

# **CARYLL HOUSELANDER**

**A BIOGRAPHY**

**Mary Frances Coady**

ORBIS  BOOKS  
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# A Rocking-Horse Beginning (1901–1917)



*The nearest one can get to that backward glance from eternity on this earth is, I suppose, to look back across the years to one's childhood.*

—Born Catholics

She looked like a medieval saint—or perhaps a medieval tumbler—who had stepped out of a stained-glass window onto the ancient streets of London. So said a friend about the artist and writer Caryl Houselander, who was born in 1901 and died in 1954.<sup>1</sup> Her hair was carrot-colored, cut irregularly in adult years, with a fringe that hung down to her eyebrows. It clashed with the purple smock she donned in her studio. She wore a white substance on her face in adulthood—perhaps a form of cosmetic powder, although another friend said she looked as if she had dipped her face in a bag of flour. As a result, she drew stares. Her round, dark-rimmed glasses sat at a slight angle on her face, giving an off-center look to a small-framed body. Her strange appearance provided the cover for a complex woman who, according to her publisher, had a touch of genius.

Over the course of only fourteen years she wrote books that formed the spiritual reading of choice for monasteries, convents,

rectories, and ordinary Catholic households. During those fourteen years Caryll Houselander became the best-selling author for her publisher, Sheed & Ward. Her most popular book, *The Reed of God*, remains a classic. The years immediately preceding the Second Vatican Council were an unlikely period for an unknown English woman of early middle age to become a best-selling Catholic author. Her writing was as clear and sharp and penetrating as that of a medieval mystic, and in fact it has been compared with that of the medieval anchoress Julian of Norwich. It is, perhaps, not a coincidence that the best of it appeared during the Second World War, amid the screech of air-raid sirens and bombed-out devastation, just as Julian's *Revelations of Divine Love* was written during the fourteenth century's Black Death.



Two months before her death, Caryll wrote to her publisher expressing guilt for the tardiness and incompleteness of the autobiography she had been working on. A “real autobiography,” she wrote, “would be impossible during the lifetime of my father and my sister”<sup>2</sup>—her mother having died shortly before. Even so, when the short memoir, titled *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*, was finally published in the United States, the husband of Caryll's older sister, Ruth, objected: he had known Caryll for the last thirty years of her life, and he said that she tended to fantasize. She could not be counted on to tell things as they actually were. In the words of a friend, one difficulty with Caryll was the way she reported facts: “with her they hadn't gone through the formality of taking place.”<sup>3</sup>

And so—is it fact or fantasy that Caryll came into the world looking like “a tiny red fish”<sup>4</sup> that was not expected to survive, as she claims in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*? Or that her mother's brother, a gynecologist who had attended the birth, importuned a Protestant clergyman to baptize the infant over a salad bowl? Or that her mother and uncle, when asked the newborn's name, fell into a fit of giggles at the idea that the tiny fish-like thing should

be given a name? Or that the baptism was hastily concluded, the infant's names improvised: Frances after her attending uncle and Caryll, after a sailing yacht her mother had been on?

In any event, Frances Caryll Houselander's birth was duly registered as having taken place on September 29, 1901, in the village of Batheaston, near the Roman city of Bath. Caryll's mother, Gertrude Provis, had married Willmott Houselander in Bath in 1898, and Ruth had been born a year later. Gertrude, always known as Gert, came from a well-established merchant and banking family. One relative, Samuel Butler Provis, a barrister, would eventually be knighted by King Edward VII for his work in supervising government-funded charities. Her father, Wilton, became a physician, and her mother, Sarah Easton, had been born in New York City (but about whom little else is known).

