CHAPTER III

BOARDING-SCHOOL IDEALS

AS MY THREE older sisters had already attended the seminary at Rockford, of which my father was trustee, without any question I entered there at seventeen, with such meager preparation in Latin and algebra as the village school had afforded. I was very ambitious to go to Smith College, although I well knew that my father's theory in regard to the education of his daughters implied a school as near at home as possible, to be followed by travel abroad in lieu of the wider advantages which the eastern college is supposed to afford. I was much impressed by the recent return of my sister from a year in Europe, yet I was greatly disappointed at the moment of starting to humdrum Rockford. After the first weeks of homesickness were over, however, I became very much absorbed in the little world which the boarding school in any form always offers to its students.

The school at Rockford in 1877 had not changed its name from seminary to college, although it numbered, on its faculty and among its alumnae, college women who were most eager that this should be done, and who really accomplished it during the next five years. The school was one of the earliest efforts for women's higher education in the Mississippi Valley, and from the beginning was called "The Mount Holyoke of the West."

It reflected much of the missionary spirit of that pioneer institution, and the proportion of missionaries among its early graduates was almost as large as Mount Holyoke's own. In addition there had been thrown about the founders of the early western school the glamour of frontier privations, and the first students, conscious of the heroic self-sacrifice made in their behalf, felt that each minute of the time thus dearly bought must be conscientiously used. This inevitably fostered an atmosphere of intensity, a fever of preparation which continued long after the direct making of it had ceased, and which the later girls accepted, as they did the campus and the buildings, without knowing that it could have been otherwise.

There was, moreover, always present in the school a larger or smaller group of girls who consciously accepted this heritage and persistently endeavored to fulfill its obligation. We worked in those early years as if we really believed the portentous statement from Aristotle which we found quoted in Boswell's Johnson and with which we illuminated the wall of the room occupied by our Chess Club; it remained there for months, solely out of reverence, let us hope, for the two ponderous names associated with it; at least I have enough confidence in human nature to assert that we never really believed that "There is the same difference between the learned and the unlearned as there is between the living and the dead." We were also too fond of quoting Carlyle to the effect, "'Tis not to taste sweet things, but to do noble and true things that the poorest son of Adam dimly longs."

As I attempt to reconstruct the spirit of my contemporary group by looking over many

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documents, I find nothing more amusing than a plaint registered against life's indistinctness, which I imagine more or less reflected the sentiments of all of us. At any rate here it is for the entertainment of the reader if not for his edification: "So much of our time is spent in preparation, so much in routine, and so much in sleep, we find it difficult to have any experience at all." We did not, however, tamely accept such a state of affairs, for we made various and restless attempts to break through this dull obtuseness.

At one time five of us tried to understand De Quincey's marvelous "Dreams" more sympathetically, by drugging ourselves with opium. We solemnly consumed small white powders at intervals during an entire long holiday, but no mental reorientation took place, and the suspense and excitement did not even permit us to grow sleepy. About four o'clock on the weird afternoon, the young teacher whom we had been obliged to take into our confidence, grew alarmed over the whole performance, took away our De Quincey and all the remaining powders, administrated an emetic to each of the five aspirants for sympathetic understanding of all human experience, and sent us to our separate rooms with a stern command to appear at family worship after supper "whether we were able to or not."

Whenever we had a chance to write, we took, of course, large themes, usually from the Greek because they were the most stirring to the imagination. The Greek oration I gave at our Junior Exhibition was written with infinite pains and taken to the Greek professor in Beloit College that there might be no mistakes, even after the Rockford College teacher and the most scholarly clergyman in town had both passed upon it. The oration upon Bellerophon and his successful fight with the Chimera contended that social evils could only be overcome by him who soared above them into idealism, as Bellerophon mounted upon the winged horse Pegasus, had slain the earthy dragon.

There were practically no Economics taught in women's colleges—at least in the fresh-water ones—thirty years ago, although we painstakingly studied "Mental" and "Moral" Philosophy, which, though far from dry in the classroom, became the subject of more spirited discussion outside, and gave us a clew for animated rummaging in the little college library. Of course we read a great deal of Ruskin and Browning, and liked the most abstruse parts the best; but like the famous gentleman who talked prose without knowing it, we never dreamed of connecting them with our philosophy. My genuine interest was history, partly because of a superior teacher, and partly because my father had always insisted upon a certain amount of historic reading ever since he had paid me, as a little girl, five cents a "Life" for each Plutarch hero I could intelligently report to him and twenty-five cents for every volume of Irving's "Life of Washington."

