

THE ALPINE PATH

The Story of My Career

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(Third Instalment)



At fourteen I wrote "The History of Flossy Brighteyes," the biography of a doll. I couldn't kill a doll, but I dragged her through every other tribulation and then allowed her a happy old age with a good little girl who loved her for the dangers she had passed through and overlooked her consequent lack of beauty.

I HAVE spoken of the time I realized physical pain. My first realization of the mental pain of sorrow came when I was nine years old.

I had two pet kittens, Catkin and Pussy-willow. Catkin was a little too meek and pink-nosed to suit me, but Pussy-willow was the prettiest, "cutest" little scrap of gray-striped fur ever seen and I loved her passionately.

One morning I found her dying of poison. I shall never forget my agony of grief as I watched my little pet's bright eyes glazing, and her tiny paws growing stiff and cold. And I have never laughed with grown-up wisdom at my passionate sorrow over the little death. It was too real, too symbolical! It was the first time I realized death, the first time, since I had become conscious of loving, that anything I loved had left me forever. At that moment the curse of the race came upon me, "death entered into my world" and I turned my back on the Eden of childhood where everything had seemed everlasting. I was barred out of it forevermore by the fiery sword of that keen and unforgettable pain.

We were Presbyterians, and went every Sunday to the old Cavendish Presbyterian Church on the bleak hill. It was never a handsome church, inside or out, but it was beautified in its worshippers' eyes by years of memories and sacred associations. Our pew was by a window and we looked out over the slope of the long western hill and the blue pond down to the curving rim of the sandhills and the fine sweep of the blue Gulf.

There was a big gallery at the back of the church. I always hankered to sit there, principally because I wasn't allowed to, no doubt, another instance of forbidden fruit! Once a year, on Sacrament Sunday, I was permitted to go up there with the other girls, and I considered it a great treat. We could look down over the whole congregation, which always flowered out that day in full bloom of new hats and dresses. Sacrament Sunday, then, was to us what Easter is to the dwellers in cities. We all had new hats or dresses, sometimes, oh, bliss, we had both! And I very much fear that we thought more about them than we did about the service and what it commemorated. It was rather a long service in those days, and we small fry used to get very tired and rather inclined to envy certain irresponsible folk who went out while the congregation sang "Twas on that night when doomed to know." We liked the Sunday School much better than the church services. Some of my sweetest memories are of the hours spent in that old church with my little mates, with our testaments and lesson sheets held in our cotton-gloved hands. Saturday night we had been made learn our catechism and our Golden texts and our paraphrases. I always enjoyed reciting those paraphrases, particularly any that had dramatic lines.

The London *Spectator*, in a very kind review of "Anne of Green Gables" said that possibly Anne's precocity was slightly overdrawn in the statement that a child of eleven could appreciate the dramatic effect of the lines,

"Quick as the slaughtered squadrons fell
In Midian's evil day."

But I was only nine when those lines thrilled my very soul as I recited them in Sunday School. All through the sermon following I kept repeating them to myself. To this day they give me a mysterious pleasure and a pleasure quite independent of their meaning.

So ran the current of my life in childhood, very quiet and simple, you perceive. Nothing at all exciting about it, nothing that savours of a "career." Some might think it dull. But life never held for me a dull moment. I had,

in my vivid imagination, a passport to the geography of Fairyland. In a twinkling I could—and did—whisk myself into regions of wonderful adventures, unhampered by any restrictions of time or place.

Everything was invested with a kind of fairy grace and charm, emanating from my own fancy, the trees that whispered nightly around the old house where I slept, the woodsy nooks I explored, the homestead fields, each individualized by some oddity of fence or shape, the sea whose murmur was never out of my ears—all were radiant with "the glory and the dream."

I had always a deep love of nature. A little fern growing in the woods, a shallow sheet of June-bells under the firs, moonlight falling on the ivory column of a tall birch, an evening star over the old tamarack on the dyke, shadow-waves rolling over a field of ripe wheat—all gave me "thoughts that lay too deep for tears" and feelings which I had then no vocabulary to express.