Gert, twenty-seven years old at the time of Caryll's birth, was known to be sporty and vivacious, and had grown up in Somerset with a love of outdoor activities, having a special passion for horses. By the time of her wedding, tennis had replaced horses as her main sporting interest. A photograph from 1898 shows her wearing a late Victorian ladies' tennis costume: a generous floor-length skirt and jacket with leg-of-mutton sleeves and bow tie. A narrow-brimmed hat sits no-nonsense style on the top of her head. She holds up the tennis racket: it is a formal pose, and yet the young woman seems ready to give a strong back hand to any ball coming at her. The Victorian age is drawing to a close, a new century is near dawn, the women's suffragette movement is slowly gaining ground, and Gert bears the look of a woman ready to move with the times. She would, in fact, become one of the top female tennis players in England, losing at Wimbledon (in the 1903 quarterfinals) to the champion Dorothea Douglass.

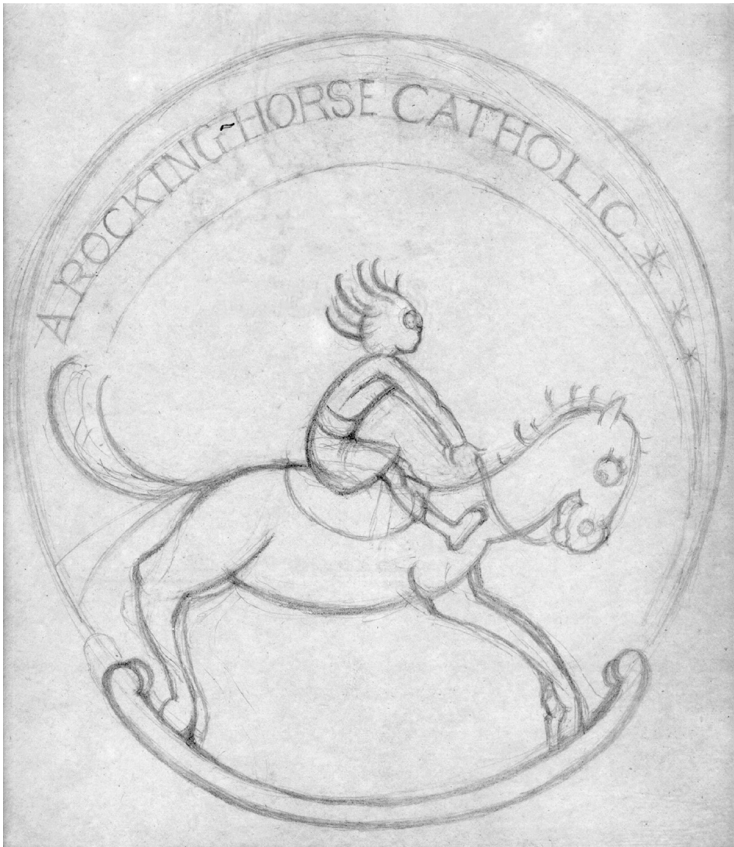
In all likelihood, Gert met Willmott Houselander at a sporting event. He was known to be a huntsman, and had run some of the first point-to-point races in England. It may be that their shared love of the outdoors drew Gert and Willmott together. Six years older than his wife, Willmott grew up in London and followed

his father into the banking business, eventually becoming the manager at Wilts & Dorset Bank in Bath. By the time Caryll was born, the family was living in Batheaston, in a substantial house called Fern Cottage. They employed a nursemaid and a cook. The family was vaguely Protestant, but Caryll's assertion in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*, that her parents "did not believe in or practice any definite religion at all; neither, I think, did they attach the least importance to any"<sup>5</sup> is probably correct.

From the outset, Caryll was called "Baby," and this was the name her family would call her for the rest of her life, her nieces eventually calling her "Auntie Baby." Much later, Ruth's recollection was that, being only two years apart in age, the two sisters "played together quite naturally, she invariably taking the lead because she was the more imaginative."<sup>6</sup> The rocking-horse image of the book's title (as Caryll explained at the outset of the book, she was not a "cradle" Catholic) was taken from a real rocking-horse that she and Ruth shared, a strawberry roan. "His tail came out," Ruth remembered, "and Baby and I were always filling him with things."<sup>7</sup>

