

# ESCAPE TO PROVENCE

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## INTRODUCTION

After living in the south of France for twenty-two years, we moved our home from a small farmhouse in the Alpes Maritimes to a village house in Sussex and learnt how to live in England once again. Researching and writing *Escape to Provence* wove their way through this upheaval, but two very resolute and unusual women were behind me all the way, and I was never allowed to slacken off for long.

Almost opposites in character, Elisabeth Starr and Winifred Fortescue (known to her friends as Peggy, the name I have used in this book) were between them, enigmatic, dramatic, obstinate and courageous – and this is their story.

Elisabeth, from Philadelphia, and Winifred, from England, left their respective countries for quite different reasons. Elisabeth turned her back on her Philadelphian family after an unhappy childhood followed by personal tragedy. The First World War, towards which she was drawn with a sense of purpose, even relief, brought exhausting and dangerous aid work on the Western Front, followed by the decision to abandon America and make her home in France. She chose the village of Opio, in the hills above Cannes.

Winifred, with her husband Sir John Fortescue, the historian of the British Army, sought in Provence an elegance of life they could neither aspire to nor afford in England. After John's death Peggy became famous, publishing her best-seller of the 1930s, *Perfume from Provence*, followed over the years by five other autobiographical books.

The two women were brought together by a mutual desire for a close and understanding friendship and the need to keep loneliness at bay. Peggy, no longer able to live in her married home with her 'beloved ghost' found her second home on Elisabeth's hillside in Opio. They had both chosen the hills above the coast, among wild flowers, vines and animals. Here, during the years of uneasy peace between the wars, they combined caring for their properties with spells of rustic living in the mountains of the High Alps or in remote coves by the sea – until the threat of war changed their lives for ever.

The history of the south of France is that of a succession of civilisations. Bordered by the Alps to the north and east and the Rhone to the west, Provence has been inhabited since prehistoric times. First came the Ligurians, followed by Greeks, Phoenicians and Romans. After the fall of Rome, Visigoths, Franks and Moors invaded this land where every Mediterranean race has left its footprint – not forgetting the marauding feet of barbarous pirates.

But in the nineteenth century came an invasion with a lighter touch, when the coastal region's winter warmth and beauty were discovered by the rich and noble of Britain, Russia and America. With them came the artists, attracted by the brilliant light and glowing colours, to which they did so much justice. From then on, apart from the clouds of war, there was no going back. The allure of that long stretch of coastline, gently lapped by

the Mediterranean and protected by the mountain ranges of the Alpes Maritimes, still endures in spite of great change. The English call the entire coast, from Marseilles to Genoa, the Riviera, but the French prefer to call their portion the Côte d'Azur. The hills inland from the coast are the *arrière-pays* – and this is where 'Provence' begins its wide sweep across the south of France.

In spite of the new fashion for summer sunbathing before the Second World War, most visitors still went to their Riviera villas for several months in the winter season. These were holiday homes, often rented out to others. But for some the south of France became their only home and for them it was not the same.

Those few expatriates who made their permanent homes among the thyme-scented terraces and olive groves of the hills rather than the bougainvillea and citrus fruits of the coast below, grew to understand and enjoy the land and its people to a far greater extent than did those who seldom ventured into the mountains. But the coastal towns, for those who had transport, were sometimes visited and it was towards lively and elegant Cannes, rather than Antibes or faraway Nice, that Elisabeth, Peggy and their friends gravitated to shop, visit a doctor or enjoy a meal in a good restaurant.

But this is not only the story of two expatriate women who were drawn to Provence in the first part of the twentieth century. It is also about the friends they gathered around them on their hillside, the houses they all lived in and the fate of those whose lives touched theirs. It is a book of portraits of people who lived through a particularly tense period of history. The Second World War would affect them all profoundly, first with the threat of occupation, then the fall of the south of France to the Vichy regime and finally the Italian and German Occupation. And, at the end of the tunnel, in an event that military historians seem to have taken rather lightly, there was bravery and drama in the liberation of the south of France by the Americans, the Free French and the southern Resistance fighting side by side.

As well as researching in archives and médiathèques in England, Paris and the south of France I have worked indirectly with universities and archives in the United States while researching this book. I have been lucky, many of Peggy's letters were discovered in sundry places, and in the underground muniments room of a great house lay a biographer's dream – files full of information concerning the two women and their families, including important correspondence written by Elisabeth. Peggy's family were immensely supportive, from the moment they received my first tentative letter. Another letter, to America, led Elisabeth's great niece who, although she knew little of Elisabeth's life, generously to send family albums, documents and correspondence that were of great value. I spent several happy hours in a small orchard in the south-east of England reading letters found in trunks in a Sussex barn, which had been written between members of the family Elisabeth had left far behind. Contacts and friendships that have sprung from writing this book have been a wonderful and unexpected bonus.

