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THE OLD PORTRAITS

by Jef Fall

I first heard of the old portraits in 1975, early in my friendship with Margaret Fall Wright, my second cousin twice removed. She's the one I called Cud'n Margaret--a lady of great wit and warmth and love of family.

Soon after I began tracing the descendants of my great-great-great grandfather, James Slater Fall, a Nashville scholar named William Waller put me on to her. "There's some kin of yours still in town," he said. "You should talk to Miz Wright."

I called her one Sunday afternoon in February 1975. Is there such a thing as love at first sound? I hadn't been talking with her five minutes when I knew I'd found someone special. She was then almost 88, and it seems to me a miracle to have been granted a friendship with her that lasted over 10 years.

Miz Wright's thoughts were often quirky and her selection of words a joy. At one point during my first visit to her apartment, we were getting ready to go out to dinner with our mutual cousin, Nell Fall Bandy. "Nell," Cud'n Margaret said, stretching out the name with an upward inflection, "Will you participate in the bathroom?"

In addition to her unusual thoughts and vocabulary, Cud'n M's speech was made unique by her habit of emphasizing certain syllables. She would pick a syllable in a word she wanted to stress and hold that syllable for a longer time than that

allotted to all the other syllables in the sentence put together. Although she normally changed the pitch of her voice with each syllable, the syllables given extra emphasis would jump up a minimum of an octave, then fall away like a spent firework.

Cud'n M. told me later that on that first day her son Douglas had been there on behalf of all the Nashville cousins, to be sure I wasn't some sharp out on the prowl. She reported that while they were waiting for me, she'd suddenly turned to Miz Bandy. "Nell," she'd said with that same upward sweep, "SupPOsin' he has a BEEEEARD?"

Since Nell Bandy and I descended from John T. S. Fall, the youngest of James Slater Fall's eleven children, Nell was closer kin to me than anyone else I met that year, all of whom descended from Alexander, the second youngest. Nell's big and expressive eyes intrigued me, because they seemed so familiar. Suddenly I had it--she reminded me of my father's sister, Nell's second cousin. The resemblance grew on me to such an extent that I began to feel I was having the opportunity to see what my aunt might have been like had she lived past early middle age.

It was Miz Bandy, by the way, who taught me the "Cud'n Margaret" form of address. She would boom it out to get the attention of Cud'n M., who was somewhat hard of hearing.

But I digress. Between my call to Cud'n Margaret in February and my visit in July, she and I exchanged several long letters, in one of which she said something like, "If you think I'm old, consider my first cousin Julia Malone Trabue (Truh-BEW)." I was bowled over. Here was someone still living who

appeared on my grandfather's Fall genealogy from the 1890's. She had just turned 101 and might well remember some of the Falls in the family that emigrated from England in 1817.

Cousin Julia and Cud'n Margaret were stepsisters as well as first cousins, because Julia's father, Judge Thomas Malone, had married Margaret's mother after the deaths of Margaret's father and Julia's mother. The two cousins/sisters had at first been close, but later were granted lives long enough to encompass not speaking to each other for over 50 years due to a falling out over Cud'n Margaret's marriage. The Malones thought the wedding too fancy for so soon after Judge Malone's death. "And it WAAAAS!" Cud'n Margaret once said to me, with the hindsight of 70 years. By 1975 the two had been friendly again for almost two decades.

When plans for my trip were being made, Cud'n Margaret wrote that Julia had hanging in her foyer large Joshua Reynolds portraits of James Slater Fall's parents, Jonathan and Elizabeth Slater Fall, "in the outfits they wore when presented at Court." Maybe she could wangle an invitation for me to see them, even if Julia were not up to greeting a Yankee cousin.

When I got to Nashville, Cousin Julia did want to meet me, and on the appointed day a party of four set out for the Trabue home. In addition to the dinner trio from the first night we had as chauffeur, Edna-Murray-Wade-Buck's-wife. Each time her name first came up in a conversation, it was said like that, as if it were a single 7-syllable word, and she was never called anything less than "Edna-Murray" even to her face, whose engaging grin,

incidentally, was made the more so by a large space between her front teeth. "Buck" was Cousin Alexander Fall Wade.

I had vaguely wondered that someone would hang paintings in a foyer, but then I was used to New York foyers. When I saw the house, however, I was glad I'd said nothing to reveal my naivete, for Cousin Julia had a foyer considerably larger than my two-room apartment. In the middle of it, in a wheelchair, sat Cousin Julia herself. A nurse stood nearby.

Greetings exchanged, I examined the many large ancestral portraits in the room, then sat on a sofa near Cousin Julia. I soon found out she was almost totally deaf and almost totally blind, with only a little peripheral vision; she would turn away when she wanted to look at me. As she also had to turn away to present her good ear, I did not see too much of her face straight on, but remember being impressed at how 95-year-old teeth could almost completely take on the aspect of amber.

The other three sat on a settee placed ten feet behind Cousin Julia, who blocked my view of all but Edna Murray. Although they chatted among themselves, I felt each also had an ear on our conversation--no hard task, considering my bellowed questions and Cousin Julia's responses, which rolled out very slowly in an astounding baritono profundo.

I started by asking about her grandaunts and uncles, the Falls who first came to Kentucky and Tennessee. She disappointed me by remembering none of them but Charlotte Fall Fanning, "a little woman in old-fashioned clothes." Of my great-great-grandfather, the Nashville poor relation, Julia knew nothing.

Her own grandfather had died before she was born--in 1866 of a burst appendix.

Having struck out there, I asked if she had met her mother's first cousin, Bettie Fall Taylor of Frankfort, Kentucky. She remembered her perfectly--a delightful person.

