Adolphe
Autobiography

Part I. Early days

3. Home at Belstead, 1863, 1864

(Written in 1925.)
a different type of religious book to any we had seen, and she read aloud remarkably well, and my heart was soon opened. The story I remember was about an Angel who was set to melt an Iceberg, and the expedients he tried, and I used to say over his prayer for myself:

"O Father Eternal, with wisdom endure,
I cannot, I cannot this Iceberg subdue;
Its smooth to the touch and its bright to the eye,
But it's cold, it's frozen all the day through!"

I had, as I have said, been well grounded in the doctrine of the sinfulness of human nature. "The carnal mind is enmity against God, an enemy may be won over and reconciled, but enmity never can"; that was one of the Chas's great sayings, it was the keynote of both Father's and Mother's religion, and I not only accepted it as Scriptural, but believed that I proved its truth in my own heart and life, that there was nothing before a disciple of Christ but "crucifixion of the flesh with all its desires and lusts." This made our Mother's entire separation from the world seem rational to me. Was I a Christian all this while? I think I was, but the sense of indwelling sin was very grievous, and I looked back to the six weeks alone with Grandam less than two years before, and wished I could have it again. The burden seemed lighter then.
the previous year, the class Dora was in was at the top + was not very effective, + I think Mamie, - as we learned to call her, - looked forward to her "Second Class" of which I rose to be a member. We were not a clever set, + were not encouraged to be so, but I think we were trustworthy.

Of all the thirty, only two excited that touch of real love that puts the one loved into a separate compartment. Virginia Dalrymple was, without exception, the most beautiful girl I have ever lived with, with her lovely fawn-like eyes, + her hair hanging like a cloak of gold over her shoulders, + her brave magnanimous character, but she was too immature for me. I did not want a child to develop; I wanted a sister to confide in, + far dearer, far more respected, was the plain, dull-coloured little Nancy Williams, who had real spiritual life + real hardships to go through while unbelieving Johnoy brothers at home. I do not think it was a foolish affection, + it certainly was a faithful one, for though completely discouraged by dear Mother (I now imagine on account of the brothers) it continued for some fifteen years, + then my sweet friend was laid in the Cemetery at Cannes. Now while I write, here in my quiet bedroom at the Sundial, there hangs a frame on the wall containing four delicate little pencil drawings, a selection of four of the best saints my life has known in any personal relation; + S. C Williams is one of them. + underneath the tiny portrait are the words, "These have not defiled their garments, + they shall walk with me in white, for they are worthy."
But here let me leave Belstead for the moment, and touch on my love of Nature on its poetic side, for it was very real, even if fragmentary. At six or seven I was lodged in a bedroom where on summer mornings the early sun shone full on the yellow-brown stone of the side of the window and shewed it up against the cloudless blue. The line of demarcation at times seemed to me unsteady, as though it rippled and trailed with joy, and shewed me something beyond this world, and this feeling has never wholly left me all through life, when I see a tree all golden in the autumn, or a cliff standing out against the sky. Again from another window once I woke and saw the Morning Star stand white and steadfast over the black fir-trees where the sky was beginning to pale toward dawn, and I climbed back into bed feeling as though I had had a glimpse of "perfect peace," which was so vivid as to be almost unlawful. Again the pathos of a fine Sunday evening seemed almost more than I could bear, when after "hymn-saying" at four o'clock, I saw the hay lying pink and golden below and the swallows flying high, high up among the little quiet clouds above. I have seen primroses that I could not pick, and rosy apples lying in grass all heavy with dew, that bore something more to me than spoils for my basket, and I have known the scent of the fallen leaves and of the first frost in the still evening to be almost intoxicating in its beauty. Verse might seem to come natural to such a mind as this. So it did, after a fashion, but these momentary impressions were far too
my little world consisted of two things—Religion on the one hand, and ridiculous fancies about Ape, "Moles & Bogies", which had in part a language of its own. So I wrote "ahymn" and this was promptly discouraged by mother who thought this path led to sentiment and unreality; and also I wrote about the Ape, but they and the whole nonsense about them faded away before I was ten years old, and then I wrote no more. These two pieces keep form and rhythm all through and are not bad for age of nine years old; but are not worth quoting.

