

Chapter Three

BOOKS ARE THE COMPASSES



SO we moved into town, still on the western hills. It marked the beginning of my adolescence, and such breaks are always disturbing. In the house in the woods we had all been children together, but now some of us were growing up.

Nevertheless, there were always smaller ones to be put to bed, to be rocked to sleep, there were feet and knees to be scrubbed and hands to be washed. Although we had more space, home study sometimes seemed to me impossible. The living room was usually occupied by the older members of the family, and the bedrooms were cold. I kept up in my lessons, but it was simply because I enjoyed them.

In most schools teachers and pupils then were natural enemies, and the one I had in the eighth grade was particularly adept at arousing antagonism. She apparently disliked her job and the youngsters under her care as much as we hated her. Sarcasm was both her defense and weapon of attack. One day in mid-June I was delayed in getting off for school. Well aware that being tardy was a heinous crime, I hurried, pulling and tugging at my first pair of kid gloves, which Mary had just given me. But the bell had rung two minutes before I walked into the room, flushed and out of breath.

The teacher had already begun the class. She looked up at the interruption. "Well, well, Miss Higgins, so your ladyship has arrived at last! Ah, a new pair of gloves! I wonder that she even deigns to come to school at all."

Giggles rippled around me as I went into the cloakroom and laid

down my hat and gloves I came back, praying the teacher would pay no more attention to me, but as I walked painfully to my seat she continued repeating with variations her mean comments. Even when I sat down she did not stop. I tried to think of something else, tried not to listen, tried to smile with the others. I endured it as long as I could, then took out my books, pyramiding arithmetic, grammar, and speller, strapped them up, rose, and left.

Mother was amazed when I burst in on her. "I will never go back to that school again!" I exclaimed dramatically. "I have finished forever! I'll go to jail, I'll work, I'll starve, I'll die! But back to that school and teacher I will never go!"

As older brothers and sisters drifted home in the evening, they were as horrified as mother. "But you have only two weeks more," they expostulated.

"I don't care if it's only an hour. I will not go back!"

When it became obvious that I would stick to my point, mother seemed glad to have me to help her. I was thorough and strong and could get through a surprising amount of work in no time. But the rest of the family was seriously alarmed. The next few months were filled with questions I could not answer. "What can you ever be without an education?" "Are you equipped to earn a living?" "Is factory life a pleasant prospect? If you don't go back to school, you'll surely end there."

"All right. I'll go to work!" I announced defiantly. Work, even in the factory, meant money, and money meant independence. I had no rebuttal to their arguments, I was acting on an impulse that transcended reason, and must have recognized that any explanation as to my momentous decision would sound foolish.

Then suddenly father, mother, my second older sister Nan, and Mary, who had been summoned to a family council, tried other tactics. I was sent for two weeks to Chautauqua, there to take courses, hear lectures from prominent speakers, listen to music. This was designed to stimulate my interest in education and dispel any idea I might have of getting a job.

My impulse had been misconstrued. I was not rebelling against education as such, but only against that particular school and that particular teacher. When fall drew near and the next session was at

hand I was still reiterating that I would not go back, although I still had no answer to Nan's repeated, "What are you going to do?"

Nan was perhaps the most inspiring of all my brothers and sisters. The exact contrary to father, she wanted us all to conform and was in tears if we did not. To her, failure in this respect showed a lack of breeding. Yet even more important than conformity was knowledge, which was the basis for all true culture. She herself wanted to write, and had received prizes for stories from *St Nicholas* and the *Youth's Companion*. But the family was too dependent upon the earnings of the older girls, and she was obliged to postpone college and her equally ardent desire to study sculpture. She became a translator of French and German until these aspirations could be fulfilled.

At the time of my mutiny Nan was especially disturbed. "You won't be able to get anywhere without an education," she stated firmly. She and Mary, joining forces, together looked for a school, reasonable enough for their purses, but good enough academically to prepare me for Cornell. Private education was not so expensive as today, and families of moderate means could afford it. My sisters selected Claverack College and Hudson River Institute, about three miles from the town of Hudson in the Catskill Mountains. Here, in one of the oldest coeducational institutions in the country, the Methodist farmers of the Dutch valley enrolled their sons and daughters, unfortunately it is now gone and with it the healthy spirit it typified. One sister paid my tuition and the other bought my books and clothes, for my board and room I was to work.