When we started for the long vacations, a little group of five would vow that during the summer we would read all of Motley's "Dutch Republic" or, more ambitious still, all of Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." When we returned at the opening of school and three of us announced we had finished the latter, each became skeptical of the other two. We fell upon each other in a sort of rough-and-tumble examination, in which no quarter was given or received; but the suspicion was finally removed that anyone had skipped. We took for a class motto the early Saxon word for lady, translated into breadgiver,

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and we took for our class color the poppy, because poppies grow among the wheat, as if Nature knew that wherever there was hunger that needed food there would be pain that needed relief. We must have found the sentiment in a book somewhere, but we used it so much it finally seemed like an idea of our own, although of course none of us had ever seen a European field, the only page upon which Nature has written this particular message.

That this group of ardent girls, who discussed everything under the sun with unabated interest, did not take it all out in talk may be demonstrated by the fact that one of the class who married a missionary founded a very successful school in Japan for the children of the English and Americans living there; another of the class became a medical missionary to Korea, and because of her successful treatment of the Queen, was made court physician at a time when the opening was considered of importance in the diplomatic as well as in the missionary world; still another became an unusually skilled teacher of the blind; and one of them a pioneer librarian in that early effort to bring "books to the people."

Perhaps this early companionship showed me how essentially similar are the various forms of social effort, and curiously enough, the actual activities of a missionary school are not unlike many that are carried on in a Settlement situated in a foreign quarter. Certainly the most sympathetic and comprehending visitors we have ever had at Hull-House have been returned missionaries; among them two elderly ladies, who had lived for years in India and who had been homesick and bewildered since their return, declared that the fortnight at Hull-House had been the happiest and most familiar they had had in America.

Of course in such an atmosphere a girl like myself, of serious not to say priggish tendency, did not escape a concerted pressure to push her into the "missionary field." During the four years it was inevitable that every sort of evangelical appeal should have been made to reach the comparatively few "unconverted" girls in the school. We were the subject of prayer at the daily chapel exercise and the weekly prayer meeting, attendance upon which was obligatory.

I was singularly unresponsive to all these forms of emotional appeal, although I became unspeakably embarrassed when they were presented to me at close range by a teacher during the "silent hour," which we were all required to observe every evening, and which was never broken into, even by a member of the faculty, unless the errand was one of grave import. I found these occasional interviews on the part of one of the more serious young teachers, of whom I was extremely fond, hard to endure, as was a long series of conversations in my senior year conducted by one of the most enthusiastic members of the faculty, in which the desirability of Turkey as a field for missionary labor was enticingly put before me. I suppose I held myself aloof from all these influences, partly owing to the fact that my father was not a communicant of any church, and I tremendously admired his scrupulous morality and sense of honor in all matters of personal and public conduct, and also because the little group to which I have referred was much given to a sort of rationalism, doubtless founded upon an early reading of Emerson. In this connection, when Bronson Alcott came to lecture at the school, we all vied with each other for a chance to do him a personal service because he had been a friend of Emerson, and we were inexpressibly scornful of our younger fellow-students who cared for him merely on the basis of his grandfatherly relation to "Little Women." I

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recall cleaning the clay of the unpaved streets off his heavy cloth overshoes in a state of ecstatic energy.

But I think in my case there were other factors as well that contributed to my unresponsiveness to the evangelical appeal. A curious course of reading I had marked out for myself in medieval history, seems to have left me fascinated by an ideal of mingled learning, piety and physical labor, more nearly exemplified by the Port Royalists than by any others.

The only moments in which I seem to have approximated in my own experience to a faint realization of the "beauty of holiness," as I conceived it, was each Sunday morning between the hours of nine and ten, when I went into the exquisitely neat room of the teacher of Greek and read with her from a Greek testament. We did this every Sunday morning for two years. It was not exactly a lesson, for I never prepared for it, and while I was held within reasonable bounds of syntax, I was allowed much more freedom in translation than was permitted the next morning when I read Homer; neither did we discuss doctrines, for although it was with this same teacher that in our junior year we studied Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, committing all of it to memory and analyzing and reducing it to doctrines within an inch of our lives, we never allowed an echo of this exercise to appear at these blessed Sunday morning readings. It was as if the disputations of Paul had not yet been, for we always read from the Gospels. The regime of Rockford Seminary was still very simple in the '70's. Each student made her own fire and kept her own room in order. Sunday morning was a great clearing up day, and the sense of having made immaculate my own immediate surroundings, the consciousness of clean linen, said to be close to the consciousness of a clean conscience, always mingles in my mind with these early readings. I certainly bore away with me a lifelong enthusiasm for reading the Gospels in bulk, a whole one at a time, and an insurmountable distaste for having them cut up into chapter and verse, or for hearing the incidents in that wonderful Life thus referred to as if it were merely a record.

