A PECULIAR TREASURE

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By

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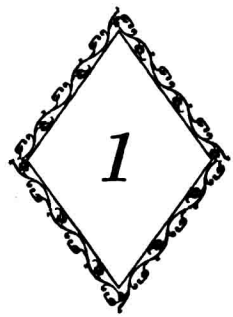
To
Janet Fox
and
Mina Fox
with the hope that my reason
for having written this book
may soon seem an
anachronism.

"NOW, THEREFORE, IF YE WILL OBEY MY VOICE INDEED, AND KEEP MY COVENANT, THEN YE SHALL BE A PECULIAR TREASURE UNTO ME ABOVE ALL PEOPLE; FOR ALL THE EARTH IS MINE; AND YE SHALL BE UNTO ME A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS, AND AN HOLY NATION."

Exodus: XIX, 5



WHEN I WAS A SMALL GIRL living in Appleton, Wisconsin, I often was sent with a quart tin pail to the creamery which was three blocks away on the wrong side of the railroad tracks. The Ferber family, I hastily and grandly add, lived on the right side of the tracks. Any native Middle West American will get the social significance (and the revolting snobbery) of that statement. I didn't much relish the errand because the creamery had a curdled smell like that of a baby who has just had a digestive surprise. Where Morrison Street met the tracks there was a sign, hydra-headed. It spoke in large black painted letters to the little girl with the milk pail:

R. R. CROSSING
STOP! LOOK!
LISTEN!

And always, though I might be deep in the weighty thoughts and plans of a twelve-year-old, I would pause for a hasty glance right and left before setting foot across the shining steel rails over which a swift iron monster might descend upon me from who knows where.

The little girl of twelve in the clean gingham dress, her bushy

black curls tied back with a ribbon bow, is middle-aged now and the curls are iron-gray. Bewildered, she stands looking at the sign which still states its warning to STOP! LOOK! LISTEN! But where the tracks used to be there is nothing. They've pulled them up. Only the warning remains, and if you heed it you can plainly hear the thunder of the iron monster approaching. But there is no knowing how to escape it, for it is trackless now and running wild.

There are many others standing bewildered at the place where the tracks used to be, so straight and shining and plain to see. Some of them rush ahead, recklessly. Some turn left and others turn right and thousands are doomed to be caught by the onrushing monster. You can hear their screams as it crushes them.

Hesitating there, confused, by the side of the road, I see an occasional face that is wise and kind and experienced. I pluck this one by the sleeve and I say, "Pardon me, mister, but I seem to have lost my way. Can you show me the road to the creamery?"

Invariably the other shakes his head. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I can't be of any help. I'm a stranger here myself."

Perhaps, I say to myself, if I go back to the spot from which I started, and retrace my steps ever so carefully, I may learn where and how I lost my bearings and missed the way.

A like feeling may account for the wave upon wave of autobiographical books with which the United States has been flooded in the past few years. Some have been written by professional writers; others by people to whom sustained writing is an unfamiliar pursuit. It is as though a panic-stricken world were trying to pin down on paper a dear and accustomed way of life that rapidly is slipping out of its grasp. There! it says in triumph, there it is, plain as a blueprint. That's the way things are. But even as it looks, the pattern changes and dissolves before its eyes.

Usually these life stories are glittering with high adventure. Vicariously the reader hobnobs with royalty and millionaires. Interviews with potentates, dictators and tycoons are relieved by eyewitness descriptions of battles whose outcome decides the fate of the world (for the moment). Safaris wend their way

through the African jungle, leopard-strewn. A Russian spy disguised as a femme fatale works her wicked wiles from Istanboul to Stockholm; fortunes are made and lost; revels are held in the prewar bohemias of Paris, London and New York.

I've never met a king or queen socially, unless you care to count as royalty Liliuokalani of Hawaii, a sad and ancient black lady in a Mother Hubbard. Her tiny lush kingdom had been snatched from her years before, and all that remained to her was a rickety wooden building dignified by the name of palace, and on her dusky hand an emerald. Immediately thereafter she died. Mine seems to be the evil eye when cast upon rulers. I saw William of Germany tootling down Unter den Linden in his chocolate-colored motorcar, his outriders blowing blasts from golden horns as he came. Very soon thereafter he was skedaddling for Doorn and the sawbuck. At a bull fight in San Sebastian I looked up to see Alphonso of Spain seated in the royal box just over my head. Next thing I knew he was burning up the road in his Hispano-Suiza toward France and safety. I wonder if the evil eye would work when applied to dictators. It's worth trying.

