

“I still remember. . .”

MAZO DE LA ROCHE

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MAZO DE LA ROCHE

“I still
remember . . .”

Our most famous—and least-known—writer breaks a lifetime's silence to recall her childhood . . . books she loved . . . her first story . . . the secret drama of Jalna, and celebrities she has known



Canada's Mazo de la Roche is perhaps unique in the twentieth-century literary scene. She is, at the one time, one of the world's best-known and least-known writers. Best-known because in the last thirty-four years she has published nineteen novels, two collections of short stories, four works in nonfiction and two books of plays. Least-known because she has chosen to keep her private life most definitely private. While a full generation of readers in nearly a dozen languages is intimately acquainted with the fabulous Whiteoak family and their home of Jalna, which she set down in the pleasant countryside just west and south of Toronto, very few people indeed know their creator. Now, Miss de la Roche has at last opened the door wide on her private life and thoughts by completing her autobiography. *Ring the Changes*. It will be published later this month by the Macmillan Company of Canada Ltd. Maclean's here presents some lively excerpts from a lively and often brilliant book.



THE PONY THAT WENT TOO FAST

“I took this picture of my lifetime friend Caroline Clement with our pony Molly, and developed it myself in the bathroom. One summer day we were driving Molly in our dogcart and we stopped to steal some apples. Making our getaway I let Molly go down hill too fast. She stumbled, the shafts broke and Caroline and I were thrown in a ditch. Reckless driving, we’d call it today.”



**THE DOG THAT WAS
IMMORTALIZED**

“In my black and white striped linen skirt I posed for this one at Lake Simcoe. Bunty, the little black Scottie, became the heroine of *Portrait of a Dog*, my favorite among my own books. She was totally blind for her last seven years.”

THE SCENE OF MY CHILDHOOD:
My memory goes back to my very early days. It is an unusual memory that has brought me both pleasure and torment. Seldom have I been able to forget anything. A scene of pain or cruelty which I may have witnessed as a child returns to me today with terrific vividness. The first such happening I remember was the sight of a dog, running in terror through the street, with a tin can tied to its tail. There were boys in the street who doubled up in laughter and shouted at him. My astonishment that such a thing could be, my helplessness to prevent it, made an impression that years could not dim.

It was sometime later than this when the first and only violent happening I ever saw in the street took place. It was early evening and almost my bedtime. The front door stood ajar and I stepped outside feeling adventurous, for I never was allowed outside alone at that hour. Suddenly I heard footsteps running. I saw two men, one young, the other old, running along the road. They were rough-looking men of the sort I had seldom seen. The younger was obviously chasing the elder. He bent, picked up a stone and hurled it after the old man. It struck him on the bald head and dark blood poured from the wound. They ran on and on, out of my sight, unseen by anyone but me.

I ran indoors, scarcely able to speak for excitement, but, when I was able to tell what I had seen, no one believed me! I simply had imagined it. Such a thing would not happen

in our quiet street. My father went to the door and looked out. No street could have been quieter, more respectable. He came back and set me on his shoulder. “It never really happened,” he said. But I knew.

Remembering the quiet country roads of those days, the exhilarating sights

in the city, I feel pity for the child of today with nothing to see but the hideous mechanized traffic, making its stinking way, bumper to bumper, through the gloomy streets; nothing better to do than to learn at sight the makes of different motorcars. How different were the streets in those days!

A dray would pass, drawn by a team of powerful draught horses—a butcher's cart, the butcher wearing his light-blue apron—a splendid equipage, with coachman in fur cap—horses, horses, everywhere! Women, holding up their long flounced skirts—men who looked like gentlemen— In summer, fruit vendors, with their cry of, "Strawberry, strawberry ripe! Two boxes for a quarter!" And they were quart boxes, not the miserable little pint boxes we buy today. There was an Italian boy I well remember who pushed his barrow of bananas twice a week to our door, with his musical call of, "Banana ripe, fifteen cents a dozen!" I even remember his name—it was Salvator Polito—and the big red bananas.

In those days everyone who had the use of his legs went for walks. Today nobody walks for pleasure. You may walk for miles and meet nobody but yourself. In the morning and afternoon people walked. In the evening they sat on their verandas behind the shelter of syringas in flower, the white skirts of the girls billowing over the steps. From indoors might come the sound of a piano. Now and again one heard the clip-clop of horses' hooves. Children went to bed, tired out by their play. Whenever they were free to play they were absorbed in their games.

What has happened to the play spirit in the child of the present? Not long ago I had lunch at the Toronto Skating Club and, looking down on the ice, saw a dozen earnest children practicing figure skating. Over and over the little perfectionists, in their faultless skating gear, repeated the monotonous figures. Nobody was forcing them, nobody was urging them. They wanted to do just what they were doing, each doubtless picturing herself as a champion of organized sport. I thought of our childhood's helter-skelter skating—hand in mittened hand doing a crack-the-whip across the rink—skates never quite fitting—skirts, flannel petticoats, getting in our way. I thought of the admiring group that would gather to see my father execute the grapevine or perhaps the figure eight—he loftily ignoring them, pretending it was easy!