My copy of the Greek testament had been presented to me by the brother of our Greek teacher, Professor Blaisdell of Beloit College, a true scholar in "Christian Ethics," as his department was called. I recall that one day in the summer after I left college—one of the black days which followed the death of my father—this kindly scholar came to see me in order to bring such comfort as he might and to inquire how far I had found solace in the little book he had given me so long before. When I suddenly recall the village in which I was born, its steeples and roofs look as they did that day from the hilltop where we talked together, the familiar details smoothed out and merging, as it were, into that wide conception of the universe, which for the moment swallowed up my personal grief or at least assuaged it with a realization that it was but a drop in that "torrent of sorrow and aguish and terror which flows under all the footsteps of man." This realization of sorrow as the common lot, of death as the universal experience, was the first comfort which my bruised spirit had received. In reply to my impatience with the Christian doctrine of "resignation," that it implied that you thought of your sorrow only in its effect upon you and were disloyal to the affection itself, I remember how quietly the Christian scholar changed his phraseology, saying that sometimes consolation came to us better in the words of Plato, and, as nearly as I can remember, that

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was the first time I had ever heard Plato's sonorous argument for the permanence of the excellent.

When Professor Blaisdell returned to his college, he left in my hands a small copy of "The Crito." The Greek was too hard for me, and I was speedily driven to Jowett's translation. That old-fashioned habit of presenting favorite books to eager young people, although it degenerated into the absurdity of "friendship's offerings," had much to be said for it, when it indicated the wellsprings of literature from which the donor himself had drawn waters of healing and inspiration.

Throughout our school years, we were always keenly conscious of the growing development of Rockford Seminary into a college. The opportunity for our Alma Mater to take her place in the new movement of full college education for women filled us with enthusiasm, and it became a driving ambition with the undergraduates to share in this new and glorious undertaking. We gravely decided that it was important that some of the students should be ready to receive the bachelor's degree the very first moment that the charter of the school should secure the right to confer it. Two of us, therefore, took a course in mathematics, advanced beyond anything previously given in the school, from one of those early young women working for a Ph.D., who was temporarily teaching in Rockford that she might study more mathematics in Leipsic.

My companion in all these arduous labors has since accomplished more than any of us in the effort to procure the franchise for women, for even then we all took for granted the righteousness of that cause into which I at least had merely followed my father's conviction. In the old-fashioned spirit of that cause I might cite the career of this companion as an illustration of the efficacy of higher mathematics for women, for she possesses singular ability to convince even the densest legislators of their legal right to define their own electorate, even when they quote against her the dustiest of state constitutions or city charters.

In line with this policy of placing a woman's college on an equality with the other colleges of the state, we applied for an opportunity to compete in the intercollegiate oratorical contest of Illinois, and we succeeded in having Rockford admitted as the first woman's college. When I was finally selected as the orator, I was somewhat dismayed to find that, representing not only one school but college women in general, I could not resent the brutal frankness with which my oratorical possibilities were discussed by the enthusiastic group who would allow no personal feeling to stand in the way of progress, especially the progress of Woman's Cause. I was told among other things that I had an intolerable habit of dropping my voice at the end of a sentence in the most feminine, apologetic and even deprecatory manner which would probably lose Woman the first place.

Woman certainly did lose the first place and stood fifth, exactly in the dreary middle, but the ignominious position may not have been solely due to bad mannerisms, for a prior place was easily accorded to William Jennings Bryan, who not only thrilled his auditors with an almost prophetic anticipation of the cross of gold, but with a moral earnestness which we had mistakenly assumed would be the unique possession of the feminine orator.

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I so heartily concurred with the decision of the judges of the contest that it was with a care-free mind that I induced my colleague and alternate to remain long enough in "The Athens of Illinois," in which the successful college was situated, to visit the state institutions, one for the Blind and one for the Deaf and Dumb. Dr. Gillette was at that time head of the latter institution; his scholarly explanation of the method of teaching, his concern for his charges, this sudden demonstration of the care the state bestowed upon its most unfortunate children, filled me with grave speculations in which the first, the fifth, or the ninth place in the oratorical contest seemed of little moment.

