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## Portrait of a California Mystic

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PORTRAIT OF A CALIFORNIA MYSTIC

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Art

by

Lisa Francesca

December 2017

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

PORTRAIT OF A CALIFORNIA MYSTIC

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH  
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2017

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## ABSTRACT

### PORTRAIT OF A CALIFORNIA MYSTIC

by Lisa Francesca

This book is about Helen van Löben Sels, an automatic writer born in the late nineteenth century, who was my great-grandmother. It explores a part of her life during which her writing was inspired by a spiritual or subconscious agency rather than by her conscious intention. I describe her childhood as an East Coast publisher's daughter, and her career as a California ranch wife and mother to discern what might have precipitated her mediumship. By exploring cardboard boxes filled with her papers, family memoirs and other sources, I found that an inherited propensity to write, the difficulty of being heard in her female role, loneliness, and a sudden illness all probably combined to produce what some mystical teachers refer to as "purification by fire," preparing her for the sensitivity required to channel entities. After examining how she continued to follow her calling despite its unorthodoxy, the book concludes with an appendix of brief passages she channeled through automatic writing. Automatic writing is a controversial topic, and Helen's claims divided her family. However, there is a hot market these days for what are now called "channeled" books, and I intend for this biography to add to the cultural conversation. So that readers might draw their own conclusions about her life, spiritual development, and writing in context, I have concentrated on rebuilding the world around her, providing a slice of early twentieth-century California life.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I dedicate this book to my husband, Mark Baumann. He built a world of green pastures and still waters where I could settle in to tell this story.

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## *Preface*

What turns an ordinary woman into a mystic or a medium? What circumstances compel a woman to channel notebook after notebook of distinct and erudite essays from personable voices? Where do the voices come from?

In order to begin this book, I must tell you about another, a thin yellow book with black spiral binding in my father's bookshelf titled *Master to Disciple*. The author was my maternal great-grandmother, whom we called Amama. Her given name was Helen. Her co-author, Anne Lane, had earlier written a book about something called "automatic writing." They printed only a few copies of *Master to Disciple*, exclusively for family members.

That book, first printed in 1938, was filled with lessons that were at most two pages long. I didn't know, then, that the writings were channeled, only that they were inspiring. Each lesson was followed by a phrase that was to be uttered, with conviction, by the reader, such as,

*I am well. I am well. I am absolutely well.*

*I am one with God and I am well.*

In my teens and twenties, I attempted again to read Helen's thin book, *Master to Disciple*, in a methodical way. I would start to read a page a day, taken with an idea that I'd grow more mature if I kept in mind the seven qualities she had outlined: Awareness, Manners, Pursuit of Power, Pursuit of Knowledge, Teaching, Poise, and Care of the Temple (the body). The language thrilled me, and I kept some of the thoughts close in my heart, but it was a difficult read and I didn't stick with it.

The Masters of whom Helen spoke appeared to be schoolteachers from another level, more evolved beings. They were not angels, but not limited to bodies on the earth either. They were opinionated and sometimes wrong when it came to details about when something would, or did, take place. But their advice was practical and their tone expansive, empowering, always encouraging readers to raise themselves to their utmost.

The book in your hands is not *Master to Disciple*. In fact, I've made sure not to inadvertently quote from any of that privately published book. Instead, I've continued to obsess all these years about the story of how Helen got to the point of writing about the Masters at all. Inspired by a biography class taught by Professor Cathleen Miller, I finally followed my compulsion to find whatever shreds of evidence existed about Helen's life, and tell her story as best as I could. This is the book you are holding.

My goal for this piece was to bring substance to a ghostly family story, to flesh out Helen's character and place her firmly in the California landscape, whether in the Delta, or visiting friends in San Francisco in the 1920s or on horseback in the Sierra. I also hoped to educate my readers about automatic writing so they are better informed to decide for themselves what they make of it. My intent was to explore themes such as the discomfort of living with a mismatch between one's internal truth and one's role in society, as well as a historical perspective on women gaining voice as they gained the vote. I also wanted to explore flooding in the California Delta lowlands, and psychic flooding from external and internal circumstances.

Writing this book has provided me with a heroic opportunity to weave episodes, events, feelings, times, and places with semantic memory (thoughts, meaning, opinions).

It has also been a chance to learn how to use my sources as enhancements, not simply prompts taking me in all directions. Resisting the undertow of research has turned out to be a particularly tough exercise, and I've done my best to live by this saying from Cathy Miller's workshop: "Only what stands out, goes in."

For the purposes of this book I have attempted to interview my elders, following Studs Terkel's example. Like Mark Twain, to use my own voice. To celebrate Helen's daily life and the small things, like so many *New Yorker* writers have done. Follow the clues, do fieldwork, interview locals and make it read like a novel, as did Truman Capote. Immerse myself in the story, as did Hunter S. Thompson. I've gathered anecdotes, letters, privately printed memoirs, news clippings, obituaries, maps and regional pamphlets, blog posts, photographs, Helen's channeled papers in binders, genealogies, taped recollections, table talk at family gatherings, conversation notes, magazines of the era, books about the era, personal memories, and personalia: a lecturer's lamp, a silver butterfly pin.

This book follows more than one biography style: it's partly "New Biography," a phrase used by Virginia Woolf, which generally refers to how biographers such as Lytton Strachey stressed artistic design, novelistic form, psychological interpretation, and dramatic sequences. This is also more of an inductive story, gathered from fragments at hand, than a deductive biography. It's a "Private Life," in fact very private, about a writer who did publish a book and at least one article, who wrote heroically for years, but deliberately did not publish most of what she wrote. This book could also be seen as "Feminist Life-writing," more a portrait of a woman than of her marriage or her family, although they are inextricable; my portrait is of a highly intelligent and literary woman in

a time and place that were just beginning to concede that women had something to say. It is also a spiritual biography. Helen had spiritual experiences of the direct kind, and had to follow her own intuition despite how her closest family felt about it.

Writing this biography of a family member has constantly raised the question: How much of myself should I allow to live among these pages? I decided to have *some* presence in the work, because Helen's life and the slim notebooks that she left behind have meant so much to me.

For more than a year I tried to weave a narrative of my life in parallel alongside of hers, but it just didn't work. Then, Edmund De Waal's *The Hare with Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance* opened my eyes to the possibility of telling ancestral stories while keeping myself in the story as a guide. I remember reading a line where he described how he decided to get on a plane to follow clues about his family and thinking, "I didn't know I could insert myself as an in-process explorer!" It is clear that the book is about De Waal's family, not himself; nevertheless he becomes a trustworthy guide to the story as I hope to be for my readers, especially when entering into the very delicate arena of automatic writing.