The drawing that Caryll made shortly before her death to accompany *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* conjures up a different memory. The drawing is a circle within which a child sits on a rocking horse. The rockers form the bottom of the circle and thus give the drawing the impression of movement. The horse has a wide-eyed demented grin, and a sparse mane consists of a few tufts of hair. The child on its back wears a skirt. Her back is curved forward and her arms, holding onto the reins, are rigid. Her hair flies back from her head. The words of the book's title, A ROCKING-HORSE CATHOLIC, form the circle's rounded top. The impression is of a loop, a circle of terror. The horse is trapped on its runner, the child trapped on the horse, and the whole cycle has no end. (For the book's release after Caryll's death, the unsettling image was greatly tamed when it was replaced by an illustration using the same motif of a rocking horse and child inside a circle.)

In the book's final published version Caryll's description of her early childhood is a contrast to the terror-driven rocking-horse



*Caryll's drawing of herself as a "Rocking-Horse Catholic." Courtesy Estae of Margot King.*

drawing. In fact, her memory in the book takes her to a lost Eden, replete with kindly people, where her nursemaid, Rose Francis, and her grandfather's groomsman, Bill Reynolds, take center stage. When she first learns of God, Caryll's imagination has God looking exactly like Bill Reynolds. Her picture of heaven is her father's rose garden, which she describes lovingly as "something enchanted and mysterious and unimaginatively beautiful."<sup>8</sup> It is a walled garden, and one enters it through a low wooden door. "When, years later, I heard of the Kingdom of Heaven," she writes, "I imagined one

must enter it, if at all, by just such a door, a door just high enough for a child to go through, and a man if he bowed low or went in on his knees, a very low narrow door . . .” and then for a moment she is snapped back into adulthood: she uses the central Christian image that permeates her published work (as if in mid-sentence she reminds herself that there is no heaven without suffering)—“made from the wood of the Cross.”<sup>9</sup>

By now it was the Edwardian age, the elderly Queen having died eight months before Caryll’s birth and succeeded by her son, Edward VII, but for young children nothing had changed. Caryll’s parents, as was the custom where servants were employed, seemed almost nonexistent in her life, and she takes this fact for granted. Not only did she have warm memories of being lovingly cared for, but the memories were sprinkled with an adult’s insightful sense of humor (Rose Francis equated Christian virtue with good manners, and “good manners” included not swinging on the garden gate while waiting for the postman, when—as Caryll later learned—Rose wanted the postman’s attention to herself.)

Caryll’s memory of an idyllic world continues when the family travels to the seaside town of Margate, where Ruth was taken to a sanatorium, having been stricken with tuberculosis. It is not clear how long this trip lasted, but during the sojourn, Caryll and her nurse stayed in the home of her nurse’s sister, who had a daughter of about Caryll’s age. The child’s name was Connie. Caryll’s remembered experience of Connie, whom she never saw again after this visit, was similar to her memory of her father’s rose garden, only in this case Eden contained a human being. She sets the stage in an image of warmth and love: she and Connie play on the floor in front of a glowing kitchen fireplace, at the feet of Rose Francis and her sister, who sit knitting, their feet in slippers. In this scene, the epiphany is “Connie herself, her fluff of canary hair, her sky-blue dress, her white boots, her odd staggering yet rhythmic gait, and the sound of the spoon rattling in her tin cup . . . and the odd piercing joy of my first conscious awareness of what was, to me at all events, the sheer loveliness of another human being.”<sup>10</sup>

In 1905 the family moved to Brighton, on the south coast of England, where Willmott became the manager of the City & Midland Bank. They settled in a house in Hove, a town close to Brighton. Around this time, the nursemaid left the family, and she was replaced by a succession of governesses, some more successful than others. Ruth would remember a game that Caryll liked to play against one of the governesses whom she particularly disliked. The game was called “dead on the stairs,” and in it Caryll spread-eagled herself on the steps, pretending to be dead. The governess told her it was wicked to pretend to be dead and that as a punishment there would be no afternoon walk (which Caryll did not want anyway).<sup>11</sup>

