ALSO BY CHARLES RITCHIE

An Appetite for Life
Diplomatic Passport
Storm Signals
My Grandfather’s House
THE SIREN YEARS
A Canadian Diplomat Abroad
1937–1945

CHARLES RITCHIE
CONTENTS

Cover
Other Books by This Author
Title Page
Copyright
FOREWORD

1937-1938
1939
1940
1941
1942
1943
1944
1945

EPILOGUE
FOREWORD

It was with adolescence that the diary addiction fixed its yoke on me – a yoke which in the succeeding fifty years I have never been able entirely to shake off, although there have been merciful intervals of abstinence. The habit had begun even earlier – had sprouted furtively when I was a schoolboy. Its seed was perhaps already sown when I would write on the front of school books, Charles Stewart Almon Ritchie, King’s Collegiate School, Windsor, Nova Scotia, Canada, North America, The World, The Universe, September 23rd, 1918, 3:17 p.m. – an early compulsion to fix myself in space and in time. Once given over to this mania there was no cure for it. With obstinate obsessiveness I continued to scribble away. Now the toppling piles of my old diaries are mountains of evidence against me, but I still postpone the moment to destroy them. Their writing and subsequent concealment were intentionally secretive – to have them discovered and read would have meant to be caught in the practice of “solitary vice.”

The diaries included in this book begin in Washington in 1937 and end in Ottawa in 1945 but are in the main my record of the years I spent in London during the Second World War. They show the scenes and people described as viewed by an outsider–insider – one immersed from boyhood in English life but not an Englishman.

The writer was during these years an officer of the Canadian Foreign Service but these are not diplomatic diaries in any sense of that word. The deliberate exclusion of official business from the record leaves the odd impression that I was floating about London in idleness. One might well ask not only, “What was his war effort?” but “What did the Canadian Government pay him for?” The answer is that I was an obscure and industrious junior diplomatic official who was thrown by chance and temperament into the company of a varied cast of characters who lived those years together in London in the stepped-up atmosphere of war, with its cracking crises, its snatched pleasures, and its doldrums. The diaries are personal – too personal to see the light of day? I once would have thought so. Now thirty years later the personal seems to me to merge into “we” of wartime London days. I resist any temptation to patronize or justify the writer. His faults, follies, and errors of judgement show plainly enough. To paper them over would seem a smug betrayal of my younger self. The diaries are as I wrote them at the time, save for occasional phrases which have been altered for the sake of clarity.

While I spare the reader a leisurely tour of my origins, childhood, and early manhood, a brief backward glance may be helpful in making the narrative and the narrator more comprehensible.

I was born at our family home, The Bower (which crops up from time to
time in these diaries), then on the outskirts of Halifax, Nova Scotia, in 1906. The Halifax of those days – at any rate the Halifax of my mother and her friends – looked back to its past as a garrison town and a base for the Royal Navy. I was brought up in an atmosphere – which must be incomprehensibly remote to modern Canadians – in which everything British was Best and “Upper Canada” was a remote and unloved abstraction. Yet my family had been in Nova Scotia for four or five generations. Their devotion to Crown and Empire was a romantic fidelity, quite different from the satisfied acceptance of the English by themselves as English. They might look to England but it was hard for the individual Englishman to pass through the eye of their needle. They were Nova Scotians first, Canadians second. They were North Americans with a difference and they clung tenaciously to the difference. They belonged to Nova Scotia, the land where memories are long, legends, loyalties, and grudges unforgotten, a land where a stranger should tread warily.

My mother was widowed when I was ten. My father, twenty-five years older than she, was a barrister and a brilliantly effective one, to whom the law, which he had in his bones from generations of lawyers and judges, was a devotion. My mother was left with two boys to bring up, my brother Roland and myself. She tackled the job with love and a touch of genius. Never possessive, she held us by the magnetism of her personality.

Our home always seemed full of people coming and going, relations and near-relations, friends young and old, and those whom my mother was sorry for or thought to be lonely. Then there was our own coming and going as a family to and fro from England in the slow boats from Halifax to Liverpool, until England began to seem the other half of one’s life.