At that time I had not yet tracked down most of the next generation, so with great hopes I shouted, "Did you know Bettie's two sons?"

"Very well."

"What happened to them?"

"I don't know. They got married and disappeared."

She joined in my laughter, which was followed by a pause while I scribbled in my notebook. Cousin Julia looked toward the door.

"I'm making notes," I said.

"I can tell," said Cousin Julia, and it was then I perceived she had to turn away to see.

One of William Waller's books contained a reference to Julia's prowess at golf, so I asked about her trophies. She responded she'd been very sorry to give up golf and tennis, and that her passion now was the St. Louis Cardinals, who she thought had a good chance at the pennant.

At this point I observed the other cousins peering around Cousin Julia to get a look at me, and realized I was sitting almost transfixed, with a rapt smile on my face.

I asked Cousin J. about her own descendants, of whom there turned out to be three generations' worth, even though she had

not married till the age of 35. Among the many great-grandchildren was a set of twins about a year old. "They walk," she said, "but not fast. When they want to get anywhere, they crawl."

"Soon you'll have great-great grandchildren."

"I shouldn't be surprised," she said--then added, "I'm not surprised by much of anything."

She told me about a grandchild who was obviously a favorite. "He works at the...at the...Talking is awkward. Just as I go to use a word it slips away. I have to use circumlocution."

"What's the circumlocution in this case?"

"Charles Lindbergh's plane."

"The Spirit of St. Louis?"

"Where it is."

"The Smithsonian Institution?"

"That's the word!"

We had another laugh at her triumph, which made me think it a good time to bring our conversation to a close. That plus Cud'n Margaret's having just sidled up, or come as close to sidling as it's possible to do using a cane. She surprised me with something slangy out of the corner of her mouth like, "Better wrap it up."

As we made our good-byes, Cousin Julia invited us to her 105th birthday party in 1979. The nurse showed us to the door, where she commented at some length on her patient's health and diet. More than once I looked back at Cousin Julia in her wheelchair, barely able to see and hear and at the nurse's mercy

even to so much as turn the chair in another direction. All atrophying outside and inside a still lively mind and a young spirit. How odd.

What impressed me most was that for as long as we stood there she sat stone still. There was no fidgeting, and I never saw one change in her expression, which seemed to reflect a bottomless reservoir of acceptance. She struck me as a living sculpture--perhaps by Saint Gaudens, if he had carved a piece called Patience as a companion to his Grief.

After a time, I couldn't resist intruding on her once more and walked back to give her arm another pat. The way her face lighted up when she realized I had approached was one of the more beautiful sights I have been privileged to witness.

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As best I can make out from scraps of information gathered from hearsay and old documents, the original paintings of Jonathan and Elizabeth Fall were not brought to America in 1817, but came over in 1851, when Philip, the eldest brother, made a return visit to England. And the pictures I'd seen at Cousin Julia's were not the originals! According to her, her grandfather Alexander had taken the originals from Nashville to Philadelphia to have copies made by a man named Cooper. After the original portraits were copied, they migrated somehow to the branch of the family founded by William Fennings Fall, the second brother, and ended up in the possession of his granddaughter, who lost them to a fire early in this century.

I had been skeptical almost from the first about Sir Joshua

Reynolds's place in the history of the paintings. In catalogs of his work I could find no reference to sittings by any Falls-- neither a Jonathan nor an Elizabeth, much less a Lord or Lady Fall, as some thought the couple had been styled.

Another factor feeding my doubts came by way of Nell Bandy's dining room. During a tour there, I was brought up short by some strange photographs of portraits of this same pair. There was Jonathan's coat, certainly, and the furbelows and frills of Elizabeth's outfit were unmistakable, but the paintings in these photographs were not nearly so life-like and well-crafted as the ones gracing Cousin Julia's foyer.

My theory is that Nell Bandy's photos were of the original portraits, and that Cooper's draftsmanship skills in copying had improved upon the originals, which were not by Reynolds at all but by the "drapery painter" Peter Toms, a second cousin to Elizabeth Slater Fall. Toms, a founding member of the Royal Academy, assisted Reynolds for many years--while Sir Joshua worked on the faces, he painted the hands and clothing.

Peter Toms received lavish praise for his "draperies," but his own portraits found little favor. Human nature being what it is, I believe over time the names of Reynolds and Toms had stopped being linked and Toms's name had "dropped out of the picture."

I shared this supposition only gingerly with Cud'n Margaret, who had long been a proponent of the paintings' high connections, both as to subject matter and creation. Perhaps I should not have been so careful, for I also knew she was a realist. She had

accepted with grace the hideous intelligence I'd recently unearthed in London: Far from being Lord Fall, Jonathan had been an undertaker.

Actually, he was a member of the Worshipful Company of Upholders, a group of skilled craftsmen whose work encompassed the modern senses of both upholstering and undertaking. My understanding is that upholders functioned most nearly as a combination of furniture makers and interior decorators today, but with the sideline of providing coffins and the carts to transport them. It's easy to see the connection--an upholsterer already had the appropriate woodworking skills and capability to move large objects. No conflict of interest, either, as there is today in some small towns in the U. S., where the local undertaker also provides ambulance services.

Cud'n Margaret so readily accepted my theory that the paintings were not by Reynolds that I began to wonder if it isn't the ability to come to grips with disappointments big and small that gets one through to a cheerful old age. "Why, in another fifteen years," I thought, "Cud'n Margaret will reach the state of perfect acceptance I saw in Julia Trabue."

We did not get to Cousin Julia's 105th birthday party. She died late in 1976 at the age of 102--without seeing another pennant go to St. Louis. I understand her house has been sold to developers, but don't know what became of the portraits.