Lucy Fairfield



Eleot from Mother

Lucy Fairfield

My mother and my granddaughter

MY mother was Lucy Fairfield Wadsworth. She must have been as a little girl like her name which suggests gentleness and poise, reserve and conscientiousness. With her hair parted and drawn over or around her ears in the pictures of her as a young girl of eighteen when she became engaged to my father she had the aspect that explained an old friend's exclamation years after her death: "Your mother was like a dove." She had hazel eyes, beautifully set in large orbits, a finely shaped nose with a bridge that made wearing glasses easy, a nose which none of her children inherited, all having their father's short blunt feature deeply cut at its juncture with the forehead. Her narrow lips were deeply incised at the corners like a statue's, a lovely feature inherited by one of her grandsons, and their curve of sweet humor counteracted the

firmness of a very square jaw. As I remember her that charming expression was enhanced by the direct gaze and the delicate wrinkles at the outer corners of her eyes.

I do not recall much color in my mother. She was more like a Flaxman drawing in a New England album than a colored woodcut by Currier and Ives. As she wore dark blue and gray or black for economy I recall with particular pleasure white and black dotted dressing sacques—which she spelled in the French way—of muslin or dimity worn on hot days in the house, and a light blue bow at the throat of her black silk dress on formal occasions. The bow was out of deference to something romantic in my father's taste. I recall having heard him speak of liking to see her wear a cherry-colored bow as a girl, but I think that was in his imagination and the blue bow was the reality. Mother would not have chosen a pink bow. She disliked pink because as a little girl she had worn it while her cousin Lizzie had been dressed in blue.

Their mothers had been pleased to dress their daughters like twins. We used to feel very sorry for mother when she told us how she had felt about that fancy of her mother's and her aunt's. But we also thought she ought to have told Grandma who if at all like our mother would not have made the little girl wear the color she disliked. It was a weakness of mother's not uncommon to New England character not to complain of discomfort, mental or physical, until afterwards. When we children were older we reproached her for what we called "Suffering in silence" and compared her unfavorably with my father who both complained aloud of small discomforts and neglect and expressed enthusiastic approval of attention which it was a pleasure to give him.

Mother had lived on the Atlantic seaboard until she married and moved to Chicago, an adventurous step for a little Massachusetts girl in the Sixties. As the favorite daughter and sister it was hard for that Boston family to understand her eagerness to go with her Philadelphia hus-

band to his law opening in the West. Though she did not leave wealth she left more certainty of comfort and a large family connection which I believe she never missed, so firmly did the more informal and friendly west and the Unitarian Community that was her Chicago seize on her imagination and hold her loyal affection.

Going west after the Civil War was the greatest adventure that could have come to the girl of twenty-three and her soldier husband of twenty-five. She always said that at her wedding in the Old West Church the bridegroom was more interested in his sword than in her, and there was something childlike in my father to the last that made it easy for his children to believe this. She had a humble sense of his intellectual superiority as a Phi Beta Kappa of Harvard and always spoke of herself as having no sense of humor, because she did not care for the jokes in "Life" which the rest of us prided ourselves on reading. But she saw how funny father was about his sword and how ridiculous all

pretense and vanity was in her children and in the other living people about her even when too kind to laugh at them. She was quiet among strangers, feeling shy of her own powers to interest, but she was very entertaining to her husband and children in her speech and her letters. At the dinner table with my father we enjoyed every incident of her day and her shrewd, amusing comment on the persons she had seen. She stayed at home a great deal, mending and sewing for three daughters and a son, and was always in the house when we came from school and when my father came from his office. He used to open the door with a latch key, unless it was hot weather and he found her with her sewing or a book on the shady front porch, and call, "Lucy." When he knew she was within hearing he would often lie down without going upstairs to see her and take a nap before our early dinner, knowing that he would find her at hand when he woke, ready to give him the news of her day and to talk over any events or problems that affected the four children. Father was very easy on us all, and

though neither of them punished, my mother was apt to dispense whatever discipline was administered. We could not bear to hurt either of them and usually considered their requests and expectations reasonable.

