

Chapter Two

BLIND GERM OF DAYS TO BE

"I think, dearest Uncle, that you cannot really wish me to be the 'mamma d'une nombreuse famille,' for I think you will see the great inconvenience a large family would be to us all, and particularly to the country, independent of the hardship and inconvenience to myself, men never think, at least seldom think, what a hard task it is for us women to go through this very often"

QUEEN VICTORIA to KING LEOPOLD



OFTEN when my brothers and sisters and I meet we remind each other of funny or exciting adventures we used to have, but I never desire to live that early part of my life again. Childhood is supposed to be a happy time. Mine was difficult, though I did not then think of it as a disadvantage nor do I now.

It never occurred to me to ask my parents for pocket money, but the day came during my eighth year when I was desperately in want of ten cents. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was coming to town. On Saturday afternoon I started out with one of my playmates, she with her dime, I with nothing but faith. We reached the Corning Opera House half an hour early. The throng at the entrance grew thicker and thicker. Curtain time had almost come, and still no miracle. Nevertheless, I simply had to get into that theater. All about me had tickets or money or both. Suddenly I felt something touch my arm—the purse of a woman who was pressed close beside me. It was open, and I could see the coveted coins within. One quick move and I could have my heart's desire. The longing was so deep and hard that it blotted out everything except my imperative need. I *had* to get into that theater.

I was about to put out my hand towards the bag when the doors were thrown wide and the crowd precipitately surged forward. Be-

ing small, I was shoved headlong under the ropes and into the safety of the nearest seat. But I could take no joy in the play.

As I lay sleepless that night, after a prayer of thanks for my many blessings, the crack of Simon Legree's whip and the off-stage hounds baying after Eliza were not occupying my mind. Their places were taken by pictures of the devil which had tempted me and the hand of God which had been stretched out to save me from theft.

Following this experience, which might have been called a spiritual awakening, I began to connect my desires with reasoning about consequences. This was difficult, because my feelings were strong and urgent. I realized I was made up of two Me's—one the thinking Me, the other, willful and emotional, which sometimes exercised too great a power, there was danger in her leadership and I set myself the task of uniting the two by putting myself through ordeals of various sorts to strengthen the head Me.

To gain greater fortitude, I began to make myself do what I feared most—go upstairs alone to bed without a light, go down cellar without singing, get up on the rafters in the barn and jump on the haystack thirty feet below. When I was able to accomplish these without flinching I felt more secure and more strong within myself.

But ahead of me still lay the hardest task of all.

Across the Chemung some friends of ours had a farm. Their orchard, heavy with delectable apples, seemed to me a veritable Eden. But to reach it by the wooden wagon bridge was three miles around, my brothers preferred the shorter route over the high, narrow, iron span of the Erie Railroad, under which the river raced deep and fast. The spaced ties held no terrors for their long legs, and they often swung them over the edge while they fished the stream beneath. When I made the trip father and brother each gave a hand to which I clung fiercely, and they half lifted me over the gaps which my shorter legs could hardly compass unaided. Held tight as I was, I became dizzy from the height, and a panic of terror seized me. In fact, the mere thought of the journey, even so well supported, made me feel queer.

The younger children were forbidden to cross the bridge unaccompanied. But I had to conquer my fear, I had to take that walk alone. I trembled as I drew near. The more I feared it, the more

determined I was to make myself do it I can recall now how stoically I put one foot on the first tie and began the venturesome and precarious passage stretching endlessly ahead of me I dared not look down at the water, I wanted terribly to see that my feet were firmly placed, but could not trust my head

About halfway over I heard the hum of the steel rails My second dread had come upon me—the always possible train I could not see it because of the curve at the end of the bridge The singing grew louder as it came closer I knew I could not get across in time, and turned towards the nearest girder to which I might cling But it was six feet away The engine with a whistling shriek burst into view—snorting, huge, menacing, rushing I stumbled and fell