How can I trust my own memories of Helen, which are very brief, based on fewer than five encounters with her? Photographs help. Harder than missing memories are the challenges to fill in the gaps of missing evidence. What was the relationship like between Helen and her husband, Maurits? Their many children have all died now, I never found a diary from her, and I've been sleuthing a cold case. Ackerman says, in her Author's Note to *The Zookeeper's Wife*:

In telling their story, I relied on many sources detailed in the bibliography, but most of all on the memoirs (“based on my diary and loose notes”) of the “the zookeepers wife,” Antonina Zabinska, rich with the sensuous spell of the zoo; her autobiographical children’s books, such as *Life at The Zoo*; [husband] Jan Zabinska’s books and recollections; and the interviews Antonina and Jan gave to Polish, Hebrew, and Yiddish newspapers. Whenever I say Antonina or Jan *thought, wondered, felt*, I’m quoting from their writings or interviews (Ackerman 11).

At first I popped my ‘self’ in the very beginning of my book to explain why I was writing it, but I learned in workshop that placing myself there was confusing to the reader. “If the book is about Helen, introduce her first,” advised a fellow student, and it made sense. Diane Ackerman does not insert herself as a character until the last five pages of *Zookeeper’s Wife*, where she describes walking through Warsaw seeing the streets and buildings where her book took place. But in her Author’s Note she does tell us, “I came to this story, as to all of my books, by a very personal route: both of my maternal grandparents came from Poland” (Ackerman 13). Rather than the Author’s Note, I used the preface and then sparingly added myself to chapters here and there.

My Helen, too, wrote an autobiographical children’s book, and gave a family interview, both of which I use in my thesis. But that still doesn’t completely address evidence gaps. I have conversations with relatives, but they only give fragments of stories, sometimes conflicting. Mary Karr offers an insight: Maybe the space in between facts is in itself valuable. In *The Liar’s Club*, she shows how a writer can acknowledge and describe the shape of missing memories:

Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for a while. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here. I don't mean to be coy.

When the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks it out. But some ghost of an event may stay in your head . . . This blank spot in my past, then, spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my life that I both feared and kept coming back to because I couldn't quite fill it in. (Karr 9)

In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Karr told Amanda Fortini more about why she readily admitted to forgetting certain scenes and details: “I feel like the reader has given up twenty-plus dollars, and I owe her a vivid experience without lying. But certain events she expects aren't there. You have to collude with her if your head is blank. Plus sometimes what you forget says as much psychologically as what you remember. I don't try to reconstruct empty spots.”

Like Karr, I want to respect and collude with my readers. That is why I leave gaps that are decades long, writing only where the evidence points to a continuing story. And the story is not that this woman was born, lived, and died, but that after Helen spent much of her life trying to please her larger-than-life father and husband, as well as the subtle, ethereal beings with whom she communicated through automatic writing, she grew into her own authority and stopped working so hard to please others.

Karr brings her voice into her memoir by directly addressing the reader—providing yet another solution. “My father comes into focus for me on a Liars Club afternoon. He sits at a wobbly card table weighed down by a bottle. Even now the scene seems so real to me that I can't but write it in the present tense” (Karr 15). I took Karr's pointer and brought myself into the work through a side door, as a guide, one who addresses the reader with a combination of personal and historical context and family memoir.

If I've left myself in as a sideways character, the landscape of California has become another, and more prominent, character. Wallace Stegner remarked, in *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*, "how important the physical landscape is in the work of almost all California writers of real quality: Jack London, Frank Norris, John Steinbeck, Mary Austin, Joan Didion" and others (Stegner 139). While writing Helen's story, I found it impossible not to describe the Sacramento Delta and the Sierra, places that shaped her adulthood as well as the far away green landscape that shaped her childhood. The Delta is an active presence; Mount Diablo its silent witness.

Stegner also said, "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, ballads, yarns, legends, or monuments (207)." As I wrote this book, my native Bay Area transformed. Oakland changed from a somewhat anonymous city to the place where Helen arrived as a young bride, and the place where she and Maurits, and some of their children, are buried. The Sierra is now not only a talisman for my memories, but a sacred container for the thread of my ancestors, resurrected in folk songs around annual bonfires.

One other book provided a model for how I could organize and present information in my proposed biography project. Mirabai Starr's *Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation* is built in a series of short chapters comprising even shorter passages. The pace is fluid. The language is simple and plain, as I wish mine to be. A student in a recent workshop called my writing "plain," and I believe that it needs to be so because the story itself is, frankly, about disembodied beings. I want the reader to focus on the content, not my use of language.

I'm also keenly interested in Starr's book because her main character falls in with a highly charismatic spiritual teacher and struggles thereafter with defining her own identity. I see traces of Helen's struggle for self-agency later in her life. She was more than a housewife, and would not be content to live the rest of her life as a servant of the Masters either. Even when she took a correspondence course with the then-popular mystic Alice Bailey, she remained too independent to fully comply with Bailey's rules.

In this book, I have created a collage of memoir scraps from a particularly writerly and communicative branch of my family. Many of them authored books other than their memoirs. Were I to tell all the stories through my own eyes, we'd have to agree that this is a work of fiction. Neither Helen nor Maurits wrote a memoir. Yet I have found memoirs from Helen's father and sister and children, and she wrote a little about her life in a children's book. I've read more memoirs and notes by Maurits' grandfather, father and brother, and unearthed news and magazine articles besides. And then there are Helen's notebooks, typed on onionskin. And handwritten letters in a round, barely legible swift handwriting (a peculiar shape of writing that my mother shares).

Selection, the art of leaving out, has been a key writing lesson and a practice that I'll likely perform up until the day I finally turn this in. I have deleted vast amounts of material and chosen specific pages and paragraphs to create a space — a temple of words, a temple created from letters — paper walls built by many voices, containing an emptiness within which the stories of Helen and Maurits can gradually come into focus and take on a new life.



When necessary, I've added the smooth plaster of transitions that seem important to the story, using my imagination as to specifics. I've tried to add, "It might have been like this," or similar phrases as much as possible, and attempted to show my scholarship with reasonable end notes and a bibliography. While this could be called a mediated biography, where I have inserted myself as a guide between the subject and the reader, and I frequently offer opinions, I've tried as much as possible to avoid the biographical fallacy of reading my own life into Helen's.

**Please note:** To increase the readability of this dense material, I made a style decision *for the body of the book* that does not correspond with Modern Language Association's *Handbook* (8<sup>th</sup> ed). I chose not to pack long quotes into indented single lines. Each person's contribution is part of the text of this story. It's meant to be read at leisure, and for the rhythms. None of that can happen easily when a quote is caged within the center of the page. I have given each paragraph opening quotes, and ended the final quoted paragraph with closing quotes.

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*Helen's Outline, Typewritten, Discovered in a Box*

How did I begin?

Ouija board—Army boys—mother-in-law—Dutch language

Five years of Ouija board

Learning to write

Miscarriage—long illness

Again pencil—admitting that there might be something for me

Pencil taken by master of mind

Study with him—objection of husband

Heading for insane asylum

Dr. Renz—DAMN sane!

Children admitted because of religious change — —

Change in my life—two years to live

Master of health introduced—daily reports

Character of lesson changes after examination of my spirit

Eight years of almost daily lessons

Birth of my youngest child—difficulty—half hour necessary

Character of lessons

Masters—use of them

Seven Purposes—spirit stressed—reincarnation explained—free spirit—necessity for

awareness of spirit.