And the games of summer on the green, green grass!

London Bridge is falling down—Here we come gathering nuts in May—The farmer views his lands—Hide and Seek—Old Witch, this last throwing one into a madness of chase and pretended fear. Afterward the throwing of oneself exhausted on the grass, staring up at the blue sky or investigating the doings in a tiny anthill . . . The winds in which one ran, all by oneself, swifter

it seemed than the wind, wilder than the tempest.

When I visited at Grandpa's I could see, far below the terrace, beyond the stable yard, a railway line, over which several times a day a train tooted. These trains were familiar friends to me because, from the time I was five, my mother would put me on the train in Toronto, in the conductor's charge, to go on a visit to Grandpa's. I was a composed traveler, not in the least nervous, ready to enter into conversation with other passengers.

Quite early in the morning a certain freight train would pass and this train had the distinction of being a weather forecaster, because on the boxcar just behind the locomotive a painted moon showed the country folk what to expect in the way of weather. A full moon promised a fine day, a half-moon, I think, rain, and a crescent moon, storms. I lay in wait for this train and, when I heard its whistle, gathered myself together for the race.

I was fair to the train. Not till the locomotive was even with me did I begin to run. Always at this moment, but whether in fear of me or rage I did not know or care, the locomotive uttered an ear-splitting shriek.

Matching it with a shriek of my own I set out with flying legs and hair to outdo it. From end to end of the lawn we ran the race, the train and I, and always I believed I had won.

Then, with thudding heart, I flew to the house to announce to Grandma what the weather would be.



MY FIRST STORY: When I was nine someone gave me copies of a young people's paper. It was, I think, The Youth's Companion. In it was announced a short-story competition for children of sixteen and under. Unconcerned by my youngness I set out at once to enter the competition. Optimistic, though easily downcast, I saw no reason why I should not be the winner. With foolscap paper, pen and ink I began to write, and so on and on till a total of eight pages were filled.

The story was about a lost child named Nancy. Terrible times she went through but at last was restored to her mother's arms—my own heart ready to burst with emotion as I finished the story with a text from the Prodigal Son.

"But, darling," said my mother, "do you think a child would ever be so hungry she would eat potato parings?"

"Nancy was," I said firmly.

“And do you think her mother would quote a text the moment her child was given back to her? It sounds so pompous.”

This was my first experience of criticism and how it hurt!

My father standing by exclaimed, “I’m dead sure I’d eat potato peelings if I were hungry enough and, as for the text—it was the proper thing for the mother to quote. Don’t change a word of it. It will probably get the prize.”

Off he went to the letter box to post the manuscript.

No stamps for its return were enclosed but a few weeks later, when I had ceased to think of it, a long envelope was put into my hand. Tremblingly I opened it, and there was my manuscript returned! With it was enclosed a letter from the editor saying, “You are very young to have entered the competition but, if the promise shown by this story is fulfilled, you will make a good writer yet.”

“Isn’t that splendid!” exclaimed my mother, her pitying eyes on me.

I sat down on a low stool in a corner and covered my face with my hands. Sobs shook me.

Nobody came near me. The family stood about me, realizing that for the moment it was best to leave me to my grief. It was ridiculous, of course, but how well I remember it.



THE WONDER OF THE WORLD: We had two bedrooms and a sitting room in the Queen’s Hotel, in Galt, Ont. Before going there to live my mother and I had paid a visit to the town, just to make sure that my mother would find it congenial.

This brief visit is memorable to me because it was then when I discovered the wonder and beauty of the world, as something separate from myself, when I experienced the exaltation of beholding that wonder. Before that morning, when something in me awoke, never again to be unconscious, I had felt no more appreciation of my surroundings than a young animal. I was cold—I was hot—this flower smelled sweet—this russet apple tasted good! I was very conscious of the separate scents of my parents—the smell of my father’s shaving lotion, his cigar, his tweeds, and a perfume he used on occasion, called Jockey Club. I was conscious of the sweet smell of my mother’s flesh and of her favorite perfume—New Mown Hay. But, until that early morning in Galt, all my emotions were instinctive. Cherry trees in bloom, the song of the robins,

the wild whistle of the locomotive, the distant roll of thunder, all were a part of the voluptuous procession of my days. I did not consciously stand in wonder. Not till that spring morning in Galt.

I had been put to sleep on a couch in a small library next to the bedroom where my mother slept. I was restless because of my strange surroundings and woke early.

The window stood open. The sun, like a great red flower, had just risen, throwing its petals of fire across the world. I sprang out of bed and ran to the window, the air, ineffably sweet, stirring my night-dress, my hair . . . Across the road from this house, there was a small field or pasture and in it, reflecting the sun, a pool. I stood entranced by the miracle of color—the blue of the sky, the vigorous green of the grass, the carmine of the pool, so conquered me that it seemed they had been invented for me and me alone, in that moment of sunrise . . . And, as though this were not enough, three snow-white ducks appeared, like actors in a play, crossed the pasture and entered the pool. As carefree as angels they floated, dived, breasted the carmine waters or gently drew together as though in love. I gazed and gazed. I felt that never should I again be the same.