It has always seemed to me, ever since early childhood, that, amid all the commonplaces of life, I was very near to a kingdom of ideal beauty. Between it and me hung only a thin veil. I could never draw it quite aside, but sometimes a wind fluttered it and I caught a glimpse of the enchanting realm beyond—only a glimpse—but those glimpses have always made life worth while.

It goes without saying that I was passionately fond of reading. We did not have a great many books in the house, but there were generally plenty of papers and a magazine or two. Grandmother took Godey's Lady's Book. I do not know if I would think much of that magazine now, but then I thought it wonderful, and its monthly advents were epochs to me. The opening pages were full of fashion plates and were a perpetual joy; I hung over them with delight, and whiled away many an hour choosing what frocks I would have if I could. Those were the days of bangs, bristles, and high-crowned hats, all of which I considered extremely beautiful and meant to have as soon as I was old enough. Beyond the fashion pages came the literary pabulum, short stories and serials, which I devoured ravenously, crying my eyes out in delicious woe over the agonies of the heroines who were all superlatively beautiful and good. Every one in fiction was either black or white in those days. There were no grays. The villains and villainesses were all neatly labelled and you were sure of your ground. The old method had its merits. Nowadays it is quite hard to tell which is the villain and which the hero. But there was never any doubt in Godey's Lady's Book. What books we had were well and often read. I had my especial favourites. There were two red-covered volumes of "A History of the World," with crudely-coloured pictures, which were a never-failing delight. I fear that, as history, they were rather poor stuff, but as story books they were very interesting. They began with Adam and Eve in Eden, went through "the glory that was Greece and the grandeur that was Rome," down to Victoria's reign.

THEN there was a missionary book dealing with the Pacific Islands, in which I revelled because it was full of pictures of cannibal chiefs

with the most extraordinary hair arrangements. Hans Andersen's Tales were a perennial joy. I always loved fairy tales and delighted in ghost stories. Indeed, to this day I like nothing better than a well-told ghost story, warranted to send a cold creep down your spine. But it must be a real ghost story, mark you. The spook must not turn out a delusion and a snare.

I DID not have access to many novels. Those were the days when novels were frowned on as reading for children. The only novels in the house were Rob Roy, Pickwick Papers, and Bulwer Lytton's *Zanoni*; and I pored over them until I knew whole chapters by heart.

Fortunately poetry did not share the ban of novels. I could revel at will in Longfellow, Tennyson, Whittier, Scott, Byron, Milton, Burns. Poetry pored over in childhood becomes part of one's nature more thoroughly than that which is first read in mature years can ever do. Its music was woven into my growing soul and has echoed through it, consciously and subconsciously, ever since; "the music of the immortals, of those great, beautiful souls whose passing tread has made of earth holy ground."

But even poetry was barred on Sundays. Then our faithful standbys were Pilgrims' Progress and Talmage's Sermons. Pilgrims' Progress was read and re-read with never-failing delight. I am proud of this; but I am not quite so proud of the fact that I found just as much delight in reading Talmage's Sermons. That was Talmage's palmy day. All the travelling colporteurs carried his books, and a new volume of Talmage's meant then to us pretty much what a "best seller" does now. I cannot claim that it was the religion that attracted me, though at that age I liked the Talmage brand much; it was the anecdotes and the vivid, dramatic word-pictures. His sermons were as interesting as fiction. I am sure I couldn't read them with any patience now; but I owe Talmage a very real debt of thanks for pleasure given to a child craving the vividness of life.

My favourite Sunday book, however, was a thin little volume entitled "The Memoir of Anzonetta Peters." I shall never forget that book. It belonged to a type now vanished from the earth—fortunately—but much in vogue at that time. It was the biography of a child who at five years became converted, grew very ill soon afterward, lived a marvellously patient and saintly life for several years, and died, after great sufferings, at the age of ten.

