

1872  
Helen Keller

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The Story of My Life  
Part IV  
M.S.S.

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PART V.

In College..



The struggle for admission to college was ended, and I could now enter Radcliffe whenever I pleased. Before I took this step, however, it was thought best that I should study another year under Mr. Keith. It was not, therefore, until the fall of 1900 that my dream of going to college was realized.

I remember my first day at Radcliffe. It was a day full of interest for me. I had looked forward to it for years. A potent force within me stronger than the persuasion of my friends, stronger even than the pleadings of my heart, had impelled me to try my strength by the standards of those who could see and hear. I knew that there were obstacles in the way; but I was eager to overcome them. I had taken to heart the words of the wise Roman who said, "To be banished from Rome is but to live outside of Rome." Debarred from the great highways of knowledge, I was compelled to make the journey across country by unfrequented roads -- that was all; and I knew that in college there were many by-paths where I should touch hands with girls thinking, loving and struggling like myself.

I began my studies with eagerness. Before me I saw a new world coming in beauty and light, and I felt within me the capacity to know all things. In the wonderland of Mind I should be free as another. Its people, scenery, manners, joys, tragedies

should be living, tangible interpreters of the actual world. The lecture-halls seemed filled with the spirit of the great and wise, and I thought the professors were the embodiment of wisdom. If I have learned differently since, I am not going to tell anybody.

But I soon discovered that college was not quite the romantic lyceum I had imagined it. Many of the dreams that had delighted my young inexperience became beautifully less and "faded into the light of common day." Gradually I began to feel that there were disadvantages in going to college. The one I felt and still feel most is lack of time. I used to have time to think, to reflect, my mind and I. We would sit together of an evening and listen to the inner melodies of the spirit, which one hears only in leisure moments when the words of some loved poet touch a deep, sweet chord in the soul that had been silent until then. But in college there is no time to commune with one's thoughts. One goes to college to learn, it seems, not to think. When one enters the portals of learning, one leaves the dearest pleasures -- solitude, books and imagination, outside with the whispering pines. I suppose I ought to find some comfort in the thought that I am laying up treasures for future enjoyment; but I am improvident enough to prefer present joy to hoarding riches against a rainy day.

My studies the first year were French, German, history, English composition and English literature. In the French course we read some of the works of Corneille, Molière, Racine, Alfred de

Lack of  
unity
 Musset and Sainte-Beuve, and in the German those of Goethe and Shiller. We reviewed rapidly the whole period of history from the fall of the Roman Empire to the close of the eighteenth century and studied critically Milton's poems and the "Areopagitica." I am frequently asked how I circumvent the peculiar conditions under which I must work in college. Of course in the class-room I am practically alone. The professor is as remote as if he were speaking through a telephone. The lectures are spelled into my hand as rapidly as possible, and much of the individuality of the lecturer is lost to me in the effort to keep in the race. The words rush through my hand like hounds in pursuit of a hare which they often miss. But in this respect I do not think I am much worse off than the girls who take notes. If the mind is occupied with the mechanical process of hearing and putting words on paper ~~as rapidly as possible~~ <sup>at lightning speed</sup>, I should not think one could pay much attention to the subject under consideration or the manner of its presentation. I cannot make notes during the lectures because my hands are busy listening; but usually I jot down what I can remember of them when I get home. I write the exercises, daily themes, criticisms and hour-tests, the mid-year and final examinations on my typewriter, so that the professors have ~~little~~ <sup>no</sup> difficulty in finding out how little I know.

When I began the study of Latin prosody this year, I devised and explained to my professor a system of signs indicating

the different metres and quantities. ¶ Very few of the books required in the various courses are printed for the blind, and I am obliged to have them spelled into my hand. Consequently I need more time to prepare my lessons than other girls. The manual part takes longer, and I have perplexities which they have not. There are days when the close attention I must give to details chafes my spirit, and the thought that I must spend hours reading a few chapters, while in the world without other girls are laughing and singing and dancing, makes me rebellious; but soon I recover my natural buoyancy and laugh the discontent out of my heart. For after all, every one who wishes to gain true knowledge must climb the Hill Difficulty alone, and since there is no royal road to the summit, I must zigzag it in my own way. I slip back many times, I fall, I stand still, I run against the edge of hidden obstacles, I lose my temper and find it again and keep it better, I trudge on, I gain a little, I feel encouraged, I get more eager and climb higher and begin to see the widening horizon. Every struggle is a victory. One more effort, and I reach the luminous cloud, the blue depths of the sky, the uplands of my desire.