Our education never stood still in one place – in and out of schools – on and off with tutors – now at a preparatory school in England, then back to Nova Scotia, then to an Anglican concentration camp of a boarding school in Ontario.

It was in 1921 while at the squalid age of fifteen I was incarcerated in this establishment that an envelope emblazoned with the Arms of Canada reached me as unexpectedly as the invitation to Cinderella to attend the court ball. The letter within was from Sir Robert Borden, then Prime Minister. He and my father had been law partners and lifelong friends. His kindly letter now informed me that he hoped in due course to see established a Canadian Foreign Service and that hearing (from my mother) of my interest in international affairs he suggested that one day I might be interested in such a career. Thus was planted the germ of an ambition.

As for my later education it seemed destined to extend to infinity, from King’s University in Halifax to Oxford – to Harvard – to the École Libre des Sciences Politiques in Paris and back to Harvard. In no hurry to earn my own living, I was in danger of becoming a perpetual student. There were intermissions, a short-lived spell of journalism in London, an amateurish but exhilarating bout of teaching French irregular verbs in an “experimental”
school in Canada, but no settled profession until the Victorian Gothic portals of the Department of External Affairs opened in August 1934 to receive me as an acolyte third secretary.

The Department of External Affairs at that time was small, as was Canada’s place on the map of international politics. Its future was being shaped by a handful of unusually gifted men who shared the belief that Canada had its own role to play in the world and a conception of what that role should be. They worked together without feeling for respective rank, without pomposity, with humour, despising pretence, intolerant of silliness, and scathing in their contempt for self-advertisement. They were my mentors and later to become my friends.

My first posting abroad in 1936 was to the Canadian Legation (now Embassy) in Washington. At first this was a sunny and enjoyable interlude. Not overemployed, the diplomatic bachelor had a full and easy hand to play in that sociable city. It was by fits and starts that the approaching war made its presence felt. Ominous newspaper headlines came and went and then business continued as usual, but by 1938 reality was coming inescapably closer. The Americans whom I knew in Washington and the American papers which I read were vehemently opposed to the appeasement of Germany. Their anti-Nazi feeling was more intense than what I was to meet on arrival in England. They felt that compromise with this evil was immoral and unforgivable. Perhaps they understood the implacable nature of the enemy better than the rest of us did. But there was this difference: emotionally committed as they were, it was not their war that was at stake.

In January 1939 I was transferred from Washington to the Office of the High Commissioner for Canada in London. The London to which I came turned out to be less concerned with the likelihood of war than the Washington I had quitted. We were permitted, indeed encouraged, to hope that the danger had passed. Whether anyone fully believed this is another matter. People behaved as if they did.

Nowhere was this state of mind more firmly ensconced than at Canada House and in this the High Commissioner Vincent Massey accurately reflected the views of his Government and in particular of his Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King – himself a fervent supporter of the Munich settlement.

On my arrival at Canada House I found that in addition to my diplomatic work I was to act as a private secretary to Mr. Massey. Despite occasional explosions of irritation to be found in the diaries, I was devoted to him. I was attracted by his personality, his sense of drama (he was a born actor), his susceptibility, the alternations of closeness and coolness in his dealings with people, and the delight of his company. It was not an uncritical devotion, but no man is a hero to his private secretary, especially a private secretary who was not himself cast in the heroic mould.

It was impossible to think of Vincent Massey without his wife, Alice. The contrast between them was as striking as their deep mutual attachment – his fastidiousness, her impulsiveness, his discretion, her outspokenness. There
was a physical contrast too between his meticulous almost finicky gestures and her exuberant smiles and greetings. She was a handsome woman: prominent eyes of piercing blue, abundant reddish hair piled high. He had the austere visage of an Indian chief belied by his small, frail-appearing form. She was, or seemed to be, the stronger nature emotionally and physically. She wore herself down in the war by hard work for Canadian servicemen in England. I see her plodding along Cockspur Street laden with provisions for the Beaver Club, which the Masseys founded for Canadian soldiers, sailors, and airmen, or at her desk writing hundreds of letters to the relatives of Canadians serving abroad.

The Masseys made their successive homes my second homes. When I was bombed out in the blitz they put me up as their guest in the snug safety of the Dorchester Hotel where they lived at the time. Their sons, Lionel and Hart, were my friends.