THOSE DREADFUL MUSIC LESSONS: I do not remember ever doing any homework. My mother was ambitious for me, but never did she supervise my study or my practice of the two instruments on one or other of which she hoped I should excel. These were the piano and the violin. A handsome upright piano had been bought in Toronto and installed in our living room. There also had been bought (for me, I realized with apprehension) a violin. My mother pictured my fingers rippling over the keys of the piano. She pictured me as standing, tall and graceful, the violin tucked beneath my chin while, with the airy bow, I drew sweet music from the instrument. I do not think she considered what grinding work must go into the production of these pleasant sounds and never could she have brought herself to force me to practice. Her cousin advised her to engage Professor Baker to teach me.

How well I remember Professor Baker—his slender figure, his upright carriage, his clear blue eyes and grey mustache! He was an Englishman and, like his father, a professional musician since childhood. His father, he told me, would as soon knock him down as look at him. I learned to look forward to Professor Baker's visits with dread.

Four times a week he came to teach me and no sooner was the strain of one

lesson over than I began to dread the next. All his other pupils were grown-up. He had no way with children. His method was to give me pieces far too difficult for me, a few bars at a time, and for days I would reiterate those deadly bars, with dogged hopelessness. Years passed before I recovered my liking for music.

I can picture him now, with a look of cold fury on his face, as I stumbled miserably through my exercise. He would leap from his chair, snatch it up as though about to hurl it to the floor, then controlling himself, mop his forehead and sit down again. Of the two instruments the violin caused me the greater suffering. With my head wet with sweat, my lip trembling, I was put through the ordeal.

Stoically, I never complained, but one day the professor, in a voice of fury, ordered me to go to my mother and tell her to cut my nails short. I went to her and held out my hand, not able to speak. She gave one look at my finger ends, almost bleeding from his pressing them on the strings; then she said, “Stay here, dear, for a moment.”

I heard her voice, clear and decisive. “I will not have my child treated so harshly.”

I heard him apologize. Never after that was he so rough with me, but still my music lessons were looked forward to in dread.



THE DELIGHT OF WRITING: Something new was stirring in me. I discovered that I wanted to write a story—one that I might send to a magazine. It must be done in secret, so that if I were not successful no one need know, and, if I were, it would be a lovely surprise for the family.

For some reason I chose to write about French Canadians. I was not a French Canadian—my connection was with Old France—yet something in me drove me to place the scene of this story in Quebec. I shut myself in the dim end of our huge sparsely furnished drawing room in Toronto. I wrote the story in lead pencil (as I have written all since) and then copied it painstakingly in pen and ink. The thought that it should be typed never entered my head.

I have little patience with writers who declare that all their works are composed in agony of spirit. This agonized creation seems to me affected, for, in truth, imaginative writing is one of the most delightful of occupations. It is exacting, it often is exhausting. It demands everything the writer has in him to give. He must believe in the characters if he is to persuade the public to believe

in them. What the writer of fiction needs—first, last, and all the time—is the public. Its interest is the steady wind that fans the fire of his creative ability. All his “agonizing” will not create a public for him.

My first stories, however, were written in a kind of calculated agony. I had the idea that I must work myself up into a state of excitement before I could write of what was in my mind. I would lie on the sofa in the dim room, my body rigid, my mind hallucinated by the pictures that passed before it. Then I would rise, take up paper and pencil and write. Again I would stretch myself on the sofa. Again I would write. I remember my reflection in the old gilt-framed mirror that hung above the sofa, the glitter in my eyes, the flushed cheeks, as of one in a fever. And so in this way the story was completed.

Related long afterward, in cold blood, it sounds rather ridiculous. But I think it is rather touching too, because I was so very young, so ignorant. I am sure that most twelve-year-olds of today are more knowledgeable than I was at that time.

In secrecy then, the story was finished. In secrecy it was posted to Munsey’s Magazine. I did not know that I should enclose return postage.

I waited.

At the hour for the postman’s call I was on hand to be the first to get the mail. From an upstairs window I would see him coming. I would tear down the stairs, my heart hastening its beat. Weeks passed. Then came a small envelope from Munsey’s—not the dreaded long envelope containing my manuscript—and in it a note from the editor saying that he had much pleasure in accepting my story. I flew to where my mother and cousin Caroline Clement were sewing.

“I’ve written a story,” I said, “and it’s accepted and I’m to be paid fifty dollars for it.”

My mother began to cry. “How lovely!” she said through her tears.

“So that’s what you were up to.” said Caroline. “We’ve been wondering.”

I had had little money in my young life. To me it seemed something of which there was a perpetual shortage in our family. I made up my mind that the cheque for this story was to be spent on a present for my mother, something she could keep always.

Caroline and I went to Junor’s store and there we discovered an ornate lamp, the base of wrought iron, the bowl of bronze, the shade of beautiful amber glass, like a full moon, and on the side of the shade a golden dragon.

How much was it? Fifty dollars—the very price!

