

Katie's childhood

I have been thinking of all the Easters past – of all the chocolate eggs and bunnies which I never had a chance to give you. You are too old for these now – but there is something I can send you – which no one else can – (when I go no one else will remember.) I have written down memories of your mother as a small girl – trivial perhaps – but the kind of thing a woman ponders over in the course of her life.

March 3, 1928 – found us in an apartment at the Hotel Berkely in Paris, where we had spent most of the winter. Ben had been told that a move to Latin America was imminent so it seemed foolish to renew the lease on our delightful brownstone row house in the rue Forteing. All our furniture had been packed – ready to leave for the New World at any moment. I do not remember why your grandfather had the day off – but I was happy to have him near as I felt particularly clumsy, tired and melancholy that day. After lunch he suggested a drive in the country – so we set out in our Buick touring car – open to the elements – and made for the Forest of Fontainebleau where we had spent such happy hours during the summer. We left the car in a clearing and walked under the great trees – already showing signs of approaching spring. As the sun began to set we went back to an old inn where we were given the French version of English tea. The tea itself was lamentable, but the “English Plum Cake” which accompanied was delicious – and we ate with the healthy appetite of youth. (It was really Dundee cake – which derives its pleasant flavor from the cherries and sullanas and whiskey which go into its making).

We arrived home late and were glad to get to bed – I don't recollect having supper. At two in the morning I woke with stomach pains and I thought unhappily of the cake. But in a minute or two I realized that this was not brought on by dietary indiscretion, but the “Moment of Truth”. I woke Ben – we hurriedly put on some garments – picked up my suitcase. I told the hotel porter to call a taxi to take us to the American Hospital at Neuilly. When the sun rose that morning Kate had made her appearance – a fine child slightly over 7 pounds – with rosy skin and black hair.

We stayed 10 days in the hospital – the usual thing at that time – then made a triumphant return to the hotel where the baby was greeted with enthusiasm by all the staff – who promptly named her Mademoiselle Berkely. There were always admirers to watch the elegant English pram being wheeled out by pretty Mlle. – the Swiss nanny. The two charges comfortably settled among embroidered pillows and covered with a lap robe of velvet and cat fur (yes, beautiful tom cat skin skillfully put together). Mlle. would take them to the Champs Elysses for the morning, where Benny played whilst Katie napped. By today's standards their clothes must have been over-elaborate and impractical – but they were very beautiful.

Katie – from the very start – was “different”. The pastel blues and pinks of babyhood were not becoming to her. But, by great good luck – someone had given her a very tailored “highwayman's” coat of a clear turquoise blue wool crepe. It had a cape bordered with a pleated frill and it was lined with rich silk from Japan. She looked charming in this garment – which bore the label of Paquin – then second only to the great house of Worth – as a source of haute couture.

We spent that spring and summer agreeably enough waiting for orders to go to Cuba – which did not come until the Autumn – when we sailed for the U.S. for a two-weeks leave before going on to Havana – where our relatives the Porbiondos had already found us a home.

But – Fate decreed otherwise. State Dept. politics sent us instead to Panama. At first this seemed a cruel blow – but, it turned out – to be a blessing – for we enjoyed Panama in the full. The children were well and happy – the work was interesting – what more could one want?

In 1930 we again got our moving orders – this time to Bogotá, Columbia. Ben had to proceed immediately – but I was forbidden by my doctor to go with him as I was 6 months pregnant and the altitude of Bogotá is bad for mothers to be. Rather than stay alone in Panama we decided that I should go to England and visit my family – and that the baby should be born there – after which I would join Ben in his Andean aerie.

In early August – our household effects having been packed – he started off on this trip to Bogotá. Mile., the children and I set off for Bristol England in a small English ship which carried bananas and passengers.

(We soon discovered that the bananas out-ranked the passengers)

The only break in a 21 day journey was at Puerto Limon - C.R. an intolerably hot town - where we spent 24 hours loading fruit. Most of the passengers escaped the heat by going to the Capital, San Jose, for the night - but this was not feasible for us. The rest of the journey to England was quite dull except for one incident - one evening after Mile. and I had seen the children fed, bathed and tucked into bed, we had settled down ourselves to an excellent dinner of roast duckling and a salad of fresh tangerines and grapefruit. (It is strange how these details live in one's mind after all these years). We were surprised to see our room steward come into the dining salon and tip toe to our table. "Madam - I think you and the young lady should go at once to the cabin" he whispered and would not give any further details. Alarmed, we left our nice dinner and dashed to the cabin to be greeted by the sight of Benny and Kate doing a kind of war dance around the room. They were stark naked - but painted over in red spots and dashes which they had achieved by using up a large bottle of iodine they had found in the medicine cupboard. They looked so startled when we appeared that it was difficult to know what to say.