The second in command at Canada House was Mike Pearson, the most stimulating of companions in and out of the office. He was at the beginning of a career which was to see him become Prime Minister of Canada. In all the changing scenes of that career he remained the same Mike I knew in those days, incapable of self-importance, ready in wit, and undaunted in the pursuit of his objectives and ideals.

The position of the High Commissioner and his staff in wartime London was not made any easier by the ambivalent attitude of our own Prime Minister Mackenzie King. Canada at Britain’s Side was the title he chose for his own book on Canada’s war effort. The title was certainly justified by the contribution made by Canada to the defence of Britain and to the conduct of the war. Yet Mr. King was obsessed through these years by the suspicion that Whitehall was plotting designs against Canada’s independent nationhood and trying to draw us back into the old imperial framework. Unfortunately for us at Canada House the Prime Minister came to believe that his representative, Vincent Massey, had succumbed to these sinister British influences. Even Mr. Massey’s successes in London were held against him. He had during his time there consolidated his personal and official position in the inner bastions of pre-war London. Cabinet ministers, editors of newspapers, directors of art galleries, the higher ranges of the peerage, not to mention Royalty itself, enjoyed his company and respected his views. This did him no good in the eyes of his own Prime Minister, who reacted with intense irritation to the Masseys’ familiarity with the Great.

To mutual resentment was added a difference of political views. Vincent Massey was a stout defender of Canada’s interests, but he believed in Canada as an actively participating member of the British Commonwealth. Mr. King emphatically did not. Whatever the rights and wrongs of their respective opinions, the resulting estrangement between them put the staff of Canada House in a difficult position. The disembodied presence of the Prime Minister brooded over us. It was not a benevolent influence. In the flesh he was thousands of miles away, but he needed no modern bugging devices to detect
the slightest quaver of disloyalty to his person or his policies. Perhaps through his favoured spiritualist mediums he was in touch with sources of information beyond Time and Space.

As will be seen, these discords did not unduly affect the diarist. London scenes and people and the conduct and misconduct of his own life were too absorbing.

In these diaries people appear and disappear. For a time one character occupies the centre of the stage only to vanish as if down a bolt-hole. Intimacies develop quickly and sometimes dissolve as quickly. Wartime London was a forcing ground for love and friendship, for experiments and amusements snatched under pressure. One’s friends came and went, some to war zones, others evacuated to the country. There was an incessant turnover of occupations from civilian to military and sometimes back to civilian. People drifted apart and together again as the war pattern dictated. This sometimes leaves the diary record disconnected. Situations are left up in the air; questions are not answered. All one can say is that this is what that life was like.

A diary is not an artistic creation. It has – or should have – a breath of immediacy but at the expense of form and style. Life is not transmuted into art. Anyone who wishes to see how that miracle can be achieved should read the work of genius set in the London of those years, *The Heat of the Day* by Elizabeth Bowen.
1937–1938
1 July 1937. Washington.

The Canadian Legation is housed in the former home of a millionaire, one of the palaces in such varied architectural styles which line Massachusetts Avenue. The Legation is both office and also the residence of the Minister, Sir Herbert Marler, and his wife. Sir Herbert is an impressively preserved specimen of old mercantile Anglo-Saxon Montreal. He looks like a painstakingly pompous portrait of himself painted to hang in a boardroom. He is not a quick-minded man – indeed one of my fellow secretaries at the Legation says that he is “ivory from the neck up.” Nevertheless he has acquired a handsome fortune and his successful career has been crowned with the diplomatic posts of Tokyo and Washington and with a knighthood.

I am acting as a sort of a private secretary to him for the time being. He is extremely nice to me although each has habits which irritate the other. He has large square hands of immaculate cleanliness with the largest, broadest fingernails I have ever seen on a hand. When reflective or puzzled he has a habit of snapping the end of his index fingernail with his thumb making a distinctly audible clicking sound while gazing meditatively into space. This little repetitive clicking echoes through the large panelled office ornamented with elaborate carved foliage in the manner of Grinling Gibbons. I stand attentively before him awaiting his command and choke back the words, “For Christ’s sake stop doing that.”