My mother was delighted. A few years later she broke the shade and one would have thought the end of the world had come, so devastated was she.

When the magazine containing my story appeared I was strolling along Yonge Street. In the window of a stationer's shop I saw the latest number. I went in and asked if I might look at the index page. I was allowed to see it, and there, in print, was my name!

I had no money with me and ran along Maitland Street home for the price of Munsey's.

At that time my paternal grandmother was visiting us. My father was determined that his mother should appreciate what I had achieved. He was going to read aloud my story to her. I never knew her to read anything but the Psalms of David and of these she knew quite a number by heart. He had placed two chairs side by side in the dining room. He took her hand and led her with ceremony to one of them.

“Do you think there will be time before lunch?” she asked, with a yearning look toward the table upon which the maid had already laid a white cloth.

“A full half hour,” beamed my father. “So sit down and prepare to enjoy yourself.”

“Is this story true?” asked Grandmother.

“No, no, it is purely imaginative.” Dramatically he began to read aloud, and she to endure.

Never could I forget the picture of them sitting there, he with a small dog on his knee, another between his feet; she a stately figure in her black silk dress, with ruchings of white at neck and wrists, and a long gold chain. Her cap, of white lace and ribbon rosettes, was on a foundation of wire. She herself made her caps and, during all the years I knew her, I never saw her do anything more arduous than this and the making of patchwork quilts. Those quilts were quite handsome, being of silk and satin with wide borders of black velvet. She scorned any material but what was absolutely new. One she made for each member of the family and, when at work on the one destined for me, she met a young man who came to the house frequently as my friend. She was favorably impressed, especially by the young man's height, and at once set about making the quilt six inches longer.

Now, with a resigned “heigh-ho” and a lifting and a dropping of her shapely white hands on the arms of her chair, she listened to the reading of the

first published story of her loved granddaughter—the only grandchild of hers ever to be produced. And she listened with every evidence of boredom.

Yet she was not to escape. My father was determined that she was to hear that story.

After a few miserable moments I slunk from the room.

When I returned the lunch was being brought to the table. My father, looking somewhat subdued, was heaving my grandmother to her feet and she, gratefully, was approaching the table. Her ordeal was over. The little Yorkshire terrier was dragging Munsey's Magazine under the sofa.



THE BOOKS I GREW UP WITH: I owned a great pile of books for children—Alice in Wonderland and Through The Looking-Glass, The Water Babies, The Little Duke, the Kate Greenaway books, these were my favorites. In those days the child had not the excitement of moving pictures and television. The young fancy was not spread out thin over many interests but concentrated on the few and, if he took to books, what a world of delight lay before him!

By the time I was ten I read every book that came my way—Oliver Twist several times, Old Curiosity Shop once, for I hated Quilp, and even then found the death of Little Nell too sentimental. But, when our teacher read aloud Misunderstood, I was so overwhelmed that the reading had to be stopped. One of my uncles was given a book called, I think, The Adventures of Hadji Baba. He was no reader, but on my next visit to Grandpa's I discovered it, and "devour" is the only word that



expresses my absorption in the adventures. I have no recollection of the story but I remember Grandpa's discovery of the book, his brief scanning of it, his striding to the kitchen and before the frightened eyes of the maid, Victoria, taking off a stove lid and thrusting the book onto the coals. In fascination I followed him. "But, please, sir," quavered Victoria, "why did you burn that nice book?"

"It was not a nice book, Victoria," answered Grandpa. "It was a very nasty book and I will not have my son tempted to read it."

Little did he dream that the small granddaughter, standing innocently by, was thanking her stars that she had finished the book before its destruction. I believed Grandpa when he said the book was wicked but I could not believe that it had hurt me to read it. I concluded that what might be harmful to a young man could not hurt a small girl.

Other books of those days come crowding into my mind—Carrots, Just a Little Boy, Spoilt Guy, Little Women (though I liked Little Men still better), The Bastables by E. Nesbit. And the theatre! I could not have been more than six years old when I began to be a regular theatregoer. My mother and I went to matinées, I feeling very grown-up, and I saw some of the great actors in plays I could not understand and that sometimes frightened me a little but also gave me a strange pleasure. The tuning up of the orchestra, the ornate curtain poised to rise on that wonderful world, filled me with a tremulous anticipation.

Sometimes a friend of my mother's joined us and brought her little boy, Bertie, and we then went back to the friend's house for tea.

I remember that Bertie had been given two birthday presents which I greatly envied him. His father had given him a rowing machine to make him strong and his mother had given him a Bible to make him good. The rowing machine was in Bertie's own room and he (a pale delicate child) got into it and showed me how it worked. He also let me hold the Bible in my hands, but only for a moment.

On the way home I enquired, "Mama, do you think I might have a rowing

THE PORTRAIT THAT HOLDS A MEMORY

"Around the time this girlhood snap was taken we stopped briefly at the Queen's Hotel in Toronto. When we rose from the table I shook hands with the waiter and thanked him for the nice dinner, as I had been taught to do after a party.

"'We don't usually,' said my mother, 'shake hands with the waiter.'

