



When I Was a Girl

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WHEN I WAS A GIRL



A short story from the book:

GRACE HOLBROOK;
AND OTHER STORIES OF ENDEAVOR AND EXPERIENCE

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WHEN I WAS A GIRL

I remember the day distinctly. I can seem to feel again how my head ached, and how the veins about my temples throbbed as I hurried home from school, rushed into the house, made a dash for my mother's room, threw myself on the floor beside her chair, and burying my face in my hands, let the sobs which had seemed to be almost choking me have full vent. I can seem to feel the touch of my mother's hand upon my head, and hear her gentle voice:

“Dear little girl! What has happened to her? Tell mother all about it.”

My mother's voice was the sweetest music the world had for me. I have a picture of her looking very much as she did that day, sitting in the large old-fashioned high-backed chair, her hair combed smoothly away from her forehead, and caught back with tortoise-shell side combs. She wore a high back comb, also of tortoise shell, which

securely held the coil of hair wound about it. Mother never was very well or strong, and we girls generally found her in her high-backed chair when we came home. Every one of us was in the habit of seeking her, to give the history of our joys and sorrows. Poor mother! How many stories she must have had to hear, and how constantly her sympathies were drawn upon. We did not think of it in those days; we took it as a matter of course. But this particular day stands out vividly in my memory. I had had a harder time than usual. I can tell the story straighter now than I did to my mother, for then it was constantly interrupted by sobs and fresh bursts of tears.

There was a girl at school who had pretty yellow curls and a pretty doll face. She was a favorite with some of the scholars, but not with me. From the very first day I met her, there seemed to be a conflict between us. Yet we were in the same classes, and often thrown together. The truth is, I suspect we were in some ways rivals, which made us both uncomfortable. Of all the girls in our class, Phebe and I were the only ones who liked to write compositions. The others groaned and sighed over them, wished that the weeks were a month long, so that every other Friday would not come so often. But to Phebe and me those Friday afternoons were looked forward to with interest.

Up to the time of my coming into the school Phebe had been altogether the best writer—perhaps that is not saying a great deal, for the others disliked the work so much that they made no effort to excel. Phebe had a vivid imagination, and knew a number of facts which she delighted to weave into story form, and read as compositions. Both girls and boys liked to listen to them much better than they did to papers about “spring” and “flowers,” such as the others wrote.

Now, it happened that I had been trained almost from my babyhood to do this very thing. “Make a story out of it for mother,” was a most familiar sentence. Before I could write, I was encouraged to tell a story for mother out of a picture which I brought to show her, or perhaps out of two or three blocks, or a few flowers. The consequence was that when I was a girl of thirteen and began to go to school, it was more natural for me to express my thoughts on paper in story form than in any other way. And naturally I became a powerful rival to Phebe, who had had no training, and only followed her own fancies.

I remember the first story I read before the assembled scholars on a bright Friday afternoon; and I remember that Phebe was the only girl there who did not seem to like it. The others flocked about me and said it was “perfectly lovely,” and “just splendid,” and all those words

which schoolgirls like to use; but Phebe tossed her yellow curls, and declared she did not think it amounted to much.

It was on a Friday that my heart was broken. I had been selected again to read; not only before the entire school, but in the presence of the trustees as well, and of several other visitors. There was always a selection made from the pupils for this honor. Only six boys and six girls, out of the several hundred which composed our school, could be heard in the chapel on Friday afternoons. I suspect it had been the custom for some time to select Phebe whenever there was any prospect of company; but on this particular afternoon I was chosen, and Phebe was not. I read my story, which was really a very silly little thing; for don't you believe I came across a copy of it but a few weeks ago, and laughed and cried over the memories connected with it, and said between the tears and the laughter, "The idea that I ever could have supposed that there was anything in this worth crying over." But it seemed a very excellent thing to me then; and many of the girls and boys thought so, too.

Well, I read it—thanks to my mother's training, I was a fairly good reader. I had more compliments than usual, and I suppose was somewhat puffed up. I remember wondering, as I went to answer a summons to Professor

Barnard's room, whether he might not be going to say to me that he considered me an honor to the school, or something of that sort. Professor Barnard was our principal. We younger girls saw very little of him, and had immense respect for him. He looked very grave as I came in; not at all as if he were going to say anything complimentary. It took him some time to explain why I had been sent for.

I was so bewildered by his first words that it made me stupid. At last, however, I understood. That girl Phebe had actually been to Professor Barnard with a statement that my composition was not original; was, in fact, stolen! She had declared to him that she had a book at home in which was every word in my composition.

This statement was repeated so earnestly, Phebe even declaring that she was willing to bring the book to school and show it to me, that Professor Barnard was troubled. He had known Phebe a long time, and had had no reason to doubt her word; and she was a bright, smart girl, and generally knew what she was talking about; it was only too evident that he thought she must be right.

