



# Memories of a Wall Street Suburb

By VAN WYCK BROOKS

*America's foremost literary historian, author of the five-volume "Makers and Finders," "The Ordeal of Mark Twain," and other widely read books, describes here the scene of his earliest memories. This article is drawn from Mr. Brooks's "Scenes and Portraits," to be published next week by E. P. Dutton.*

**M**Y earliest friend, Maxwell Perkins, my lifelong friend, used to say that every man has a novel in him. The idea was not originally his—it was, in fact, a commonplace—but, being a man of character, he made it his; and I always felt that he might have written a first-rate novel himself if he had ranged over his own life. He was in his way a novelist born, but instead of developing this bent in himself he devoted his intuitive powers to the development of others, leaving his mark, as everyone knows, on the fiction of his time and the work of some of its best writers. As for myself, I have never wished to write a novel. But the scenes and characters of my younger days have come to seem to me like a novel that I read long ago, and I have often thought of reviving that novel.

I was born in February 1886, in the

unloved state of New Jersey. That, like all other states, this had its lovers I only became aware in later days; for the "old Jersey element," as I heard it called when I was a boy, was remote from the little world in which I grew up. Our families were in it but not of it—they were inveterate New Yorkers whose local affections and pride were invested elsewhere and who lived for generations there without becoming naturalized, any more than the inveterate Philadelphians across the state. The old Jersey element had fixed immemorial ways of its own that were thought of as generally narrow, provincial, and dull, while the newcomers had brought with them not only a current of world life but a mind that was more complex and more aggressive. The suburbs were all theirs and the fulness thereof; and, as their interests and loyalties were otherwise

engaged, the state had become a prey to all manner of abuses. Yet its history had been honorable in the days of the Boudinots and Captain Lawrence, the young man who said, "Don't give up the ship." There lived John Woolman and Philip Freneau, there Fenimore Cooper was born, like Stephen Crane and Randolph Bourne still later; and various eighteenth-century New Yorkers had sent their sons to school there to learn to speak pure English undefiled. Alexander Hamilton and Aaron Burr had studied as boys in Elizabeth, and the poet Shelley's grandfather had been a merchant in Newark, where Sir Bysshe Shelley, the merchant's son, was born. But the two great cities that flanked the state on east and west had as it were depolarized the New Jersey mind.

My native town was Plainfield, a name that used to mortify me in my hyperesthetic youth, for it struck me as naive; and I was greatly relieved when I found that the name of Tolstoy's place, Yasnaya Polyana, meant the same thing in Russian. My grandfather Ames had gone out there in 1869, to be near his office in New York, building the brown stucco house with spreading verandahs and a mansard roof in which I spent the first

years of my childhood. For my father and mother soon abandoned the smaller house with the mansard roof in which they had set up housekeeping after their marriage and lived with my mother's parents from that time forward, moving after my grandfather died into a new house on the edge of the town that was not without some slight architectural pretensions. This was the largish yellow brick house in which my formative years were passed and which was later characterized as "colonial outside, baronial inside" by one of the friends of our circle who passed for a wit. For the house fell at last into more affluent hands, and the new owners doubled its size and plastered it with the panels and doors of an ancient English manorhouse they had bought from the Duveens. By that time too the old picket fences had been stripped away on all the streets, with the beds of canna lilies and the cast-iron fountains, the monumental urns and painted deer-hounds, and the quiet Quaker village where Woolman had preached in the meeting-house had become a full-blown Wall Street suburb. Even the name of Peace Street had vanished forever.