*[End of fragment]*

Part One: The Making of a Mystic

Recounting history, you wake the dead.  
—Ken Burns, in conversation  
San José State, 2016

“How Do I Begin?” (1920)

Like silvery nautical balloons, the cottonwood trees on either side of the Sacramento River sigh, whisper, glitter, forming a mirage of coolness. In fact, the summer heat can be merciless. To approach Vorden and the Amistad Ranches, one turns from the highway and drives along levee roads bordered by sycamores, walnut trees, and eucalyptus. Pear orchards and alfalfa fields lie low on either side.

The white, three-story house, Amistad, is surrounded by a park of oaks and palms. Between winter bedrooms and summer porches, more than thirty-two sleeping rooms cascade around a wide, curving oak staircase, where massive portraits of ancestors peer down or gaze into space. The dining table seats twenty; the icebox has its own room, and there is another room just for the dishes.

Inside the stifling house there is commotion. Helen is upstairs being interviewed by Dr. Renz, who is reputed in 1920 as one of the finest “doctors of mental illnesses” in California. Helen’s husband, Maurits, glowers downstairs, pacing across the Oriental rug before the large fireplace. The children have already learned to make themselves scarce when Papa is in such a state. The new governess, from Switzerland, has also repaired to her room and is lying still on her bed, her stocking feet near the open window, desperate for some cool breeze.

Helen’s recent behavior has been, well, disgraceful. Maurits had thought that once she was allowed to publish her little book for children, all the odd ideas would be flushed from her system and she’d settle back to mothering and being a wife. But she’s gotten worse. And now, though ill, she is not following any of the orders that the good doctors

have given her. Nor will she take the grey oil, an experimental drug which has been proven to work, at least for sick horses. Her stubbornness and force of will, something Maurits so loved in her when he met her, now present an immovable stone against which he has been spending his fury and frustration.

Helen had fallen gravely ill months earlier. Was it trichinosis? Pancreatic cancer? Whatever it was, it struck at the very center of her body and put her to bed for weeks. Knowing the family's stoicism, Helen may well have been in pain for months before it laid her flat. Doctors conferred and concluded that she could not be cured. They prescribed a regimen to keep her comfortable. Regular bleeding. Morphine. She should put her affairs in order. But then she began to act in a manner most peculiar.

She stopped lying in bed. Every morning she disappeared into her upstairs office in the wash building. She would emerge hours later and do strange things, such as drink quarts of water through the day and avoid the meat at dinner. For several days, she ate only walnuts and drank water and apple cider. Then for more than a week she took baths as hot as she could stand, four to five times every single day, and a housekeeper told Maurits the water was "just black" after she emerged. She refused the leeches, the morphine, and balked at taking the grey oil. This behavior was deemed insane, but the thing was, her health seemed to steadily improve. She wouldn't talk about it. When asked what she did in her office, she shrugged, "Only writing and reading."

Now Helen takes long walks at dawn and sunset. She appears to be talking to herself and sometimes singing. She has stopped eating with the family altogether. When she does appear, she is much thinner, but does not seem to be weak or frail or in need of anybody's

help. Although she shows affection to the children and to Maurits, and confers regularly with the Chinese cook and the governess, she appears a little remote.

The woman is a mule, thinks Maurits. He is sure that this change has something to do with these past few years of her confounded scribbling on paper, which began with the Ouija board incident. If only he had not been in the room. If only he had not recognized the letters as forming Dutch words. Had he been absent, he could have dismissed the whole thing as an incredible story.

While deep inside he feels Helen has the same healthy mind he's always known, still her social removal makes him wonder if she may be losing her sanity. He can scarcely bear to think of a future if Helen goes mad. He relies on her for everything—running the house, raising their children, keeping the intricate service of farm, ranch, and orchard running and the hired hands satisfied. What on earth would he do without her?

The pang of loss shoots through him. He remembers the babies who lie under the oak tree. He remembers the house fires and floods, sometimes every couple of years, which have wiped out their crops and money. Together, he and Helen have endured so much loss. Yet they rebuilt everything again from the ground up. He cannot lose Helen.

Then, again, fury replaces his pain. He will not have such disruption in his house. Doesn't she see that he is running a business? What does she mean abiding by rules he cannot see or understand? Part of him hopes that the doctor will take her away with him today, this afternoon, at least to restore some form of order, some simplification.

Grumbling, he paces. There is no breeze at the window. Padded by oriental rugs, the house is deeply quiet except for the Grandfather clock ticking slowly in the hall. Across

from the fireplace, the wide luminous painting by George Innes, the one Innes brought to the young homesick bride when he visited, glistens in the shaded living room. “You need a bit of Connecticut with you,” he had murmured. His daughter had married Helen’s brother. The painting had always been an oasis, a refreshment to her in the flat, empty tan of the Sacramento landscape. On the canvas, about six feet from side to side, a wealth of green suggests a forest, a subtle tangle of thicket; here and there you can glimpse luminous eyes of deer. Hard to divine. Mysterious. Maurits no longer sees the painting.



## 1. They Call Her Baby

Of all the children, she alone had the mop of black, glossy curls. They called her Baby—everyone: Papa, Mama, her older sister Lucy and her older brother Bradford, Cook, and even Mr. Rood, who looked after the horses. The people in town called her Miss Baby. She would not know her own name was Helen until years later when the next baby, her sister Betty, was born.

In October 1889, when she was seven and Brad eight and Lucy nine, Mama and Papa took them from Yonkers on a train to New York City. Their nanny, Fraulein, went with them. For days before leaving Yonkers, Mama and Fraulein and the four maids were very busy packing many trunks. The family would make a grand voyage to Europe.

The steamship Arizona left the New York Harbor at nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning. The children were sick for the first three days and then they acclimated, soon even able to go to meals in the saloon. Fraulein stayed sick in bed a few days more. Bradford was treated like a young man by the sailors and taught to tie all kinds of special knots, but Lucy and Helen were considered women, and rudely rebuffed whenever they approached the sailors.

The ship rocked, sometimes more than ten feet up and down, the children forever falling and skinning their knees on the wooden deck. Once, Papa and Mama sat on the deck without having their chairs tied on. The ship gave an awful rock and they tumbled pretty near head over heels.

After resting a few foggy days in a London hotel, they boarded a new steamer and headed to Gibraltar. There, the family stayed in a house with a beautiful path and flowers

blooming all over the wall. Real live monkeys walked among the trees and climbed into the fort through cannon holes to drink water. The children lived in Gibraltar with Fraulein and an English family for more than a month while Mama and Papa took photographs of Spain for *Century Magazine*. The English family who hosted the children had been prejudiced against loud Americans, but they had been completely won over by the Ellsworth children's politeness. And Baby's curls.

In January, Papa and Mama returned and the whole family traveled to Egypt. After a few days, Helen, Lucy, and Papa decided to go riding. They stepped outside their hotel and just as the donkey boys heard that somebody wanted a ride they all came rushing. They gathered around Papa and crowded him. The hostess came out with a whip to drive them away, but they didn't care. Then a waiter went to the top of the house with a bucket full of cold water and poured it down on the donkeys and men both. Papa decided they didn't need to ride that day. Lucy recorded all of this in her diary, which would be partially published in *St. Nicholas Magazine*, Century's highly successful national publication for children. The children back at home read this and teased her unmercifully for putting on airs—imagine, having your diary published.

