Ilka Chase

PAST IMPERFECT

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PAST IMPERFECT

To MOTHER

who thought it would be a good idea to try
and to BILL, *who prodded me until I finished it*
this book is dedicated.
It is their chicken, and it has
come home to roost.

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CHAPTER ONE

Life with Grandma

I AM ALWAYS IMPRESSED, WHEN I READ AN autobiography, by the amazingly accurate memory of the writer and the detailed background of his life, which he can evoke with the twist of a brain cell. My own memory is distressingly spasmodic, and I have destroyed or mislaid most of the old letters which others always seem to have prudently garnered and stored in the upper left-hand drawer. To be frank, I never had much of a collection. Either my friends don't go away, or if they do they are wretched correspondents; and since the flowering of American Tel and Tel, there is a dearth of epistolary material. I dare say the Messrs. Plutarch, Boswell, and their ilk wouldn't have been so glib with their reminiscences if all they had had to go on were a few remembered phone calls and here and there a telegram relaying the latest ribald story, cunningly cleaned up for the chaste eyes of Western Union.

But if I am impressed by the correspondence-savers,

I am even more awed by the diary-keepers. They seem to me creatures of iron determination. Who would voluntarily lash himself daily to his desk and write for the simple pleasure of it, with no thought of fame or gain? I am not at heart a diary-keeper, always having believed that once a day is past, it's past, and the hell with it. There is also my feeling about blackmailers. Belonging, as I do, to the candid school of self-expression, it is better not to lay oneself open in black and white. This same idea must have occurred to me in my extreme youth, as I remember getting a letter from an early beau which began: "Dear Ilka, I have just received your note, written with one eye on the jury box." Would that my youthful caution had prevailed throughout my maturity! Many's the pretty pickle I would be saving myself.

Also I have been much influenced by the movies where the heroine goes to the cad's apartment to recover the slim diary or the bundle of letters he has rifled from her secretary (the inanimate variety). In her bag is a small pearl-handled revolver which she whips out and applies when his attentions become too pressing and she is certainly lucky to be married to Herbert Marshall, whose brilliant plea to the jury clears her fair name. Mr. Marshall not being as active in these matters as he once was, a girl should indeed look lively and watch her step when committing herself to paper.

However, if this is to be an autobiographical treatise, I suppose it would be more orderly if I got myself born. As they say in novels, no inkling of the dark future disturbed that early spring morning when I first saw the light of day. Taking a leaf from my betters, who all seem to have firsthand data about these things, I recall.

after some consultation with my mother, that I was born at 2 A.M. on April 8, on East Fifty-ninth Street in New York City, by which it will be seen I am no average New Yorker, as most of them are born in Scranton, Buffalo, or Des Moines. The world-shaking event of my birth took place in a small hospital, in the shadow of the Queensborough Bridge.

I was a tall baby. Indeed, I remember the doctor observing that I came by the yard; and on his first look my father promptly christened me "Stubbs," owing to the button formation of my nose. This has plagued me through life, my husband even now referring to it as negligible. There seems to have been some division of opinion as to my early appearance, with my mother further confusing the issue according to her mood—one day saying I looked like a little Chinese doll, with straight black hair and eyes like violets, and the next remarking irritably that I was so dark, so low of brow, that I looked alarmingly like a monkey. Certain it is, however, and to my eternal regret, that the violet eyes turned humdrum brown. "It was awful, darling," says Mother. "I looked at you one day, and your eyes were full of coffee grounds, nasty little black specks, and a couple of days later they were quite dark." Ochi cherniia!

Although never much of a hand at family-tree tracing, I gather that I am the product of a long line of Quakers on my mother's side and of New Englanders, many of them seafaring, on my father's. To judge from daguerreotypes, I look remarkably like my maternal great-grandmother. This has always secretly delighted me, as I consider her something of a glamour girl. During the Civil War she ran away from her children, Grandma among them, and her first husband, who was

a stanch Abolitionist, to marry a Southern doctor. She lived with him for many years in Florida, raised another family, and, when he died, returned to my great-grandfather, whose second wife had by that time died too, and remarried him. This seems to me nice going at any time, but in that day and age a truly remarkable feat. Somewhat harried and, I should imagine, dazed by such goings on, Great-grandfather eventually passed to eternal rest, but Great-grandmother hung on till the age of ninety-two, when she died from injuries received in an automobile accident while out joyriding with a beau.