Going away to school was epochal in my life. The self-contained family group was suddenly multiplied to five hundred strangers, all living and studying under one roof. The girls' dormitory was at one end, the boys' at the other, but we shared the same dining room and sat together in classes, occasionally a boy could call on a girl in the reception hall if a teacher were present. I liked best the attitude of the teachers, they were not so much policemen as companions and friends, and their instruction was more individual and stimulating than at Corning.

I did not have money to do things the other girls did—go off for week-ends or house-parties—but waiting on table or washing dishes did not set me apart. The work was far easier than at home,

and a girl was pretty well praised for doing her share. At first the students all appeared to me uninteresting and lacking in initiative. I never found the same imaginative quality I was used to in my family, but as certain ones began to stand out I discovered they had personalities of their own.

I had been at Claverack only a few days and was still feeling homesick when in the hall one morning I encountered the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Long hair flying from her shoulders, she was so slender and wraithlike that she seemed unreal. I have never since been so moved by human loveliness as I was by Esther's. I cried at night because I sensed it was something I could not reach. Even her clothes were unlike all others. Many girls envied their taste and quality, but I knew they belonged to her of right. Of every book I had read she was the heroine come alive.

Worlds apart though we were in tradition, looks, behavior, experience, Esther and I had the same romantic outlook. Having aspirations for the theater, she remained only one year and then left to attend Charles Frohman's dramatic school. I had been too overpowered by my admiration for her to be happy in it, and it kept me from caring particularly about anyone else. Nevertheless, I am convinced that in any interchange of affection the balance is unequal, one must give and the other be able to receive. My second year I was the recipient of devotion from a younger girl similar to that I had showered upon Esther. The loyalty and praise of Amelia Stuart, my laughing friend, fed all the empty spaces in my heart. She was gay and clever, a Methodist by upbringing but not by conviction. Each Sunday afternoon, given over to the reading of the Bible, we received permission to study together in my room, and there occupied ourselves dutifully, I in mending and darning, and she reading aloud, but interspersing solemn passages with ridiculous exaggerations. What was intended to be a serious exercise of the spirit was turned into merriment.

My friendship with these two girls has been interrupted, but never broken.

Very shortly after my arrival at Claverack I had been infected by that indefinable, nebulous quality called school spirit, and before long was happily in the thick of activities. Assembly was held in the

chapel every morning, during which we all in turn had to render small speeches and essays, or recite selections of poetry I had a vivid feeling of how things should be said, putting more dramatic fervor into certain lines than my limited experience of the theater would seem to explain, and on this account the elocution teacher encouraged me to have faith in my talents

Every girl, I suppose, at some time or other wants to be an actress Mary had taken me to the theater now and then, once when Maude Adams was playing Juliet to John Drew's Romeo, and had gone to some pains to explain to me the difference between artistes like Mary Anderson or Julia Marlowe and mere beauty as such She would not have been pleased at my seeing Lillian Russell, which I did during a Christmas holiday in New York, Lillian Russell was too glamorous and, furthermore, she was said to have accepted jewelry from men

One vacation I announced to my family that I was thinking of a stage career Disapproval was evident on all sides Father pooh-poohed, Mary alone held out hope She said I had ability and should go to dramatic school in New York as soon as I had finished Claverack She would apply immediately to Charles Frohman to have me understudy Maude Adams, whom I at least was said to resemble physically—small and with the same abundant red-brown hair Lacking good features I took pride only in my thick, long braids I used to decorate them with ribbons and admire the effect in the mirror

The application was made, I was photographed in various poses with and without hats A return letter from the school management came, enclosing a form to be filled in with name, address, age, height, weight, color of hair, eyes, and skin

But additional data were required as to the exact length of the legs, both right and left, as well as measurements of ankle, calf, knee, and thigh I knew my proportions in a general way Those were the days when every pack of cigarettes carried a bonus in the shape of a pictured actress, plump and well-formed In the gymnasium the girls had compared sizes with these beauties But to see such personal information go coldly down on paper to be sent off to strange men was unthinkable I had expected to have to account for the quality of my voice, for my ability to sing, to play, for grace, agility, character, and

morals Since I could not see what legs had to do with being a second Maude Adams, I did not fill in the printed form nor send the photographs, but just put them all away, and turned to other fields where something beside legs was to count

Chapel never bored me I had come to dislike ritual in many of the churches I had visited—kneeling for prayer, sitting for instruction, standing for praise But in a Methodist chapel anyone could get up and express a conviction Young sprouts here were thinking and discussing the Bible, religion, and politics Should the individual be submerged in the state? If you had a right to free thought as an individual, should you give it up to the church?