My mother knew very little about cooking and taught us nothing about it, saying that any woman of intelligence could cook. But in those days the servant problem bore lightly on us all. Two Irish women lived with us and did the housework throughout my childhood. Her hospitality was of the generous kind that shares what is at hand and does not struggle to make a show of greater richness than the family has in its daily life. And though as a snobbish child I sometimes felt a false shame over a lunch of soup and rennet or cocoa and bread and butter served on a red cloth, I had the discrimination later to estimate duly the hospitality of the Sunday suppers to which any number could and did come unannounced to share a cold dish, bread cut from the loaf, tea, preserves and cake. In later years

father made Welsh Rarebit on a chafing dish for one of whose ingredients he rushed the growler at the corner saloon. Certain things my father demanded of her. She always gave the books which overflowed into every corner of the house their annual cleaning. I can see her with head tied up, a gingham apron over her long, full skirts, with strangely dirty hands, clapping gently together two leather bound volumes, wiping, and laying them in piles until the bookcases were ready to receive them. She was hardly ever sick so that there was an awfulness in a story my father liked to tell of the time when someone was hired to come in and "do the books" because my mother was ill in bed or upstairs with a new baby. He who knew where every book in his library belonged and missed a single one out of its place even for a single evening, found it incomprehensible and almost indecent that the hired woman put the books back on the shelves according to size and color, mixing the sets of which there were so many, English novels, early dramatists, history especially. But the story had another

significance to me though I joined with my book-loving father in surprise at the woman's lack of familiarity with the ways of books, because it was so hard for me to imagine home with mother upstairs and unable to move actively about in our service. Perhaps, indeed, I was the baby who had kept her from her labors. Another, and I think more trying task that father said could only be done "by a lady" was the care of the oil lamps. We used at least two of these every day in addition to the gas, and in the summer, when the work was sometimes relegated to me—but never for long—how I loathed the feel of the crusty wick under the greasy cloth, the squeaky texture of that same saturated rag, and the smell of the kerosene.

Mother's best dress the year around was a black silk, renewed over long periods, and made "out of the house," the one I remember best being of heavy grosgrain. This was worn on rare occasions, and when it came out of its old linen wrappings in the lowest drawer of her mahogany bureau I can recall watching with my younger

brother its emergence and feeling the impressiveness of the social occasion it was to grace—perhaps a reception for a new minister at Unity Church, a Thanksgiving dinner, or a Ladies' night at the Chicago Literary Club. Its folds shaken out gave spaciousness to mother's small bedroom where the big mahogany bed, the tall wicker workbasket, the Wilcox & Gibbs sewing machine, the wardrobe in which father's clothes and his bottle of lavender water were kept, and a comfortable cane seated rocker left very little space for so much family drama as was enacted there. The rocker especially, with a squeak that is forever associated in my memory with the comforting smell of Pond's Extract, had presided over scenes of healing to wounds both of body and mind when seated in it mother held me in her arms and rocked pain and fears away.

I remember once as a little girl having a sudden new perception of my mother's beauty, an inner quality more even than an outer, that shone through and held me for a few minutes in a realization of her

spiritual distinction. A small distinct memory isolated from what went before or came after, like a sentence separated from its context, or an image seen in reflection. And it has often been flashed back to me at unexpected times by the inexplicable caprice of memory.

We were riding together in an open street car, the kind that used to run by underground cables through Chicago, with seats that crossed the width of the car, entered from a step that ran the length of the car and on which the conductor propelled himself by straps to collect his fares. I was sitting beside my mother, watching a woman and her children a few seats in front of us. They were what my brother and I, like the Bible, called "poor people." The woman was absorbed in the older child, a little girl younger than I, who kept turning her head to smile shyly at someone behind her and then hide her face. Following her glance I saw that she was exchanging these smiles with my mother, who, unconscious of any third observation, was smiling at the child each time she

turned, and waiting for the glance to be renewed to smile again. I forgot the little girl and sat in absorbed contemplation of my mother while a warm sense of something I had not till then been conscious of filled me with contentment and an appreciation very different from the self-interested dependence of a child. It was the first time I can remember thinking of my mother as a person outside myself, an individual who could be estimated apart from her importance as my mother. I never spoke of this incident. There really was nothing I could put into words, and as I write it down now for the first time I feel that I am not conveying what it meant to me, except that I was conscious for the first time of beauty in my mother, shining from the hazel eyes and in the gentle expression of her smiling lips.