"To draw attention from my lapse I remarked, 'Papa is forgetting some of his money.'

"'That,' said my father, 'is for the waiter.'

"'It's better,' I remarked, 'to shake hands with him.'"

machine and a Bible?”

“Neither of them,” she answered decisively, “is suitable for a child.”

I pondered this, not being quite convinced, but I was not a child who begged for things. I did not refer to the matter again but many a time I pictured myself skimming along in the rowing machine, Bible in hand . . .

One evening my mother said to my father, “We should do some serious reading. It will be good for us and good for Mazo to hear. There are those volumes of Shakespeare your father gave you. Let’s read one of the plays aloud.”

“We’ve seen Irving and Ellen Terry in them,” he said. “And Robert Mantell. That ought to be enough.”

“That will not help our child. It will be splendid for her to hear us read them. Let’s begin with Othello. I’d love to do Desdemona. You can be the Moor. We’ll divide up the other characters.”

He became as enthusiastic as she. They drew chairs to the table and laid the volume before them. The pug and I were audience.

At first the reading went well. Then my father read words that made my mother recoil. She cried, “Oh, you shouldn’t read that—not in front of her!” and she cast a solicitous look at me.

“How was I to know what was coming?” he demanded.

“Anyone could see what was coming!”

“Why didn’t you stop me then—before I said it?”

“I tried to stop you but I couldn’t.”

“Anyhow,” said my father tranquilly, “she wouldn’t understand—not any more than that pug.”

My mother cast doubtful looks on both me and the pug, and we, feeling embarrassed, slunk into the next room . . .

When I gave up childish reading I spent my happiest hours in one of the deep window seats, living with the novels of Dickens and Scott—David Copperfield, A Tale of Two Cities, Rob Roy, Quentin Durward. My mother cared little for Scott but she delighted in Dickens, the Brontës, Jane Austen. Another favorite of hers was Rhoda Broughton, though what pleased me most in her books was their lovely titles—Red as a Rose is She, and Cometh up as a Flower.

All three of us read everything that came our way, with uncritical zest. Often my father and I read the same book at the same time, his six foot three extended in an easy chair, my growing length draped against his chest. So I remember reading *The White Company*, Harry Lorrequer, *Nada the Lily* by Rider Haggard. In this last book there was a young warrior named, I think, Umslopogaas, whom we very much admired. From this time, for many years, my father called me by this name.

I think it was in these days, when first we began to read together, that the bond between my father and me strengthened into a deep understanding and we became the most loved of friends. As he waited for my slower grasp of the page to catch up to his, as his large shapely hand was raised to turn the page, a palpable emotion stirred within us. My love for my mother was instinctive. I took her devotion for granted. But he was my hero, my protector, my gay companion . . .



MY FAVORITE STORY: Shortly before one Christmas when my father was ill he said to me. “Nothing would please me quite so much for a Christmas present as a puppy. It would be fun for me to train it. It would amuse me when time hangs heavy on my hands. And I know just where a Scottie could be bought, at a quite reasonable price—from champion stock too.” He always knew.

It was wonderful to hear him ask for something. How gladly I sent the order to the breeder, leaving him to choose the prettiest, the sweetest-tempered puppy from the litter. Scarcely could we bear the waiting for its arrival. Our man drove to the station and brought back the small crate and set it down in the kitchen. We all crowded around. Two glowing almond-shaped eyes looked up at us between the slats. The man took off one of them, put his hand into the crate and lifted out a tiny black brindle morsel of life that wobbled when he set her on her feet. This was Bunty.

She became an important member of the family and, during the thirteen years of her life, her understanding of our ways, her loyalty to us, her capricious feminine nature, were a wonder and a delight. In *Portrait of a Dog* I have written her history. I wrote it when I was living in Devon, far from the farm by the lake where she came to us as a puppy.

John Galsworthy told me that he thought he had never read a more beautiful story of a dog. This pleased me very much, for he himself had written a lovely life of his spaniel in *Memories*. As for his feeling for *Portrait of a*

Dog, I share it. I would make a claim for it, in its own place, that I would not for any other book of mine.

Unfortunately my publishers produced it in the same season with a dog story by Rudyard Kipling. I do not see how Mr. Kipling could have brought himself to write of a Scotch terrier in the unreal baby talk in which he indulged himself in *Thy Servant a Dog*.



ON GOING TO CHURCH: Caroline and I were at one time what might be called religious—that is, in the outer forms of religion. We went devotedly to the services of our church. We had been confirmed. We looked on Father Ingles, our high-church rector, with reverence, his word as infallible.

Yet, I think, there was no real Christianity in us. We were intolerant of other creeds. We were fascinated rather than uplifted by the ritual of our church.

The six-o'clock Communion service, after the walk through the sabbath-quiet streets, the church with the sparse early-morning congregation, the twitter of birds outside the open windows, the sibilant murmur of the rector, as he gave us the bread and wine, drugged us as though with lotus.