How shall I describe to you the storm of passion into which his words put me? I realize now how very suspicious this must have seemed to Professor Barnard. How he probably said to himself, "If this little girl is

innocent, why does she not quietly and earnestly explain to me that there is some mistake, and that she certainly wrote her composition herself, without help from any book, instead of getting into such a rage, and talking so fast that I can hardly understand what she says, even stamping her foot?"

Yes; I remember I stamped my foot, not at Professor Barnard, but at the very thought of Phebe. I spent my breath in trying to explain what I thought of such a dreadful, dreadful girl. At last Professor Barnard interrupted with: "That will do, Isabella. Do not speak another word. You are not in condition to talk properly."

How well I remember his language. "This is a very grave charge, and we must investigate it fully. I think you know me well enough to be sure that you will not be condemned without positive proof. Unfortunately Phebe lives too far away to be sent home for the book, and as it is Friday afternoon we shall have to let the matter rest until Monday. But I will direct her to bring the book to me on Monday morning and show me the story which she thinks the same as yours. If they are very much alike you shall explain to me, if you can, how you think it may have happened. It is possible, that you may have read a story and forgotten about it. Such things have occurred."

But at this I was so indignant that I was very near stamping my foot again. "I never did!" I said excitedly; "I never, never read a story like mine."

"Hush!" said Professor Barnard. "You are not to say another word about this matter in the school building. Do not speak to the scholars on the subject; if I hear of your doing so I shall be greatly displeased. And now, as it is nearly time for closing, and you are through with your work for the day, I will excuse you at once. I advise you to go directly home. I am very sorry that you have allowed yourself to get into such a passion. The matter is serious enough, without adding to it in this way."

His words hurt me. Perhaps it is no wonder that I remember them well. I had never been reproved by Professor Barnard before.

So this is the story that I sobbed out to my mother; and all the while her gentle caressing hand was on my head.

"Poor little girl!" she said. "Mother is very sorry that you were angry." I stayed my tears to look up at her with astonishment.

"Why, mother," I said, "how could I help being angry? You would have been angry yourself. What do you mean, mother? Don't you know that it is not true?"

“Certainly, my daughter, mother knows, and so does her little girl. Such being the case, why should you become angry at a simple mistake?”

“Mistake!” I repeated indignantly. “There is no mistake about it. It is just her mean ugly way. She is jealous of me, and took this way to make me have a horrid time. I know just what she will do, she will say that the book is lost; that she cannot find it anywhere, or that somebody who was visiting them from a thousand miles away has carried it off. Oh, I know her! She will slip out of it in some way, and make everybody think that I stole my story. The professor thinks so now; I know he does.”

Then I remember that I buried my face again in my mother’s lap, and cried harder than ever. Oh, what a time it was! And what a dreadful Sunday we had. I think I made everybody in the house miserable. Poor mother was sick, and could not go to church, and I stayed with her; but I gave her very little peace. I remember I had moments of trying to be submissive to my fate. I even made up a story about a girl who rose above a like trial, and showed such a beautiful spirit that in the end she obliged everybody to see that she had been a martyr. But it was easier to make a story about it than it was to live it. The greater portion of the time I was going over every little detail of the trouble, trying to plan what I should

say the next morning. I remember that the day seemed a very long one. I looked anxiously forward to Monday morning, and at the same time dreaded it.

I went to school armed with a letter from my mother, carefully written, in her pretty delicate hand, on the very prettiest note-paper she had. It explained to Professor Barnard that I wrote my composition sitting by her side, and that I proposed and rejected several ways of finishing the story, even writing one or two of them out before I finally settled on the plan which suited me. In proof of this she enclosed the first writing, on scraps of paper, just as I had scribbled them. I might have been saved all my agony and ill-temper if I had remembered what strong proofs these were of my truthfulness.

Directly after prayers I was summoned to Professor Barnard's private room—the place where scholars always went to receive either special praise or special scoldings.

Phebe was there, her curls looking more golden than ever in the bright sunlight; and I thought her eyes danced wickedly. Professor Barnard motioned us both to seats in front of him, and said: "Well, Phebe, you remember, I suppose, what I told you you must bring me today. Are you ready to do so?"

"Yes, sir," said Phebe, very promptly. "I brought it, and Isabella's story is in it word for word, just as I said. It is

on the shelf in the hall; the book is so big that I could not bring it into chapel with me. May I go and get it?"

I could hardly believe my ears. The professor bowed his head, and Phebe tripped out, coming back in a moment with a great book, which she carried to the desk, my heart beating so meantime that it seemed as though the professor must hear it.

I suppose it was only a moment or two, but as I remember it, it seemed to me at least an hour that he stared at those pages, with a look on his face that I could not understand.

At last he raised his eyes, and said, in a very peculiar tone, "Isabella, you may come here and see if you recognize the words that are in your story."

I know that my face was very pale, and I suppose I was as near fainting as I ever reached in my girlhood. I took hold of the molding which ran round the side of the room, to steady me as I walked toward the desk. What do you think I saw lying on the professor's knee? It was a copy of Webster's Dictionary, Unabridged. Of course there was a sense in which what Phebe said was true; every single word of my story was in it.