I had many fears for years after an illness and none of them however absurd were laughed at or pushed out of my parents' tender considerateness. Though I sometimes was unable to tell them what I was afraid of until the emotion was wan-

ing, I never met with indifference or impatience even when their imaginations and sympathies must have been taxed by the inconvenience of my demands. I think in a day when child psychology was an unknown science it was remarkable that a sense of inferiority or shame was hardly permitted to arise. There was one entire year when my mother did not leave the house after dark because I was frightened if I woke and found her gone. I remember her grave compliance with my impassioned plea to promise to stick a knife into me if I died lest I be buried alive. And though I think I knew she wouldn't do just that—where would she get a suitable implement?—I relied on the sincerity and endless kindness of her relation to me to make some equivalent and equally satisfactory test before my interment. For a great part of a year I did not read aloud or recite at school because after breaking down one day I said to her that I could never go back if I had to raise my voice. Without my knowing how it was arranged the school was made to understand that I was to be passed over in recitations, and this

was carried out without making me self-conscious, because of my mother's and father's sympathy with me and power of gaining respect for their views from the teachers in the school.

We had more enlightened treatment in regard to sex than prevailed in the Seventies and Eighties. What we were told of physical laws of reproduction was somewhat sentimental and onesided from the point of view of modern realism, but it served to prevent any uncomfortable shocks in after-life, having a possibility of adaptation and extension, and gave me at least a feeling of being in my parents' confidence and of being able to ask questions of them both. Our religious teaching was a blend of benevolent anthropomorphism and mild bigotry about the orthodox, especially those of the Episcopal denomination. But the ethics we were taught still seem sound to me. We imbibed some Boston and Philadelphia prejudices with our parents' teachings. I respected unduly people who took the Atlantic Monthly, had current jelly with

mutton and Yorkshire pudding with roast beef, and I thought gum chewing not less than indecent. But I am glad that Unitarian exaltation of the humanity of Jesus, and an Abolition tradition added to my father's military experiences in a colored regiment, made us free of unhappy prejudice against Jews and Negroes, although our beliefs were not much tested by experience.

My mother changed with age in her views on religion more than my father. He had a liking for the simple ceremonies and dogma of the Unitarian Church and still more for the coming-together of the congregation under a leader with whom he enjoyed an occasional disagreement, which lasted to the end. But my mother quite early in my recollection took to staying at home on Easter when the elaborate service seemed to her inconsistent with a disbelief in the resurrection, and no symbolism of the awakening of spring quite honest. When her grandchildren arrived she agreed with me in an inability to teach even a belief in the fatherly deity of my

childhood or a heaven as free to all as were the prizes in Alice's caucus race. She had the pleasure so often given to grandparents of allowing herself freer demonstration of her love for them than she had for us, for by the time they came she had known the most cruel sorrows and even her habit of self-control and sense of the duty of restraint which had kept her from expressing to us the full measure of her love seemed artificial and unmeaning.