Papa and Mama took the children to the Great Pyramid of Giza. Helen recalled this many decades later, and described the event to her grown children while a cassette recorder silently captured her story. No fences guarded the pyramids. There was no city built up next to them. The children prowled around the foundation and climbed up one of the corners. In the heat, the stone was smooth, soft, like the pelt of a golden animal.

How grand am I, thought Helen, climbing the pyramids of Egypt!

A few days later Helen sat in a café with her father. Papa drank an Egyptian coffee, small and black, while she drank hot chocolate and swung her legs. A man in full Arabian dress asked if he could sit next to them.

“Absolutely,” said Papa. The man sat and looked at Helen for a minute. Then he asked Papa if he could give something to this child. Her father said yes again. The man reached inside his robe and pulled out a very large and beautiful moonstone, and gave it to her.

“Thank you,” whispered Helen, cradling the gem in her hands and gazing down as a slender star disappeared and reappeared like a shining eye.

\*

Helen’s Mama was Helen Yale Smith Ellsworth and Papa was William Webster Ellsworth, great-grandson of Noah Webster. William, or W.W, was brilliant, driven, focused, and successful. His days were spent at the Century Publishing Company, headquartered in nearby New York City, where he managed and wrote for *Century Magazine*. He worked with Rudyard Kipling, Jack London, Mark Twain, Mary Mapes Dodge, even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. He ate most of his meals at the gentleman’s club, though he tried to spend at least one night a week with his family during the summer. He was proud of having sired a son and three daughters, even loved and cared about them, but he was first a businessman, and his wife was his able helpmeet. It is unsurprising how little his family is mentioned in his book, *A Golden Age of Authors*, published, of course, by Century. But in another book, a memoir published for only his descendants, there too he barely mentions his children. He was a man of his times.

At home in Yonkers, Helen Yale ran the house and lands. That meant knowing strategy and economy, and management of staff. Nannies and tutors cared for the children, cooks cooked and maids cleaned, drivers cared for the horses, and farmers farmed. Helen Yale was also expected to entertain frequently at the summer home in new Hartford, Connecticut, which they named Esperanza, “house of hope.” Entertaining literati and other artists required extensive event and hospitality planning as well as being calm, well-dressed, witty, and as gracious as the occasion demanded.

Helen Yale was quite at ease with her literary guests. Her mother, Julia Palmer Smith, was a prolific novelist. Helen Yale’s sister, Carlotta Norton Smith, was working diligently on what would become a popular book in Collier & Sons’ household management series: *The Homemaker: Her Science, with a Treatise on Home Etiquette*. One could venture to say that as W.W.’s helpmeet and hostess, writing up his notes, dropping the children off to Gibraltar for a month, Helen Yale had little room in her life to mother the children.

Music was part of their household—pianoforte certainly, and a violin or two, a flute, even a guitar. Baby Helen’s sister, Lucy, later wrote, “My most poignant and delicious memory of those early days is of the singing. As I lay in my bed in the porch room I could hear them singing. They would be in the green parlor on a soft summer evening, with a few Japanese lanterns hanging here and there. There would be a little talk and a little laughter and then another song. My mother had a beautiful soprano, clear and sweet. My father had a lovely tenor. Aunt Lillian Myers sang a most moving contralto and Uncle Perit sang a glorious bass.”

There were horses, with names like Whim, Posey, Lady, Molly and Dick, lovely Morgans. Helen loved—adored—horses. A horse will nakedly show affection, or its fear; a horse will take all the time one wants to befriend it. Helen could talk to them, their ears trembling now and then, whickering in a friendly, conspiratorial way. She could feed a horse an apple, or some grass, or let it find a lump of sugar in her pocket. She could tug its mane with her small hands, and ride like royalty on its magnificent back. Horses smell good. Helen could not think of a single thing that was not good about a horse. Hour for hour, she spent more time raised by these gentle giants than by anyone else. Later, she would have a favorite horse, and nearly every day, she would ride down to a velvety dark, muffled part of the woods locally called Satan’s Kingdom. She would carry a rifle and be fearless.

“We had so much time,” wrote Lucy in her memoir. “Time for everything. Time for reading, tennis, swimming, walking, long—we took very long walks. And we had our bicycles, too, but I preferred horseback riding. We would be in the saddle early before breakfast on hot summer mornings, and for long rides in the lovely fall afternoons, the air redolent with the delicious fragrance from the witch hazel blossoms.

“We had our ‘grapevine kitchen’ in which Helen and I made all the preserves and pickles for the house. Helen usually found time to make a huge spice cake which we would eat at once after an evening of games or charades. We spent hours planning the most ingenious and amusing charades.

“Before going to bed, we would all walk down to the pump on Pussy Lane to get a drink of that delicious water. And if it was a lovely moonlit evening, we might walk

down to the church and climb up to the belfry by way of the most rickety ladders. We would sit there, and sing, and tap that lovely bell lightly with our fingers, very softly so as not to disturb our neighbors.”

On summer evenings, the children were called to cross back over the fields to home where they shared bowls of bread and milk around the low nursery table. “It’s too light to go to bed,” they complained, but their bodies were tired. When Nurse poured pitchers of hot water into the bath they were glad to slide in. Brad went first, then Helen and Betty while Brad was toweled off, then Lucy. Their white cotton night shifts felt wonderful. The screens kept out the mosquitoes but allowed an occasional drift of warm breeze, and cicadas lulled them to sleep.

In the silence of this world, populated by animal or insect noises but no radio or television drama, there is deep restfulness. Their world is plain and factual, in front of them, surrounding them. Their thoughts can create their own cacophony and often do, but they are not bombarded by disturbing stories. There is no newscast, no interlude of fast-paced commercials, no scrolling feed of pictures and videos about what others are doing. This is a Big Silence, and dwelling within it helps to keep the soul whole. Years later Helen would find that deep quiet again in Yosemite, and on her beloved patch of land with wooden cabins at Ebbett’s Pass, eight thousand feet high in the California Sierra.

## 2. Maurits Carel Constantijn

Across the continent from Helen and her family, Maurits was born in the old de Fremery home known as “The Grove,” a lot that comprised nearly six blocks near Eighteenth Street and Adeline in Oakland. A community park still exists there, one of the oldest in the city. Maurits’ father, Pieter Justus (P.J.) van Löben Sels, was a Dutch Consul with a business in San Francisco. P.J., a University of Utrecht graduate whose family had a moated castle near The Hague, had married Adele, the San Francisco-born daughter of the pioneer Jacobus “James” de Fremery.

James had famously come over by ship from the Netherlands in 1848 with thousands of pairs of Dutch wooden clogs in the hold. He thought the gold-rushers might want to keep their feet dry and warm in San Francisco, but his wares were mocked by every storekeeper. He returned to his ship and split every last pair for kindling, which he sold at a great profit in the wood-starved city. Later, he founded the Savings Union Bank of San Francisco, which became Wells Fargo. He also wrote *Mortgages in California: A Practical Essay* in 1860, a deeply footnoted book as dry as unbuttered toast.