In all my life I've seen only one President of the United States while in office, and he was on his way out, weary and bewildered. The one duchess I ever met was American-born and wore a terrible red hat at luncheon in London. She talked unceasingly in a voice that sounded like hailstones on a tin roof. It beat down mercilessly on the conversation of the man at my left to whom I so passionately wanted to listen. He was a little leather-colored man with great soft eyes and a gentle Scotch voice. Chap by the name of Barrie.

Handicapped for reminiscence thus on the one hand by having failed to mingle sufficiently with the royal and powerful, I am equally at a loss on the other hand through never having known the alleged picturesqueness of poverty. Want has never squatted, a toothless yellow hag, on the doorstep of my childhood or later life. I never have married. I have borne no child. I come of American middle-class Jewish family life. For thirty or more years I have sat daily for hours with my face in a typewriter. I have been

conventional, thrifty, hard-working, respectable. Certainly, these are no attributes for a life story. Yet if I were to die tomorrow (which, being middle-aged and neurotic, I feel fairly certain I shall), I should say today that I have had an enchanting time of it; a rich, gay, exciting and dramatic life.

It may be only I who would find it so. Who doesn't think his own life dramatic? In the day's miscellany of mail every professional writer finds a letter or two saying:

No doubt you will be surprised to get a letter from someone who is a complete stranger to you. I am writing to you because I feel sure you are the person who can write a book I have in mind. It is an idea for a great book, but I do not feel that I can write it myself because I am too busy. It is the story of my life. All of my friends say that if I would just write down the story of my life it would make a wonderful book.

Well, you think (though you toss the letter into the wastebasket), and so it doubtless would. The story of any life, told with truth, selection and a dramatic sense, would make an arresting book. Surely romance and agony, humor, adventure and tragedy lie within the span of any ordinary lifetime.

Since I was seventeen I have been a professional writer, yet only once have I deliberately taken a large piece of my own life as the subject of a book. This was the novel entitled Fanny Herself, and even that is so changed and colored by the thick glaze of fiction as to be almost unrecognizable. I am more than a little embarrassed to find myself doing this. It always has seemed to me that a writer of fiction should work almost as does a chemist or a research-laboratory scientist, experimenting with the action of this on that to get the desired effect. The writer himself is only a test tube, a retort and a lamp through which the chemicals are mixed and from which they emerge, transformed. That he himself should be the substance and the subject of the experiment has seemed to me akin to the case of the strange insect that eats itself for nourishment.

There exists, of course, a writing cult which is concerned only with a rather adolescent self-revelation. It might be called the emetic or regurgitation school of writing. The disciple of this

writes his first book all about his first school, his first sex experience, his first love affair, his first job, his first marriage, his first divorce, his first trip to Europe, in terms of thinly disguised fiction. This finished, he then begins his second novel, which is all about his second love affair, his second marriage, his second divorce. The trip this time is to Mexico. The third book depends upon whether or not he goes through these performances a third time.

For two or three years I fought the desire to put down this rather haphazard account of my own life because to do so seemed definitely silly. In the beginning I said, dishonestly, that I would put down these things for my own perusal only. I'll never want them published, I said to myself. Besides, who'd want to read them? I'm only doing it to clear my mental vision so that I may see a little way ahead in the darkness. What a lie! Perhaps as much as any professional writer can mean this, I meant it. But writers write to be read. Only amateurs say that they write for their own amusement. Writing is not an amusing occupation. It is a combination of ditch-digging, mountain-climbing, treadmill and childbirth. Writing may be interesting, absorbing, exhilarating, racking, relieving. But amusing? Never!

Since the impulse would not abate, I gave way to it. I want more than anything to write about myself, and my Family, and about Train Riding, and America, and Jews, and Writing, and the Theater, and Fun, and Friends, and Work, and Food and Hope and Hate and Ambition. Everything I put down will be true, but I make no promise to Tell All. Sores displayed in the market place are seldom fascinating or even interesting. A bandage is mysterious. Removed, it may reveal only a hangnail. The soul-baring school of autobiography is more embarrassing for the reader than for the writer. When one innocently opens a door and comes unexpectedly upon a nude occupant, it is infinitely more painful for the door-opener than for the person within the room. For he or she already is naked, and knows it. Nakedness of the soul is interesting to the psychiatrist, the physician, the ethnologist and the patient. To all others it is likely to be boring.

This, then, isn't a story of my life, written because I am fatuous

enough to think that anyone is interested. It is the story of an American Jewish family in the past half-century, and as such is really a story about America which I know and love.

