

A Goodly Fellowship

by

MARY ELLEN CHASE



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To
WILLIAM ALLAN NEILSON

Chief among the goodly fellowship
of those who teach

The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise
Thee.

Te Deum

Rest to the souls of those fine old Pedagogues;
the breed, long since extinct, of the Lilys and the
Linacres: who, believing that all learning was
contained in the languages which they taught, and
despising every other acquirement as superficial
and useless, came to their task as to a sport.

Charles Lamb: *The Old and the New
Schoolmaster.*

THIS book is the story of a life spent in teaching. I know it well, for it is my own. I have taught now for thirty years, beginning in a rural school on the coast of Maine, concluding, although happily not ending, in Smith College. The course of these years marks not so much promotion as a normal sort of progression, since in my experience a teacher is a teacher wherever placed, and the interest aroused and held in the college classroom essentially no different from that excited and kept in the country school. In other words, the personal resources of the teacher, always more important than the intellectual, the compensations, and the fun, are very much the same.

I write this book partly because I have been encouraged to write it by persons whom I respect, mostly because I shall have a good time doing so. The first reason I state in the desire to absolve myself from the presumption always latent, to me at least, in autobiographical narratives by those relatively unimportant; the second reason is the real one. Teaching has been, and is, the good life to me; and, if only for my own pleasure, I shall enjoy

putting into words my experiences in a wide variety of educational institutions. Moreover, since the past thirty years have witnessed so many changes in American education, in both schools and colleges, in both theory and practice, it may be that such a record as this will be of interest and, perhaps, of value.

I do not, however, write as one having authority on "Education" as a profession. I know little of theories and am inclined to be suspicious of those experimentalists who are forever tampering with that most personal of possessions, the human mind, and with new ways and means for its nurture. I am a teacher and not an "educator", and what I know of my job has been acquired not through experiment but through experience, not by theory but by practice.

My book is, in a sense, a complement, perhaps a sequel, to *A Goodly Heritage* written ten years ago. The material of one chapter, that on the rural school, is much the same as in the earlier book. I include it here in different form only to make the story of my teaching complete.

Like the Lyls and the Linacres, of whom Lamb speaks in his essay, *The Old and the New Schoolmaster*, there are thousands of teachers today, whatever their subjects and wherever they may be teaching, who likewise come to their task "as to a sport". They have been and remain, not among the noble army of martyrs but among the goodly fellowship

of the prophets, praising whatever Gods there be. It is among these thousands, this goodly fellowship, that I hope to find my readers. It is to them, and especially to one among them, that I address and dedicate my book.

MARY ELLEN CHASE

Smith College
April, 1939

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Chapter I

MY EARLIEST TEACHERS

I

MY MOTHER was my first and always my best teacher. I make this statement, not in the sentimental vein of Mothers' Day, nor yet after the deferential manner of King Solomon in praise of the virtuous woman, but merely as a fact. My mother possessed all those natural gifts and qualities which have given rise to the term "a born teacher". Her own actual experience in the art had been brief, limited to two terms in a Maine rural school, which she taught at sixteen in the year 1882 for five dollars a week, and to one year of teaching Latin in a Maine Academy. She married at eighteen; but with three children at the age of twenty-two and with five others at more comfortable intervals in the years following, she found ample scope for her talents.

In our small Maine village of Blue Hill, situated at the head of Blue Hill Bay, between those two greater arms of the Atlantic, Penobscot Bay and Frenchman's, the schools in the eighteen-nineties were precisely what one would expect of the

time and place and of the nature of village society. Blue Hill, like other coast villages once known in many a remote corner of the earth because of their seafaring, had long before the turn of the century settled into an unimportant and secluded existence. The onrush of summer residents and tourists, who were soon to afford the one means of livelihood to most coast towns, had in those days hardly begun. Among the thousand inhabitants of the village a few families still lived upon what was left of the money made in shipping; but for the most part the character of its society was that of a hundred other places similarly situated and similarly endowed. There were the usual professions represented: one doctor, one dentist, two ministers, one lawyer (who was my father) and the praeceptor of the Academy. There were the usual tradesmen and shopkeepers, and the usual fishermen, some of whom sailed to the Banks, more of whom set their trawls or dropped their lines in nearer, more quiet waters. There were the farmers, whose few tough acres were cultivated hardly a mile from the village post-office as well as through the high surrounding country-side. There were two saw-mills by the stream that ran into the harbor, mills which from the timber got out of the woods in winter turned out logs, boards, and staves for the coastwise schooner trade, clapboards and shingles for local building, and "edgings" at five cents a bunch for village cookstoves and fire-places.