Maurits grew up at the Grove with his parents, brothers Ernst, James, and Justus, and a sister, Virginie. About living there, Maurits’ father, P.J., wrote in his memoir: “The Grove was a big place, covering six or eight blocks in what was once believed destined to be the coming residential district of Oakland. It was covered with a dense growth of primeval oaks. Majestic, bent, gnarled, some were several hundred years old. Some had been blown over by the prevailing west winds. A dense growth of wild blackberries and other vines and bushes filled the spaces between the trees and in places hung from the

branches—a sight to please the gods in the springtime. It was a breeding place of the California quail, hundreds of which, as also an occasional rabbit, would be seen roaming in their natural habitat. The quail would sometimes be quite tame, feeding in droves just outside our windows. And sometimes we would trap them in order to feast on quail-on-toast, at one time a very favorite dish in these parts. Personally, I always thought the meat to be tasteless and dry” (PJVLS 16).

About his son, he wrote, “Maurits, our beast man, from earliest childhood evinced a love of animals and a remarkable power over and with them. He raised two or three hundred chickens at the Grove, also ducks and doves. They were well fed, as the boy was interested in their welfare. . .”

Back then, California was populated by fewer than a million people, half of whom lived in and around the San Francisco Bay Area.

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In 1888, P.J. took the family to Europe. Maurits’ brother, James, remembered later in his memoir how they took the overland train to Chicago, and then New York for several days and nights, where they stayed in a hotel near Central Park and the brothers were allowed to play and walk the streets by themselves. They left New York on the Holland-American steamer *Veendam*.

James wrote, “P.J. raised his head rather suddenly and hit a projection in a door which crushed his skull a little. He later had to have an operation in Holland to remove the bone and they did not put in a plate. So forever after, there was a small depression on top of his head that you could drop a marble into” (JFVLS 2).



From Holland they took trains over to Vienna and then Switzerland. As Adele recuperated from tuberculosis in a Viennese hospital, P.J. and the children lived in a cottage near Lausanne, with the governess and a maid, for about a year. Unused to snow, the boys were given skates for Christmas and promptly put them on and skated across the magnificent hardwood floors. The parents came home to a shredded floor.

During their mother's absence, the three older boys each wrote her a letter once a day in English, French or Dutch, alternately, and she would send them back corrected. The next day when they wrote again, they were to spell the corrected words in the previous letter. That was all their schooling for the year. Later, a governess was engaged to teach them, as best she could, some arithmetic, geography, and history.

“My father went back to California to look after his ranching interests during that first winter and must've been gone several months,” James continued. “When he came back it seems to me it was really the first time I remember him very clearly—what he looked like, how he acted, and what he expected of us. He was a large, rather heavy man, very bald, who liked the outdoors. Very often he would organize a walk to a nearby, rather low mountaintop, taking the whole family along, including the governess. I remember on one such trip my mother was even able to go along.”

Altogether the boys spent about five years in Europe, where they became fluent in French, German, and Dutch and not quite so fluent in English anymore. Adele's health grew slowly better, though she never did get over her tuberculosis. She did her best not to communicate the disease to any of her children, and succeeded. In 1893, on the voyage back to America, they arrived in Chicago just as the Columbian Exposition was opening.

James said, “One of the things which impressed us most was a gas engine, a one cylinder affair which made an awful lot of noise but which was used to operate a cement mixer and also a pump. I remember my father saying he could use some of those, and he later did.” From there they took the train back to Oakland where they arrived: father, mother, five children, a governess for the sister, a tutor for the boys, a Swiss cook, a Swiss maid, a Swiss laundry woman, and the son of the cook, who was tasked with the heavy work such as building fires and cleaning shoes.

P.J. was an exacting father who made his sons work hard, as we shall hear him say later on. He was also a bit gruff with others; these traits Maurits inherited, as well as a reticence that would later lead some to characterize him as cruel. Maurits was not cruel by intent, but he appears to have had plans that often didn’t take the feelings and opinions of others, especially women and children, into account. Nevertheless, his European stay probably gave him a sense of the vast and interesting world, something he’d recognize and enjoy in Helen, and his trips to the Sierra gave him a passion for those mountains that he would share later with Helen: one thing, at least, on which they always agreed.

### 3. Cornell

One afternoon I listened to cassette tapes of Helen, my great-grandmother, then in her eighties, reminiscing with Carel, one of her younger sons. They spoke about when she had attended Cornell University's College of Agriculture for three years—the sole woman in Cornell's farming classes in 1903. Cousins say she was banned from the cow-milking sessions because the school considered young ladies too delicate to watch such intimate operations!

The young farming students took an interest in why she was there, and some courted her—young men she called her swains, by taking her on exciting dates. They knew she liked to do fun, unusual things. One man worked out a deal with the train company so that she actually *drove a train* for two hours toward New York, then they got on another train homeward and she drove that one, too.

Another invited her to drive his sleigh and horses in the snow. Her voice on the cassette tape was deep and measured. “He said, are you sure you can drive this? And I said, ‘Of course!’ So I drove them, and as we turned a corner, there we went, tumbling into the snow. I knew how to drive! But in that snow, well, there was the ditch right next to us!”

Maurits and Helen shared one of the very early morning classes in 1904. Various factions of our family are convinced that Helen and Maurits met while having a discussion over the merits of a particular bull. Others say it was a horse. Maurits, a Western farmer who had spent at least a year at the University of California at Berkeley, was there because the only farming classes in the country were at Cornell.

The morning class began before seven a.m. They became friends, though Helen continued to go out with her swains on extraordinary, but inexpensive dates. No one had much money. Helen, being the girl, of course could not offer to pay for anything, but she would make food before leaving home so that she and her young escort could have a simple picnic.

Maurits was good-looking and also had an arresting confidence. The *Oakland Tribune* had been filled with mentions of the van Löben Sels brothers at this debutante ball, that cotillion *en masque*, or another birthday party wherein the game of Hearts was played. The papers were often breathless. “Hundreds of invitations were issued,” said one. “The spacious apartments were thronged with people. The house was brilliantly lighted throughout with electricity.” Maurits had ample opportunity to get to know members of the fair sex in his age group in Oakland, but when he met Helen at Cornell, he found her more compelling than anyone. I suspect they walked together, comparing their siblings, their larger-than-life fathers, and their grand tours of Europe. Maurits, smitten, asked Helen pretty quickly to marry him and go out West. As she tells it, “I said, are you *sure* about this?”

“He said, ‘Yes, I am.’

And I said, ‘Well, I’m not. I have to think about it.’ One of the things that helped me decide to go out West with him: he promised I could have as many horses as I wanted!”

Maurits was probably not amused by the acrostic one of Helen’s friends wrote for her:

*To a Young Lady on the day of her wedding to Maurits C.C. van Löben Sels:*

Helen Ellsworth—lovely name!  
Echo of thy strength and sweetness  
Love, that's made of flowers and flame,  
Envies thee thy rare completeness.  
Name like music in our life  
Earnest, mellow, gentle, singing  
Let us, ere its long eclipse,  
Linger on its bell-like ringing  
Seven names though thou shalt wear,  
Worthy, noble and complete,  
On them thinking now I swear  
(Rose by any name so sweet)  
Thou, when memory fails, shalt be  
Helen Ellsworth still to me.