Now as soon as I got away to Belstead a sort of pressure was lifted off me, and I could be myself, and I began to write. Then I found that Virginia had the same aspirations, and she and I agreed we would write a book and show the contents to no one but each other. So we bought a dingy little copy-book, labelled it "Viz. Con." and she was to write what she liked in the one end, and I in the other. She was then in a passion of admiration for Mary Queen of Scots, and thought Elizabeth "a dreadful old dragon," so she planned out a long poem to be called "Scenes in the Life of Mary Queen of Scots." But alas, the manipulation of language is not an easy art, and the sweet child had never done "Thesaurus," and she could do nothing. At her end of the book is written:

"The parting rays of sun had fled, from Seven's castle, walls." These two lines she used to repeat with great dignity, but never
could add a third & a fourth, so the fragment was signed "Virginia," & there it remains to this day. My end has four pieces in it, one of these called "A Belstead Day by a Belstead Child," so immensely long that the copy-book is filled to the end with my fable sloped writing, & Virginia's single page remains only intact. That is worth nothing, nor is another, but perhaps this ode may be copied. It was June 14, 1864, Virginia's birthday & we had a picnic in her honour. She had roses had suddenly come into bloom, & the hedges were full of them, & we made her a crown. I wrote "A Birthday of Roses."

"Let us crown her, let us crown her! Let us make her Pet a wreath! She shall wear these joyous hours, a wild breath of woodland flowers. Oh, why must they fade in death?

Gather roses, gather roses! Gather all that you can see, opening buds of rosy brightness, blossoms too of snowy whiteness, Queen of roses she shall be!

O Virginia, our Virginia! Childhood's years are flying past. Fourteen years have now passed o'er her, an unknown land lies on before her, with a sunny, sunny past. She shall wear it, she shall wear it! Though it soon must droop in death, these fair buds will fade 'er gone, May she bear at home in Heaven, a bright, glorious, fadeless wreath!"
This has many faults but some promise, but there is far more in the fourth one, which by the way is dated Nov. 1863, and I feel a little proud of it! The setting on scene is this: When we had something to learn that required no writing we were allowed to leave our desks and sit where we liked in the drawing-room. It was a large room, and in the distance Mamie sat at her writing-table busy with her large correspondence. She was reading "The Geography of the Sea" by Sienst. Mauvy. The first Atlantic Cable had just been laid, and the whole subject was to me full of interest. I will transcribe in full.

Late Afternoon

She drew a chair and sat down to write;
She took up her map and books and crossed the floor;
She sat and read her lessons to prepare.

A little silence, then again her step
Was faintly heard through the half-open door.
She softly entered with a book to read,
And this time took her seat upon the floor.

In the bow window, carpeted with green,
She sat, her book upon her knees, her head,
But o'er the page to catch the fading light;
She thought with interest on what she read.

The drooping ferns hung softly bright o'er her head.
They caught the autumn sun's setting gold;
And flushed with light their lovely veining shown
Against the dark red curtains massive fold.
She had not their beauty, for her thought
Was with that mighty stream, whose constant flow
Girdling the earth with waters fresh & warm,
Brings life & health with never-chilling glow;
And with those winds, those curious winds, that blow
For half the year without a stop or stay,
The current veering round, they change
And speed the merchant-vessels on their way.
The golden light waned faint & fainter still,
The print grew dim, the diagrams confused,
The letters came & went upon the page,
And she could scarcely see the books she read.
Her head bent lower, lower o'er the page,
She held it up to catch the fading light,
At last she laid it down on her knee
And gave it up to rest her weary sight.
The autumn evening drew in clear & chill,
There was no wind, the breeze a sign of rest,
The flames hung calmly, sadly, all around.
Partook of solemn & unbroken rest.
The beech-tree stood up black & lonely there
And spread its bared branches all around,
And now and then a pale, sere, yellow leaf
Stole gently down, and rested on the ground.
They fell so softly through the still, still air,
As if it just touched by winter's frosty breath,
Weary of life, they, longed for repose.
Bought the damp path, chilly grass beneath.
The twigs stood out like bleakest stone
Against the pure, calm orange of the sky,
Which, melting into tenderest green above,
Became at length a pale, pale blue on high.
And then the utter quiet all around,
No hum of insect, no chirp of bird,
A sort of listening silence, in the room
The ticking of the clock was only heard,

Besides the hurrying of a pen, a sound,
The child well knew, I loved it too so well;
It told that one was there, not far away,
One whom she loved beyond what words could tell.