Our own home in the hills of Provence was in a neighbouring village to Peggy and Elisabeth's Opio and, by coincidence, our home in Sussex is now in the next village to where Peggy spent the war years at Many Waters. But when I think of Elisabeth and Peggy, it is always on their quiet hillside, where so much happened and which the local people called La Colline des Anglais.

# Chapter One

## An American in Provence

The waterfall sings: 'I find my song when I find my freedom'. Rabindranath Tagore

A citation of November 1919 reads: 'To Miss Starr (Elisabeth Parrish) the *Médaille de la Reconnaissance Française* in Silver. Voluntary nurse and member of the French War Emergency Fund. Head of Reconstruction of the Civilian Section of the Somme region. She showed proof of devotion and unflagging zeal.' The medal, which is awarded to foreigners in recognition of services to France, hangs from a sand-coloured ribbon with blue stripes. On one side is a rather craggy depiction of 'Marianne', the symbol of the Republic, and on the other a sprig of oak leaves. It would seal Elisabeth's bond with her adopted country. It was decisive, for it proved that here in France, her qualities had been recognised.

After four years spent on the edge of the battlefields of the Great War her beauty was beginning to fade. At thirty-one, constant exertion and years of wartime rations had caused her to lose weight, fined down her face and made her large dark eyes seem even larger. Her slender body was weary, but she still moved with grace and her walk was swift, covering the ground with long strides. Her 'soft, slow voice' with its Transatlantic accent, was attractive. Above all, she was enigmatic, which trait found its own admirers.

She had decided that the village of Opio, in the Alpes Maritimes, would become her home. East of the perfume town of Grasse and 17 kilometres above Cannes and Antibes, the village was, by any standards, very simple. The Castello, the ancient, stone-built house she chose, was tucked under the lee of a hill, overlooking one of the loveliest views in the south of France and surrounded by 8 hectares (about 20 acres) of land, laid down to grazing, olives and vines.

It was a Provençal winter when she signed the deeds in November 1921. When it rained the countryside became monochrome and the dusk fell in a grey-green mist. The air was damp and smelt of pines, and the leaves of the olive trees on the hillsides flickered with delicate silver flashes in the breeze of a dying light. Hilltop towns and villages gave themselves up to the night as oil lamps were lit one by one in the tall, narrow houses, while above them the mountain ranges faded from grey to black. As the night drew in the thick walls and tiled floors of old buildings were often chillingly cold and dank, and then it was time to burn brushwood and seasoned olive logs in the stone fireplaces. Elisabeth was content then to be the only foreigner in the village (the Italian immigrants were scarcely foreign) but that was something she would gradually change.

Far below, on the glittering coast, lay the post-war reawakening of the Riviera. The life down there did not tempt her. Generally, at that time, the very rich stayed on the coast and those of slimmer means went to the hills. Elisabeth was comfortably off rather than rich and the countryside and its animals were what she needed. So it was possibly the rustic simplicity of the small village with its promise of peace, coupled with the rather haunting atmosphere of the Castello, that attracted. She intended the old, dim house to become a sanctuary for the rest of her days. She did not

intend to return to America. It was all a very long way from Philadelphia.

Elisabeth Parrish Starr was born on 29 April 1889 at 1504 Walnut Avenue, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She had been christened Elizabeth with a *z* but, as one of her gestures of defiance to her family, she would change the *z* to *s* in the French fashion, and that was the spelling she would always use. She was born, as the youngest child, into a secure and accepted family in the right kind of house, in a sought-after street, in a city where social standing and family achievement were of immense importance. Perhaps she would have been more extrovert and less enigmatic in temperament if she had been better loved as a child, but this is idle speculation, as is trying to understand the depth of the problems in the Starr household that would create the rift to come.

Elisabeth's father, Louis, was the son of Isaac Starr, a banker. His mother was a French woman, Lydia Ducoing, whose family, originally from Bordeaux, had fled the island of Santo Domingo (now Haiti) during the slave uprising of 1791. The Starrs were descended from an earlier Isaac Starr, an English Quaker, who emigrated from England and settled in Delaware in 1710. At forty, Louis Starr was one of Philadelphia's most successful doctors. One of the first to establish paediatrics as a branch of medicine in its own right, he would become internationally acclaimed in his field.

The family of Mary Parrish, Elisabeth's pretty, spirited mother, was well-to-do and active in the Society of Friends as well as many charitable causes including education, concern for the poor and the abolition of slavery. Mary's Quaker pedigree was faultless. Her grandparents owned the houses and lands of Oxmead Farm, across the Delaware River in New Jersey, and so combined wealth with a highly developed social conscience. Dr Joseph Parrish, Elisabeth's great-grandfather, had kept one of the safe houses on the 'Underground Railroad' at his home at Mulberry Street in Philadelphia, helping slaves to escape from the South. This compassionate action, along with others of a similar nature, ensured the Parrish family became known for its high moral standing. Mary's uncle, Professor Edward Parrish, a pharmacist, invented Parrish's Food, whose ruby-red bottles gleamed in chemists windows in the United States and Europe for several generations.

