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Relative to My Grandmother

By James Branch Cabell

MY grandmother was born a Patteson—Martha Louise Patteson—to begin with (nor was there any crime more outrageous, such as a mere rape or a murder, than to spell "Patteson" with an *r*); and her husband, who was drowned some ten years before I undertook the hazards of human living, had been her second cousin. She had loved this, as I thought from his portraits, rather dictatorial- and peevish-looking James Read Branch with a complete devotion which survived him throughout the thirty-nine years of her widowhood up to her last moment on earth. "Colonel Branch" to her finding had been flawless. But at that, Grandmother did not ever weigh the fantastic notion of the Branches' being the social peers of the Pattesons. This point was not stressed. It was but a tacit axiom tactfully not dwelt on.

In any event, she did marry "Cousin Jimmy," as throughout the first twenty-four years of her life she had called this, to my immature judgment, somewhat grim-looking person who scowled at you, from between side-whiskers, sort of as if he didn't much like your being named after him. But once they were married, then she of course, at the commands of Virginian etiquette, referred to and addressed him always as "Mr. Branch." When The War came on—and as I have recorded elsewhere, so far as my grandmother's generation was concerned, there had never in the world's history been but one real war, this being the carnage which "Mr. Lincoln" (as he was termed aloofly) had started in 1861—why, but then before long my grandmother's husband had become to her conversationally "Colonel Branch." And Colonel Branch he remained forever afterward.

He was wholly perfect. There was never a better or more loving and attentive husband. I was told, it is true—but I was told casually, during a condescending philippic of which the target was a quite other person, about that wartime incident when Grandmother, coming unexpectedly into the room, had found the wife of his commanding general in the Army of Northern Virginia sitting in Colonel Branch's

lap and slobbering all over him with her big, wet, spitty kisses. —Which simply showed you just what sort of a person that nobody from Charles City, or somewhere else down there, really was. And so Grandmother had told the woman at once, right to her face.

"But, Grandmother, weren't you mad with Grandpa too?"

"Why, of course I was not angry with Colonel Branch," she replied, a trifle surprised. "Men never do have any sense about things like that, and nobody expects them to."

—Which statement I, upon reflection, find to embody a fairly substantial section of our former Southern mores.

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Well, then, but after The War Colonel Branch went back into the Produce Commission business; and within four years he had put by what in those days was considered an ample fortune. And when he was drowned in the July of 1869, along with a policeman, through their both being pinned down under a collapsing bridge, then Grandmother became the richest widow in Virginia, or as it was reputed, in the entire South, still in her thirties.

She was handsome, too, with the dark and clear-cut, somewhat Spanish features of all the Pattesons. So before long there were any number of gentlemen who endeavored to become Colonel Branch's successor.

She refused each of them civilly, because as befitted a Patteson, she was always courteous to and concerning everyone (excepting, it is true, that nobody from down in Charles City, whose prominence at so many Confederate re-unions my grandmother resented continually with a partly amused scorn), but I am afraid all these polite rejections had a tinge of hauteur. She did not think that a real gentleman would ever marry a widow, she explained to me. You could not respect any man who would take another man's leavings.

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It is pleasing (and yet wistfully depressing also) to remember the days of her affluence when Grandmother owned the big house at First and Franklin Streets, where the Richmond Public Library now stands. Her rambling three-storied mansion and its grounds then occupied about half of the block, with a hedged flower garden, having also a few smallish fruit trees in it, to the front and the east, and with an enormous catalpa tree—surrounded by a circular wooden bench, I

remember—and a substantial stable in the rear, as well as a smoke house and a sort of storage hall with several rooms up over top of it for the servants to live in. There were two horses and two cows and a small vegetable garden and some large grape trellises all back there too, in Grandmother's so very big back yard.

—So that the place was really a minor plantation in what is nowadays a business section of downtown Richmond. And my ability to remember these matters I have found to be wistfully depressing, do you let me explain, in that it causes me to feel not at all unlike a survivor of some Pliocene or Cro-Magnon tribe and its social orderings.