**I** LITTLE realized as a child the dramatic events that were taking place in the outwardly tranquil dwellings of our friends and neighbors so many of whom were involved in the operations of that savage and lawless epoch of American finance. The trusts were in those days being formed, oil was spouting from Western lands, and the country seemed to be drunk with a passion for riches, but, as money was never spoken of, it could scarcely have

occurred to us that some of these neighbors were financial buccaneers and brigands. Nor did we ever think to ask why their wives, our mothers' friends, spent so much of their time in darkened rooms, seated in Bath chairs, attended by nurses, the victims of "nervous prostration," the secrets of which the Freudians had not yet exposed. I was always instructed to walk on tiptoe through the dim corridors of one such house with which my mother was often in communication, delivering my messages to the nurse without whom this friend of our household never thought of stirring out of doors. That this was a kind of strategic protest against her husband's double life I did not become aware for many years, and I even doubt if the lady in question knew quite *how* double this life was, though she certainly knew it was far from straight or simple. Everyone was aware in time that he had escaped a prison term only because his brother had become a bondsman for him, while he had an unauthorized family somewhere else; but this was after his big steam-yacht had been swept away, as he had swept away the savings of his coachman and his servants. For years a professional "capitalist," as he called himself in *Who's Who*, he had sat in the seats of the mighty, with a whole floor at the Waldorf, and when my mother went with his family to Cuba they were received at Havana like traveling princes. For the capitalist had financed the new waterworks there, and the cardinal in person showed them the ashes of Columbus, which had not yet been transferred to Santo Domingo. But when the blow fell one could only admire the code of

sporting ethics with which he and his wife played the game, reduced as they were to living in three or four rented rooms with a few remnants of silver and one good old portrait. *He* found a small clerical job in the town—the *ne plus ultra* of humiliation—and walked home at the day's end with a leg of mutton under his arm and a fresh carnation still in his buttonhole. *She*, moreover, after spending years fanned, like the Pope, in her invalid's chair, rose with zest and cooked the leg of mutton. Both had an air of happiness and confidence at last.

One could tell many another tale of what a French writer might have described as the grandeurs and miseries of Wall Street in this age of buccaneering, the story of another friend, for instance, a much more famous financier who had been known as one of the "Big Four." Ruined by underestimating the cost of a great municipal enterprise which he had financed in New York, he was finally obliged to retire to a Harlem hall-bedroom, but, with a small pension from Pierpont Morgan and a membership in his college club, he cheerfully played the game in reminiscence. He liked to recall his old battles on the Exchange in Broad Street and how, on a certain afternoon between two and four o'clock, he had conjured out of E. H. Harriman three-quarters of a million. At another time he had put together all the locomotive plants and organized the Locomotive Trust. It was his office in which my father had a small post towards the end of his life, after vainly endeavoring to survive as an independent broker, a work for which he was ill equipped as I would be myself, for he had no competitive instinct whatsoever. How many other ups and downs, not to say scandals, we heard of, muffled as they were in the reports that reached our ears—for one, the descent, like an empire falling, of a certain conspicuous family we knew when the head of the house was convicted as an embezzler and absconder. Then there was the neighbor with the cherry orchard, a lover of children—and we all loved him—who vanished, as we gathered, into prison; and another family that blossomed out with governess-carts, tandems, grooms, liveried footmen, and a tally-ho that also vanished—whither? Vast red sandstone houses rose, like so many Kenilworth castles, with turrets, verandahs, balconies, and portecochères, with arches, fountains, coach-houses, kennels, and stables, and with sons who had an air of owning all creation and whose thoughts and talk were entirely about yachting and coaching. Pathetic these boys were destined to be, how often, when they

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## Your Literary I. Q.

Conducted by John T. Winterich

### SO YOU'VE READ ROBINSON CRUSOE!

A. C. Palmer of Pomfret Center, Connecticut, offers ten questions requiring for their resolution a somewhat intimate knowledge of "Robinson Crusoe." If you can get five correct answers, you should feel proud; six, prouder; seven or better, you have just read the book again to find out. Answers on page 54.

1. Where was Crusoe's island?
2. What animals did Crusoe save from the ship?
3. What books did he bring ashore from the ship?
4. How many trips to the ship did he make?
5. Crusoe spent months making a boat. Why was it wasted labor?
6. How long had Crusoe been on the island when he saw the footprint in the sand?
7. How much longer before Friday came?
8. How many years more before Crusoe left the island?
9. What relics did Crusoe carry away from the island?
10. Why was Friday so named?