However, this brief delay between our field of Waterloo and our arrival at our aspiring college turned out to be most unfortunate, for we found the ardent group not only exhausted by the premature preparations for the return of a successful orator, but naturally much irritated as they contemplated their garlands drooping disconsolately in tubs and bowls of water. They did not fail to make me realize that I had dealt the cause of woman's advancement a staggering blow, and all my explanations of the fifth place were haughtily considered insufficient before that golden Bar of Youth, so absurdly inflexible!

To return to my last year of school, it was inevitable that the pressure toward religious profession should increase as graduating day approached. So curious, however, are the paths of moral development that several times during subsequent experiences have I felt that this passive resistance of mine, this clinging to an individual conviction, was the best moral training I received at Rockford College. During the first decade of Hull-House, it was felt by propagandists of diverse social theories that the new Settlement would be a fine coign of vantage from which to propagate social faiths, and that a mere preliminary step would be the conversion of the founders; hence I have been reasoned with hours at a time, and I recall at least three occasions when this was followed by actual prayer. In the first instance, the honest exhorter who fell upon his knees before my astonished eyes, was an advocate of single tax upon land values. He begged, in that phraseology which is deemed appropriate for prayer, that "the sister might see the beneficent results it would bring to the poor who live in the awful congested districts around this very house."

The early socialists used every method of attack,—a favorite one being the statement, doubtless sometimes honestly made, that I really was a socialist, but "too much of a coward to say so." I remember one socialist who habitually opened a very telling address he was in the habit of giving upon the street corners, by holding me up as an awful example to his fellow socialists, as one of their number "who had been caught in the toils of capitalism." He always added as a final clinching of the statement that he knew what he was talking about because he was a member of the Hull-House Men's Club. When I ventured to say to him that not all of the thousands of people who belong to a class or club at Hull-House could possibly know my personal opinions, and to mildly inquire upon what he founded his assertions, he triumphantly replied that I had once admitted to him that I had read Sombart and Loria, and that anyone of sound mind must see the inevitable conclusions of such master reasonings.

I could multiply these two instances a hundredfold, and possibly nothing aided me to stand on my own feet and to select what seemed reasonable from this wilderness of dogma,

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so much as my early encounter with genuine zeal and affectionate solicitude, associated with what I could not accept as the whole truth.

I do not wish to take callow writing too seriously, but I reproduce from an oratorical contest the following bit of premature pragmatism, doubtless due much more to temperament than to perception, because I am still ready to subscribe to it, although the grandiloquent style is, I hope, a thing of the past: "Those who believe that Justice is but a poetical longing within us, the enthusiast who thinks it will come in the form of a millennium, those who see it established by the strong arm of a hero, are not those who have comprehended the vast truths of life. The actual Justice must come by trained intelligence, by broadened sympathies toward the individual man or woman who crosses our path; one item added to another is the only method by which to build up a conception lofty enough to be of use in the world."

This schoolgirl recipe has been tested in many later experiences, the most dramatic of which came when I was called upon by a manufacturing company to act as one of three arbitrators in a perplexing struggle between themselves, a group of trade-unionists and a non-union employee of their establishment. The non-union man who was the cause of the difficulty had ten years before sided with his employers in a prolonged strike and had bitterly fought the union. He had been so badly injured at that time, that in spite of long months of hospital care he had never afterward been able to do a full day's work, although his employers had retained him for a decade at full pay in recognition of his loyalty. At the end of ten years the once defeated union was strong enough to enforce its demands for a union shop and in spite of the distaste of the firm for the arrangement, no obstacle to harmonious relations with the union remained but for the refusal of the trade-unionists to receive as one of their members the old crippled employee, whose spirit was broken as last and who was now willing to join the union and to stand with his old enemies for the sake of retaining his place.