Frequently we went again to the eleven-o'clock service, this time accompanied by my father, in regulation frock coat and top hat. He liked the service, the excellent singing of the choir, but the dreary sermons bored him and he had a way of surreptitiously looking at his watch that filled me with anxiety. The movement of his hand, the bend of his massive head, the secretive glance of his large dark eyes, seemed to me so obvious that I feared Father Ingles from his pulpit would see him.

And so one day he did and dreadfully paused in his discourse till my father blandly returned the watch to his pocket.



PANIC IN A PUBLISHER'S OFFICE: I have reason to remember my first visit to a publisher's office. Hugh Eayrs, of Macmillan's, had invited me to have tea with him. It was winter and before I left the house I went down to the basement to have a look at the coal furnace, to make sure that all was well there.

Before I went down I drew a grey sweater over my pretty dress, for its

protection. The sad thing was that I forgot, in my excitement, to take the sweater off. On top of it I put my muskrat coat and set out. Hugh Eayrs made me welcome in his private office. A typist brought in the tea things and left us.

Hugh was about to help me off with my coat when he was suddenly called from the room. "I shall be back in a moment," he said and hurried away. I was left alone and thought I would myself take off my coat. What was my shock to discover that I still wore the sweater, old, shabby, with a hole in one elbow! I decided that I must refuse to part with my coat. I would say I had had a chill. But the room was hot. I should surely faint in a fur coat. I was in a panic. Then I discovered that a window was open on to the street. I did not hesitate. I threw off my coat, I tore off the sweater, rolled it up and cast it out of the window.

Hugh briskly returned. "What a pretty dress!" he exclaimed. Then, "Will you pour tea?" But I could not forget the sweater, lying in the street. I expected, at any moment, that it would be returned to me but never did I see it again.



THE SECRET DRAMA OF JALNA: In the summer of 1925 I began a new novel. Two of the characters in this had been half-formed some years earlier and were to have been characters in a play that never was written. They had no names but later they were to emerge as Meg and Renny Whiteoak in the novel Jalna.

Jalna was inspired by the traditions of that part of southern Ontario that lies a few miles west of Toronto. The descendants of the retired military and naval officers who had settled there stoutly clung to British traditions. No house in particular was pictured; no family portrayed.

From the very first the characters created themselves. They leaped from my imagination and from the memories of my own family. The grandmother, Adeline Whiteoak, refused to remain a minor character but arrogantly, supported on either side by a son, marched to the centre of the stage.

The name Jalna was suggested to me in this way: a member of the Civil Service, who worked in the same department as my lifelong friend Caroline, had spent many years in India. When she told him that I was in search of names of military stations there he sent me a list of quite a number. I pored over them and chose Jalna because it was the shortest; it was easy to remember and looked well in print. When I wrote it at the top of my first page of manuscript, it never entered my head that one day it would become well-known to quite a number of people.

That summer I lived with the Whiteoaks, completely absorbed by them. In fancy I opened the door of Jalna, passed inside, listened to what was going on. Except for my beloved dog Bunty I was isolated in my woodland cottage till Caroline's return in the evening. As the chapters were finished she read them aloud.

In time, Jalna was finished and the typed manuscript sent to Macmillan's of New York; Hugh Eayrs had already expressed great hopes for it. The New York house agreed and were to publish it in a few months. Then, in a chance copy of the Atlantic Monthly I came upon the notice of a competition the editors were holding for "the most interesting novel" by any author from any part of the world. The prize was large. Very much I should have liked to enter Jalna in this competition, but there it was—bound by contract to the New York Macmillan's!

The more I thought of it, the more I wanted to enter that competition. "I don't see how you possibly can," said Caroline.

Neither could I see how I could but still I mused on the possibility.

Then brightly came the thought that as my chances of winning were slight it would do no harm to anyone and would be a satisfaction to me just to send Jalna to the Atlantic and discover if it made any impression. I could not resist the temptation. The bulky manuscript (a carbon copy) was posted, and when Caroline returned that evening I confessed what I had done.

"Now," she said, "you may be in for trouble."

Weeks passed and more weeks.

Between the Atlantic on the one hand and New York Macmillan's on the other I began to get really nervous. Then came a letter from Harold Latham, fiction editor of Macmillan's, setting the time of publication and speaking of proofs to be corrected. This sort of double life could not go on. I decided that I must retrieve my manuscript from the competition. How terrible it would be, I thought, if I should win the competition during the full tide of preparation for publication by Macmillan's. Why, I might end in prison!

I wrote to the editors of the Atlantic, asking them to return Jalna to me, as I had a publisher for it. They replied that my manuscript was being held, with two others, for further consideration. I should hear from them soon.

A flood of excitement shook me, but I was not submerged. I had promised myself that I would be henceforth honorable and above board with publishers, and so must I be. I wrote to Mr. Latham telling him that I had entered a second

copy of *Jalna* in the Atlantic competition. I asked him if, in the event of my winning, Macmillan's would release me from my contract with them. He replied (I suppose that in his wildest imaginings he did not consider this a possibility) that they would release me. There was kindness indeed. I settled down to wait.