Gert’s brother was practicing medicine in Brighton at the time, and it was likely through him that the Houselanders met the physician who would become their family doctor. His name was Dr. Frederick Paley. Dr. Paley was the son of Frederick Apthorp Paley, a classics scholar at St. John’s College, Cambridge, who under the influence of John Henry (later Cardinal) Newman had converted to Catholicism and as a result had lost his Cambridge position. His son, the medical Dr. Paley, had been educated at the Oratory School founded by Newman in Edgbaston, near Birmingham, and had received his medical degree at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London. He and his wife, Maud, had three children (twelve-year-old Molly, nine-year-old Frederick Raymond, and six-year-old Graham), whom the Houselander daughters played with. The sacrifice of Dr. Paley’s father in giving up an illustrious career in order to become a Catholic had probably left a strong mark on Dr. Paley’s own character and led to Caryll’s recollection of him as a man of charity and humility who had dedicated his life and his medical practice to the service of the poor.

There was one other person from the Houselanders’ Brighton period who would figure prominently in Caryll’s life. This was the mysterious figure of George Spencer Bower, a London barrister, who became known to Caryll and Ruth as “Smoky.” (His nickname would also be variously spelled “Smokey” and “Smokie.”) Smoky, born in 1854, had grown up in a prosperous family in St. Neot’s,



in Cambridgeshire, and thus by the time he came into Caryll's life he would have been in his early fifties. He had been educated at Winchester College in Hampshire and graduated from New College, Cambridge with first class honors. A scholar of classical literature, he was called to the bar in 1880 and appointed Queen's Counsel in 1903. Smoky had a range of interests in literature and the theater. His first book was a survey called *A Study of the Prologue and Epilogue in English Literature from Shakespeare to Dryden*, and he would go on to write textbooks on several branches of the law. In 1885 he had married Minnie Blanche, the daughter of an actor and theater owner, Charles Culverwell, who had taken the stage name of "Charles Wyndham" and had become one of the best-known theater actors of the day. Smoky enjoyed the company of actors and attended theatrical productions frequently. He and his wife were childless.

It is not known how the Houselanders became friends with Smoky. He and his wife lived in the St. John's Wood district of London, near Regent's Park, and according to Caryll, he spent holiday times living in the Houselander home in Brighton. It seems an odd arrangement, and in her description of the years when Smoky figured in the family's life, she omits any mention of his wife. Nor is it known how exactly he fit into the regular family life of the Houselanders. Caryll's memories of Smoky revert in many ways to the world of idylls—this time, Smoky is the godlike father figure who introduces her to the outside world in the form of classical literature, art, the theater, and, if she is to be believed, Catholicism. Smoky was an agnostic, she tells us, but he was well-versed in church history and Catholic teaching, and regarded the Catholic Church as the repository of all that was beautiful in art and literature. He believed that the Catholic faith was the true one and that if it had not been for the Catholic belief in the Virgin Birth, he would have been baptized. His legal mind was not able to wrap itself around this teaching, and it became such a sticking point for him that he was to remain an agnostic for the rest of his life.

Caryll would correspond with Smoky until the end of his life (she destroyed letters from all her correspondents, and so we have

only her side of the few letters to Smoky that have survived). Her first letter to him, perhaps written after Smoky's first visit to Brighton, when he had returned to London, is undated, but is in the hand of a child who is still learning to write:

My darling Smokey, I do hope you will soon be well because we want you to come down for Christmas because I want to marry you. Our party is on the 27th and Father Christmas is coming himself this time, so you must be here to see him. These are love XX  
Your loving Baby<sup>12</sup>

There is no explanation for the next important thing that happened to Caryll and Ruth—was it Smoky's kindly agnostic influence? Or the Christian example of the Paley family? Gert, the lackluster Protestant, decided that her two daughters should be baptized as Catholics. Ruth was nine years of age and Caryll, three months shy of her seventh birthday. The conditional baptism took place at Sacred Heart Church in Hove on July 16, 1908. Caryll would remember the date for the rest of her life—it was the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel—and that, as a small child, she had to stand on a chair so that the baptismal water could be poured over her head. After the baptismal event, life seems to have gone on much as before. Still having two Protestant parents, Caryll would take another few years for her Catholic identity to assert itself. In the meantime, another favorite game that she and Ruth liked to play was “church,” which they held in the lavatory, pulling the chain of the toilet as the ringing of the bell.