We scribbled during study periods, debated in the evenings Without always digesting them but with great positiveness I carried over many of the opinions I had heard expounded at home To most of the boys and girls those Saturday mornings when the more ambitious efforts were offered represented genuine torture They stuttered and stammered painfully I was just as nervous—more so probably Nevertheless, I was so ardent for suffrage, for anything which would “emancipate” women and humanity, that I was eager to proclaim theories of my own

Father was still the spring from which I drank, and I sent long letters home, getting in reply still longer ones, filled with ammunition about the historical background of the importance of women—Helen of Troy, Ruth, Cleopatra, Poppaea, famous queens, women authors and poets

When news spread that I was to present my essay, “Women’s Rights,” the boys, following the male attitude which most people have forgotten but which every suffragette well remembers, jeered and drew cartoons of women wearing trousers, stiff collars, and smoking huge cigars Undeterred, I was spurred on to think up new arguments I studied and wrote as never before, stealing away to the cemetery and standing on the monuments over the graves Each day in the quiet of the dead I repeated and repeated that speech out loud What an essay it was!

“Votes for Women” banners were not yet flying, and this early faint bleating of mine aroused little enthusiasm I turned then to an equally stern subject The other students had automatically accepted

the cause of solid money I espoused free silver At Chautauqua I had heard echoes of those first notes sounded by Bryan for the working classes The spirit of humanitarianism in industry had been growing and swelling, but it was still deep buried I believe any great concept must be present in the mass consciousness before any one figure can tap it and set it free on its irresistible way

I had not seen the "Boy Orator of the Platte," but the country was ringing with his words, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold" These rich and sonorous phrases made me realize the importance of clothing ideas in fine language Far more, however, they struck a solemn chord within me I, also, in an obscure and unformed way, wanted to help grasp Utopia from the skies and plant it on earth But what to do and where to start I did not know

Due to my "advanced ideas," for a time, at least, I am sorry to say, it was chiefly the grinds with whom I "walked in Lovers' Lane," nodding wisely and answering their earnest aspirations with profound advice But this did not last Soon I was going through the usual boy and girl romances, each season brought a new one I took none of them very seriously, but adroitly combined flirtatiousness with the conviction that marriage was something towards which I must develop Therefore I turned the vague and tentative suggestions of my juvenile beaux by saying, "I would never think of jumping into marriage without definite preparation and study of its responsibilities" Practically no women then went into professions, matrimony was the only way out It seems ages ago

Various pranks occurred at Claverack, such as taking walks with boys out of bounds and going forbidden places for tea Towards the end of my last year I thought up the idea that several of us should slip out through the window and down to the village dance hall where our special admirers would meet us About eleven-thirty, in the midst of the gayety, in walked our principal, Mr Flack, together with the preceptress who had come for the "ladies" We were all marched back to school, uneasy but silent

The next morning I received a special invitation to call at The Office I entered Mr Flack, a small, slight, serious, student type of

man, with a large head and high brow, was standing with his back to me I sat down He gave me no greeting but kept on at his books To all appearances he did not know I was there Then, without looking around, he said, "Miss Higgins, don't you feel rather ashamed of yourself for getting those girls into trouble last night, by taking them out and making them break the rules? They may even have to be sent home"

Although surprised that he should have known I was the one responsible, I could not deny it, but it flashed across my mind at first that someone must have told him He went on with rapid flow, almost as though talking to himself, "I've watched you ever since you came and I don't need to be told that you must have been the ringleader Again and again I've noticed your influence over others I want to call your attention to this, because I know you're going to use it in the future You must make your choice—whether to get yourself and others into difficulty, or else guide yourself and others into constructive activities which will do you and them credit"

I do not quite recall what else he said, but I have never forgotten going out of his room that day This could not exactly be called a turning point in my life, but from then on I realized more strongly than before that there was a something within myself which could and should be kept under my control and direction

Long afterwards I wrote to thank Mr Flack for his wisdom in offering guidance instead of harsh discipline He died a few years later, and I was glad I had been able to place a rose in his hand rather than on his grave