Anyhow, there Grandmother lived in state in a tiny Richmond where everybody knew everybody else, and where most of the population seemed to be Grandmother's cousins. You wondered how on earth she kept track of all those cousins.

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On week days every morning Grandmother would ride down town in her big carriage with her two horses pulling it, to the Sixth Street Market and buy everything she needed. Then Jackson, that fat and sort of solemn-looking colored man who was her coachman, and in a real fine uniform with nice shiny buttons to it, would drive the meat and the vegetables and the eggs, and whatever else there was, back to the house in the carriage while Grandmother walked home. She did not have to walk but seven blocks, yet it almost always took her right much time to walk them, because she would have to stop on the street and talk to such lots of her friends, or may be she would go into this or the other cousin's house just for a little visit, or perhaps to look at the new baby. In those days nearly every one of the married ladies had a new baby every two years. And in those days nobody was ever in any special hurry about anything, anyhow. So Grandmother would very often not get home until almost two o'clock and barely in time for her dinner.

But on Saturday afternoons she would send you down to Mr. Ferrandini's, over on Broad Street, right underneath your dancing school, to ask for "that package for Mrs. Branch," and you would bring it back for her. It was a wrapped-up small flat box, real light to carry, and you were not supposed to know what was in it. But you did. It was Grandmother's front hair.

Ladies did not wear any false hair, of course. False hair was just plain tacky. But lots of ladies put away their combings in a little round box on the bureau until they had got enough for Mr. Ferrandini to fix up into a front or into a switch, or sometimes into little separate curls which you stuck in with a hair pin wherever you wanted to. And each one of these was made out of the ladies' own hair entirely, so that it wasn't false hair. And Grandmother used to have her front all stiffened up or frizzed or washed, or something, every Saturday, so that she could wear it to St. Paul's Church on Sunday morning and look extra nice while she listened to Dr. Minnigerode preach.

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—For Grandmother was "on the board," whatever that meant, of the St. Paul's Church Old Ladies' Home over on Marshall Street, and she was on the board of the Ladies' Hollywood Memorial Association, and she was always being put on boards to get up bazaars to help something or other that was Confederate. So she kept pretty busy. And besides that, she gave heaps of parties, and she had what people called tableaus and sometimes whole plays in her back parlor which you were allowed to sit up to.

You went to her bazaars too, over at the Richmond Blues' Armory, where Grandmother bought for you once, from the gentleman who made up all sorts of shiny glass things right while you were looking at him, a ship with sails and everything in a foamy little round ocean. But for your brother Robert she got two bright colored birds with long necks drinking out of a pink fountain, with the fountain part of it shaped sort of like one of those champagne glasses that Grandmother used on birthdays in the family.

Those bazaar things were made of what people said was spun glass. And that was a funny name for it, you thought, because the real foreign looking gentleman at the bazaar did not seem to be spinning anything, but instead he blew his glass into the shapes he wanted with a little tube. Anyhow, they were made out of his sort of glass, the ship and the birds and the ocean and everything, and they were under a kind of rounded-off shaped, right tall cover made out of just plain glass. The covers were pretty much like the cover that your Grandfather Cabell and heaps of other people had over the parlor clock, and the covers kept the ship and the birds from getting broken or having dust on them.

Both of these spun glass ornament things stood on the mantelpiece in the nursery at your house for a long time. They were so shiny and so mighty cheerful looking they were just beautiful, you thought; and Grandmother was always giving nice presents like that to you and to almost everybody.

* * * *

When the Confederate Memorial Day came around, then Grandmother would take you and her next biggest grandchild, Thomas McAdams, out to Hollywood Cemetery for two or three days before it was Memorial Day, so that you could help about fixing the flags and the wreaths and the other designs and about keeping the flowers watered upon dead people's graves who were kin to Grandmother, and in Colonel Branch's section especially. She was always right solemn about Confederate Memorial Day and that Mr. Lincoln.

She had a signed picture of the gentleman that had killed him, along with a pack of cards the gentleman had sent to Colonel Branch. Colonel Branch and Grandmother had known Mr. Booth when he was a play actor in Richmond in what people called a stock company.