In those days I was plump, and this plumpness saved me Instinctively my arms went out and curled around the ties as I dropped between them There I dangled over space The bridge shook, the thunder swelled, the long, swift passenger cars swooped down I was less than three feet from the outer rail, and a new terror gripped me I had seen the sharp, sizzling steam jet out as locomotives drew near the station I screwed my eyes shut and prayed the engineer not to turn on the steam

After the blur of wheels had crashed by I could feel nothing I hung there, I do not know how long, until a friend of my father, who had been fishing below, came to my rescue He pulled up the fat, aching little body, stood me on my feet again, asked me severely whether my father knew where I was, gave me two brisk thwacks on the bottom, turned my face towards home, and went back to his rod and line

After waiting a few moments to think matters over I realized that it would be impossible for me to retrace my course Common sense aided me The journey forward was no further than the journey back I stepped ahead far more bravely, knowing if I could reach the end of the bridge I would never be so terrified again Though bruised and sore I continued my cautious march and had as good a time at the farm as usual

However, I returned home by the wooden bridge, the long way round, but the practical one

When Ethel asked me that night why I was putting vaseline under

my arms I merely said I had scratched myself Foolhardiness was never highly esteemed by anyone in the family Though resourcefulness was taken for granted, running into unnecessary danger was just nonsense, and I wanted no censure for my disobedience

We were seldom scolded, never spanked If an unpleasant conversation were needed, no other brother or sister was witness, neither parent ever humiliated one child in front of another This was part of the sensitiveness of both Mother in particular had a horror of personal vehemence or acrimonious arguments, in trying to prevent or stop them she would display amazing intrepidity—separating fighting dogs, fighting boys, even fighting men

Peacemaker as she was, on occasion she battled valiantly for her loved ones, resenting bitterly the corporal punishment then customary in schools Once my brother Joe came home with his hands so swollen and blistered that he could not do his evening chore of bringing in the wood Mother looked carefully at them and asked him what had happened He explained that the teacher had fallen asleep and several boys had started throwing spitballs When one had hit her on the nose she had awakened with a little scream

Most children had the trick of burying their faces behind their big geographies and appearing to be studying the page with the most innocent air in the world But Joe had no such technique He was doubled up with laughter The teacher first accused him of throwing the spitball, and, when he denied it, insisted that he name the culprit She had been embarrassed by her ridiculous situation, and had turned her emotion into what she considered righteous indignation Joe had paid the penalty of being beaten for his unwillingness to violate the schoolboy code of honor

This was injustice and the surest road to mother's wrath She started at once the long trip to the school When she found no one there, she walked more miles to the teacher's home Reproof was called for and she administered it But that was not enough She then demanded that father go to the Board of Education and take Joe with him There would have been no sleeping in the house with her had he not done so An investigation was promised, which soon afterwards resulted in the teacher's dismissal

The teachers at the Corning School were no worse than others of

their day, many of them were much better. The brick building was quite modern for the time, with a playground around it and good principals to guide it. Its superiority was due in part to the influence of the Houghtons, the big industrialists of the town. For three generations they had been making glassware unsurpassed for texture and beauty of design, and hardly a family of means in the country did not have at least one cut-glass centerpiece from Corning. The factories had prospered during the kerosene lamp era, and now, with electricity coming into its own, they were working overtime blowing light bulbs.

Corning was not on the whole a pleasant town. Along the river flats lived the factory workers, chiefly Irish, on the heights above the rolling clouds of smoke that belched from the chimneys lived the owners and executives. The tiny yards of the former were a-sprawl with children, in the gardens on the hills only two or three played. This contrast made a track in my mind. Large families were associated with poverty, toil, unemployment, drunkenness, cruelty, fighting, jails, the small ones with cleanliness, leisure, freedom, light, space, sunshine.