I spent three happy years at Claverack The following season I decided to try my hand at teaching, then a lady-like thing to do A position was open to me in the first grade of a new public school in southern New Jersey The majority of the pupils—Poles, Hungarians, Swedes—could not speak English In they came regularly I was beside myself to know what to do with eighty-four children who could not understand a word I said I loved those small, black-haired and tow-headed urchins who became bored with sitting and, on their own, began stunts to entertain themselves But I was so tired at the end of the day that I often lay down before dressing for dinner and awakened the next morning barely in time to start the routine

In very short order I became aware of the fact that teaching was not merely a job, it was a profession, and training was necessary if you were to do it well I was not suited by temperament, and therefore had no right to this vocation I had been struggling for only a brief while when father summoned me home to nurse mother

She was weak and pale and the high red spots on her cheek bones stood out startlingly against her white face Although she was now spitting blood when she coughed we still expected her to live on forever She had been ill so long, this was just another attack among many Father carried her from room to room, and tried desperately to devise little comforts We shut the doors and windows to keep out any breath of the raw March air, and in the stuffy atmosphere we toiled over her bed

In an effort to be more efficient in caring for mother I tried to find out something about consumption by borrowing medical books from the library of the local doctor, who was a friend of the family, and in doing this became so interested in medicine that I decided definitely I would study to be an M D When I went back for more volumes and announced my decision the doctor gave them to me, but smiled tolerantly, "You'll probably get over it"

I had been closely confined for a long time when I was invited to Buffalo for the Easter holidays to meet again one of the boys by whom I had been beamed at Claverack Mother insisted that I needed a vacation Mary and Nan were both there, I could stay with them, and we planned a pleasant trip to Niagara Falls for the day

With me out of the way mother sent off the little children one by one on some pretext or another She had more difficulty with father The fire bricks in the stove had split and she told him he must go to town and get new ones Much against his will, because he was vaguely unquiet, he started for the foundry He had left only because mother seemed to want it so much, but when he had walked a few blocks, he found he could not go on For some Celtic mystic reason of his own he turned abruptly around and came back to the house Mother was gasping in death All the family hated scenes, she most of all She had known she was to die and wanted to be alone

It was a folk superstition that a consumptive who survived through the month of March would live until November Mother died on

the thirty-first of the month, leaving father desolate and inconsolable I came flying home The house was silent and he hardly spoke Suddenly the stillness of the night was broken by a wailing and Toss was found with his paws on the coffin, mourning and howling—the most poignant and agonizing sound I had ever heard

I had to take mother's place—manage the finances, order the meals, pay the debts There was nothing left for my clothing nor for any outside diversions All that could be squeezed out by making this or that do had to go for shoes or necessities for the younger brothers Mend, patch, sew as you would, there was a limit to the endurance of trousers, and new ones had to be purchased

To add to my woes, father seemed to me, who was sensitive to criticism, suddenly metamorphosed from a loving, gentle, benevolent parent into a most aggravating, irritating tyrant, nobody in any fairy tale I had ever read was quite so cruel He who had given us the world in which to roam now apparently wanted to put us behind prison bars His unreasonableness was not directed towards the boys, who were in bed as soon as lessons were done, but towards his daughters, Ethel and me Whatever we did was wrong He objected particularly to young men

Ethel was receiving the concentrated attention of Jack Byrne Father in scolding her said she should mix more My beaus were a little older than the ones I had had at school, and more earnest in their intentions Though not one really interested me—their conversation seemed flat, consisting of foolish questions and smart, silly replies—father scolded me also about them, "Why aren't you serious like your sister? Can't you settle yourself to one? Do you have to have somebody different every evening?"

Messages were coming to me from a young man going West, post-marked Chicago or San Francisco These daily letters and sometimes telegrams as well, were not father's idea of wooing What could anyone have to say every day? To his way of thinking, a decent man came to the house and did his talking straight, he sat around with the family and got acquainted Father said, "That fellow's a scoundrel He's too worldly He's not even known in town"

We had to ask permission whether Tom or Jack or Henry could call Without reason or explanation father said, "No," and that was

an end to it. If we went out, we had to be back at ten and give an account of ourselves.

Then came the climax. Ethel and I had gone to an open-air concert. On the stroke of ten we were a full block away from home running with all our might. When we arrived, three minutes late, the house was in utter darkness—not a sight nor sound of a living creature anywhere. We banged and knocked. We tried the front door, the back, and the side, then again the front. It opened part way, father looked out, reached forth a hand and caught Ethel's arm, saying, "This outrageous behavior is not your fault. Come in." With that he pulled her inside, and the door slammed, leaving me in the dark, stunned and bewildered. I did not know this monster.