Helen married Maurits in May 1905. The wedding took place at Esperanza. Helen wore a gown of white chiffon trimmed with Valenciennes lace that had adorned her mother's wedding gown, and a veil caught up with orange blossoms. Holding a shower bouquet of lily-of-the-valley, she stood on the same small rug her mother, her sister Lucy, and her Aunt Carlotta had stood on when they each married. The house was filled with family from both coasts, as well as some prominent guests from New York, Hartford, Boston, San Francisco, Oakland, Baltimore and Washington.

#### 4. The Pancake

I love train rides: the comfort, the sound, moving past fluid landscapes and sometimes peeking into lit kitchen windows and back yards. Think what the train ride might have been like for Helen, an East Coast girl freshly married. Imagine leaving your home in Connecticut, where so much of the road is covered by leafy trees and the only bits of sky come into view around neatly kept farms. Coming from this to the great skies over sweeping plains and prairies, through the majestic Rockies to the great alkali wasteland of Utah, and from Sierra snows to the broad Sacramento valley. About the last leg of that trip, in *California for Travelers and Settlers*, Charles Nordhoff effused: “A grander or more exhilarating ride than that from Summit to Colfax, on the Central Pacific Railroad, you cannot find in the world. The scenery is various, novel, and magnificent. You sit in an open car at the end of the train, and the roar of the wind, the rush and vehement impetus of the train, and the whirl around curves, past the edge of deep chasms, among forests of magnificent trees, filled you with excitement, wonder, and delight.”

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In 1905 the State of California turned Yosemite over to the federal government. Only a few months earlier, President Theodore Roosevelt had signed into law the act redrawing its boundaries as a National Park. He had done this based on his days spent camping with the great naturalist, John Muir, who occasionally wrote articles for Helen’s father at *Century Magazine*.

Helen and Maurits would have seen a few more large trees across the valley floor than there are today, but not that many more because of the carefully controlled burns by

generations of Miwok. The valley was filled with quail, grouse, deer, bears, panthers, and coyotes. According to family lore, Helen had an impromptu horseback race with a local native—I would guess a Miwok or an Awahneeshi man. The very next year, Miwok and Awahneeshi people were forcibly removed from Yosemite Valley to preserve land for the national park.

Hotels and guides were plentiful, but Maurits and Helen decided to camp in a tent. Our family has a story about that, too. Early next morning, Helen slipped out, dampened a cloth in the icy water from her canteen, washed herself and dressed. When all was tidy, she found the flour and salt and an egg and beat everything together. Then she busied herself stoking the campfire to a steady flame, found the spider griddle and placed it on top, and poured some of the batter. By the time Maurits poked his curly head out of the tent, the pancake had been flipped.

Helen was feeling proud and wifely. She had baked spice cakes, but this was her first griddle cake. Maurits washed up and sat by the fire, tin plate on his knee, flapjack on the plate. He bit into it and frowned.

“My dear wife, have you ever made pancakes before?”

“Why, no. Is there something wrong with it?”

Maurits set his jaw in a look that would become very, very familiar to her. He swiftly rose with his plate, rummaged in his saddlebag, and with a mallet nailed the offending flapjack to a tree. He stopped to gaze at Helen, still sitting by the fire, half amused and half perplexed. Then he removed his gun from its holster, took aim, and shot the pancake. The shots echoed through the valley floor this early morning.

They ended up eating oatmeal (that Maurits made) and drinking strong black coffee. Helen would eventually learn to cook well, and this story would be told for generations. But what is overlooked in the many humorous retellings is Helen's dawning awareness that her loving family and tutors and her years of schooling had actually done little to prepare her for marriage and housekeeping, and that her handsome new husband would be . . . opinionated. Forceful. Blunt.



## 5. On the Topic of Awareness

*Men and women of Earth, you are so slow to realize the advantages that could be yours if only you called on us. We are standing waiting and we can help you in so many ways. . . Come and ask of us and we will give you aid.*

*Men and women on earth, let it be known to you that we spirits are not dead but living in and around you, and we will make ourselves known unto you in many ways and with many signs.*

*Let them that have eyes, see — and them that have ears, hear.*

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The above is a fragment from Helen's notebooks, found in a box kept by a family branch in Oregon. All the italicized entries that follow, and all the "lessons" in the appendix, come from Helen's typed notebooks during the period from 1924-1925.

## 6. Oakland

What must Oakland of 1905 have seemed to Helen, a Yankee from Yonkers and Hartford, Connecticut? A genteel Easterner, Helen might have appreciated the scene of orderly streets with residences, schoolhouses and churches, and long lines of evergreen trees stretching toward the Bay. As described in W.C. Bartlett's essay for John Muir's travelogue, *Picturesque California*: "It is a city of homes and schools, and as an educational center people are drawn to it from all parts of the Pacific coast. Like Brooklyn, it catches the overflow of a larger city; and it draws to it the best elements. The turbulent and disorderly are not attracted" (Muir 130).

Helen was introduced as "my wife" into the Maurits' family household of five men and two other women, all of whom spoke Dutch most of the time: Peter Jan (P.J.) the great bald patriarch with a white beard and a tiny dip in his skull; Maurits' brothers Ernst, James, and Justus Jan; his mother Adele, and sister, Virginie. They had moved from "The Grove" to a new home on 520 Sycamore, a place that no longer stands. It might have been a tight fit, all those adults. Helen was a long way from home, and had not yet picked up any Dutch. Virginie, a few years younger than Maurits, never warmed to Helen. Before he went away to Cornell, Maurits had a terrible bout of mastoiditis and spent months at home, head wrapped like van Gogh, languishing in darkness and quiet. Perhaps of all the siblings Virginie had grown closest to her brother, patiently reading to him and caring for him, and resented the new, fashionable woman who arrived and took up all of Maurits' time.

It might have been difficult for Helen to acclimate to the new household, not much like her parents. Maurits explained his family is not from “Holland,” but from the Netherlands, and why the wording makes a difference. He taught her the words “Dank u wel” (thank you) and “alstublieft” (please). Helen heard how closely *als-tu-blieft* echoes the courtly, “as you please,” and marveled at how Dutch bridges English and German.

After they finished dinner, they sat back and “de oude man” P.J. told Helen a story that he would later recount in his memoir (PJVLS Major). “My dear wife and I, always liking to have the children with us, sharing and guiding their pleasures and desiring as much as possible to spend life out-of-doors, were wont on all sorts of occasions to pack the entire family, the maid, and Major [the dog you see right here, by my chair] in the big red wagon, ever faithful companion of over 20 years.

“Early in the morning, right after breakfast, the word would be set forth and off all would go, each to his appointed task. Maurits and Jim would harness the horses and pack feed, Ernst would grease the axles, Virginie would make sandwiches, cut meat and bread for the picnic lunch, and JJ would fill and sling canteens, and serve as courier general. I do not know what I did except the driving and superintending.”

