



CLAVERACK AND ROMANTIC DREAMS

Maggie and Michael, driving a rented horse and buggy, arrived in Claverack on a fine autumn day. They drove straight to the school, an imposing wooden building set among twenty acres of lawn, trees, and playing fields.

Maggie bid her father a hasty goodbye and dashed out to explore. She discovered to her delight that every floor had a sink with running water, at home water had had to be carried in from a well. Better yet, there was a library right in the building, whereas Corning didn't have one in the whole town. Best of all, the reception rooms were furnished in elegant red and green plush, at home there was nothing so fine.

She quickly changed her name on the register from Maggie to the more dignified Margaret, then chose courses which struck her as romantic: elocution, painting, and belle lettres. She also applied for membership in a literary society where, according to the catalogue, "The young ladies and gentlemen are improved in Declamation, Composition, and Extemporaneous Speaking."

Next she chose a church to attend. Though, like most private schools of the time, Claverack had been founded by a minister, this one, the Reverend Flack, a Methodist, was tolerant in religious matters. Daily morning and Sunday evening services in the school chapel were compulsory, but on Sunday mornings the students could attend any of the

three churches in the town For reasons she never divulged, Maggie chose the Episcopal

At this time she also formed her first adolescent crush A Claverack memoir tells the story

I immediately fell in love with Esther, a girl whose beauty, form and loveliness was to be compared only to the statue of the Virgin Mary I started down the hall early one morning and beheld the loveliest creature I ever saw in my life She was getting water from the sink in a coffee-pot Her hair had fallen over her shoulders, she was slender as a lily and seemed so unreal that I fled past her in fright But I could not go far away Esther held me fascinated for the entire year I cried at night because I felt her loveliness to be something I could not reach She, and all that she was, represented an entirely new world to me She was the queen of this new world, the heroine of every book I had read come to life

After Esther, Margaret formed a friendship with Amelia

Amelia Stuart was unattractive as Esther was beautiful She was shorter and younger than I, but her wit and keen sense of appreciation fired my Irish imagination Her loyalty and praise and admiration fed all the hungry spaces in my being

Some of the older girls carried on a whispering campaign about the affection and devotion Amelia showered on me It did not worry us We continued our friendship through the years I gave my first son her family name

By eighteen, Margaret's sexual urge was fully developed She had not reached puberty until sixteen, and from thirteen on had been frantic with worry lest menstruation and all it implied might never arrive When it did come, her interest in sex was greatly intensified

Margaret places first sexual awakening at about age nine In her autobiography she ascribes this awakening to her father and speaks of male sexuality as "blind, imperious and driving" She tells how she came to fear her father as a man who exemplified this

The only memory I have of any sex awakening was when I was ill with typhoid fever I remember nothing beyond go-

ing upstairs to a cold room and a colder bed It was pitch dark I felt about me and knew I was in Mother's bed Then I heard heavy breathing beside me It was Father I was terrified I wanted to scream out to Mother to beg her to come and take him away I could not move, I dared not move, fearing he might awaken and move toward me I lived through agonies of fear in the few minutes Then Father's breathing changed—he was about to awaken I was petrified, but he only turned over on his other side with his back toward me I was cold, I began to shiver, blackness and lights flickered in my brain, then I felt I was falling—and knew no more

This fear and distrust of men is quite different from her attitude in later life Probably these feelings were heightened because as a child she considered herself the plainest of the four Higgins sisters The others were quite lovely Ethel, the loveliest of all, had the reddest, curliest hair and the clearest and most delicate skin, while Margaret, shown in a family picture wearing a drab dress while the others sparkled in white, appears straight-haired and dull

But puberty brought a sudden blooming to Margaret She had a slender figure, burnished hair, and wide sparkling eyes that looked sometimes hazel and sometimes violet blue At eighteen she was charming

Unchaperoned dates were forbidden at Claverack, just as they had been at home, but that didn't deter her There were twenty acres of lawn and trees and in the nearby cemetery there was an old horse shed, the back of which faced the road, making the front dark, private, and sweet smelling What better place for Margaret to meet boys and exchange kisses, especially since it had the extra allure of being "off limits"?