If he is unconscious of my irritation I have been equally unconscious of a trick of my own which must madden him. One day last week Lady Marler drew me aside and said that the Minister had wanted to speak to me about something personal but had asked her to do so instead. Her manner made me wonder whether it was halitosis or a moral misdemeanour of mine which had offended him, but she said, “His Excellency would much appreciate it if you would stop whistling in the hall outside his office.”

The Marlers are quite strong on the use of the word Excellency. Once when they were leaving the Legation with their small son I heard Sir Herbert say to the chauffeur, “His little Excellency will sit in the front with you.”

There are two other junior secretaries at the Legation with me. We share offices on the top floor. When I arrived they told me that it was a tradition in the Legation that the most newly arrived officer must walk along an extremely narrow parapet running under the office windows. I obediently climbed out of the window and took a few precarious steps looking down at a drop which would have brained me if I had faltered. Then I climbed back in again to be told that I was the first person to be such a bloody fool as to believe this story.

16 July 1937.

Staying in the house in Georgetown which Dudley Brown has lent me. Woke in a state of stupid irritation with Dudley’s Negro manservant who had
neglected to call me. He is a handsome creature with a peculiarly rich voice and a glib talker. His name is Vernon.

19 July 1937.

There was no hot water. Vernon’s face was thunderous. I ate breakfast nervously conscious of his mood and feeling unable to cope with it. “There’s a heap of small things in the house that just have to be attended to,” he said. “Mr. Brown forgot to have the boiler filled. I spoke to him about it before he went away too.” He spoke with the grim, tight-lipped disillusionment of the stern father of an incurably feather-brained offspring. I felt that I could hardly admit this tone in speaking of a fellow “white master.” “Oh, he forgot,” I said, with a nervous attempt at nonchalance. “Yes indeed,” said Vernon, allowing his magnificent, sultry, dark eyes to dwell on me for a moment in contemptuous disapproval. Then he withdrew to the pantry. I turned again to Anna Karenina. In a minute or two I would have to shave, but what with? There was no hot water. Then unfortunately for my peace of mind it occurred to me that Vernon could quite easily heat up some water – not that it really mattered – I have often shaved in cold water. Why go and face him? Am I afraid of him? I thought, putting down Anna to look this disagreeable thought in the face. No, of course not, but I do not like meeting those sullen, disgusted eyes. This is getting too much, I thought, and went into the pantry. “Vernon,” I called in quite a loud, confident voice. He was in the kitchen sitting beside the table with a black silk stocking twisted around his head – I suppose to keep the kink out of his hair. “Vernon.” He did not get up, but rolled his eyes at me. “I wonder if you could heat up a little water to shave in.” I spoke rapidly. “Well, I will have to get some kind of a pot or pan, and it will take some little time to do.” This brought me to myself. I said sharply, “Of course, only get it heated up.” I felt better after that. Later I was able to go down to him and in quite a calm voice ask him the road I should follow to get to the town in Virginia where I was lunching. Feeling my change of mood he became more amiable himself and gave me the directions I asked for. “What is there to do when I get there?” “Well, there are some places of considerable interest,” he said gravely, “there is the home of Nathan Freeman, the great Negro Emancipator, now turned into some kind of museum, and then also there is St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the Insane.” “Indeed,” I said politely. I was so pleased with this information that on impulse I nearly asked him to make me a small picnic luncheon, but although I felt better about Vernon I did not feel equal to this.

3 November 1937.

Michal Vyvyan1 said on the telephone that he would come around in twenty minutes to show me the draft of the telegram of greetings to Canadian War Veterans. With him came a new man just out from the Foreign Office, a smooth-faced Etonian with an air of sophistication. What happens to them at Eton? However innocent, stupid, or honest they may be they always look as

13
though they had passed the preceding night in bed with a high-class prostitute and had spent the earlier part of the morning smoothing away the ravages with the aid of creams, oils, and curling tongs. This graceful young man handed me an elegantly worded little draft message typed out on a piece of paper. I said it was very pretty – “Good morning” – and when they had left went down to tell the Minister about it. “What,” said he, “was the significance of this move on the part of the British Embassy?” “A gesture of politeness – of co-operation,” I hazarded. But no, it was not as simple as all that. He had to be very careful in his dealings with the Embassy. “They are a queer lot, Ritchie.” I was to call Vyvyan and ask him the significance of the whole thing. On second thoughts he would do it himself. Then Vyvyan must needs come down and explain it in person and the Minister explained that we would have to consult our Government. And this was all because they had shown us a message of welcome to Canadian Veterans. The Minister is obsessed with the dangers of any dealings with the British Embassy.