This last year, my second year at Radcliffe, I studied English composition, the English Bible from a literary rather than a religious point of view, the governments of America and Europe, the odes of Horace and Latin comedy. The class in composition has been the pleasantest, I think. It met in the afternoon and was

very lively. The lectures in that course are always interesting, vivacious, witty; for the instructor, Mr. Copeland, more than any one I know, brings before you literature in all its original freshness and power. For one short hour you are permitted to drink in the all-time beauty of the old masters without definition, needless interpretation or exposition. You revel in their fine thoughts. You enjoy with all your soul the sweet thunder of the Old Testament, forgetting the existence of Jahweh and Elohim; and you go home feeling that you have had "a glimpse of that perfection in which spirit and form dwell in immortal harmony; truth and beauty bearing a new growth on the ancient stem of time."

But college is not the universal Athens I thought it was. There one does not meet the great and wise face to face, one does not even feel their living touch. They are there, it is true; but they seem <sup>un</sup>municipified. We must extract them from the crannied wall of learning and dissect and analyze them before we can be sure that we have a Shakespeare or an Isaiah or only a clever imitation. It seems to me, ~~Scholars forget~~ that our enjoyment of the great works of literature depends more upon the depth of our sympathy than upon our understanding. The trouble is that very few of their laborious explanations stick in the memory. The mind drops them as a branch drops its overripe fruit. It is possible to know a flower, root and stem and all, and all the processes of growth, and yet to have no appreciation of the flower fresh bathed

in heaven's dew. Again and again, I ask impatiently, "Why concern myself with these explanations and hypotheses?" They fly hither and thither in the heaven of my thought like blind birds beating the air with ineffectual wings. There are times when I long to sweep away half the things I am expected to learn; for the over-taxed mind cannot enjoy the treasure it has secured at the greatest cost. It is impossible, I think, to read four or five different books in different languages and treating of widely different subjects, in one day and not lose sight of the very ends for which one reads,—mental stimulus and enrichment. When one reads hurriedly and nervously, having in mind written tests and examinations, one's brain becomes incumbered with a lot of choice bric-a-brac for which there is very little use. At the present moment my mind is so full of heterogeneous matter that I almost despair of ever being able to put it in order. Whenever I enter the region that was the kingdom of my mind, I feel like the proverbial bull in the china closet. A thousand odds and ends of knowledge come crashing about my head like hailstones, and when I try to escape them, theme-goblins and college nixies of all sorts pursue me, until I wish — oh, may I be forgiven the wicked wish!—that I might smash the idols I came to worship.

But the examinations are the chief bugbears of my college life. Although I have faced them many times and cast them down and made them bite the dust, yet they rise again and menace me

*Objection,*  
*perhaps*  
*redoubt,*  
*might*  
*is made*  
*to, that*  
*misstate*

*is made*

with pale looks, until like Bob Acres I feel my courage oozing out at my finger-ends. The days before these ordeals take place are spent in cramming your mind with mystic formulae and indigestible dates -- unpalatable diets, until you wish that books and science and you were buried in the depths of the sea. At last the dreaded hour arrives, and you are a favored being indeed if you feel prepared and are able at the right time to call to your standard thoughts that will aid you in that supreme effort. It happens too often, however, that your trumpet-call is unheeded. It is most perplexing and exasperating that just at the moment when you most need your memory and a nice sense of discrimination, these faculties take to themselves wings and fly away. The facts you have garnered with such infinite trouble invariably fail you at a pinch. "Give a brief account of Huss and his work." Huss? Who was he, and what did he do? The name looks strangely familiar. You ransack your budget of historic facts much as you would hunt for a bit of silk in a rag-bag. You are sure it is somewhere in your mind near the top -- you saw it there the other day when you were looking up the beginnings of the Reformation. But where is it now? You fish out all manner of odds and ends of knowledge -- revolutions, schisms, massacres, systems of government; but Huss -- where is he? You are amazed at all the things you know which are not on the examination paper. In desperation you seize the budget and dump everything out, and there in a corner is your man,



serenely brooding on his own private thought, unconscious of the catastrophe which he has brought upon you! Just then the proctor informs you that the time is up. With a feeling of intense disgust you kick the mass of rubbish into a corner and go home, your head full of revolutionary schemes to abolish the divine right of professors to ask questions without the consent of the questioned.

Thus my ideas of college have changed a good deal since I entered Radcliffe. While my college days were still in the future, they were encircled with a halo of romance which they have lost; but in the transition from the romantic to the actual I have learned many things I should never have known had I not tried the experiment. One of them is the precious science of patience which teaches us that we should take our education as we would take a walk in the country, leisurely, our minds hospitably open to impressions of every sort. Such knowledge floods the soul unseen with a soundless tidal wave of deepening thought. Some one has said, "Knowledge is power." I say knowledge is happiness because to have knowledge, broad, deep knowledge, is to know true ends from false and lofty things from low. To know the thoughts and deeds that have marked man's progress is to feel the great heart-throbs of humanity through the centuries; and if one does not feel in these pulsations a heavenward striving, one must indeed be deaf to the wonderful harmonies of life.