Her first boyfriend, a student named Corey Alberson, came from a well-to-do family and wanted to marry her Margaret described him as "fine, clean and honest," and they became secretly engaged, planning to marry when she graduated

Margaret probably didn't wait for sex until marriage, however Years later, she told of her "trial marriage" with Corey, indeed, for several summers she went on vacations alone with him

But Corey, Esther, and Amelia did not use up all of her energy at Claverack She plunged into writing, memorizing, and declaiming essays

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In declamation class I recited an essay on woman's suffrage and the facts of woman's history I sent long letters to father for more information and got oh! what letters in reply All about Helen of Troy, the battle of Nebedenazzar, Ruth, Cleopatra, Poppaea, Queens, Women Authors, Poets and Mothers It was a great essay I stole away first to the cemetery and stood on the monuments over the graves and said every word aloud Again and again, each day I recited in the quiet of the dead

It made no difference that when she later recited her essay in class, the boys guffawed and drew pictures of her on the blackboard in manish trousers, smoking a long black cigar She sniffed disdainfully, erased the board, and went her way

After suffrage, I took up the silver question of Mr Jennings Bryan No one else knew anything about it They were all for gold, so I took the other side and studied and worked on a debate I gradually became known to have advanced ideas, only serious boys paid attention to me, and the girls came to me in all their sorrows and woes In recitation and acting I excelled

Soon she was playing the lead in a school play, and when her teacher complimented her and told her she'd make a good actress, she immediately agreed

I went home one vacation and announced I was going on the stage Shocks and disapproval were evident Father pooh-poohed the idea, but my sister Mary, the most saint-like woman who walked the earth, agreed with me as to my ability and said I should go to Dramatic School as soon as I finished Claverack, that she would apply at once to Charles Frohman and I should try as an understudy to Maude Adams Great hopes! Splendid aspirations! A wise sister!

Mary raised enough money to have Margaret photographed in various dramatic poses, and they sent an application to the renowned producer A reply came with a form letter asking her age, height, color of eyes, hair, and skin Margaret eagerly started on the form, but when she came to the size of her legs, ankle, knee, calf and thigh, she stopped cold

Enthusiasm for the stage vanished. It was not that I did not know the size of my own legs. I did. But to see that personal and intimate information go coldly down on paper and be sent off to strange men, was like cutting yourself into parts. I could not see what legs had to do with being a great actress. I did not fill in the printed form, nor send the photographs. I just put them all away and turned my desires to more serious studies where brains, not legs, were to count.

But soon her Claverack days came to a sudden end. Her father ordered her home because her mother, who was ravaged not only by tuberculosis but also by cancer of the cervix, was dying. Maggie unexpectedly found her in the care of the Sisters of Mercy, indeed Michael Higgins had relented so far as to let the nuns send for a priest. "Surely," he had said, "get her one if it will make her feel closer to the Lord." So on March 31, 1899, a priest had come and given Anne the last rites, as she murmured, "My Heaven begins this morning."

At the actual moment of death, Margaret stood cold and dry-eyed, refusing to kneel. She had never been close to her mother, she couldn't pretend to be now. But her father felt the loss keenly, he became sad and disoriented. He neglected his work more than ever. Most of his time was spent either sounding off in the pub or roaming the woods with his dogs, while Margaret endlessly cleaned, washed, and cooked.

Infuriated, she now fought with him constantly. "Dammit, you killed my mother. She was only forty-nine when she died. But those eighteen pregnancies didn't hurt you a bit. You—you'll live forever!"

She let their run-down house deteriorate even more. Realizing she could never get enough money to return to Claverack to graduate, she decided to leave Corning for good. When Amelia invited her to visit her at White Plains, she packed her clothes, borrowed the fare from Mary, caught the first train, and vowed never to return.