In 1910 Willmott was transferred to the City & Midland Bank in Bristol, and the family settled in the suburb of Clifton. Soon afterward, on July 12, 1910, Gert was conditionally baptized by Father Robert Stevenson at St. Mary-on-the-Quay Church. At the time, this parish church was served by Jesuit priests. Four months after Gert's reception into the Catholic Church, a Jesuit by the name of George Carolan arrived at St. Mary's. In *A Rocking-Horse*

*Catholic*, Caryll makes the curious statement: “About this time priests started to frequent our house, where, in spite of his continual unbelief in Catholicism, my father entertained them lavishly.”<sup>13</sup>

No doubt these priests included the Jesuit Father Carolan, a native of County Cork in Ireland, who had been ordained a priest for twelve years and had spent his priestly career in teaching and parish work up and down England. At the time of his arrival at St. Mary’s parish in Bristol, he was forty-four years old. Father Carolan would figure strongly in Caryll’s life over the next few years.

For unknown reasons, whether under the influence of Father Carolan or another priest, or to make an impression on the priests, or perhaps seized by a fit of newfound fervor, Gert, according to Caryll, entered her daughters’ lives with a pietistic vengeance. There is no reason to disbelieve Caryll when she writes that her mother insisted that the two girls make little altars and decorate them with Catholic bric-a-brac: statues, candles, and vases of flowers. There was a set of long prayers (she does not mention the rosary, but this could possibly have been one of them) that Caryll and Ruth were made to recite before a particular priest—probably Father Carolan—whom Gert had become particularly fond of. When the adults were out of sight, was when Caryll, so she indicated, said her own private prayers (God “whom I did know to be everywhere, was also localised on my altar”<sup>14</sup>). The piety at home was matched by excessive church-going, at least in Caryll’s memory—Mass in their local parish, followed by a High Mass somewhere else on Sundays, and sometimes Benediction after that. Ruth would later claim that her mother had lovers during this time, and possibly Father Carolan was one of them, and the enforced piety was perhaps a means of deflecting neighbors’ criticisms. Vague rumors, however, persisted.<sup>15</sup> What the enforced piety did for Caryll was to turn her away from ostentation in prayer.

Around this time an occurrence took place in which Caryll fell ill with an all-consuming physical weakness accompanied by a high temperature and difficulty in breathing. The illness was made worse

by hallucinations of guilt and the feeling of a need for her to confess all sins, real and imagined. In *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* she gives the reason for the illness: a visit to a church one day when her father was at work and her mother and sister were away. The church was holding a mission retreat. The retreat master was a member of the Redemptorist Order, which was known at the time for so-called “hellfire and damnation” sermons that gave loud and graphic detail of the horrors of hell if sinners did not repent and seek immediate absolution in Confession. The illness, which Caryll later thought resulted from hysteria, remained undiagnosed, although some later thinking suggests that its origin may have been a physical one.<sup>16</sup>

In late 1912 came the thunderbolt news: Gert and Willmott decided to separate. Decades later Ruth recalled that she, at thirteen, was “much more involved” in the lead-up to their parents’ separation than eleven-year-old Caryll, possibly because Caryll, having recently recovered from her serious illness, was still somewhat fragile and kept removed from the discord. Ruth’s memory of the disintegrating family atmosphere at the time was: “The parents poured out their complaints of each other to me, vying for my sympathy.”<sup>17</sup> In *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* Caryll says that the separation came as a sudden blow, but in the unpublished memoir, “Ghosts and Memories,” a long series of poetic verses (which she would later call “rhythms”) tell a different story. The first several lines suggest the fragmentation inside the mind and spirit of the sensitive eleven-year-old child who is considered a baby and thus too young to understand. The verses have a desolate ring:

