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My Mother

HELEN KELLER

It was while I was in vaudeville that the first bereavement came which struck at the very roots of my life. My mother died while we were appearing in Los Angeles. My father's death, which occurred while I was a young girl sixteen years old, never seemed so real to me. But I had had my mother all those years and fine ligaments of love and sympathy had knit us together.

I have no vivid recollections of her before my education began. I have a dim sensation of arms about me, and hands that wiped away my tears; but such memories are too vague to bring before me a picture of her.

She used to tell me how happy she was when I was born. She dwelt on her memories of the eighteen months when I could see and hear. She told me how, as soon as I could walk, I chased sunbeams and butterflies, how I held out my little hands to pet every creature I saw and was never afraid. "And what wonderful eyes you had!" she would say, "you were always picking up needles and buttons which no one else could find." She had a pretty workbasket which stood on three slender legs, quite high above the floor. It had holes all round near the top. She loved to tell how I would come to her knees and lisp something which she interpreted to mean, "I wonder when I shall be tall enough to look through those holes and see what is in the basket." She also remembered my delight in the open wood fire, and told how I insisted upon sitting up late watching the sparks and laughing as they danced up the chimney. "Yes, life was good to us both for a few brief months," she would say wistfully. Then when she was twenty-three came the illness which left me deaf and blind, and after that life was never the same to her. It was as if a white winter had swept over the June of her youth; I know, although she never said it, that she suffered more through me than through her other children. Her nature was not expansive or happy. She made few close friends, and wherever she sojourned, the sorrow and loneliness of her spirit persisted. The larger opportunities for enjoyment and intellectual enrichment which she gained on

her journeys with us or her visits in our home at Wrentham did not erase from her heart the sense of tragedy and denial which my limitations kept always before her. That her suffering was crushed into silence did not lessen its intensity. But there was nothing selfish in her sorrow. What she had suffered broadened and deepened her sympathy for others.

She never talked about herself. She was sensitive even to the point of pain, and shy of revealing herself even to her children. But, veiled as her personality was, she was always an intimate part of our lives. It was inexpressibly sweet the way she said to me that her last thought at night and her first thought in the morning was of me. She suffered much from rheumatism in her hands, and she found it most difficult to write in braille, which disappointed her keenly because she never liked to have anyone read her letters to me.

It is a comfort to me to believe that all she hoped and prayed for was fulfilled in her second child, my lovely sister Mildred. Five years after her birth came my brother Phillips, who bears the name of one of my earliest and dearest friends, Phillips Brooks. When my father died, my mother devoted herself to the bringing up of her two younger children. (I was away from home most of the time, in New York and Boston.) Then Mildred married Warren L. Tyson of Montgomery, Alabama, and my mother spent the later years of her life partly with them and with me.

By temperament my mother was not domestic; but after she married my father, she had a large Southern household to manage. She carried the whole burden of housekeeping, supervision of negro workers, gardening, looking after the poultry, preparing hams and lard, sewing for the children, and entertaining the guests whom my father brought home to dinner almost every day. She was an expert in the science of poultry-raising. Her hams were praised all the country round; her jellies and preserves were the envy of our neighbours. She went about these homely tasks silent, unutterably sad, with me clinging to her skirts. Tall and stately as Juno, she stood beside the great iron kettles, directing the negroes in all the processes of making lard. My teacher often wondered how such a sensitive, high-strung woman could endure this sort of work; but my mother never complained. She threw herself into these tasks

MISS KELLER'S MOTHER, MISS SULLIVAN
(MRS. MACY), MISS KELLER.

as if she had no other interest in life. Whatever the problem, whether in the house, the chicken yard or out on the farm, for the time being she gave her whole mind to it. She said to Miss Sullivan once, "Of course lard-making hasn't the charm of sculpture or architecture or poetry; but I suppose it has its importance in the universal scheme of things."