Oh, the cruel suspense of that waiting! Each morning after breakfast I perched on the window seat to watch for the postman. Each morning I flew down the stairs to get the mail. There was nothing from the Atlantic. I made up my mind that one of the other manuscripts had been chosen. *Jalna* had been thrust aside and forgotten . . . Again I wrote demanding the return of the manuscript. "How I wish you never had gone into that dreadful competition," exclaimed Caroline. "You grow paler every day. It is killing you."

It turned out that Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the Atlantic, was ill in bed at the time—and wanted no one but himself to give me the good news. He and I had had some very friendly correspondence—confidential on my part, warmly sympathetic on his. He had remarked of me to a visitor from Toronto, "She has a far better friend in me than she guesses."

It was he then who wrote to me of the judges' final decision.

When Caroline came home from the office I told her that *Jalna* had won the Atlantic competition, but she was past rejoicing. Too long had she suffered suspense. She simply said, "Oh," and sat down and looked at me. The fount of our enthusiasm had dried. We sat silent, unable to rejoice.

After a little I said, "It is a large prize I have won."

"Yes, it is large," she agreed.

"Now we can travel."

What emotion we felt was dammed within us, for the editors had begged me to preserve complete silence on the subject of my triumph till they had sent proper notice to the press. It was not easy to mingle with one's friends—to appear nonchalant when they asked me if I had had any news of the competition, to look subdued when they implied that I had better give up hoping.

The Atlantic was to publish *Jalna* in collaboration with Little, Brown of Boston, and in Canada by the firm with which they were affiliated, of whom a Mr. Gundy was head.

Nothing appeared impossible to Hugh Eayrs. When I told him that I had entered the Atlantic Monthly competition he at once wrote to Mr. Gundy

(word of mouth would not suffice) and asked him if, in the event of my being successful, he would agree to the book's being published in Canada by Macmillan's. Mr. Gundy cheerfully agreed, in writing. Therefore when the headlines filled those in his office with joy, he could only ruefully admit that he had promised the rights of *Jalna* to a rival house.

In the period of waiting, the ten days or so of secrecy, Caroline and I decided it would be easier for us if we were out of town. Removed from all that was familiar, we could rest, collect ourselves, prepare for the ordeal of publicity to come.

We went to a small guest house in Niagara Falls, Bunty of course accompanying us. Never had I known Bunty to like less any situation in which she found herself . . . But her barking was as nothing to my barking. Somehow, I had contracted a very bad cold.

I lay on the bed coughing. When a questionnaire came from Little, Brown for use in publicity I felt too ill to answer the questions. Caroline filled in the form as best she could, with only a few mistakes. Two days before the date when a notice was to be given to the press we returned to town. At two o'clock in the morning we were woken by the telephone. It was a call from a newspaper office to ask whether it were true that I had won the Atlantic Monthly prize of ten thousand dollars. The secret had somehow leaked out.

There followed exciting times for us. Our first lack of emotion when we heard the news was followed by a period of sheer excitement that was at once delightful, stimulating and exhausting. Though the press was less demanding than it is today, still newspaper reporters crowded into our living room; there were interviews and articles. Telegrams, flowers, letters of congratulation deluged us.

The warmth, the feeling of good will toward me was, as I remember, universal. Even critics who had not been very kind to my earlier books joined in the praise. The general feeling seemed to be that of rejoicing that a Canadian (not this Canadian in particular) had achieved distinction in the United States, a country that heretofore could scarcely have shown less interest in Canadian letters. Thomas Raddall, the Nova Scotian novelist, has written to me: "You cannot imagine what your winning of the Atlantic Monthly prize meant to us other Canadian writers. It was as though you opened a door that had been inexorably shut against us."

A really splendid dinner was given for me by combined literary societies. Speeches by the lieutenant-governor and other dignitaries—a handsome silver tea service presented to me by the City of Toronto—I making a small, rather

tremulous speech of thanks, and wearing a French evening gown, long-waisted, short-skirted in the extraordinary fashion of the day. This dinner was held in the Queen's Hotel, a house of dignity and fine traditions, quite unlike the seething anthills of business conventions and heartless high-pressure traffic which the hotels of today have become.



“NO” TO \$25,000: The American magazine *Cosmopolitan* had paid me two thousand dollars for an option on *Whiteoaks*—the sequel to *Jalna*—for publication as a serial. Therefore, as soon as I had got it typed, I sent the manuscript to the editor, Ray Long. He read it at once and then from New York there came to Trail Cottage an intelligent assistant to the editor. They would, I was told, accept the novel for serialization if I would write a new ending. She spent the day with us, enjoying, as she said, the peace and quiet. But there was no peace or quiet in my mind. I was at the end of long and arduous work. I had endured considerable physical and mental suffering to accomplish it. As always I longed to be told what to do.

Caroline looked me firmly in the eyes. “You are not to attempt it,” she said. “It would ruin the story. It would be madness.”

“But it would change the ending only for the magazine,” I insisted, wishing really to rouse her. “It would not affect the book.”

“It will affect you,” she declared. “I won’t see you ruin your health.”

“But twenty-five thousand dollars . . .”

“What is twenty-five thousand dollars?” she demanded scornfully in a rags-to-riches tone. “I won’t let you do it.”