Hurt beyond words, I sat down on the steps, worrying not only about this night but about the next day and the next, concerned over the children left at home with this new kind of father. I was sure if I waited long enough he would come out for me, but it was a chilly evening in October. I had no wrap, and began to grow very cold.

I walked away from the house, trying to decide where I should go and what I should do. I could not linger on the streets indefinitely, with the possibility of encountering some tipsy factory hand or drummer passing through. At first there seemed no one to turn to. Finally, exhausted by stress of emotion, I went to the home of the girl who had been with us at the concert. She had not yet gone to bed, and her mother welcomed me so hospitably that I shall be eternally grateful. The next morning she lent me carfare to go to Elmira, where I had friends with whom I could stay.

Meantime father had found me gone. He had dressed and tramped up and down First Street, searching every byway, inquiring whether I had been seen. When he had returned at daybreak to find me still missing he had sent word to Mary, who received his message at almost the same time as one from me, telling her not to worry, I was all right. Both of them urged me to come back to Corning, and in a few days I did so, taking up again my responsibilities. Father and I tried to talk it over, but we could not meet on the old ground, between us a deep silence had fallen.

Father had almost stopped expounding, instead, he was reading

more Debs had come on his horizon, and the Socialist papers cropping up all over the country were appearing in the house. From the Free Library, which he had helped to establish years earlier, he was borrowing Spencer, who was modern for that time, and other books on sociology.

I had given up encouraging young men to see me, but I, too, was patronizing the library. My books were fiction. "All nonsense," father snorted at the mention of such titles as *Graustark*, *Prisoners of Hope*, or *Three Musketeers*. The word "novel" was still shocking to many people, and he classed them all as "love stories." "Read to cultivate and uplift your mind. Read what will benefit you in the battle of life," he admonished. But I continued my escape from the daily humdrum to revel in romances, devouring them in the evenings and hiding them under the mattress during the day.

One noon when I was waiting for the children to come in to lunch I was buried in *David Harum*, finding it very funny, and did not hear father enter. He stood ominously in the doorway. I should have felt trapped, but, instead, without warning and without reason, the old love flamed up again. I laughed and laughed. I was no longer afraid nor did I care for his scowls or his silly old notions. The long silence was broken.

"Do listen to this." And I started reading. The frown began to melt away and soon father too was chuckling. This was the first laughter that had been heard in that dreary household since mother's death. The book disappeared into his room, and soon thereafter he was caught seeking more of "that nonsense."

At last I realized why father had been so different. He had been lonely for mother, lonely for her love, and doubtless missed her ready appreciation of his own longings and misgivings. Then, too, he had always before depended on her to understand and direct us. He was probably a trifle jealous, though not consciously, because he considered jealousy an animal trait far beneath him, and refused to recognize it in himself. Nevertheless, he had been sidetracking the affections of his little girls. So oppressed had he been by his sense of responsibility that he had slipped in judgment and in so doing slid into the small-town rut of propriety. His belated discipline,

caused by worry and anxiety, was merely an attempt to guide his children

I, however, considered the time had passed for such guidance I had to step forth by myself along the experimental path of adulthood Though the immediate occasion for reading medical books had ceased with mother's death, I had never, during these months, lost my deep conviction that perhaps she might have been saved had I had sufficient knowledge of medicine This was linked up with my latent desire to be of service in the world The career of a physician seemed to fulfill all my requirements I could not at the moment see how the gap in education from Claverack to medical school was to be bridged Nevertheless, I could at least make a start with nursing

But father, though he proclaimed his belief in perfect independence of thought and mind, could not approve nursing as a profession, even when I told him that some of the nicest girls were going into it "Well, they won't be nice long," he growled "It's no sort of work for girls to be doing" My argument that he himself had taught us to help other people had no effect

Father's notions, however, were not going to divert me from my intention, no matter how peaceful the home atmosphere had become, still I had to get out and try my wings For six months more we jogged along, then, just a year after mother had died, Esther asked me to visit her in New York I really wanted to train in the city, but her mother knew someone on the board of the White Plains Hospital, which was just initiating a school There I was accepted as a probationer