From occasional outspoken remarks I gather Grandma never approved of her mother. That she left her husband, Grandma could understand; she left two herself, and she frequently said that sex was the devil's invention. When you consider the trouble it gets you into, she may have had something there. But she could never forgive her mother for having deserted her when she was an infant. Even at the age of eighty Grandma was not past referring to herself as poor little motherless Laura. She was a peppery old party with a will of solid granite and a hot, flaring temper. Had she possessed self-discipline with her fabulous vitality, she could have succeeded at anything she'd had a mind to. At the age of seventy-eight she took up painting, and although it was not art, her grapes and flowers and birds were entirely recognizable as such, and the family was delighted that she had found an occupation. She sang rarely, but she had a singularly sweet and true voice, and she and I both thought she should have gone on the stage. Certainly her gift for self-dramatization was second to none. We always used the Quaker "thee" when talking to Grandma, although occasionally the Friends' locution

must have sounded a little odd, such as the time a friend of mine, arriving unexpectedly, crumpled up with laughter because, Grandma having driven me into a frenzy, I was shouting at her, "Thee is a horrible old woman."

The sense of the theater was strong in Grandma, and she fancied herself in the role of a dear little old lady in cap and lavender taffeta, until an opinion was uttered which challenged her own. Then she would let fly. She never used bad language, but she had a shattering fierceness of attack and lung power totally unexpected in so frail a being. She became tiny in her old age, like a little gray leaf, but her periodic rages, instead of destroying her, seemed to infuse her with new vitality. Many subjects could rouse her ire, and she was inaccurate, but violently opinionated on politics. When she died, the New York *Times* lost its most faithful subscriber. Any argument she settled once and for all by the flat statement that such and such was obviously true, as she had read it in the *Times*. I do not know whether it is because of her convictions, but I find myself humbled and convinced by the *Times*, whereas even the *Herald Tribune* will leave me cocky and self-opinionated. As for Mr. Hearst's press, I frequently enjoy it, but aside from the sporting and theatrical pages, I think they make the whole thing up. I feel I might grow to like the *News* if I could ever get myself disentangled from the Ludwig Baumann ads.

I once suggested the *News* to Grandma, as she took a lively interest in murders, and I thought the pictures might prove stimulating. "If I may venture a criticism," I said, "the *Times* is a bit conservative with its murders." Grandma looked at me coldly and said, "Thee obviously

doesn't appreciate the New York *Times* newspaper. Besides, I know my way around it. At my age I haven't the time to go gadding about in the tabloids." Grandma's gadding *was* pretty limited, being chiefly confined to the movies around Fifty-seventh Street, where she lived. When I was in Hollywood, she went faithfully to see every picture I was in. Indeed, she would follow them around the neighborhood playhouses and see them five or six times, and she would announce that my performance on Thursday was, she was happy to see, a good deal better than the one I had given Monday. I tried once or twice to explain that in a picture the performance doesn't change, but she would glare angrily and say, "Thee doesn't have to explain that to me. I'm not a fool, dearie. I tell thee Thursday was better than Monday."

According to Grandma, whenever she went to the movies, the lady sitting next to her would always be the one to open the conversation. Carried away by enthusiasm, she would remark, "My, my, who is that attractive girl?" "Well, dearie, I had no intention of mentioning thee," Grandma would say, "but when she asked, what could I do? It was only polite to tell her thee was my granddaughter; then she got so interested I told her that my daughter was the editor of *Vogue*."

As Grandma was, to say the least, somewhat *dégagée* about her appearance, feeling that comfort was more desirable than chic, Mother and I would receive this revelation with mixed emotions. I was torn between annoyance and laughter; Mother would say with considerable irritation, "Really, Mother, it isn't necessary to tell thy business to everybody," and Grandma would

grin maliciously. There was nothing she relished so much as others' discomfiture.