Miss C. the accountant is reading a book on How to Make Friends and Influence People. She says that she goes down to see the Minister and after five minutes, despite all the lessons she has learned from the book, she is longing to say, “Oh, to hell with you, you damned old fool.” He wears down one’s tolerance and amiability like a dentist’s drill.

17 November 1937.

The secret telegrams sent by the Dominion Governments to the Government of the United Kingdom during the Rhineland occupation crisis in 1936 have been an eye-opener to me. I have just been reading them. Not much “rallying around the Mother Country in time of danger,” and if a similar crisis blew up tomorrow would it be the same song? If the United Kingdom Government could publish these telegrams it might give their Collective Security critics something to think about. The Dominions are not going to fight on account of the rape of Spain nor an indecent assault on Czechoslovakia. The United Kingdom must choose her ground very carefully. I am not sure that a German invasion of France would do the trick. Perhaps not until the first air raid on London.

I was sitting at the bar in the Club tonight beside a man on a visit from New York. “So I took this woman out to dinner,” he said, leaning his two elbows on the bar and looking into his brandy and soda. “Marvellous-looking woman and from what my brother had told me I thought it was, well, a foregone conclusion.” “An open and shut proposition,” I suggested. “Exactly as you say – an open and shut proposition. First of all she ordered three chops straight off like that. That was not all.” He twisted his ragged moustache in an agony of remembrance. “I picked up the menus – one was table d’hôte. I really shoved the other at her more as a gesture. It was à la carte – everything three times as expensive in it, of course. She chose a dollar apéritif – there were several at forty cents – then right the way through, a three-dollar entrée, lobster mornay, always the most expensive thing in sight, and after dinner
seven double whiskies in the course of the evening, and I never came near to first base.” He said, “There must have been something wrong with the woman – physically I mean.”

17 February 1938.

At the Soviet Embassy hordes of fat, bespectacled women, young and old, “Radical” newspaper columnists with jowls and paunches shouting their phrases the second time lest they should not be heard or appreciated the first time, a few senators and political big-shots whose faces give one a feeling of familiar boredom like picking up an old twice-read newspaper.

The Soviet Embassy was first the house of Pullman, the inventor of the Pullman car, and then the Imperial Russian Embassy. It is full of tasteless carving, red silk panelling, heavy chandeliers, and marble. Now everything is slightly soiled and shoddy, the silk is frayed, the carved floral designs are encrusted with dust. Paunchy Russian Jews wander about through the marble halls in their shirt sleeves with cigars dripping ashes on their ties, or muttering together in the corners of the big saloon.

18 February 1938.

Reading Shakespeare’s Henry IV, the scene between Hotspur and his wife. From that glimpse we know what Hotspur is in bed and at table, how he would make love, how he would flick impatiently through his morning paper, how he would drive a car, how he would bring up his children. Hotspur the falcon-eyed aviator, reckless skier is easy to imagine. The jesting, unsentimental tone when talking with his wife and his quick come-backs are startlingly “modern.”

7 March 1938.

I went for a walk in the country with the Australian Minister at the British Embassy. His blue, candid eyes, his silver hair, his ruddy cheek, his kindly, wholesome air all announce the fair-minded man of good digestion. He takes snapshots of old forts and churches, he observes the lie of the land, the names of the plants – he walks a steady pace, stout stick swinging at his side, pausing to appreciate a pretty stretch of country or to smile with good humour at a child playing in the village street. He is so nice – why then does one feel stealing over one a faint disgust at the man? Is it because for the best of all possible reasons his bread is always buttered on the right side? His house is in excellent taste, his dinners are not fussy but well cooked, suitable for a manly bachelor, his guests are sensibly chosen, the conversation is cheery and pleasant. On his shelves are Foreign Office reports, official war histories, biographies, and the novels of Galsworthy. In his garden are crocuses planted by an ambassadress. In the mirror in his neat, manly dressing-room are stuck dozens of invitation cards from those who appreciate his jolly niceness. He is too shrewd and too dignified to let the cat out of the bag, but it is for these invitations he lives. They are wife and children to him. The man of the world
with his silver-clasped evening cloak, his signed picture of the Duke of Gloucester on the drawing-room mantelpiece, his brandy in old glasses. The Australian without an Australian accent.