He paused and stared at Helen, nodding his head meaningfully in the direction of Maurits. “In this regard the doctrine has of late been enunciated that I made my boys do all the work, worked them too hard. Perhaps that is right, but I know that the system worked well in producing a fair and healthy lot of manly men, alert, helpful, always ready to jump in and assist in anything going on, knowing how to do things, how to tackle a

job. I have no apologies to make.” Maurits smiled apologetically at Helen and her heart surged with sympathy and pride for her husband as a boy.

The old man continued. “I remember a picnic, such a picnic as I have described, to Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. We had been away all day. I remember, at the corner of California and Market streets while returning at 5:00 PM towards the ferry, looking back and seeing Major following our wagon. Wagons did not go via the creek route but were transferred on the big white ferry boats which carried the thousands of passengers crossing every 20 minutes of the day.

“We made our ferry, and then, nearing the Oakland side and preparing to debark — no Major. It appeared that our dear companion had been blocked at the boarding gates at the pier in San Francisco. My dear wife wanted me to go right back, but I was sure that a dog of his intelligence would know how to fool a gatekeeper and would find his way home. So we continued on our way, and I was lazy and tired and I stayed home.

“The next day, Sunday, again my wife wanted me to go, and again I declined to do so. The last thing I heard Monday morning as I left for my day’s work was the exhortation: don’t fail to bring back Major! I promised readily, but had first to go to the Oakland courthouse to take care of a legal matter, and it was approaching noon by the time I finished. I am ashamed to say I had forgotten all about the dear dog, and so continued routinely on my way to San Francisco.

“Imagine, if you can, the dense packed crowds at the ferry terminal, surging every twenty minutes through the narrow gangway giving access to Market Street. As I was moving along as part of such a surge something like a cyclone hit me, something fierce

and strong and dark and wild, moving at once all over, around and through me. It took me moments to realize what was happening. The crowd gave way, and there was that fine dog who had been watching the hundreds of thousands of legs which had passed that very spot from Saturday, five o'clock pm to Monday noon, say forty-three hours, without having had anything to eat or drink or a place to sleep, determined that no pair of legs he knew was to pass through unclaimed."

"Goodness," Helen exclaimed, privately thinking this was an unconscionable way to treat a dog. "What happened then?"

"Why, we went to my office in a car and I got him a bone to eat and water to drink. These he dispatched ravenously, and then fell asleep exhausted at my feet in the Consulate, corner of Sacramento and Montgomery streets." He leaned down and stroked old Major's ears.

## 7. Dutch Salad

Helen stood in the kitchen of her in-laws' grand house, watching Adele, the matriarch, make salad for Maurits and his father and brothers in the Dutch way, the way the men in the family are accustomed to eat.

Adele de Fremery, a San Francisco native, was partly Dutch, too; her father, James de Fremery, was a Dutch Consul just like her husband. A slight chill may have still existed between her and this tall, awkward Yankee girl, Helen, who had evidently not worked much in the kitchen before. Adele may have not quite forgiven her son for bringing this lanky, headstrong girl home from Cornell.

“The lettuce must be fatigued—Fatiguee, FatiGUEE, comme ca,” she instructed. She took a wooden spoon and beat the leaves of fresh, crisp iceberg lettuce until at last they submitted into a green cape draped along the inside of the large wooden bowl. Helen reflected on that forlorn lettuce. It hadn't a chance in this woman's be-ringed claws.

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My mother remembers what went into the Dutch salad. She recalls eggs, and “tender greens,” possibly butter lettuce or even some escarole, and a thin dressing of mayonnaise. Years after Helen stood with Adele in Oakland, I ate this salad in a suburb of Los Angeles, prepared by my grandmother. Roberta, born in Illinois and transported by train to California, had learned from Helen how to make this salad for the continuing stream of Dutch men. I was perhaps eight years old. We sat on ironwork patio chairs on a hot day, the sky smogged into a single sheet of gray, and I gazed at the arbor of grape leaves overhead and noticed tiny pale grapes.

My mother had brought my little brother and me here, visiting her parents. My mother visited from New York City, I visited from my father's house in San Francisco, and Justin visited from his father's house on the other side of San Francisco. It was our first meal together as a family in more than a year.

I was unimpressed by the salad (mayonnaise, hard-boiled eggs, chopped onions, and the wretched remains of lettuce), but I was absolutely crazy over my Grandmother Roberta's wall shelf that held twelve miniature silver spoons from the Netherlands. She had let me hold them and count them. They had tiny windmills at the end, the blades really moved, and the silver was so thin I could feel the heat from my fingers through the bowl of the spoon. I decided then that everything Dutch must be marvelous.

## 8. On the Topic of Manners

*You must always be sensitive to the other's point of view. Make your greeting a more effective greeting, emphasizing it and speaking a little about your trip. Play a game about it if you wish. No harm, and overdo it a little until you make it yours. Make believe that you are the wife of the highest official you can imagine and play the part to your own . . . amusement—and your own great benefit. Of course you will overdo! But let it be so for a time.*

*Do not forget that your thoughts of others are quite as important as your words about them, or toward them. Make it your habit to laugh if you find that you are permitting yourself to be annoyed. Laugh at yourself and the way in which you do not come up to your ideals, and then make an effort to dispel all annoyance. You must not dwell on thoughts that cause annoyance. Forget them. Overlook them and go about your affairs serenely. This attitude may cause annoyance to others. If it does you must not let that change your way for this is your right, and here others must learn to conform to you.*

*I am here this morning to impress on you . . . the need for less haste in your relationship with ALL with whom you come in contact. You give your orders and leave and the contact is abrupt. Be just a little slower, let just a little more of your personality loose so that others will glimpse a little of the real you. Do it as a game, and you will enjoy watching the change in the faces of those with whom you come in contact.*

*Do not be satisfied with any contact, be it ever so slight, unless you feel that you have given something worthwhile away, and study how best to make this gift acceptable.*



## 9. Earthquake

The honeymoon had borne some fruit. When Helen was heavily pregnant, her father and mother took the train from Yonkers to stay with the Oakland household, a trip they would take annually for decades while William Webster (called W.W.) nurtured his national lecture tour. On an April afternoon in 1906, W.W. and Maurits' father, P.J., got along like old friends, swapping stories in the parlor over cigars and brandy, while Helen attempted to rest upstairs. Like P.J., W.W. loved a good adventure, and like P.J., he considered foreigners, women, and animals to be mere background in his travels, hardly warranting a voice of their own.

“When I made a trip to the Mediterranean with my family,” said W.W. to P.J., “I took with me the first Kodak I had ever seen—a long, oblong box which only made round pictures, and you pulled a string to do it. In Tangier the natives dislike photographs—a reproduction of one's Mohammedan self in a picture may make trouble for the original in another world—and I carried my Kodak done up like a brown-paper parcel, a small hole in the end for the lens, another for the string. It worked fairly well excepting that the click sometimes betrayed me.”

