

Continued from page 13



## SUBURBIA THE DAY BEFORE YESTERDAY...

a young girl, and I can see her little withered face still above a mist of pink ruffles. "Ella," my mother said to her once, "you dress too young. It is not becoming." Poor Miss Ella burst into tears. All the time she considered a mention of age as a breach of etiquette, and if someone said that such-and-such an event must have been ten years ago, "Oh, surely not that long, oh my no, don't speak of such a thing!" they would say. Months after the old lady's death, my belligerent aunt asked Miss Julia how old her mother had been at the time. "Why goodness, I haven't the faintest idea!" said Miss Julia. "What a question! She certainly was not old." I have often wondered if they put dates on their tombstones.



with. I once asked the name of the young lady in the portrait and was told, or so I thought, that she was a Miss Hacksaw. I think it must have been Hacksall, or something of the sort, but at the time I accepted Hacksaw, and the word still brings before me a simpering young girl with a rose in her hand, a lovely complexion, and shining black hair parted in the middle—the epitome of the ante-bellum world.

### We Had Our Mysteries, Too

Tragedy was not absent from Walnut Street. Three houses down from my grandmother's was a mansion of mystery, a great square house with a mansard roof. It was set far back from the street, among shadowing trees, and surrounded by a wild growth of weeds. Mrs. McCandless lived there. Years before my birth, she had been famous for her hospitality, especially her "musicales." As distinguished from a musical evening, a "musical" was a formal party where the talent was imported rather than domestic. After the concert a light supper was served and people could resume the conversations that had been interrupted by the music. By my time, Mrs. McCandless had become a recluse. One day, some three or four years before I was born, dreadful news stared from headlines of the New York papers. Mrs. McCandless had been arrested in a New York department store for shoplifting. What had actually happened? Mrs. McCandless was a wealthy widow of impeccable background. One theory was that the lace on her sleeve had caught up whatever it was she was supposed to have stolen; another, that she had absent-mindedly walked out of the store with something she had every intention of paying for. No one—or very few—believed that she was a kleptomaniac. "Such a thing," said my grandmother, "shall never be said under my roof." Yet why was she arrested in a store where she was, doubtless, known? Whatever the truth of the matter, the incident crushed Mrs. McCandless. She shut herself up in her great house and was never seen again. People saw the servants come and go, but I doubt that anyone would have been bold enough to question them. Her cousin, who acted as her companion, frequently walked to Main Street but never stopped to talk to anyone. The tall shutters on the front and sides of the house were kept closed, the lawn was abandoned to the weeds. Whenever I passed the place, I felt that I should hold my breath and tiptoe by. Reading *Great Expectations*, I had the thrill of knowing that someone akin to Miss Havisham lived right down the street.

### My Friend Peyton

The most memorable family to me was the Campbell family. The only child, born when his mother was in her forties, was a son, Peyton Randolph Campbell. He was a year older than I and was my closest friend from the time I was five until eighteen years later when he was killed in France during World War I. His father was twenty years older than his mother. He was a Scotchman who, during the Civil War, had owned and commanded a swift paddle-wheel steamer that ran the Federal blockade to aid the South. He looked exactly like the Emperor Francis Joseph of Austria, whose face was as familiar to us as pictures of Elizabeth II are to the present generation. Mrs. Campbell—Rosalie, her first name was, which I thought particularly beautiful—was one of the Virginia aristocrats, and had the usual LEST WE FORGET in her hall, together with several portraits, one of which was an object of especial adoration, a young woman from about 1850, who was spoken of as "our beloved" and occasionally had a silent toast drunk to her in sherry before dinner. I have never known what her relationship was. Randolph and I were building a tree house in a huge chestnut nearby, and his father had given us a hacksaw to work

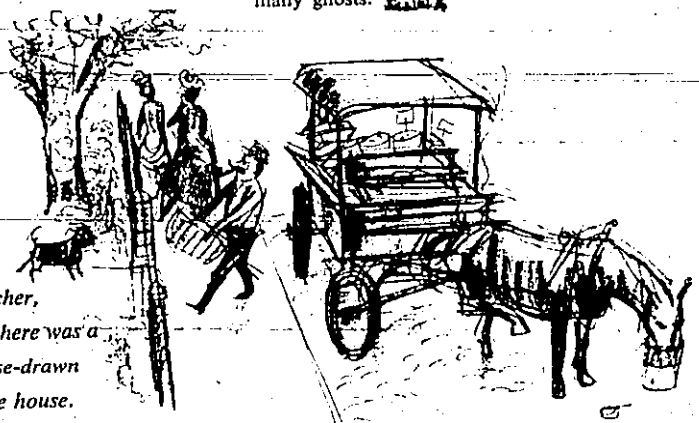


There were a few bolder spirits among the ladies, for example, Miss Amy Brown bicycling down Walnut Street in bloomers and evoking some laughter from passersby and a loud "Disgusting!" from old Mr. Meeker, who stood on the curb shaking his head at her. Then there was Dr. Phelps. The mere thought of a woman being a physician was considered most unwomanly, and she had no patients as far as I know. Although she attended Grace Church regularly, clad in dusty brown velvet, she was thought to be a crank, for she had a notion—again how unseemly—that women should vote. Woman suffrage was an immoral kind of idea, as Miss Ella Southwell declared. My mother laughed and replied that although, heaven knows, she certainly had no desire to vote, she had no objection to other women doing it. "It won't make any difference except to double the foolishness."

### Slowly, the Era Ended

In 1909, when I went away to school, never to return for any length of time, the customs and conventions of Walnut Street were still intact, defended ever more fiercely against change. But one by one the Victorians died, and their grandchildren married and moved away. By the time of the first World War, the town was sliding belatedly, like a crumbling sand castle, into the twentieth century. Once it started to go, it went quickly, and the air was loud with the groan of old timbers being torn down and the slap of mortar on brick as apartment houses supplanted them. On a block where, half a century ago, fifty individuals lived, a thousand people live today. There is just one house left on Walnut Street that survives from my childhood and is still inhabited by the same family.

When my grandmother's house was torn down twenty-five years ago, I asked my sister, who lives not far away, to buy for me from the wreckers a wonderful stained glass window of a phoenix arising from the flames that had cast a spell over my earliest years. But wreckers work faster than she knew, and when she got there, nothing was left but the cellar, which seemed small for so large a house and so many ghosts.



The fish man, iceman, butcher, vegetable man, fruit man—there was a constant procession of horse-drawn wagons stopping before the house.