

"IT IS A VIVID BOOK, WITH PASSAGES OF GREAT DESCRIPTIVE BEAUTY..."

—*Literary Review*

# ESCAPADE

## *An Autobiography*



# EVELYN SCOTT

AUTHOR OF *The Wave*

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EVELYN SCOTT

ESCAPADE

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*An Autobiography*

Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc.  
New York

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What others have said about *Escapade*:

“Mrs. Scott has brought forth an impressive and brilliant book . . .”

—*New Republic*

“This book tells the story of a high and heroic adventure, an adventure entered upon with the complete intellectual lucidity and lived through with astonishing fortitude . . . It is clear that *Escapade* is indeed literature, that the major portion of it belongs to what we have in America of quite serious art.”

—*The Nation*

Books by Evelyn Scott

PRECIPITATIONS, *Poems*

THE NARROW HOUSE, *A Novel*

NARCISSUS, *A Novel*

THE GOLDEN DOOR, *A Novel*

MIGRATIONS, *An arabesque in histories*

IDEALS, *A book of Farce and Comedy*

THE WAVE, *Narratives of the Civil War*

ESCAPADE, *An Autobiography*

*To Adám, the monkey; Dinah, the tan and white bitch; the armadillo, a small unrelenting secret; the owl; the hawk; the deer; the mangy little chicken who lived in a cotton nest after its leg was hurt. To the delicious goats, and all the little birds with sunken breasts and rigid claws—my friends who are dead, who loved me for no more than the food I gave them.*

## INTRODUCTION

**D**URING THE EARLY MONTHS of 1914, New Orleans newspapers carried stories of the sensational 'escape' of Elsie Dunn, granddaughter of a prominent New Orleans family, and Frederick Creighton Wellman, Dean of the School of Tropical Medicine at Tulane University. She was nearly twenty and he was at least twice her age, married to his second wife, and a father. The furor created by the sudden disappearance and unknown destination of the couple had both immediate and future effects on the runaways and those closely connected with them.

*Escapade* is the autobiographical memoir of Evelyn Scott's chosen six-year exile with her married lover in primitive and remote regions of Brazil, of her separation from family and friends by distance and circumstance, and the geographic separation from cultural, artistic, and social activity that forced Scott to cope with years of solitude, to struggle against poverty, illness, and social condemnation, and to come to terms with an ordered universe. "It was during the first six early years in the tropics that I came to grips with the bedrock actuality in a primitive sense, and learned, through a geographical remoteness from social stimuli, the full value of self-dependence and an 'inner life'."

The act that produced *Escapade* and the book itself shocked both conservatives who criticized Scott's high-minded, open flaunting of moral codes and social conventions and liberals who

criticized society's judgment of Scott's conduct as immoral. The changes in her life that this romantically envisioned but desperate act brought about, and the subsequent publication of *Escapade* and her perceived reception of it, haunted Scott for the rest of her life.

As a literary work, *Escapade* stands alone. While there is no need for knowledge of either of the participants, their backgrounds, or the events leading up to their 'escape,' the intensity of Scott's personality emanating from her interior vision in the writing stimulates one with a desire to know more. When I first read *Escapade* some time in 1977, before I was drawn into the rediscovery of Scott, I knew little about her. Since that time I have learned a great deal about her, but to enforce my statement that the work stands alone, I can say that in my many re-readings of *Escapade*, my acquired knowledge neither adds to nor subtracts from the artistic quality of the impact of the book. So strongly do I believe in the artistic excellence of *Escapade* that were it not for the fact that we are rediscovering an artist's life and work, my feeling would be that this Introduction should actually be an Afterword.

But to fan the fires of curiosity and to provoke interest in the author and her career, I believe it is appropriate to reveal some facts relevant to *Escapade* about Scott's life before New Orleans, her meeting with Frederick Wellman, their life together after Brazil, and Scott's obsessive preoccupation with the effects of the Brazil years on her life—particularly her wish to be allowed to take responsibility for her own actions and her change of name.