8 March 1938.

I went to the district jail to see a Canadian who had been kept thirty-five days awaiting trial for illegally entering the United States. I sat on a bench in the stone-flagged rotunda where visitors may talk to prisoners. The rotunda is in the centre of the prison and is lined with iron grating, beyond which one floor on top of another of the prison is visible, rising right up to the glass roof of the rotunda five floors above your head. The floors are connected by iron staircases. It is like being in the central hall of a zoo, an impression which was heightened by the figures sprawling on the staircases in attitudes of recumbent boredom. They were some of the prisoners and seemed mostly to be Negroes. Why they were sitting about on the stairs instead of being in cells I do not know. It is one of those illogical details which usually occurs in dreams. My prisoner came towards me across the floor. He was a pale boy with romantic, brown eyes and a shadow of a moustache. His features were delicately chiselled and rather trivial. He had on a very clean shirt open at the neck. He must have put it on a minute or two before coming to meet me. He seemed from his name to be of Greek origin and was in show business. “My brother,” he said, “had sworn out a warrant for my arrest.” “What did he do that for?” I asked. “I do not know what he would do a thing like that for,” the boy replied in a gentle, speculative tone as though pondering the vagaries of human nature. I felt my question had been impertinent. His reply was so gracefully said that it could hardly be called a snub, but I did not pursue the subject. I left him a tin of cigarettes. “It has made me feel good to have you come here,” he said with cordiality as I got up to go.

9 June 1938.

How many nights have I sat alone in my room listening to the laughter in the streets, looking furtively at my watch to see if I could get up and go to bed. All those nights in my stuffy little room in Paris, in my room at Oxford with the clock of Tom Tower striking nostalgia on the night air, at school with the movements and muffled voices of the boys in the corridors, and at home at the table which faced the window looking out on the lawn with the single oak tree. And always this piece of staring, white paper in front of me with the few and feeble words strung across it. These wasted nights are most remarkable. Nothing could be more stubborn than my devotion, nothing more stupid than my persistence. After all, I have written nothing – I will write nothing. Twenty years have not been enough to convince me of my lack of talent.

23 June 1938.

After dinner at Dumbarton Oaks our hostess Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss led
us by circuitous paths to the little lake in the “wilderness” beyond the formal gardens. The night was cool, the sky clear, and there was no shiver of breeze among the box hedges that line the path. When we reached the lake she went ahead of us alone with a flashlight to spot the path under her feet. We remained standing in a little group on a high bank that overlooked the water. We watched her treading lightly and gracefully in the spots of torchlight as she went around the edge of the lake to the other side. There she vanished beyond a tree and touched a switch so that an electric light cleverly placed high in the trees above shone down with a clear, bright, but not too bright, light on the surface of the water. She pressed another switch and a second light shone. The lake and the trees around it were illuminated so that every shadow was given its precise value. When our hostess was within earshot again we murmured our admiration of the ingenuity of the lighting and the beauty of the scene. Quietly she accepted our praise. There was a pause while we stood there gazing at the discreetly illuminated lake conscious of a scene which must be photographed on our memories. In the silence created by our dumb appreciation our hostess’s voice sounded in a tinkling falsetto, “It has I think a quality of stillness about it which is most appealing.” We nodded agreement. It was a sentiment which could not be enlarged upon. Meanwhile with surprising stealth the moon had slid up over the trees and was regarding us with an expression of indifference.