Since I was seventeen, and a reporter on the Appleton, Wisconsin, Daily Crescent (sworn circulation 2,389, Samuel Ryan, Editor and Prop.), I have written for hours daily about America as I saw it, and felt it. It is the one country I really understand. I understand its courage, its naïveté, its strength, its childishness, its beauty, its reality. I find it more thrilling to ride through the flat prairie land of Kansas or Nebraska than through the most glorious Swiss or Italian mountain passes. Not more beautiful, please note, but more stimulating, more interesting, more vital. It is the difference between going through a cemetery and going through a school yard in which children are shouting, playing, scuffling. The cemetery is tree-shaded, beautiful, majestic and dead. The school yard may be ugly, utilitarian and makeshift, but it is full of life, it is being used, it is progress, hope, everything in it shows chance for improvement. I have no notebook, I have no diary, I have no scrapbook. All these years of my writing life I have meant to keep a record of reassuring items which would tell, in large black print, all about my books and plays, with photographs of myself staring out from every page. To feed on these stale scraps in middle age must be sustaining; otherwise so many people would not do it. But I always have felt that to reread praise of work long finished is poor fodder, containing about as much nourishment as a leaf of wilted lettuce. After all, the things that stay fresh in the mind through the years are the happenings, large and small, made of tender or dramatic or stern or colorful stuff.

I would rather have lived these last twenty-five years than any other period in the world's history. It has been a perpetual three-ring circus in which spectators and performers, animals and humans, trapeze artists and side-show freaks have been inextricably mingled. Haggard, disheveled and wild-eyed though I am from both beholding and participating in this kaleidoscopic show, I have enjoyed it enough to be willing to stay another twenty-five years—but only if they change the acts. Certainly

those of us who remain that long will see the end of this show and the beginning of a new one. It is rarely given to a people to see the end of an epoch—perhaps the end of a civilization—clearly defined. Certainly a new cycle is being born; or an old one is dying without progeny. That means the end. But even that, though doubtless painful, will be interesting to see.

Those of us who found ourselves in the spotlight of success about twenty-five years ago, blinking a little in the unexpected glare, but liking its warmth, are still able to perform the new steps if we've kept limber through the years. Lately we may have puffed a little, trying to keep up, for the world formations have got into the habit of changing between the Home Edition and the Sports Edition of the evening papers.

The writer who can turn back the leaves far enough to include the past twenty or twenty-five years finds the World War of 1914–1918 staring out at him, a dirty obscene blob of grease on the printed page. From this he recoils. Scurrying past, he finds himself in the Jazz Age, which is too recent to be picturesque and too dated to be vital. He may find shelter in the Mauve Decade, the Civil War period, or the Covered Wagon days. From this excursion into the past he emerges with a Nostalgia Novel which is offered as a sedative to a jittery world. It is called the Escapist School of writing. It is a school held in deepest contempt by the one-syllable novelist of the Shock or Slut-and-Cup School. He, in turn, is considered less than the dust by the Propaganda or Boiler Factory School of novelist who writes with a hammer, and ignores both past and present to concentrate upon the future, which he finds rosy but which the world calls red.

We who were born in the late '80s and early '90s are now men and women in our late forties and early fifties. Only a handful of years, yet we remember when the horseless carriage was a freak; when the airplane was a hoax called the flying machine; when the Germans were considered a nation of poets, music lovers, scientists and homebodies; the French, according to our history books, were "a gay people, fond of dancing and light wines." Britannia ruled the waves. The motion picture was a thing

called a nickelodeon to which no one gave a thought except dirty-faced little boys and bums with a nickel.

I feel sorry for anyone born after 1918. To have been an adult before the World War of 1914–1918 and to have lived twenty years after it is to have known two worlds in one lifetime. The boys and girls born after 1918 sprang full-grown from a Jovian forehead. They missed, somehow, all the fun of growing up in a placid normal world. I'm a quarter of a century distant from being an old lady, but I remember when I thought the telephone was pretty amazing. They take for granted airplanes, television, radio, streamliners. Yesterday is as unreal to them as though a blanket fog had blotted it out. Perhaps it will be rather thrilling for them to discover it when they are fifty and the fog has lifted. One advantage they have that we had not. They are the first generation, surely, that has not sneaked, smirked, gloated and whispered about the biological facts of the human race. If television isn't a shock to them, neither is sex.

Never before, I should think, in the history of the world, has there been a time when middle age and old age did not envy youth. Always the rich, the powerful, the successful, the failures, the poor, having passed the hilltop of life, with the downward slope ahead of them, have looked back at youth. "How I envy you!"