Elsie Dunn was born January 17, 1893 in Clarksville, Tennessee. Her parents, Maude and Seely Dunn, enjoyed for a time a certain influentially and financially secure aristocratic existence, based on tobacco and railroads. Money and position were lost after the Civil War and the family did not cope well with either loss; Scott's mother's mental condition suffered considerably. Scott says of her in *Escapade* that she "was born with a gold spoon in her mouth and she doesn't understand what has become of it." In *Background in Tennessee*, published in 1937 and reissued by the University of Tennessee Press in 1980, Scott recreates the atmosphere for growing up Southern, and she describes events in the life of a charming child becoming a young

woman searching for an identity that eventually led her outside the boundaries of the South in her life and writing. The family's financial condition deteriorated further. When Scott was sixteen, the Dunns were forced to move to New Orleans to be closer to Seely Dunn's parents who could give some monetary relief. Scott was the youngest student ever to enroll in Sophie Newcomb College, but she did not adjust well to the discipline involved in university life. Motivated by simultaneous ambitions to become a writer, a painter, an actress, and a disciple of Pavlova, Tolstoy, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Karl Marx, she continued to educate herself by reading. Evelyn's father was involved with another woman; disillusioned with her parents' strained marriage and her mother's worsening mental state, resistant to the notion of being a Southern belle "like everybody else," and homesick for Tennessee, Evelyn was extremely unhappy and, according to Wellman, suicidal.

Frederick Wellman, when he was on a research expedition in Honduras earlier, had met Seely Dunn who was building a railway line from the port of Telas to the interior of the country, and when he returned to New Orleans, he visited him, and met Evelyn. Wellman, too, was unhappy and felt trapped in a situation, mostly of his own creation. The two were attracted to one another, partly because of their similar interest in philosophy, partly because of their mutual unhappiness and discontent. Wellman later claimed that apart from his attraction to her and the fact that she could discuss philosophy with him, Scott was the only woman who would go to Brazil with him. He made the same claim about his first wife who had accompanied him to Africa.

Elaborate plans were made to conceal their departure and route of escape. Evelyn *did* confide in her mother who begged her not to go and even threatened to shoot herself if she went; but Mrs. Dunn kept silent.

To explain his absence and buy time, Wellman told his wife that he was going on an extended fishing trip. Knowing Evelyn's father could use his knowledge as a railroad man to trace anyone who hadn't "walked or swum" away from the United States, they first took a train North. With only the clothes they wore and very meager baggage, they left the United States for Southampton, England; they changed their names to Evelyn

Scott and Cyril Kay Scott. Evelyn took two volumes of poetry, Keats and Shelley, and *War and Peace* in three volumes. Cyril took seven hundred dollars. Their planned destination was the Amazon where they would collect beetles.

Behind them they left the woman scorned, who talked loud and long to the newspapers, harrassed Evelyn's parents and threatened to invoke the Mann Act when the couple was found, a major university that wanted to avoid publicity about a missing Dean, and an embarrassed, prominent Dunn family.

Because of Mrs. Wellman's threats and the escalation of World War I in Europe, what Scott envisioned as a romantic fusion became an ordeal that not only lasted six years but forced her to live in isolation and under such wretched conditions that she wished for a "saving insanity" that would blot out her acute awareness of the situation. The physical and psychological deprivation was a reality that Scott, with her sheltered background, could not have begun to imagine. "When we left home with a deliberate intention never to return, we both anticipated hardships. But I had only conceived of some sort of work we could do together. I thought poverty was something which could be more completely shared." Scott's only child, Creighton, was born in Brazil.

Out of this experience Evelyn Scott wrote *Escapade*—an autobiography, but also a deliberately conceptualized work of art. Cyril Kay Scott in 1943 wrote his autobiography, *Life Is Too Short* that contains an account of the experience. We can be sure the accounts tally by comparing the order of events, but beyond this, any similarity—in writing, and *experiencing*—ends. Cyril Scott was critical of Scott's rendering of *Escapade* in two important ways, two ways that point to the fact that the work is not simply a chronological autobiography covering six years spent in Brazil. First he says that the book is so subjective that it might as well have been written in Newark, New Jersey. Secondly, he objected: "My wife was not an observant person, except of her own subjective verities." However, both critical objections that Cyril Scott makes are actually strong evidence of Evelyn Scott's artistic intention and fulfillment. The two books exhibit a perfect comparison between two people writing about the same events. One writer is a chronicler, reciting what 'really' happened, the other, a literary artist conveying personal

impressions of the same events. Reading these two books side by side, it would be hard to recognize that these two people shared a common experience. In fact, they did not.