3 July 1938.

We walked beside the lake arm in arm and stopped every now and then to kiss. The lake and its surrounding circle of trees was still as the empty sky. We saw a white house on an incline among the trees with a big plate glass in the front like the window in a shop. The glass was a blinding gold from the setting sun. “What a view they must have from there over the lake.” We wished the house was ours, but then we had said that about so many houses and we nearly always found some objections. This time it was the mosquitoes. “There must be clouds of them rising off the lake in the summer.” Instead of the houses we would have we talked for a little about trips to Bermuda, to Provence, or to rocky coasts with inlets of pale sand somewhere in Donegal or Nova Scotia. One place would be too far, another too expensive, another perhaps dull. It was not that we disagreed, but we both knew that none of these things would happen to us – that we would not have a house together nor visit the coasts of Donegal or Nova Scotia.

5 July 1938.

With no rules that I put faith in, no instinct to guide me except the instinct of self-preservation, a soft heart, a calculating head, and a divided mind, is it any wonder that I cause confusion when what I want is so simple – a woman who will love me and who will sleep with me sometimes, who will amuse me and listen to me and not flood me with love.
9 July 1938.

Until I touch her she seems not to be made of flesh – her clothes are of one material, her skin is of another. It seems madness to kiss her cheek, which is made of some soft stuff not silk or velvet. As one might put a piece of velvet to one’s face to feel its texture I put my lips close to her skin. I feel a casual pleasure in the softness of her cheek. A moment later a miracle has been achieved – her body is no longer a stubborn material thing of painted wood covered in velvet. It is now fluid and sparkling and electric with life. I can bathe in this moving stream and drown in this strong current.

12 July 1938. Dance at the Leiters’.

The house built in the nineties is rightly famous for its appalling ugliness. The ballroom of inlaid marble was a monument of frigid vulgarity. Other interesting features included the enormous green malachite mantelpiece in the dining-room and the portrait of old man Leiter in the hall which justifies the worst that could be said of the Leiter family.¹ I suffered less than usual during this party as a result of consuming one glass of champagne after another in quick succession. I realized that this was necessary when somebody came up to me and said, “You look like Banquo’s ghost.” After that I felt I must go home immediately or get tight. I am glad I chose the latter course. I danced with Mrs. Legare who was the local beauty. Platitudes dropped from her lovely lips, each platitude as smooth and flawless as a perfect pearl. “Paris is so beautiful in spring when the chestnuts are out.” “Women should wear what becomes them, not what happens to be the fashion.” Her beauty too is that of a pearl – smooth and flawless. She wore a full-skirted dress of some stiff, shiny material which seemed to radiate a sort of moonlight brightness. Her gestures with her arms and hands, her way of dancing, were of a liquid grace.

15 July 1938.

I am longing to get to Nova Scotia. I want to breathe air from the Atlantic, to lie in bed at night and listen to the fog bell’s warning and to live in a family again – tea and gossip in the middle of the morning – my mother sinking exhausted into a chair, lighting a cigarette, beginning an impassioned attack on the stupidity or the ingratitude of the worldly-wise or telling one of those spontaneous masterpieces of mimicry, humour, and pathos, which give such depth of variety and colouring to a small incident.

23 July 1938.

Walked home last night through the dark jungle of the Negro quarter. The groups of Negroes – women sitting on the steps of their houses, young braves under a street lamp at the corner – are waiting for an artist who can render the grace of their movements, their natural nobility of posture or repose.

31 July – 1 August 1938. Newport (Staying at The Breakers, the Vanderbilts’
When I stepped out of the station there was the car gleaming like patent leather and a small chauffeur in a greying livery, a pink and crumpled face and an accent which I presumed to be Hungarian.1 “Two things in the United States not good – dogs and children – both too fresh,” wheezed the chauffeur in a piping, choking voice as he swerved the car to avoid a dog and again to miss hitting a child. “How much must I tip you?” I thought. “There is the home of Mrs. Vanderbilt,” he said. Our Mecca was in sight. In another minute we passed through high iron gates, past great trees – even the grass was a rich man’s grass. No house was grander than ours I thought, as we curled through the iron gates under the massive trees. After glancing at the immense marble hall, I was in the lift and then along a red carpeted corridor and then in my room. It appeared to have been designed for an Edwardian lady of fashion. It was panelled in faded chintz. There was her upright piano, her chaise-longue with its frilled and faded pink cushions. On the walls hung the pretty pictures which one sees nowadays only in the darkest corner of a second-hand dealer’s shop where they are piled on dusty shelves asking a shilling a lot for them and glad to get rid of them. I went out into the upper stone terrace and looked over the perfection of green lawns, the fountains and two little groves of trees which framed the seascape beyond. There was the sea – a magnificent blue carpet spread in front of the house, the breakers broke obediently at the foot of the cliff as if performing for the special benefit of the Vanderbilts and their guests. It was all very gratifying.