She was passionately devoted to her gardening and to her flowers. Nothing delighted her more than to nurse a plant weakling into strength and bloom. The wealth of her heart had to spend itself even upon the most unworthy of nature's children. One early spring morning she went out to look at some young rose bushes which she had set out some time before, thinking that the warm days were surely coming. She found that a heavy frost had killed them, and she wrote me that very morning that "like David when his son died, she lifted up her voice and wept."

Her love of birds was equal to her love of flowers. She would spend hours in the little wood near our house in Wrentham watching their pretty antics when they made love, or built their nests, or fed the young birds and taught them to fly. The mocking bird and the thrush were the darlings of her heart.

My mother talked intelligently, brilliantly, about current events, and she had a Southerner's interest in politics. But after my mind took a radical turn she could never get over the feeling that we had drifted apart. It grieves me that I should have added to the sadness that weighed upon her, but I have the consolation of remembering that no differences could take away from us the delight of talking together.

She was an omnivorous reader. She welcomed all books new or old, in the English of Chaucer or the English of Ruskin. She had a horror of mediocrity and hypocrisy. I remember the scorn in her words as she quoted some bromide that was pronounced by a dull celebrity. In keenness of wit she resembled Mrs. Carlyle, whose letters she read with pleasure. Mr. Macy introduced her to Sydney Smith, and she used to say that his sayings were a silent accompaniment to her thoughts. Boswell's *Johnson* also gave her many bright moments. Bernard Shaw irritated her, not because he was radical or sarcastic, but because he was a chronic iconoclast. She had no patience with Lawrence's books. She would exclaim, "He seems incapable of

conceiving purity and innocence in a woman. To him love is indecent. No modest violets grow in the fields of life for him."

But in the presence of true genius her humility was complete. Walt Whitman did not shock her. She knew several of Balzac's books almost by heart. She read Rabelais, Montesquieu, and Montaigne. When she read Lanier she said "his 'gray and sober dove,' with the eye of faith and the wing of love, nestled in her bosom."

One memorable summer we rented a cottage on Lake St. Catherine, in Vermont. How we all enjoyed the lovely lake, the pine-covered hills, and the winding green alleys they call roads in Vermont! I have a mental picture of her which I treasure, seated on the little porch which overlooked the lake, in the evening, her dear hands idle for a few minutes, while she watched the children and young people in boats and canoes, with a tender, wistful expression on her beautiful face as the sun disappeared behind the green hills.

When the World War burst upon us she refused to talk about it, and when she saw the thousands of young men who were encamped round about Montgomery, her heart yearned to shield them from the horrors which awaited them. When Russia offered her splendid peace terms to the Allies, my mother said she wanted to stretch her arms across the ocean and embrace the one country which had the courage and the generosity to call war a crime against humanity.

Her death came as she had always prayed it would, swiftly, before she was old and dependent. She had dreaded illness and the slow parting scenes that usually precede death, and she desired that she might die in her sleep, or suddenly. So it was according to her wish that the end came. She was with her dear ones in Montgomery, but no one saw her die.

I received the telegram telling of her death two hours before I had to go on the stage. I had not even known she was ill. Every fibre of my being cried out at the thought of facing the audience, but it had to be done. Fortunately, they did not know what I was suffering, and that made it a little easier for my teacher and me. One of the questions asked me that day was, "How old are you?" How old, indeed! I felt as old as time, and I answered, "How old do I look?" The people laughed, pleased that I had evaded telling my age, which they supposed

would have been embarrassing to me. Another question was, "Are you happy?" I swallowed hard and answered: "Yes, because I have confidence in God." Then it was over, and for a little while I could sit alone with my sorrow. I had absolute faith that we should meet again in the Land of Eternal Beauty; but oh, the dreary blank her going left in my life! I missed her everywhere I went over the road she had travelled with me. I missed her braille letters, and she seemed to have died a second time when I visited my sister in Montgomery the following April. The only thought that upheld me was that in the Great Beyond where all truth shines revealed she would find in my limitations a satisfying sense of God's purpose of good which runs like a thread of gold through all things.

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