But the union men would not receive "a traitor," the firm flatly refused to dismiss so faithful an employee, the busy season was upon them, and everyone concerned had finally agreed to abide without appeal by the decision of the arbitrators. The chairman of our little arbitration committee, a venerable judge, quickly demonstrated that it was impossible to collect trustworthy evidence in regards to the events already ten years old which lay at the bottom of this bitterness, and we soon therefore ceased to interview the conflicting witnesses; the second member of the committee sternly bade the men remember that the most ancient Hebraic authority gave no sanction for holding even a just resentment for more than seven years, and at last we all settled down to that wearisome effort to secure the inner consent of all concerned, upon which alone the "mystery of justice" as Maeterlinck has told us, ultimately depends. I am not quite sure that in the end we administered justice, but certainly employers, trade-unionists, and arbitrators were all convinced that justice will have to be established in industrial affairs with the same care and patience which has been necessary for centuries in order to institute it in men's civic relationships, although as the judge remarked the search must be conducted without much help from precedent. The conviction remained with me, that however long a time might be required to establish justice in the new

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relationships of our raw industrialism, it would never be stable until it had received the sanction of those upon whom the present situation presses so harshly.

Toward the end of our four years' course we debated much as to what we were to be, and long before the end of my school days it was quite settled in my mind that I should study medicine and "live with the poor." This conclusion of course was the result of many things, perhaps epitomized in my graduating essay on "Cassandra" and her tragic fate "always to be in the right, and always to be disbelieved and rejected."

This state of affairs, it may readily be guessed, the essay held to be an example of the feminine trait of mind called intuition, "an accurate perception of Truth and Justice, which rests contented in itself and will make no effort to confirm itself or to organize through existing knowledge." The essay then proceeds—I am forced to admit, with overmuch conviction—with the statement that women can only "grow accurate and intelligible by the thorough study of at least one branch of physical science, for only with eyes thus accustomed to the search for truth can she detect all self-deceit and fancy in herself and learn to express herself without dogmatism." So much for the first part of the thesis. Having thus "gained accuracy, would woman bring this force to bear throughout morals and justice, then she must find in active labor the promptings and inspirations that come from growing insight." I was quite certain that by following these directions carefully, in the end the contemporary woman would find "her faculties clear and acute from the study of science, and her hand upon the magnetic chain of humanity."

This veneration for science portrayed in my final essay was doubtless the result of the statements the textbooks were then making of what was called the theory of evolution, the acceptance of which even thirty years after the publication of Darwin's "Origin of Species" had about it a touch of intellectual adventure. We knew, for instance, that our science teacher had accepted this theory, but we had a strong suspicion that the teacher of Butler's "Analogy" had not. We chafed at the meagerness of the college library in this direction, and I used to bring back in my handbag books belonging to an advanced brother-in-law who had studied medicine in Germany and who therefore was quite emancipated. The first gift I made when I came into possession of my small estate the year after I left school, was a thousand dollars to the library of Rockford College, with the stipulation that it be spent for scientific books. In the long vacations I pressed plants, stuffed birds and pounded rocks in some vague belief that I was approximating the new method, and yet when my stepbrother who was becoming a real scientist, tried to carry me along with him to the merest outskirts of the methods of research, it at once became evident that I had no aptitude and was unable to follow intelligently Darwin's careful observations on the earthworm. I made a heroic effort, although candor compels me to state that I never would have finished if I had not been pulled and pushed by my really ardent companion, who in addition to a multitude of earthworms and a fine microscope, possessed untiring tact with one of flagging zeal.

As our boarding-school days neared the end, in the consciousness of approaching separation we vowed eternal allegiance to our "early ideals," and promised each other we would "never abandon them without conscious justification," and we often warned each

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other of “the perils of self-tradition.”

We believed, in our sublime self-conceit, that the difficulty of life would lie solely in the direction of losing these precious ideals of ours, of failing to follow the way of martyrdom and high purpose we had marked out for ourselves, and we had no notion of the obscure paths of tolerance, just allowance, and self-blame wherein, if we held our minds open, we might learn something of the mystery and complexity of life’s purposes.

The year after I had left college I came back, with a classmate, to receive the degree we had so eagerly anticipated. Two of the graduating class were also ready and four of us were dubbed B.A. on the very day that Rockford Seminary was declared a college in the midst of tumultuous anticipations. Having had a year outside of college walls in that trying land between vague hope and definite attainment, I had become very much sobered in my desire for a degree, and was already beginning to emerge from that rose-colored mist with which the dream of youth so readily envelops the future.

Whatever may have been the perils of self-tradition, I certainly did not escape them, for it required eight years—from the time I left Rockford in the summer of 1881 until Hull-House was opened in the autumn of 1889—to formulate my convictions even in the least satisfactory manner, much less to reduce them to a plan for action. During most of that time I was absolutely at sea so far as any moral purpose was concerned, clinging only to the desire to live in a really living world and refusing to be content with a shadowy intellectual or aesthetic reflection of it.

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