William, Mary's father, a handsome man 'of generous impulses' did not go to college as did his clever brothers (all doctors or pharmacists) but became involved in property development, particularly the exclusive Riverton area of country homes on the New Jersey side of the Delaware River. The enterprise was eventually a success, but William did not live long enough to profit from it or enjoy the attractive house he had built for his family on the river bank. He died in 1863 at the age of forty-eight leaving his widow, his daughter Mary and her brothers Dillwyn and Alfred without the fortune that had been hoped for. The three children would have to make their own way in the world with more difficulty than many of their peers. They would all, during the course of their lives, leave America and make their homes in England and France.

A studio photograph, taken perhaps for Mary's engagement, shows an attractive young woman with a china-doll complexion and a fan held lightly against her cheek. She wears a flounced and pleated dress of velvet and taffeta, with deep collar and cuffs of thick white lace. The photographer has allowed himself a breath of pink colouring on her cheekbones. She is unlike her future children, who would inherit her husband's dark, Latin looks.

It was in no way extraordinary that Mary Parrish and Louis Starr should meet, as both families were involved in the medical circles of the city and he was probably a good catch for a girl without a large dowry. Louis, as well as having a successful medical practice and academic work, became the author of respected medical books. One of his publications, *The Hygiene of the Nursery*, contains much common-sense advice on the care of young children, although such recommendations as, 'Every well-regulated house should be provided with two nurseries, one for occupation by day, the other by night,' and 'The third floor of a house being a better elevation for a day nursery, as such rooms are remote from the ordinary domestic disturbances', shows this was not a book intended for those of slender means. Mary Parrish could have done far worse.

In September 1882 the couple went to England, where Mary's two brothers, Alfred and Dillwyn Parrish, now had active business interests. Here they were married, not in a Quaker Meeting House, but in the Parish Church of Bickley in Kent. A marriage in England possibly avoided a large and costly Philadelphian wedding. Louis was thirty-three and Mary, at twenty-seven, a rather mature bride for her generation. The profession of each of their fathers is entered on their marriage certificate simply as 'Gentleman'.

For the socially ambitious, as Mary was, the main route to the high tables of the great families of Philadelphia and on to the East Coast was to discard the Quaker mantle and become Episcopalian, the American branch of the Anglican church. In his book *Philadelphia Gentlemen*, a study of the social history of Philadelphia, Digby Baltzell writes that such a conversion was typical of those hoping to move into the indigenous aristocratic elite of the city at the end of the nineteenth century. These leading families, known as 'Proper Philadelphians', were almost exclusively Anglican or Episcopalian, 'the congregation of wealth, fashion and position', although their own origins may well have been Quaker. The city was imbued with an 'edgy or complacent class consciousness, depending on where your family stood in the social structure of the town'. Mary felt her rightful place was among the Proper Philadelphians, but the Starr family were uneasy about her aspirations, foresaw problems and were later to accuse her of being their cause.

Three children were born to the Starrs: Louis junior; Dillwyn (after his Parrish uncle) and the youngest, Elisabeth. The family home was in Rittenhouse Square, the most fashionable residential section of the city and the home of Philadelphia's 'Victorian aristocracy'. From the very first, Mary, kittenish, rather superficial and with a touch of eccentricity that would deepen as she grew older, concentrated her love and ambitions on her two sons. Her letters show she seemed to have had little interest in her only daughter and to have singled her out for indifference. It would be a long time before Elisabeth's quiet charm and dark beauty would attract admiration and love. But not, it seems, from her mother. There is a photograph of Elisabeth as a teenager, perhaps fifteen years old. She is attractive, and wears a soft hat at a rather rakish angle, perched on dark curls held back by a Gibson Girl bow. She stares straight into the camera, arms folded across her chest, perhaps to hide her hands which, like her feet, were very long. Her look is determined rather than defiant. She seems to be a girl who knows her own mind.

While the children were growing up, Louis Starr continued to establish his reputation as a medical academic and successful doctor. He needed to do so, for Mary had determined that her two sons should follow in the

footsteps of other sons of Proper Philadelphians and go to the best East Coast schools and colleges. Her choice was Groton School, founded by the illustrious Endicott Peabody, loosely related to the family on Mary's side, and then Harvard. Thus a way of life was established for the couple that would carry with it the anxiety of constant money worries. Unfortunately the scholastic achievements of the Starr boys did not live up to Mary's expectations. By 1902 it was clear that neither was academic and she was forced to admit 'certainly our boys do not shine in the field of learning'. But she refused to be deflected from the course she had mapped out for them, and declared: 'Harvard must be tried for at any price.' By dint of intense private tutoring for the entrance exam, first Louis and then Dillwyn were squeezed into that most elite of colleges.

Elisabeth visited her brothers at Harvard. And there, at nineteen, petite, with upswept hair and her compelling dark eyes, she met Stewart Robinson, nephew of the President of the United States.

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