham's students, have adapted the form to their own requirements and have injected into it wholly American concepts and themes. Today it has become recognized as a highly effective form of expression of vital themes, and it is significant that its greatest practice and popularity are found in radical organizations,