"Envy *me!*" youth has exclaimed. "I've got nothing."

"You've got youth. You have the world ahead of you. Youth, the most precious thing in the world. I'd give everything I have for it."

But who now envies youth? Not I. And that this should be so is the most terrible indictment of the human race, and of the once civilized world.

I should like, in this book, to write about being a Jew. All my life I have been inordinately proud of being a Jew. But I have felt that one should definitely not brag about it. My Jewishness was, I thought, something to wear with becoming modesty, calling attention to it no more than to my two good physical points which were a fine clear skin and an abundant head of vigorous curly hair. Perhaps someone—it may have been my grandfather

Neumann, but I do not remember it—had told me this. As I grew older and became a woman the feeling was intensified. This is inexplicable, because my early childhood was spent, for the most part, in an anti-Semitic Middle Western town, and mine was not and is not a religious family. But I have felt that to be a Jew was, in some ways at least, to be especially privileged. Two thousand years of persecution have made the Jew quick to sympathy, quick-witted (he'd better be), tolerant, humanly understanding. The highest compliment we can pay a Christian is to say of him that he has a Jewish heart.

All this makes life that much more interesting. It also makes life harder, but I am perverse enough to like a hard life. I like a fighting life. I like overcoming things. Maybe a psychiatrist could tell me why, and it might not prove flattering. Being a Jew makes it tougher to get on, and I like that. The highest apple on the branch is the sweetest, and nearest the sun. But, I hasten to add, there's such a thing as overdoing it. The Nazis' little plan has made things just a shade too tough. A joke's a joke.

It may be that being a Jew satisfied the frustrated actress in me. It may be that I have dramatized myself as a Jew. I am fond of referring, especially of late, to two thousand years of persecution. The fact remains that hundreds and thousands of years of continued ill-treatment must stamp its mark upon a people. Primarily, to be a Jew meant to belong to a religion, not a race. But a religious sect, persecuted through the centuries, takes on a certain resemblance, one to another, in countenance, in habits, in feeling, much as one often notes that a husband and wife, through years of common experience and companionship, grow to look alike. The Jewish eye is a melancholy eye, the mask is tragic. He has acquired great adaptability, nervous energy, ambition to succeed and a desire to be liked.

It irks me to hear people say that Jews are wonderful people or that Jews are terrible people. Jews are wonderful and terrible and good and bad and brilliant and stupid and evil and spiritual and vulgar and cultured and rich and poor and beautiful and ugly and gifted and commonplace. Jews, in short, are people.

Anti-Semitism has, through the centuries, become a behavior-

istic habit, like stealing or arson or murder. It is a way of thinking that has been handed down from generation to generation, like tainted blood. It is a criminal weapon used against society by the unsuccessful, the bigoted, the depraved, the ignorant, the neurotic, the failures. It thrives on terror, hunger, unemployment, hate, resentment. It is mob psychology displayed at its lowest and most unreasoning. It is a thing to fill one with a profound sadness and pity for the whole struggling human race.

Quite a few hundreds of years before Christ a largish group of human beings decided that, instead of worshiping idols made of stone and wood and metal as the rest of the world was doing and had done for centuries, they would acknowledge a higher Power, a Power that was the Spirit, a Power for good. This Power, they felt, would rule the universe if only one would accept It in humbleness and sincerity. That Power they called God, the One God. Those human beings were the Jews. It constantly astounds me afresh to learn how little the so-called civilized world knows about their origin and history. As the Christian religion was founded on the Jewish religion, this is all the more inexplicable. When people express a mild curiosity I refer them to a book called History and Destiny of the Jews, by Josef Kastein.

America—rather, the United States—seems to me to be the Jew among the nations. It is resourceful, adaptable, maligned, envied, feared, imposed upon. It is warmhearted, overfriendly; quick-witted, lavish, colorful; given to extravagant speech and gestures; its people are travelers and wanderers by nature, moving, shifting, restless; swarming in Fords, in ocean liners; craving entertainment; volatile. The *schnuckle* among the nations of the world.

What a country it is! And what a superb time I have had writing about it these last twenty-five years! Violent, varied; tropical, arctic; vast, insular, spectacular. Sequoia trees, Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, Rocky Mountains, Painted Desert, Great Lakes, Mississippi, black prairies; metal, water, forest, grain, all on a Gargantuan scale. In the very quality of the soil itself there seems to be something that makes for vitality and excitement, an electric

element very disconcerting to the European visitor. I have seen staid and conservative Englishmen full of bad British cooking step off an English transAtlantic ship as stuffy as Dundreary, only to be transformed one week later into bounding fauns, eyes alight, step frisky, conversation snapping with what they fondly hope is the newest American slang.