Marketing was simple in those days and the exchange of money almost strictly local as the nearest bank was fourteen miles away, a two-hour journey by horse and carriage through hilly country. Those who kept hens sold eggs at ten cents a dozen to their neighbors, who in turn sold them milk at five cents a quart. What meat there was was mostly native, brought to one's door in a white-covered wagon to supplement the supply of pork, bacon, sausages, ham and hogshead cheese which awaited most families in near-by pig-pens. Boys dug clams, shelled and sold them at ten cents a quart. Fishermen either peddled their early morning catch from house to house or, in their boats at the town wharf, awaited customers who bought cod and haddock at three cents a pound. When mackerel, smelts or alewives were running, heads of families looked quickly after their own tables. Butter was made in a vast majority of homes in a blue hand-churn on the kitchen floor, and to buy a loaf of bread was not only unheard-of, but impossible. Had it been possible, indeed, it would have been considered a wanton extravagance, indulged in only by the shiftless. In my childhood to harbor a "boughten" cookie in a household marked a family as already doomed to insignificance and failure!

The schools of such a village were simply its schools. They were hewn out of respectability and governed by necessity. No one thought of them as either good or bad, and without doubt they pos-

sessed qualities of both. Within the boundaries of Blue Hill, which extended seven miles to the north and about the same distance east and west and which included an inhabited island or two, there were a dozen or more district schools supported as was that of the village proper by local taxation. In my childhood the village school, which possessed two rooms known as the primary and the grammar school, or as the lower and the upper school, managed to exist for only twenty-five weeks during the year, since there was not sufficient money for more instruction. From late January until early April we had the Long Vacation.

The two teachers of the village school like those of the district schools were local women, products for the most part of the Normal School in the neighboring town of Castine, sixteen miles away. I am sure that they taught me a great deal. I can still bound Idaho at a moment's notice, still work cube root, still locate the Falls of Nyanza, still diagram the first twenty lines of *Paradise Lost*. I find myself on solitary walks still declaiming "The Burial of Moses" and "Horatius at the Bridge"; in fact, with very little prompting I can recite the three hundred pages of Mr. T. W. Harvey's *Fifth Reader* since, because of municipal poverty and my early learning to read, I stayed within its covers for eight pleasant years. I shall never forget that "the use of the monotone is chiefly confined to grave and solemn subjects, as in 'Man that is born

of a woman is of few days and full of trouble' ". The counties of Maine have always stood me in great good stead, for, repeated as they should be, they have all the dignity and resonance of Milton's fallen angels or of Agamemnon's hosts before the walls of Troy.

To one who, like myself, loves useless and extraneous bits of knowledge and who still believes the memory an important part of the human mechanism, the village school offered many blessings, for which I shall be forever grateful. I am grateful, too, in an age when the salutary effects of fear are questioned, for the fears which my teachers instilled into me—the fear of careless, untidy work, the fear of disobedience, the awful fear of failure and subsequent disgrace. But, so far as I can remember, my teachers in the village school did not make me conscious of the drama in knowledge. At a weekly wage of seven dollars, in return for which one taught fifty unassorted children, drama, perhaps, was not included in the price! There was, of course, plenty of drama in school itself: in the daily spelling-classes, in the frequent imposition of punishment, in competition for prizes, in the weekly selection of colored picture cards for perfect performance of one's duties. But the drama seemingly so obvious in the incidents of history, in Antony's speech over Caesar's dead body and in Plato's description of the death of Socrates, both of which selections were in our

school Reader, as well as the drama hidden in the morning Psalm, was not so evident in school. That I learned at home from the teaching of my mother.

My mother, I feel sure, did not teach us at home because she was dissatisfied with our teachers at school. Like the other mothers of the village she took the school as a matter of course. She taught us because she could not help it. She was a born teacher, and we were there and ready for the exercise of her talents.

I have often thought since the days of my mother's instruction in the kitchen, in the orchard, in the dining-room how most of what I know about teaching has come from her. In the first place, she understood, perhaps unconsciously, the first and cardinal principle of all successful teaching: that in order to interest others in anything at all, one must be oneself consumed with interest. My mother's prodigal vitality brought into life and action all people, events, and places within the covers of books. No one and nothing could remain dull and lifeless once she had touched and enlivened them with her magic. Possessed alike of a fine memory and a pleasing voice, she recited the poems in Mr. Harvey's Reader so that the sing-song in which we so often droned them in school became an insult to both poet and poem.

We were always reciting something or other in our Maine kitchen. On Saturday mornings we churned to anapaests:

“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming with purple and gold”

My mother sang or recited as she rolled out brown dough for ginger snaps or cut out doughnuts with swift, rhythmical turns of her capable hand. I first learned in her pantry of

“old, forgotten, far-off things
And battles long ago.”

Jerusalem, the Golden, will always smell to me, not of milk and honey, but of doughnuts bobbing about upon hot fat, and in all heavy snowfalls today God again becomes a shelter from the stormy blast as He was so defined by my mother's voice in the Maine blizzards of the nineties.

My mother's imagination cast gleams and motes of light upon the worn pages of our school Speller. From her I first learned the charm and magic of certain words, the stupidity latent in others. We learned our spelling lessons around our dining-room table, which served us as a common desk in the evening.

“*Multitude*,” said my mother. “Now that's a big, splendid word. See how big it sounds. Get your Testaments and we'll find it. ‘And seeing the multitudes’, great crowds, remember, ‘he went up into a mountain’. Look at the word and see all the people crowding about. Now I'll find even a better