The fathers of the small families owned their homes, the young-looking mothers had time to play croquet with their husbands in the evenings on the smooth lawns. Their clothes had style and charm, and the fragrance of perfume clung about them. They walked hand in hand on shopping expeditions with their children, who seemed positive in their right to live. To me the distinction between happiness and unhappiness in childhood was one of small families and of large families rather than of wealth and poverty.

In our home, too, we felt the economic pressure directly ascribable to size. I was always apprehensive that we might some day be like the families on the flats, because we always had another baby coming, another baby coming. A new litter of puppies was interesting but not out of the ordinary, so, likewise, the cry of a new infant never seemed unexpected. Neither excited any more curiosity than breakfast or dinner. No one ever told me how they were born. I just knew.

I was little more than eight when I first helped wash the fourteen-and-a-half-pound baby after one of mother's deliveries. She had had

a "terrible hard time," but father had pulled her through, and, in a few weeks, tired and coughing, she was going about her work, believing as usual that her latest was the prize of perfect babies. Mother's eleven children were all ten-pounders or more, and both she and father had a eugenic pride of race. I used to hear her say that not one of hers had a mark or blemish, although she had the utmost compassion for those who might have cleft palates, crossed eyes, or be "born sick."

Late one night a woman rushed into our house, seeking protection, clutching in her shawl a scrawny, naked baby, raw with eczema. When her hysteria was calmed sufficiently we learned that her husband had reeled home drunk and had thrown the wailing infant out into the snow. Father was all for summoning the police, but mother was too wise for that. She dispatched him to talk to the man while she gave the weeping woman a warm supper and comforted her. Father returned shortly to say it was safe for her to go back to the multitude of other children because her husband had fallen asleep. Ugly and taciturn though he was I could picture him coming home after a hard day's work to a household racked with the shrieks of the suffering little thing. I could see that he too was pathetic and a victim, I had sympathy for his rage.

But mother did lose one of her beautiful babies. Henry George McGlynn Higgins had been named for two of the rebel figures father most admired. The four-year-old was playing happily in the afternoon, a few hours later he was gasping for breath. Father heated his home-made croup kettle on the stove until it boiled, and then carried it steaming to be put under the blanket which rose like a covered wagon above the bed. As soon as he realized that home remedies were failing he sent for the doctor. But events moved too swiftly for him. We had gone to bed with no suspicion that by morning we should be one less. I was shocked and surprised that something could come along and pick one of us out of the world in so few hours.

I had no time, however, to consider the bewildering verity of death. We all had to turn to consoling mother. Perhaps unconsciously she had subscribed to father's theory that the face was the mirror to the soul. She complained she had no picture of her lovely boy,

and kept reminding herself of the fine shape of his head, the wide, well-set eyes, the familiar contours which had been wiped forever from her sight, and might soon be sponged from her memory as well

Mother's grief over her lost child increased father's. Because in part he blamed himself, he was desperate to assuage her sorrow. The day after the burial he was constantly occupied in his studio, and when evening fell he took me affectionately by the hand asking me to stay up and help him on a piece of work he was about to do. I agreed willingly.

About eleven o'clock we went forth together into the pitch-black night, father pushing ahead of him a wheelbarrow full of tools and a bag of plaster of Paris. We walked on and on through the stillness for fully two miles to the cemetery where the little brother had been buried. Father knew every step, but it was scary and I clung to his hand.

Just beyond the gateway father hid the lighted lantern in the nearby bushes over a grave and told me to wait there unless I heard somebody coming. He expected me to be grown up at the age of ten. Nerves meant sickness, if any child cried out in the night it was merely considered "delicate." Consequently I obeyed and watched, shivering with cold and excitement, darting quick glances at the ghostly forms of some of father's monuments which loomed out of the darkness around me. I could hear the steady chunk, chunk, chunk of his pick and shovel, and the sharper sound when suddenly he struck the coffin.