One time when she was ill, Mother, in an effort to bring some order into her apartment, had removed about half of her works of art, because Grandma created them in such profusion that they completely covered the walls and stood on the floor four and five deep. Grandma had barely emerged from the Valley of the Shadow, however, when hell began to pop. She demanded to know where her pictures were. Mother, playing for time, said they were in the country in the Oyster Bay house, but Grandma, scenting mice, was not to be put off. She called the police and had them send a detective to search every cupboard in my apartment. When the poor man, somewhat upset by this want of family tact, asked her why she suspected her own granddaughter would filch her paintings, Grandma replied with sirupy satisfaction, "I'm sure she's hidden them in her closets. Ever since she's moved into that new apartment she's been boasting of the wonderful closet space. I'm sick and tired of hearing about it. Thee go and have a good look. Likely there are skeletons to boot."

When I realize the great good the Quakers do in the world, I am proud I can claim kinship with them, but I fear our particular branch has not always been entirely in line with the teachings of the founder, all our family having been quicker on the uptake than on turning the other cheek. I like to think that it is because injustice is still the vice that goads us to swiftest action. Grandma once took her umbrella to a man who was beating a horse, and when she was through with him, he was glad to be turned over to the police.

As far as I can learn, none of the Woolmans was a

very mild character. There is certainly nothing namby-pamby in John Woolman. He was Grandma's great-great-uncle, and the wintry beauty of his famous *Journal* still stands as testimony to the man's spirit. Many of the old Quaker relations were preachers, but I think they would have got on well with the New England Chases and Coffins of my father's family, as they seem to have been straightforward men of action. Daddy has sometimes said to me, "Well, dear, what you don't know about some of those seafaring ancestors won't hurt you. I'm damned sure a couple of them hanged. They were good men, though; great sailors."

My father himself loved the sea and sailed it for many years before he married Mother. As a young man he was sent to the University of Heidelberg. I don't know how much he learned there, but I am pleased that he avoided the saber cut from dueling—an affectation considered *de rigueur* by the bloods of the time and place. It has always seemed to me a phony Germanic concept of heroism, smelling of ham, and all too reminiscent of Erich Von Stroheim made up for a De Mille epic. Daddy's father made and lost two or three fortunes, and when my father was a youngster, his family had a big house in Boston and one in Nantucket, where he was always fiddling with boats. When I was a baby, Daddy would walk the floor with me, singing ribald sailor chanteys instead of conventional lullabies, and I loved them. Mother was a little shocked by this, feeling it would have a bad effect on my subconscious, but Daddy figured that the chances of my understanding them were dim. I don't know, though; I still prefer "Blow the Man Down" to "Rockaby Baby."

During one of the flood tides in Grandfather's affairs

he got grandiose ideas about horses and started to build a stable with marble stalls. Then he went broke, and the estate got no farther than the marble slabs sticking up like teeth. They stood for many years and were known as "Chase's Folly." I think as a child I was once taken to see them, but nobody is quite sure.

Many of my childhood summers were spent in Brookhaven, a small village stretching for about a mile inland on the south shore of Long Island. When I was a little girl, it was a flourishing colony of artists and writers. Everybody ate at Mrs. DeArcas' boardinghouse, and on Sunday afternoons used to gather for tea at Mother's. I enjoyed those tea parties—I sensed that the guests were entertaining, but my most immediate concern was the sumptuous chocolate cake made by the woman who lived across the road from us, and which it was my job to fetch on Sunday mornings. My companion on this agreeable errand was a bright yellow duck named Kiki, who followed me everywhere, and who was as passionately devoted as I to the neighboring cuisine. If ever I saw a duck who couldn't be trusted with chocolate cake, that Kiki was the one. This reprobate fowl was a handsome character with feathery deep golden plumage, orange bill and feet, and shoebutton eyes. We loved each other dearly, and when he was a tiny duck he slept in a basket in a grass nest under my bed and chirped to me softly through the night and smelled rather high. He met a swift and brutal end while doing battle with a weasel. We had bought a wife for Kiki; her name was Miss 'Arriet, but she was a banal white duck, and I never cared for her much.