On my breakfast tray was a gardenia in a glass of water. Anxious to miss nothing I was sniffing at it when the footman appeared. I felt that I looked slightly silly sniffing at the gardenia and I hastened to engage him in conversation about the day’s boat race.

On the doorstep that morning we all stood waiting for the car to arrive. My host in white flannels had a cotton cap with a small, transparent, green window in its peak, my hostess in a pink dress and her little girl who was like an old-fashioned doll with circular pink cheeks, china-blue eyes, and golden ringlets. A Hungarian nurse went with the child as though they were two pieces of the same set of chinaware, as she too had the pinkest of cheeks and the bluest of eyes. The nurse and child both shone with cleanliness. I am not particularly fond of sailing, and I know less than nothing about boats, but the day was agreeable. I was sustained by the sensation that people would envy me seeing the America’s Cup Races on such a fine, fast boat and with such knowledgeable and truly sporting men. I was sustained too by the caviare and champagne and by the slightly heady feeling of association with people whose incomes outdistanced my own by astronomical proportions. The harbour was full of ships, and people kept on saying, “This is the sight of a lifetime.” I believed them readily enough. There was in fact nothing remarkable to see. The two yachts were somewhere on the horizon, the English one well in the rear.

That night there was a dance. It took all my energies to wear an easy,
pleasant expression. I was frightened of catching a glimpse in one of the mirrors of a pallid, ghost-like face and recognizing with horror that it was my own. As I knew hardly anyone there it was necessary to hide the anxious and slightly embarrassed air of one “who does not belong,” particularly in this case because, in the eyes of the guests, those “who did not belong” at this party could belong nowhere mentionable. All were talking the same unmistakable cosmopolitan language of the dollar, but it was not their money that filled me with exhaustion – it was their vitality.

In the garden I was led up to old Mrs. Vanderbilt, who received me with the cordial simplicity of royalty. Her husband with his seedy beard does in fact look like an eccentric member of the German ruling family. One suspected him of epileptic attacks and a passion for collecting birds’ eggs. I was paired off with a woman who had recently with unflagging zest embarked on her fourth marriage. She was one of those invulnerable American women set in motion by some secret spring of energy who go dashing through life at such high speed that it is impossible to think of them except in terms of motion – from hotel to hotel – from party to party – from cocktail to cocktail – from bed to bed – and doubtless too from book to book, for American women have of course read everything. Her present husband is a pink-cheeked and amiable guardsman who, with a reckless courage which does more credit to a stout heart than to any appreciation of the laws of possibility, seeks to satisfy her.

The young girls at the dance had skins the colour of warm sand which the sun has burnished and the grace of movement and easy buoyancy of those who swim through life on golden tides.


The clammy air comes in through the windows. There is fog in that air, and at intervals there is the melancholy mooing of the foghorn. A tram goes by in the quiet street. As it recedes, its sad monotonous chant grows thin upon the air. When it stops at the corner it puffs like a stout woman with too many parcels. All sounds here are in a minor key, all colours dimmed by a slight disparaging mist.

10 August 1938.

The miasma of the small town – the terror that comes as you are shaving the next morning and remember the things you said the night before. Will it be repeated and distorted? Will your employer hear of it? Will it cause people to think you odd or affected or depraved? Will people say you are a communist or an advocate of free love? Have you hurt somebody's feelings?

The last of the three old Miss Odells is dead – foolish, ugly, innocent ladies coming down the aisle after Holy Communion, their silks creaking, their gold bangles tinkling. Now their big solemn town house is for sale and its contents will be offered at an auction next Wednesday, the proceeds to go to the cathedral diocesan fund. Already the china, the glass, and the silver are laid out on tables in the dining-room in preparation for the sale. The little silver