*Escapade* is purely subjective and Scott sustains the interior design of the work without faltering. The images in the text are conveyed so as to produce a conscious and deliberate literary effect and should not be seen as accessory and subconscious elements in the narrative. Her writing therefore should be seen primarily as emanating from this 'conscious' standpoint. The reader is never exposed to self-pitying, romanticized suffering and anguished spiritual birth scenes, but feeling is conveyed through shifts in focus from naturalistic objectivity to flashes of sensory perception. Scott does not describe to make the reader see. She senses the exterior influences—people, poverty, physical discomfort, her bizarre situation—only in direct interrelation with the way they appear to her inner being, what she calls 'inner life'. Everything Scott tells us in this autobiographical account of her life in Brazil is within that context.

So *Escapade* is one of the rarer works of autobiography which consciously uses fictional techniques to achieve certain literary effects. The reader experiences *Escapade* in ways one might experience fiction, such as the type of fiction that begins without explanation of preceding events, who (in terms of character) is there, or why. The deliberate disorientation brought about by the technique comes and goes throughout the book like waves of feeling. The structural sequence is not the usual chronological sequence of most autobiography, but moves backward and forward with the same wave-like effect.

A thematic structure of birth-life-death, a cycle that is repeated and implied even in the end when there is liberation (birth) and return to health (life) but again the darkness (death), is set up in the beginning of the book with the impending birth of Scott's child. Along with the thematic structure, Scott also sets up an isolation motif in the first pages of the book by emphasizing the language barrier she encounters with the native servant girl who converses easily with a man she is with while Evelyn herself is unable to get through to her.

It is fairly certain that Scott did not write *Escapade* while she was in Brazil, but by using the present tense, she lends an immediacy to experiences as though the events were happening

at the time of the writing. The permanent impressions created in the mind of the reader by the immediacy are also intensified by the disparity of using lyric, imagist language to describe such dreadful circumstances.

The double fictionalizing of names is a curiosity. Frederick has already been changed to Cyril, but in the book, he is "John"; the son, Creighton, is "Jackie," a derivative of John. Two of the characters, actually her mother and father, not only have different names—"Nannette" and "Alex"—but become Scott's aunt and uncle. The characters in Scott's mind have a particularly strong subjective aura, almost giving them a mystical or ghost-like quality. Never do we have a sense of characters that we could bump into and we never have any feeling of John, Nannette, or Jackie living an ordinary day-by-day existence. We do not experience Scott as a flesh and blood being, but more as a consciousness.

Another unusual aspect of this autobiography is that it has an ending similar to a work of fiction. Just as the most important level on which *Escapade* begins is the esthetic and the literary, so also does the work end on this level. At the end of the memoir detailing and evoking six years in the jungles of Brazil under conditions conducive to madness and near-death, Scott writes: "A heavy iron door opens, rolls back from one world's end to another, and lets me out" symbolizing the author's release from the solitary confinement of exile, or beyond that, her birth through the iron doors of the womb.

This brings us to the final chapter—a beginning, so to speak, *after* the end. The language shifts abruptly, causing the reader's intense participation to move to a satirical, seemingly unassociated epilogue. This chapter epitomizes Scott's individualistic perception of social, moral, and religious conventions. She juxtaposes the world of nature, the hypocritical world of man, and the unrealistic spiritual world. The names, the personified roles of the animals, and the spiritual symbols give the chapter an aura of mixed sources, and the tone, structure, and fable-like base evoke a memory of *Alice in Wonderland*. Only the first line, "Impenetrable darkness. A moment of silence," and the last, "Silence and darkness, as it was in the beginning," that extend Scott's birth-life-death philosophy, relate to Scott's Brazil experience. Without background explanation, one can only

read the last twenty-six pages of *Escapade* for what they seem to be—Evelyn Scott's personal satiric commentary on the moral climate of society expressing itself negatively in relation to her past behavior.