There was a whispering in the house—  
“for the sake of the children!”  
There was a whispering on the stairs,  
whispering in the chink of the door,  
whispering in the curtains,  
whispering in the cupboards;  
the house was whispering,

whispering like the flitter of mice . . .  
 “For the sake of the children,  
 for the children’s sake!”  
 whispering, whispering, whispering,  
 like the flitter of mice the whisper of lies. . . .<sup>18</sup>

The verses go on for several dozen lines. The two sisters never spoke to each other of their parents’ breakup or the new turn their lives were taking. Home as they had known it no longer existed. Their destination was now a convent boarding school. On January 13, 1913, they were put on a train to Birmingham, and from there to the nearby town of Olton. There they were admitted to the Convent of Our Lady of Compassion, known familiarly as the Olton Convent. It was run by nuns who had come from France in recent years, possibly to escape the anti-clerical laws in that country.

It is not known when Caryll’s eyes had begun to need correction, but by the time she arrived at the Olton Convent, she was wearing eyeglasses. Fellow boarders at the convent would remember Caryll’s distress during that period, her slight stature, her pallor, and her thin straight copper-colored hair, her main comfort being the teddy bear that she called “Roosy,” which she had received at the age of six when the family was on holiday in the seaside town of Bournemouth, in Dorset. (The stuffed bear would remain with her until her death.)

After her initial unhappiness, Caryll grew to love the Olton Convent. In describing it, she reverts to the idyllic language she used in recalling her early childhood. Everything was sparkling and full of sunshine in the convent—the look of dazzling sheets in the white dormitory, the kindness of the nuns, the smell of lemon and soap when she came close to one particular nun. In fact, the convent, like all Catholic boarding schools of the period, was run like a little monastery. Regularity governed each day: daily Mass, regular hours for schoolwork and for meals. Children sat at the same place for each meal and were required to keep their beds and desks tidy

at all times. There were periods of silence, and edifying readings took place at mealtimes. "Good manners" were taught, and every minute of the day was to be spent in some useful pursuit. Sewing and knitting were taught to the girls. After the chaos of home life, this regular discipline was what Caryll needed in order to thrive. The feast days of the Church were joyous occasions, with treats at mealtime and special privileges allowed. The convent became the Houselander girls' home, even during the holiday periods. As at a regular home, there were chores such as collecting eggs from the hens and pounding plums to make jam.

During her first months at the Olton Convent, and probably before, Caryll wrote poetic verses and accompanied them with thumbnail sketches. It was no doubt an important gratification to her, given her budding creative life, that she not only felt free to submit her written work and her drawings to the school paper, *The Oltonian*, but that these were accepted and printed. One offering from eleven-year-old Caryll shows an unusual sensibility and an already keen sense of humor, as well as a droll acknowledgment that she had no musical inclination:

### **The Music Pupil**

#### THE PIANO

I have tried at C, I've tried at A,  
But the right note I cannot play.  
I can't play a flat, I can't play a sharp,  
I'll give it up, and play the harp.

#### THE HARP

On the notes my fingers shake,  
The strings they always seem to break;  
The way I hold it is all wrong,  
I cannot play a single song.  
For me to play is quite a sin,  
I think I'll try the violin.

THE VIOLIN

Alas, alas, I've tried in vain,  
And I will not try again;  
I might as well cry for the moon  
As try to play a single tune.

MORAL—Before the great attempt the small,  
And so in time accomplish all.

Another poem, a nine-stanza ode to Roosy, appeared in the same issue of the school paper:

**Roosy (My Teddy Bear)**

1.