An earlier object of my consuming affection had been a small teddy bear. One day when I was at school, while

cleaning out my closet, Mother had given him away to "some little poor children." I reproached her bitterly. "But, darling," she said, "how was I to know you treasured that particular bear? You have so many toys."

"You should have known," I cried passionately. "You should have known!" And I burst into a storm of sobbing. It was my first experience of loss, and to this day, whenever bears crop up in the conversation, Mother regards me uneasily, with the expression of one who fears that an old wound has never quite healed.

I was sent to boarding school when I was very little—about five, because my mother and father were both working, and away from home all day, and they couldn't afford anything so starchy as an English nurse or a French governess. Mother did not relish the idea of delegating my upbringing entirely to the slap-dash, if devoted, care of an Irish or colored maid, so she hit on the idea of sending me to a convent. We are not Catholics, but there were two reasons for this choice. One was that most boarding schools did not take such young children, and the other was that Mother felt that the nuns, whose lives were dedicated to devotion and service, would be affectionate as well as disciplinary. In this she was not wrong, the only trouble being that, as I was the baby of the school, I ran the risk of being spoiled beyond redemption.

After a brief miserable brush with the Ursuline Sisters, I was sent to the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus, on Riverside Drive, where, except for occasional violent attacks of homesickness, I was, on the whole, very happy.

Homesickness seems to me one of the most terrible maladies, and one which you do not necessarily outgrow

with age. It lies in wait like a recurrent illness, and sometimes, quite unexpectedly, the old familiar pain will surge over you. The desperate longing for home and the people you know will so engulf you that nothing on earth matters but the urgency of your need.

As I was at boarding school so much as a child, my bouts of homesickness assumed something of the quality of an occupational disease, from which I would recover, however, with resiliency, and then be for long stretches quite spoiled and happy. I was much impressed by the nuns, especially one Mother Mary Dismus. That was a long time ago, and her face is very dim, but she has always seemed to me one of the sweetest souls I ever knew. We called all the nuns Sister except the Mother Superior, who was called Reverend Mother, and who was an awesome character. Even for my mother, though, the convent proved something of a mixed blessing. The difficulty was that convent authority lingered over those week ends when I returned to my pagan home, and my dear parents suffered considerably from my reiterated tales of convent standards, invariably prefaced by "Sister says——"

"Never mind what Sister says," they would remark tartly. "You think up something on your own, or else just depend on us." Sister once said it was impolite to blow your nose in public; which elicited from Mother the retort practical: "What are you supposed to do? Let it run?"

A cause of keen aesthetic discomfiture to Mother was the unfortunate rule which stated that at all recitals or social functions in the convent we should wear black silk gloves. She thought this bad taste and said so. She also thought that the idea of children from six to ten

piously singing, "Weary of life and laden with my sin, I look at Heaven and long to enter in," while piquant, was too idiotic to be borne with equanimity.

Opposed to that, however, was the credit column. The nuns were teaching me nice manners. I fear, alas, that the wear and tear of life has rubbed off most of them, with the exception of my reaction to door-banging. The precept that no lady slams a door was so firmly imbedded in our minds that to this day if I bang a door accidentally, I quickly open it again, even if the room is empty, and I have caught myself murmuring politely: "I beg your pardon."

They were teaching me manners; I was moseying along among the three R's; scholastic standards were not high; and I was learning a very smooth game of pool. This last may seem an odd accomplishment to have absorbed from the dear Sisters, but it came about quite naturally.

After I had spent two years on Riverside Drive, Mother decided I needed country air, and so she sent me to the house in Suffern which had been given to the Order of the Holy Child by Thomas Fortune Ryan. The upper rooms had been remodeled into dormitories, but the downstairs was left pretty much as it had been during the tycoon's incumbency. There was a pool room, and in the room, a pool table; and the dear Sisters had seen no reason for removing it. We all played continually, and it was a pretty sight to see Mother Mary Agnes, who shot a mean ball, leaning backward over the table, her veil slightly askew, while with her cue tucked under her arm she aimed swift and true for the corner pocket.

Among my fellow students of this game of skill and chance were three whom I still know and sometimes