The Scotts returned in 1920 to the United States, and after settling Mrs. Dunn once more in Clarksville, they lived in Greenwich Village. Evelyn Scott moved among the most important artists of the time. Both in Greenwich Village and later in Paris. Between 1920 and 1941, she published thirteen major works of fiction, three children's books, two volumes of poetry, an autobiographical history of Tennessee, and one three-act play, performed by the Provincetown Players, short stories, critical essays, and, of course, *Escapade*, all of which were critically acclaimed by many of the foremost authorities.

In each book Scott wanted to create and express an integral part of the completed universal design. She explains this in the following manner: "One book can be only a partial attempt to create or express the universe. There is something in each of my books that makes it an integral part of the architecture of the whole and even if, at my death, a turret should be missing, you will be able to get an idea of the general design . . ." As is clear from the texts, she possessed a rare combination of personal intuitiveness, literary conception and an artistic genius for style and technique. Her books can be read on artistic, philosophical and psychological levels.

When William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* was being considered for publication, Scott was given the manuscript to read for comment. She was asked to expand her comments into an essay that was circulated with advance copies of the relatively unknown novel in manuscript form. Later this essay was published as a pamphlet entitled *On William Faulkner's 'The Sound and the Fury'*. It was published specifically to publicize Faulkner's work and was prefaced with this statement by the publisher: "*The Sound and the Fury* should place William Faulkner in company with Evelyn Scott." The irony here of course is that Scott who sustained a high literary image for twenty years, faded while Faulkner, to whose work she brought attention, is our most renowned Southern writer today.

When I wrote *Melancholy Necessity*, an article about *Escapade* for the *New Orleans Review*, in 1979, the only work in print

was that piece on Faulkner. I discovered that while she had been forgotten in literary circles, historians still counted *The Wave*, reissued last year by Carroll & Graf Publishers, among the ten great Civil War novels. With the reissue of *Background in Tennessee*, *The Wave*, *The Narrow House* and now *Escapade*, it is clear that Scott's books are as relevant today as they were when she wrote them.

Peggy Bach

*There is a little space in the park. Here the grass, yet green, rushes up softly beneath the trees. Bare twigs spray the sky in showers of black glass. The clouds pearl above the blue-white water which is trans-fixed as by a shiver. The sun is a seared eyeball that melts in sightless intensity. Its pink glows like spring-time in the smutted coal-yard. A train rushes past in the distance and chokes the quiet with reverberations. A lather of blue and violet smoke curls slowly upward, and creams along the edges, lifting itself sumptuously, yet delicately, like a great trumpet-shaped flower, unfurling in heaven.*

*Gray clouds, dissolving, re-form in hard square lines, rigid as an ideal god. I feel pressed between the high buildings. I am like the grape in the wine press. I am a hull, flattened and shapeless. I have a weak sense of being ill-treated. But that is all irrelevant to the majesty of elevated tracks, factories, and church steeples: things too lofty for my interest. The end is resignation, decay: the ungrateful oblivion of a grain of sand, wind-hurled, eon after eon, across a sphinx's face.*

*The gigantic shadows of my delirium are dim along the bleared horizon. A dwarfed Liberty has ceased to threaten. The fog glistens. The pale air is a stupid resolution. In the deck chairs are rows of sickly quiescent faces. Soon the stony sunshine and the symmetrical palm trees will mark rows of identical graves—the graves of those who masqueraded in differentness.*

# ESCAPADE

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## PART I

**T**HROUGH the only window I saw ragged clothes on a line between outbuildings of unbaked brick that leaned against each other as though about to fall. Because the hill jutted up precipitately behind the Hotel Rio Branco, the outhouses came on a level with my eyes and were very close. In the morning it was delicately bright in the room. John was asleep. The mosquito netting around him made his face dim. There was a knock at the door, and the Portuguese girl entered, very slovenly, her coarse black hair hanging in stiff locks against her full florid cheeks. When she said, "Bom dia," I understood that, but the rest of her speech was a harsh murmur of guttural sound and depressed me with its strangeness.

John's gaze, always so still and kind, opened on me first. Then he talked to the girl. In the interchange of unintelligible noises I felt my exclusion from the life about me, my helplessness. The girl could not grasp the nature of my incapacity. She tried to force me to listen to her. When I remained blank and uncomprehending she began to shout. With difficulty I articulated the few phrases I knew. "Eu não fallo Portuguez. Não entendo o que a senhora está dizendo."