But mother was appreciative of her children's good intentions even when they resulted in disadvantage to herself. Grace, who felt her responsibility as the oldest child and was full of elder sisterly kindness and initiative, once planned a surprise when mother was visiting her family in Boston. Beaver was a fashionable fur that winter and Grace, who had a flare for what was fashionable far beyond my mother, decided that we children should make out of a dowdy mink muff stored in camphor, a fashionable one of what she called "plucked beaver." It was

like Grace to let even the youngest have a share in the preparing of a gift to mother on her return. Evening after evening we four, three little girls and a littlest boy, sat around the doomed muff and plucked out its long, red hairs, leaving a smooth, short haired beaverish-looking fur in its place. But the fingers of the youngest and perhaps of the next to the youngest were unskillful, and they sometimes plucked out more than was intended by our guardian sister, so that there were thin patches—even places where the skin showed—on the renovated muff that was to replace the honest mink. I seem to recall a recognition of disaster when these patches were revealed under Jim's fingers, but no hard words from Grace. Nor was there anything but gratitude and appreciation expressed by mother on her return for the labor of love, though I cannot remember that the fur was in evidence afterwards. The sense of humor that my mother and father agreed she did not possess must have operated to make a pleasant legend of this episode instead of the bitter memory it might have been.

My mother had many friends among younger women. As the years went on she cared for youth more than for her contemporaries, and if not advanced in all her views was ready to listen to new ones and to understand as much of any new outlook and point of view on debatable and controversial subjects as they would tell her. One woman whom I lately praised for the generosity of her attitude towards her daughters, said with surprise as though I should have known it, "I learned it all from your mother." And another wrote me when mother died, "I believe she had the spiritual power that Christian Scientists reach for. Whatever she had to suffer never seemed to take away from what she had to give to others."

The stories which we loved to have her tell of herself all as I look back had a heroic quality, however simply she regarded them. The least of these had to do with her handsome nose which bent slightly to one side because swinging in a barn door as a child she had fallen and the door had swung to and bent her nose.

Another was of her applying her little tongue directly to the hot flatiron to see if it was ready to use instead of the indirect method of the wet finger which she had watched and hoped to improve on. These two must have their quality of the heroic merely from my knowledge of my mother whom I never saw cry or protest aloud at any pain or discomfort. But there were stories of the Great Fire, that epic of Chicago, which did have Homeric value; of the eighteen pairs of little drawers made for her two little girls, my older sisters, with six buttonholes in each which she had finished and put into the laundry hamper that week, all burned with her house and its belongings and more regretted than anything else she left behind in her flight. There was my little brother's scarlet fever when mother nursed him behind a wet sheet hung across her door. All of these stories were of sad incidents ending well, even that of a libel suit which threatened and greatly distressed her until dismissed; and there was the long successful battle in the Chicago Woman's Club of which my mother was

one of the founders, for the admission of a colored woman. These two we children were old enough to live through with her. But later as to all families came tragedy and my mother's vigor never recovered from the crushing blow of the deaths of my sister Grace, the oldest of us four, and my brother Jim, the youngest. Mother was not with her children when they died. Grace, the best of us all, the giving, never withholding friend and sister and daughter, died in California after a losing battle of four years with tuberculosis. And Jim, the lovable, the gay, the little friend of all the world, died in one of our country's shameful camps of typhoid fever during the Spanish War. I was in Europe on my wedding trip, but they told me of the sleepless nights that followed one another while mother and Margaret at home waited for the news from his bedside to which mother, broken by Grace's death, was unable to accompany my father, and how when the news came at last that Jim had died she slept the sleep of exhaustion that comes when hope is gone and a noble fortitude accepts the inevitable.

A year and a half later my oldest child Nancy was born and what healing could come to mother she brought. For the ten years that mother lived I think Nancy was the dearest object of her love, certainly the object on which she lavished most freely and most devotedly the rich treasure of her heart. If Nancy, bossing three little brothers, strong, competent, reserved little girl, was perfect in her Granny's eyes, the knowledge of that to Nancy did her no harm. Surely it is well for any human being to live in the sunlight of one perfect confidence and appreciation. The bond between the alternate generations may be the most perfect of all, there is so little that is selfish in it. When sixteen years after my mother's death, I stood in the delivery room of the Presbyterian Hospital and heard my daughter after a blessedly short labor call her first child Lucy Fairfield, I knew how that love which mother had given to my first child had been remembered and returned. Another Lucy Fairfield was to be with us for four years and in her short life to give the joy to her mother and to her grandmother that Nancy had given a generation earlier.