Well, and at first Grandmother thought Mr. Booth had done a fine thing when he shot Mr. Lincoln, but later on she decided that may be it was a mistake, because perhaps if Mr. Lincoln had gone on living he would have been nicer and kinder to the South than those Carpetbaggers were. Mr. Lincoln had meddled with the South when he had no business to, and he was an awful tacky person. Everybody knew about how he had left five dollars for his wife upon her mantelpiece the next morning after they got married. —Which simply showed you just what sort of women he was used to. But then almost all Yankees were tacky; and lots of people said Mr. Lincoln had meant well.

You thought privately that five dollars was a mighty nice present; but something told you this was one of the things which grown-up people knew about, and you didn't. So you did not argue about it. And in fact very few persons ever did argue with Grandmother. She was just set in her ways, and that was all there was to it.

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It may be inferred that my grandmother was "unreconstructed." She was. Even up to the end of her life the fall of the Confederacy, some forty-three years earlier, remained to this now age-stricken gentle-

woman a never forgotten personal loss, a loss as irreparable as had been the death of Colonel Branch. I do not mean she was ever lachrymose about either; but merely that her devotion to the memory of the Confederacy and of Colonel Branch stayed at all times sacred.

—Or as another grandson, my own, if some deal incongruous, revered first cousin, the Reverend Walter Russell Bowie, has written concerning her:—

"To a woman like Martha Branch, devotion to the past was nothing less than religious; to a cool outsider it would have seemed fanatical. Any question against what she regarded as the unsullied record of the South was blasphemy; and any sign of compromise toward the northern enemies was a moral lapse."

—All which I endorse as being, for a minister of the gospel, a remarkably sound and temperate statement.

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I have spoken thus far of the days of her affluence alone as my first childhood observed them, howsoever briefly; for by the time I was ten or thereabouts Grandmother had spent cheerily almost the last penny of Colonel Branch's money, just somehow. Nobody ever knew quite how, and least of all did she. The once largest fortune in Virginia had lasted her, though, for near twenty magnanimous years, throughout which economy and my grandmother remained total strangers, and profuseness and generosity stayed her hourly companions. To anybody who was in trouble, I mean, but in particular to anyone who was blood kin to her, or to any public cause of which she approved, she immediately and with eagerness gave whatever was needed—or to be wholly accurate, whatsoever was asked for—as befitted a Patteson. To do that was her code. The resultant, the inevitable, poverty and the twenty years of dependence upon her nearer relatives, of whom but yesterday she had been the free-handed patroness, and the disappearance of her bodily health—all of which followed—she faced not one whit less cheerily.

So by-and-by did Grandmother become a little, bent gray wisp of feebleness and never quitted her bedroom nowadays. Yet still she enjoyed life; she existed vicariously but with a lively vigor in every least concernment of her five children and of her eleven grandchildren; so that through her fathomless love for them her interest in life stayed always vivid and benevolent and quietly garrulous even until her life

had ended, of a sudden and without pain, upon the eve of her seventy-seventh birthday.

Well, and it was then that forthwith I got the notion of the dear heaven of Jurgen's grandmother, into which the rejuvenated pawnbroker was to climb upon Jacob's Ladder a considerable number of years afterward. —Because I knew exactly how my own grandmother, now that she was dead, would be dealing with the not impossible Proprietor of this universe, whom my story fabled to be called Koshchei, and how he would never be able not to humor her. For this reason did Martha Louise Patteson Branch, in the guise of Steinvor, enter into the tale triumphant over all reason, whether human or divine; and Koshchei created out of hand, for her inhabitance, that special sort of heaven which she had expected and so well merited.

Speak Gently, Love

SPEAK gently, love.
I want no cadences, no poetry,
no measured vows in verbal symmetry.
Leave me no ecstasy to miss.
Leave me no unrepeated kiss.
Speak gently, so when Winter silence nears,
I shall not hear a Spring that spoke with tears.

Go gently, love.
Ah, hold me not too close to you, nor say
a single word to last beyond today.
Leave me no smile, nor touch of hand,
nor sudden flame that passion fanned.
Go gently, so when I must miss your touch
I need not make myself forget so much.

—Roxane Cotsakis