America has been a work hive since the fifteenth century. All over the hundreds of thousands of miles of virgin land the tents went up, the cabins went up, the wooden houses went up, then the brick, the stone, the fantastic cloud-scraping shafts of concrete and steel. Wagon roads cut across Indian trails, railroads blotted out wagon roads across mountains and through forests, automobile roads crisscrossed the railroads, airplane routes zigzagged above them all. The workshop became a mill, the mill became a factory, the factory became a vast plant, the plant grew into a solid town composed of works and workers and owners of works.

With millions of others I have been a work worshiper. Work and more work. Work was a sedative, a stimulant, an escape, an exercise, a diversion, a passion. When friends failed or fun palled or spirits flagged, there was my typewriter and there was the world, my oyster. I've worked daily for over a quarter of a century, and loved it. I've worked while ill in bed, while traveling in Europe, riding on trains. I've written in woodsheds, bathrooms, cabins, compartments, bedrooms, living rooms, gardens, porches, decks, hotels, newspaper offices, theaters, kitchens. Nothing in my world was so satisfactory, so lasting and sustaining as work.

America turned out a million little gadgets, and I and my fellow writers turned out a million little stories, and we all were as merry as grigs. (Note. A grig is a cricket, and it has the reputation for merriness when in reality it is only making a lot of noise.)

We were so busy being workers and merry little grigs that we forgot all about a region which was one of the first to be cleared and settled in America. It had grown into a jungle, weed-ridden, snake-infested. It was called the Soul and Spirit of America and at one time was thickly inhabited and very highly thought of, though fallen into disrepute and even ridicule now.

Long years ago I vainly disputed those cheery ones who said, "Just a temporary unpleasantness. Mere little recurrence of the hard times this country always has, periodically. Good for us, really. Like a purge." I tried to say that this was no mere economic sickness. It was a sickness of the soul and of the spirit that might well usher in the end of our world. Oh, hush, they said, oh, hush your croaking. Be a merry little grig like us, not a croaking cricket.

But the mills and the plants and the works and the towns took on an awful stillness. And the typewriters of the little grigs ceased their clatter, too.

The imaginary world of creative writing has vanished because the real world of today is so much more fantastic than anything the mind could conceive. The pages of any newspaper today make fiction seem absurd.

So, baffled, we turn to autobiography. Psychologists tell us it is our attempt to creep back into the shelter of the womb, where life held no problems. It isn't necessary to go back quite that far to remember a measure of peace and serenity. We who were in our twenties when the World War began knew the days when a passport was something they used in that backward country, Russia; when the income tax was unheard of; when your Irish, Hungarian, Swedish, German, Bohemian houseworker came over by the hundreds in every ship; when people were folks, and not The People. When a man who worked was a working man, and not The Worker.

A legitimate reason makes me reluctant to use my own life as the subject for a book. The element of surprise and the possibility of change are here absent for the writer. In writing a book of fiction or a play the most astonishing things may happen to a character or a situation overnight; may happen, for that matter, in a split second. Your heroine may be as blonde as Brunhilde and as virtuous as Penelope on Monday morning at ten, only to turn into a black-haired Carmen at eleven, with a dagger in her garter. The scene which was a garden may turn out to be a bedroom. I have started a novel with a secondary character who became so dominant that I had to kill her in the middle of the

book in order to save the heroine's face. But in this tale, day after day, week after week, month upon month, I must deal with actual events, bare facts, real people. Imagination has no chance here; fancy is not free, but shackled. The plump and determined seventeen-year-old reporter on the Appleton, Wisconsin, Crescent will not be permitted to turn into a thing of lithe loveliness at sight of whose beauty strong men turn pale and women bite their handkerchiefs and faint. The road back which I must travel is inflexible. The one chance is that, in retracing it, I may find by the wayside and on the path itself small flowers, lovely vistas, and even fellow travelers whose existence as I traveled the road forward I was too hurried, too self-centered or too blind to see clearly.

So then, with this slight warning of what is to come, I go back to that faintly improbable-sounding town called Kalamazoo, Michigan, where I was born to Jacob Charles Ferber and Julia Neumann Ferber. In that way perhaps I may be able to discover what I am doing at a typewriter in a penthouse apartment on top of a roof on Park Avenue, New York.