We decided that I should promise to write to the editor when I had had time to consider the proposal. This I did and *Whiteoaks* was serialized instead in the *Atlantic Monthly*.



THE LIFE OF THE NOVELIST: The *Master of Jalna* had been published, and I began a new novel of the *Whiteoaks* which I called *Cousin Malahide* but later changed the title to *Young Renny*. I could not deny the demands of readers who wanted to know more of that family. Still less could I deny the urge within myself to write of them.

Sometimes I see reviews in which the critic commends a novelist for not

attempting to repeat former successes, and goes on to say what an inferior thing his new novel is. If a novelist is prolific he is criticized for that, yet in all other creative forms—music, sculpture, painting—the artist may pour out his creations without blame. But the novelist, like the actor, must remember his audience. Without an audience, where is he? Like the actor, an audience is what he requires—first, last and all the time. But, unlike the actor, he can work when he is more than half ill and may even do his best work then . . .

My public was steady and warmhearted. They understood me and I understood them; that is to say, I offered them lucidity and living characters and, in return, they gave me a belief in those characters which was equal to my own. In truth, considering the letters I continue to receive through the years, it seems to me that their acceptance of them exceeds mine.

This applies only to the *Whiteoak Chronicles*, because to them I have given the sustained work of a lifetime, and my other books and many short stories are diversions, distractions. I make four exceptions—they are my novel *Growth of a Man* and my history of the Port of Quebec.

The other exceptions are my first two novels, *Possession*, and *Delight*. These four, so different, represent living, experience, and, in a way, failure, because they have been so overshadowed by the *Whiteoaks* . . .

Looking back, it seems to me that the life of the novelist is the best of all and I would never choose any other.



THE CELEBRITIES OF LONDON: We went now and again to London. There we met a number of writers. The most striking in looks was John Galsworthy who somehow resembled a bishop on holiday. There were Robert and Sylvia Lynd who entertained you with heart-warming kindness, though physically you were frozen in their draughty house. There was Charles Morgan with his air of chill distinction. There were the Priestleys in their lovely house in Highgate, with *her* children, *his* children and *their* children, very happy and jolly together. Priestley said to me, “I like your books about the *Whiteoaks*. You should be compelled by law to write a new one every year. But—let us hear no more about Renny *Whiteoak*. I hate thin horsy men!”

Here his wife interrupted, “Don’t mind what Jack says. He’s just jealous of Renny *Whiteoak*. Already we’ve quarreled over him” . . .

Walter Allward, the Canadian sculptor, was then working on the memorial for Vimy Ridge. He and his wife, Margaret, gave delightful parties where one

met interesting people. We met a good many writers—Sir John Squire, Hugh Walpole who had written a glowing review of Whiteoaks in the Graphic, Clemence Dane who had done the same in the Bystander.

Tea in Walpole's flat was always a pleasure. He had beautiful things in it. I remember looking down at a small rug and admiring it. "Yes," he agreed, trying hard to smile, "but it's not really meant to be stood on" . . .

At the Malvern Festival we saw the first performance of Saint Joan with Wendy Hiller whom Shaw himself had chosen for the part. We sat directly behind Shaw at the first performance of *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles*. He appeared cheerfully interested during the first act. In the interval he told me he was satisfied with it—after that he fell shamelessly asleep till he slipped out just before the final curtain.

Can genius be an excuse for rudeness? I did not think so when, in the hospitable house of the Reyner Woods, in Colwall, Shaw exclaimed when refusing tea, "I have not taken it since I had it here a year ago and I hope never to take it again!"



THE TERRORS OF PUBLICITY: Always have I hated publicity, and if all those "in the news" were as unco-operative as I, the newspapers would require fewer pages . . .

Before we set forth on our first trip abroad I made my will. Fancy my having something to will! By my writing, I had earned such a precarious livelihood. I remember feeling really important when I went to the lawyer's office early one January morning. The grim buildings were beautiful in a covering of hoar frost but the hoar-laden air was bad for the bronchial cough I had contracted. This cough I took with me to New York where I had a great number of engagements.

I remember how I sat coughing in a house in Fifty-third Street while an artist from the Bookman made a drawing of me. That night we went under the river to a theatre in Hoboken where an old melodrama was being revived by Christopher Morley. We reached our ship just as the gangway was about to be drawn in. She was the *Vulcania* and this was her maiden voyage.

A luncheon had been given for me on board by my publishers, where without preparation I had had to make a short speech. Afterward I was photographed on deck surrounded by sixteen men in the book business. I still have the photograph, in which, wearing a great bunch of violets, I look

dreadfully like a movie star.

That night, casting myself on my berth completely exhausted, I burst into tears. I thought I knew what movie stars felt when they took an overdose of sleeping tablets and ended all publicity.

On a later occasion we sailed for England in the Empress of Britain. Crowding the newspaper reporters, photographers and agents in our stateroom made me think, "If this is the outcome of a modest success, heaven preserve me from a great one."

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been moved from their original locations.

Book cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of "*I still remember . . .*" by Mazo de la Roche]