His height is just one foot,  
His eyes are black as soot,  
He used to have much hair  
But now he's nearly bare  
His temper is quite strange  
It always seems to change,  
But he's been a faithful friend  
To me from start to end. . . .<sup>19</sup>

During the early summer of 1914, the French nuns at the Olton Convent paid particular attention to the alarming reports of military escalation coming across the English Channel. Then, on August 3, came the news everyone was dreading: Britain declared war against Germany. At the Olton Convent, this was not an abstract reality happening to people far away. Many of the nuns spoke about their bitter experiences during the Franco-German war several decades earlier, and when news came in late September of the wanton destruction of parts of Rheims Cathedral in northern France by German shellfire, anti-German fervor was raised to fever pitch. At the same time, tales reached across the Channel of

atrocities committed in Belgium. Belgian refugee children began to arrive at the convent. Caryll's patriotic writing was encouraged, and it was a source of pride and accomplishment to her when a nun composed music for one of her verses.

Shortly after the appearance of reports that compared Germans to savage "Huns," Caryll, now aged thirteen, had the first of three unusual experiences which she wrote about in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*. She had no satisfactory descriptive word for these strange happenings except that she saw them with her *mind*, not with her eyes. In Caryll's brief account of the first experience, it had to do with the convent's lone German nun, who, in Caryll's written telling, remained nameless (her name was Sister Mary Benedicta). At the time of the Olton Convent, some orders of nuns were divided into two classes: "choir sisters" did the work requiring training and education, such as teaching; "lay sisters," often having little education, did housework and kitchen and laundry duties. In girls' boarding schools the lay sisters acted as servants. They often cleaned up after the children, took care of their clothing and even washed the children's dishes after meals. The nun in Caryll's account was a lay sister. She spoke English badly, and unlike the cultured French nuns who taught at the school, she did not, according to Caryll, excel in anything.<sup>20</sup>

On the day of Caryll's particular encounter with her, the nun was polishing the boarders' shoes in the boot room. As Caryll came closer to her, she saw tears running down the nun's cheeks. Too embarrassed to make eye contact, the girl looked down at the nun's rough, chapped hands and the child's shoe she was polishing. When she looked up, Caryll saw on the nun's head a crown of thorns. The vision—if that was what it was—lasted only a few seconds. In her essay written for Frank Sheed's anthology, *Born Catholics*, Caryll described the experience more fully: It was "more like a cap of thorns, covering her head, and so heavy that it bowed it down."<sup>21</sup> "I shall not attempt to explain this," Caryll wrote in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*. "I am simply telling the thing as I saw it."<sup>22</sup>



During the next months, when food shortage became a problem, meals at the Olton School were unappetizing and in general not especially nourishing. Caryll began a secret regimen of starving herself, whether because physically she could not stomach the food, or as a means of rebellion and anger. (Roosy the teddy bear was her constant companion, and she pretended to be feeding him under the table instead of herself.) News of the war just across the English Channel filtered continually into the convent, and a school friend remembered that Caryll's creative writing dealt a lot with war images.

In the early months of 1915 she also began experiencing abdominal pains. It is not clear whether her mother was summoned to the convent (Gert and Willmott both disappear from this part of Caryll's own narrative) or whether help was sought by some other means, but in March 1915 Caryll was taken to London, where her mother was now scraping out a living, and where appendicitis was diagnosed. Her mother's brother conducted the surgery. After her recovery, she was sent to a series of Protestant schools near her mother, but at each one she felt dislocated, a stranger, unable to fit in. She seems not to have fully recovered from the surgery, and perhaps the hormonal changes of puberty exacerbated her condition. Both *A Rocking-Horse Catholic* and her short memoir in *Born Catholics* indicate her sense of being not only "singular," but "a freak" during these teenage years. Decades later, Ruth would write: "My sister was 'a natural oddity' and could never have fit into any community."<sup>23</sup> Yet for a girl of fourteen, not to be able to fit in and make friends would have been a disconcerting, and perhaps deeply lonely, experience.