Father had taken it as a matter of course that I should understand and had not explained what he was about to do. But I never questioned his actions. I did not know there was a law against a man's digging up his own dead child but, even had I known, I would have believed that the law was wrong.

We traveled back the long, weary way, arriving home in the early hours of the morning. Nothing was said to mother or to the others about that amazing night's adventure, I was not told to keep silent, but I knew there was mystery in the air and it was no time to talk.

For two evenings I worked with father, helping him break the death mask, mold and shape the cast. I remember the queer feeling

I had when I discovered some of the hair which had stuck in the plaster. On the third day, just after supper, father said to us all, "Will you come into the studio?" With tender eyes on mother he uncovered and presented to her the bust of the dead little boy.

She was extraordinarily comforted. Though to me the model, perfect as it was, seemed lifeless, every once in a while she entered the studio, took off the cloth which protected it from the dust, wept and was relieved, re-covered it and went on.

Not one of us dared to utter a word of criticism about mother's adored and adoring husband, nevertheless her soul was harassed at times by his philosophy of live and let live, by his principles against locked doors and private property. She was merely selfless. Often when one of her children was feverish she went to the kitchen pump for water so that it might be cooler and fresher for parched lips. Once, groping her way on such an errand, she stumbled over a tramp who had taken advantage of the unlatched door and lay sprawled on the floor. She rushed back to arouse father, telling him he must put the man out. But he only turned over on his side and muttered, "Oh, let him alone. The poor divil needs sleep like the rest of us."

Another night mother was awakened by noises outside. "Father," she called, "there's somebody at the hencoop!"

"What makes you think so?" he answered sleepily.

"I hear the chickens. They wouldn't make a noise unless somebody was in there. Get up!"

Obediently father put on his trousers and coat, not even before thieves would he appear in his nightshirt out of his bedroom. He proceeded to the kitchen door, and, holding a lamp on high, addressed the two men, one of whom was handing out chickens to the other, "Hey, you, there! What do you mean by coming to a man's house in the middle of the night and shtearing his chickens? What kind of citizens are you?"

This seemed to mother no time for a moral lecture. "Why don't you go out?" she prodded.

"It's raining."

"Give me the lamp!" she demanded, exasperated.

She started towards our nearest neighbor, splashing through the

little brook, getting her feet wet, calling, "Some one's in our chicken house"

Our neighbor armed himself and came running. A man with a gun sent the marauders scurrying up the hill. That was mother's philosophy. I think father fell in her estimation for a few days after this. She expected him to be the guardian of the home, but he was never that. His liberal views were so well known that our house was marked with the tramp's patrin of the first degree. "Always get something here. Never be turned away." If it happened to be pay day they could count on a quarter as well as a meal.

One particular evening we were expecting father home, his pockets bulging with the money from his latest commission, but by night-fall he had not yet returned. When mother heard a rap at the door she went eagerly to open it. Two ragged strangers were standing there.

"Is the boss in?"

"No, but I'm looking for him any minute."

"We want something to eat."

With no more ceremony than was customary among the knights of the open road they pushed through the door and made for the kitchen, plainly knowing their way about.

"How dare you come into this house!" exclaimed mother indignantly. "Toss! Beauty!" she cried sharply. The fear in her voice brought the dogs lunging downstairs with fangs bared and hackles bristling. They leaped at the backs of the uninvited guests.

Father came in a few hours later. The door was swinging wide, the snow was blowing in. Torn scraps of clothing, spots of blood were about, and mother was unconscious on the floor. He poured whiskey down her throat. "It was only good whiskey that brought you to," he often said afterwards, recalling his alarm. He used the same remedy to pull her through the ensuing six weeks of pneumonia. But he had been so thoroughly worried that his generosity towards tramps lessened and his largesse was curtailed.

After this illness mother coughed more than ever and it was evident the pines were not helping her. Father decided to move, the house was so obviously marked and he had to be gone so much he thought it unsafe for us to live alone so far away.