And through the gathering dusk, that growling fast
Mysterious made the corners of the room,
A bright green lamp with solitary ray
Had placed a little circle in the gloom.

Thus it ends abruptly, and surely it is good; in spite of some
horribly prosaic lines, for fourteen or fifteen years it is good.
If I had been taken up at this point, the direct observation of
nature encouraged, the scale places shown, the rules of
emphasis explained, they might have made a poet of me, who knows?
I showed it to no one who had any authority or judgment, & the
whole matter dropped. Before leaving this subject, let me go on
to something about eighteen months later. When, amid three or
four entirely worthless products there is another good one. It
is on the songs of birds, & seeing I had not then read Browning’s
Thrush, Shelley’s Skylark, or Keats’ Nightingale, it seems to me
to be full of promise. It is the first attempt to rhyme the first
and third lines, & is fairly successful. After this one, except for
some Bouss Rhymes & other Christmas games, there is scarcely
an attempt to “write a poem” for thirty or thirty-five years, so
I will place it here.
The Songs of Birds

Oh who may know of what the bird is singing,
When his notes gladly swell,
His clear voice over all the earth is singing,
Yet none of them can tell.

6 birds, who live without a shade of sadness
Dumming your happy days,
Your life seems one continual hymn of gladness,
Striking the note of praise.

Here, that wild song, that rising, slow & falling
Makes the deep woodlands ring,
It is the thrush who from the hedgerow calling,
Wakens our hearts to sing.

Far, far into the blue ethereal distance
Soars the free eagle on high,
Shouting, as if he poured his glad existence
Into the boundless sky.

The morning breezes freshly round him glowing,
The sunlight on his wings,
And louder, yet his ceaseless song is flowing,
As straight from earth he springs.

Earth's low & tangled bushes he despises
Where other parrots rove,
Heavenward alone his soaring spirit rises,
And swift he darts above.

And then the deepening twilight softly stealing
Quiets the songs of light,
When whispering leaves are hushed, & every feeling
Is calmed at coming night.
O nightingale, 'tis then thy strange sweet sound
Most vividly remains
When in the listening silence of that hour
Are heard thy low clear strains

Now full they rise with joyous gladness singing,
And now with plaintive note,
As of some touching tale of sorrow singing,
Thy tones in sadness float.

Two or three of these verses are good. Though later I escaped
the obvious faults & attainment improved, it is sure that
I touch the high-water mark of promise. But the atmosphere
of my home was gently repressive of these attempts, & they
sank down into nothing.

Enough of this. Let me return to Belstead. Dora left in July
being nearly eighteen, & I had one term alone. It was during
that term that I heard of Harry's engagement to Gertrude
Sanftan, though it was exciting, I was not quite sure that
I was happy about it. However all went smoothly, & they were
married in Feb. 1864. [I see, I am getting my dates wrong,
though it is not of much importance. It must have been in
Oct. 1863 they were engaged, & that winter Haritz took a house
in Manchester Square, & we all migrated to London. I had no
more than the Christmas holidays there, & the two or three days
for Harry's wedding.]

Well at Christmas 1864 I left Belstead. I was not yet
sixteen, & it was too early to leave. Haritz said he "didn't
see why" he should go on paying for an expensive school, then
I should do quite well at home with three sisters above me who had been educated till they were eighteen. I felt this as a kind of slight, a hint even still going on that I was not worth much, but I did not venture on a word of remonstrance, nor even to express regret. I was sorry not to get into the First Class & be one of the trusted few who set the tone for all the others, & yet I knew I was not carrying much, & I braced myself to go home & see what I could do by myself in the way of preparation for life.

I do not remember the actual partying, but I do remember the home-coming, & how a fire bonfire was lighted in the meadows in my honour, & how there were some blazing top-balls which the boys bravely & recklessly threw about, & how the two brothers, Harry & George, made a carrying chair of their hands & bore me round the fire with shouts that the last of us was home from School, & we would not be parted any more.

(Thus far is written April 1925)