It may have been desperation that drove Gert to consult Dr. Paley, the Houselanders' former family doctor in Brighton who had had such a formative influence on the family and on Caryll in particular. The decision was made that Caryll would be admitted to a convalescent home in Brighton under the care of Dr. Paley. The Paley family renewed acquaintance with the thin, pale, disconnected teenager. Molly Paley, in particular, now in her early

twenties, took Caryll under her wing, and they would remain friends well into adulthood.

In January 1917, Caryll was admitted to the Convent of the Holy Child in St. Leonards-on-Sea, on the coast of Sussex, near Hastings. The sea air was thought to be suitable for a girl who was still convalescing. This convent, which had been established by the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, was bigger than the Olton Convent, and although she grew to respect both the nuns and the other girls, fitting in was not easy. Girls were expected to be outgoing and to enjoy sports, to be apple-cheeked and robust. To be like Gert. “Singularity” was frowned upon, and in the atmosphere of “let’s all be a jolly lot,” Caryll writes that she became “too acutely self-conscious, too aware of myself as a freak.”<sup>24</sup> She also perceived an ethos of snobbery, a type of English Catholicism that prided itself on being part of polite and acceptable society. In later life she reflected on this reality as a failing in Christian charity, but at the time she was likely aware that her family—her parents separated, her mother earning a living at odd jobs, her father absent from her life—would not have fit into the category of what were considered “good” (that is, well-to-do and respectable) families. She took refuge in letters to Smoky. In one she griped that it was “too sickening” that “the girls never seem to read Hamlet except as a Penance—to think of a poet giving the treasures of his mind to be a delight, a pleasure, a consolation—and they turn this to punishments for naughty little school girls.”<sup>25</sup>

In another letter to Smoky she laid out all the faults, as she saw them, of her fellow students. According to her recollection in *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*, she added a complaint about the “prefect,” or nun in charge of the boarders: “Mother So-and-so thinks that she is the cock of the walk here.”<sup>26</sup> According to her account, she submitted her letter in an unsealed envelope (according to the custom of the time), to be read by the nun in charge. The nun handed the letter back to her and said, “I won’t let this go because I can’t let you say such unkind things about the children that I love.”



*Caryll Houelander at the age of sixteen. Courtesy the Utley family.*

The nun added, according to Caryll, who was red-faced with shame, "About myself, you are right. I am the cock of the walk here, so there is nothing to be done about that but to make the best of it." She told Caryll to rewrite the letter, stating the same grievances if she wanted, "but more justly and more kindly."<sup>27</sup> Then, when Caryll handed her the rewritten letter, the nun sealed the envelope without reading the contents. (The nun's name was Mother Aloysia. Many years later, upon her death in 1971, she would be described as a nun who "believed in discipline and in imposing it with some severity, but she inspired respect by her utter sincerity and her prayerful spirit; the children might be rather scared of her but they knew they could trust her and that she loved and respected them as children of God, especially some of the more difficult ones whom she was often able to understand

and help.”)<sup>28</sup> It says something about Caryll, knowing that Mother Aloysia would read the letter, that not only was she not frightened of this nun, but she actively provoked her. It is likely that Caryll was one of the “difficult” students whose “singularity” Mother Aloysia understood, and the nun would continue to figure greatly in Caryll’s life for the next several years. They would remain friends until Caryll’s death. A few years after Caryll left St. Leonards, the school would inaugurate an annual magazine called *The St. Leonards Chronicle*, and during the course of the 1920s Caryll would contribute six poems to the publication. She would also visit the nuns, sometimes staying a few days.

Caryll remained friendless at St. Leonards because, according to Mother Aloysia in later years, the other girls in the boarding school did not understand her.<sup>29</sup> But for Ruth, the Holy Child Convent, which she attended at Cavendish Square in London, was a godsend. She did very well in her studies and with the help of one of the Sisters was admitted to Oxford University to study history. She would eventually become a magistrate and the chair of the Tower Bridge Juvenile Court.

School days, however, were soon to come to an end for Caryll. According to the convent’s records, Caryll left the school at Christmas of 1917. She was now sixteen. According to Caryll herself, Gert had decided it was time for her to enter the world of work.