I must have read that book a hundred times if I did once. I don't think it had a good effect on me. For one thing it discouraged me horribly. Anzonetta was so hopelessly perfect that I felt it was no use to try to imitate her. Yet I did try. She never seemed by any chance to use the ordinary language of childhood at all. She invariably responded to any remark, if it were only "How are you to-day, Anzonetta?" by quoting a verse of scripture or a hymn stanza. Anzonetta was a perfect hymnal. She died to a hymn, her last, faintly-whispered utterance being

"Hark, they whisper, angels say,
Sister spirit, come away."

I dared not attempt to use verses and hymns in current conversation. I had a wholesome



My "red letter day" came when I was nineteen and received my first cheque for a short story. I did not squander that five dollars in riotous living, nor invest it in necessary boots and gloves; no, I bought five volumes of poetry with it. I wanted something I could keep forever in memory of having "arrived."

conviction that I should be laughed at, and moreover, I doubted being understood. But I did my best; I wrote hymn after hymn in my little diary, and patterned the style of my entries after Anzonetta's remarks. For example, I remember writing gravely "I wish I were in Heaven now, with Mother and George Whitefield and Anzonetta B. Peters."

But I didn't really wish it. I only thought I ought to. I was, in reality, very well contented with my own world, and my own little life full of cabbages and kings.

I HAVE written at length about the incidents and environment of my childhood, because they had a marked influence on the development of my literary gift. A different environment would have given it a different bias. Were it not for those Cavendish years, I do not think "Anne of Green Gables" would ever have been written.

When I am asked "When did you begin to write?" I say, "I wish I could remember." I cannot remember the time when I was not writing, or when I did not mean to be an author. To write has always been my central purpose around which every effort and hope and ambition of my life has grouped itself. I was an indefatigable little scribbler, and stacks of manuscripts, long ago reduced to ashes, alas, bore testimony to the same. I wrote about all the little incidents of my existence. I wrote descriptions of my favourite haunts, biographies of my many cats, histories of visits, and school affairs, and even critical reviews of the books I had read.

One wonderful day, when I was nine years old, I discovered that I could write poetry. I had been reading Thompson's "Seasons," of which a little black, curly-covered atrociously printed copy had fallen into my hands. So I composed a "poem" called "Autumn" in blank verse in imitation thereof. I wrote it, I remember, on the back of one of the long red "letter bills" then used in the postal service. It was seldom easy for me to get all the paper I wanted, and those blessed old letter bills were positive boons. Grandfather kept the post office, and three times a week a discarded "letter bill" came my grateful way. The Government was not so economical then as now, at least in the matter of letter bills; they were then half a yard long.

As for "Autumn," I remember only the opening lines:

"Now autumn comes, laden with peach and pear;
The sportsman's horn is heard throughout the land,
And the poor partridge, fluttering, falls dead."

True, peaches and pears were not abundant in Prince Edward Island at any season, and I am sure nobody ever heard a "sportsman's horn" in that Province, though there really was some partridge shooting. But in those glorious days my imagination refused to be hampered by facts. Thompson had sportsman's horns and so forth; therefore I must have them too.

Father came to see me the very day I wrote it, and I proudly read it to him. He remarked unenthusiastically that "it didn't sound much like poetry." This squelched me for a time; but if the love of writing is bred in your bones, you will be practically non-squelchable. Once I had found out that I could write poetry I overflowed into verse over everything. I wrote in rhyme after that, though, having concluded that it was because "Autumn" did not rhyme that Father thought it wasn't poetry. I wrote yards of verses about flowers and months and trees and stars and sunsets. And I addressed "Lives" to my friends.

A school chum of mine, Alma M—, had also a knack of writing (Continued on page 32)



My old home at Cavendish, Prince Edward Island, taken from the front. In the grove to the left was our playhouse with the wonderful door that we made ourselves.