Once settled in Bogotá the three children led a sensible if dull life. We had a large house with a nice garden in one of Bogotá's suburbs. The house had once been a club for officers in the Columbian Army and was showy rather than comfortable. It was much too big for us - but we had been lucky to find a house at all - and the empty rooms were a fine playground for the children. We bought them a goat to play with and this animal was stabled in a patio in which there were several peach trees - laden with unripe fruit. In spite of our admonitions, the children ate heartily of this fruit and came down with amoebic dysentery. The finest pediatrician in town also happened to be the minister from Costa Rica - so we at once called in our colleague for advice. He had been trained either in England or the U.S. I forget which and was considered very advanced in his methods. He put the children on a regimen of rest - and meals which centered around applesauce - puree of spinach - rice and all the liquid they could drink - were it "Cambrio tea" - fruit juice - bouillon - or plain boiled water. This worked and in a short time our invalids were restored to full health - though Katie seemed to be extremely prone to colds - which would settle in her lungs and exhaust her with the coughing.

When we left Bogotá for Montevideo in 1932 she was just recovering from such a cold. The 3 day journey to the west (by train and automobile) over chill mountain passes and through torrid valleys did not help this condition and she was running a very high fever before we reached Buena Ventura - the port at which we boarded the Grace line for Valparaiso. She was so ill that we called in the ship's doctor - a very young man who had the courage to tell us that she was so ill that there was little he could do except try to lower the fever. He said that in Guayaquil Ecuador there was a very good American doctor and his advice to us was to get off the ship in Guayaquil and stay there until the next ship Valparaiso bound passed in two weeks time. This would give Dr. X (I forget his name) time to put Kate back on her feet and he would telegraph for the doctor to meet the ship in Guayaquil.

The hours flew by as we made the arrangement for our party to get off the ship - whilst the luggage - except for what was strictly necessary went on its way to Montevideo (There were 12 in our party - not to mention Jimmy the Airedale). We arrived in Guayaquil very early in the morning and the doctor arrived on the same little boat as the sanitary authorities. He saw Katie and at once confirmed our worst fears - "Mastoid," he said, "she should be operated on as soon as possible." -- We and Katie were allowed off the ship at once. The others followed later. We went straight to Dr. X's house next door to which he was building his clinic. A small surgery and 4 bed ward had just been completed. Everything was starkly simple - but spotlessly clean. Two Ecuadorean nurses were in attendance. Dr. X himself was a person of some note. He had been on the staff of Goelhale during the building of the Canal and had stayed on - judging that his skill was more needed in Latin America than in the U.S. He had been most successful.

Ben and I lived through two harrowing hours as the doctor leaned over the sleeping child. Mastoid in those days was an extremely serious illness and many children died from it. But the doctor worked on quite calmly and we began to feel reassured. Three hours later Katie came to and she seemed already better in spite of the after effects of the anesthetic. By the next morning the temperature was almost normal - the grey waxy look had gone from her face and she began to take interest in food. We had to wait 10 more days for another Latin bound ship to put in port - so, as the child was doing so well the doctor and his wife

suggested we go up to Quito for 3 days. A suggestion we followed though not before arranging for Benny and the 3 Sanchez children, Beatriz, Samuel and Cecilia all to have their tonsils removed, a necessary operation in each case. In this way we could take advantage of good surgery - good care and playmates for Katie who was getting restive. Also, it was "cheaper by the dozen". Katie had one glorious day of lording it over the other children, but after that it settled down to a normal condition and the 4 small patients had a jolly time together - overall in fine health when we continued our trip to Chile.

Montevideo proved a strange place - modern - clean and very dull for those of us who preferred cultural facilities to beaches and golf courses. For the children it was a good place. The house was comfortable and we lived two blocks from one of the best beaches. It was also within walking distance of the Colegio Ingles - to which in due course, Benny and Katie were sent.

As in Panama and Columbia our chief diversion - apart from diplomatic functions was picnicking and every week-end we would pack into the car and go to some neighboring village to enjoy the magnificent stretches of sand. One of our favorite places was an hours' drive from Montevideo, a very French looking group of cottages and small villas - set in a pine wood at the waters edge. The little "hotel" was most comfortable and the food good if one could settle down comfortably in the Uruguayan diet of meat and citrus fruit — wild peaches in their season.

Mlle. was no longer with us, she had chosen to stay in Bogotá with her lovesick airmen, so there was no nursery life. The children ate with us and went along with us. Domey and Maria the Mexican retainers seeing that they were bathed, dressed and tolerably tidy. On one such weekend Katie, upset at the thought of going to Montevideo, disappeared as we were ready to leave. We hunted "high and low" no Katie. Finally, someone searching the second floor rooms of the hotel came back to tell us the Lavatory door was closed - from the inside. We could hear breathing inside. But not all our pleading moved Katie one inch and the proprietor had to get on to the roof with the aid of a long ladder and let himself into the lavatory through a small sky-light. He emerged with a furious child in tow!

Dancing classes were the thing in Montevideo - so Benny and Katie were duly enrolled in one which had an ambitious programme of ballet and drawing room dances. They hated these classes until they were chosen to appear in a ballet which was to be danced at a charity event in the City's most elegant theater, I expect the costumes had something to do with the enthusiasm for this event - Benny was to be a gnome and Katie a cornflower - in a beautiful deep blue tutu of satin and tulle.

The great night came and along with dozens of other excited parents we left the children at the stage door