They both chuckled, and he continued to reminisce. W.W. had worked on an article by Theodore Roosevelt; he had been rather intimidated when Rudyard Kipling came to the Century offices to argue about royalties while working with Mary Mapes Dodge on *The Jungle Book*; he corresponded with Jack London and had visited London's mother while in Oakland. WW's father-in-law (Helen Yale's father) had once lived in the same boarding house with Edgar Allen Poe, who was in the depths of poverty. “Each boarder

had to heat his own room,” said W.W., “and my father-in-law lent Poe a stove to keep him warm, and sometimes helped him out with his board money.”

He recalled when Walt Whitman came to New York in 1889 and read his lecture on Lincoln in Madison Square. James Russell Lowell was in that audience, and Mark Twain, and many other literati. W.W. mused about Whitman’s appearance: “In looks the good, gray poet was rarely satisfying, a noble head covered with flowing gray hair and with a beard that was a part of it, his face of a healthy hue, on his well-shaped body a loosely fitting gray suit. . . One felt that he was of any age—that his counterpart, clad in a long robe, might have been an Old Testament prophet.

“As he was lame he sat in a big armchair through the lecture, which while somewhat disjointed was tenderly, beautifully delivered, with frequent stops for illustrative interpolations. There was a suggestion of Lincoln himself in the speaker, a certain calm, removed air as of one who lived in great spaces and who thought on noble things. At the end he read ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ and we all wept together” (Ellsworth GA 64)

Maurits might have been sitting in that room, but not as an active participant in these conversations between fathers-in-law. As his son, Maurits Just, would write many years later, “To my father, the measure of a man was in his ability and readiness to handle his end of an eight-foot cross-cut saw; to load beans (hundred-pound bags) all day; to yo-heave ho five-wire bales of hay. That’s not where W.W. was, or ever had been. Conversely, conversing simply for the joy of give and take, or writing, editing, publishing, and consorting with those who did—that was not for M.C.C.” (MJVLS).

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Helen, largely pregnant, could not get comfortable. She lay upstairs in the Oakland house attended by Bridget Martin, her childhood maid and cook who had ventured out West with Helen's parents to assist with her labor. Maurits made plans with friends to go duck hunting in the Delta the next morning, knowing he would be consumed with anxiety and therefore useless around the birth of this first child, and he spent the night on one of the broad covered sleeping porches. Well before dawn on April 18 he woke and crept out in stockinged feet with his gear, putting his boots on outside so as not to wake anyone. He was far away, almost ready to embark upriver on the *Delta Queen*, when the rumbling started. It was a catastrophic earthquake—the quake—that set San Francisco on fire for days.

Of the event, W.W. would later write in his family memoir: “Our Bridget, who came with us, had her jaw broken by a falling book-case as she sat on Helen's bed, holding her hand. I went after a doctor for her and for Helen—of course, all telephones were knocked out—and I saw the devastation of Oakland in its very first stage that morning—a church spire lying across Telegraph Avenue, and every one of the 40,000 chimneys in Oakland down.”

The sleeping porch where Maurits had lain just hours earlier had become a dusty pile of chimney bricks. The family gazed at the pile, speechless.

The next day, Maurits' and Helen's first daughter, Helen Adelaide Ellsworth, nicknamed Ailee, was born.

## 10. Vorden

Maurits' grandfather de Fremery founded the San Francisco Savings Union, which happened to own huge tracts of land in Sacramento. Since 1881, Maurits' father, P.J., had been appointed as an agent to manage their lands in the Pearson District: more than three thousand acres of reedy swampy reclaimed lands on the banks of the Sacramento River. For nearly forty years, the construction of a back levee, seven and a half miles long, twenty-three feet high, and twelve feet wide at the top was P.J.'s main effort.

After the cosmopolitan bustle of Oakland, the Sacramento Delta was another world entirely. The Stockton Port is seventy-five nautical miles up from the San Francisco bay. In 1906 the deep-water channel was fifteen feet deep; by 1932 it deepened to twenty-seven feet, allowing the first ship, the Daisy Grey, up from the ocean all the way to the Delta. The river must be dredged annually; it fills with silt washed down from the Sierra Mountains.

Back then, plantations dotted each side of the river. Steamboats plied up and down the river during vegetable season. Charles Howard Shinn, another of Muir's essayists from *Picturesque California*, described the set-up: "Each farmer has a landing, usually in the shade of a wide-spreading sycamore tree. The foliage ashore is tropical in its forms and luxuriance. The freight sends up the aroma of orchard and vineyard, for it is largely fruit — peaches, prunes, pears, cherries, grapes — luscious all. Occasionally a landing is piled with melons, watermelons, musk melons, and that cross between the two, the Casaba." This is the world's only inland Delta, other than the one on China's Pearl River.

Later in his article, he adds a less sylvan note: “There is a wild sort of strength dormant here, in this low land region; it has its perils and its heroes, no less than the high Sierras. Lonely, terrible, beautiful, are the real fen-lands of history, and this tule country is of them. . .” Tule refers to the bulrushes that dominate both sides of the river: luxuriant reeds that grow to more than eight feet high. Layers and layers from eons of rotting, decayed tules form the light brown, rich peat that makes the Delta such powerful farmland.

“Here, indeed,” Shinn pointed out, “one finds many a Belgian or Hollander already at work, and more coming every year; the blood of the dwellers by Zouder Zee turns to such fertile lowlands as these, and devotes its unconquerable stubbornness to the task of permanent reclamation” P.J. had renamed Trask’s Landing “Vorden,” after his hometown in the Netherlands. Maurits is already familiar with it from having spent summers there with his brothers and fathers, working. Always working. A mere eleven hundred miles of manmade channel-front levees prevent the reclaimed land from reverting to its origins, a swamp, wetland, fen, and estuary.

At first, Maurits’ older brother James worked the ranch at Vorden and lived there, and so, while they continued to live in Oakland, Helen and Maurits frequently visited and assisted. But late in 1906 he fell very ill, too sick to run such a large operation. In his place, P.J. decided that Maurits and his new wife should live there and work the lands, which included ensuring that the electric pumps kept river water out of the fertile acres. When James at last recovered from his convalescence, there was no longer really a place for him at the ranch, which engendered some resentment between the brothers.

Imagine how it is for Helen when she and Maurits finally arrive at the ranch house midway between Courtland and Walnut Grove. The house is white, quite a nice roomy, airy home. Small palm trees are planted around the lawn. After the street noises of Oakland, Vorden's quiet is overwhelming. There don't seem to be any immediate neighbors. The lands are vast; there are so many hired hands and there's a mountain of work to be done. Does she wonder if she's up to the task?

In the proper town of Vorden, away from the house, at least ten structures line the riverfront with several clusters of buildings nearby: two grocers, a saloon, a hotel where patrons can enjoy a seven-course Italian meal for one dollar, a post office, a one-room school where nine grades are taught, a Catholic chapel, and a number of homes. On hot summer days the river turns pale green with a multitude of floating asparagus butts, chopped and discarded by Chinese workers in the Del Monte Cannery.

Much of this land was within the floodplain, and floods occurred nearly every year between 1899 and 1912. After years of relative quiet, the next batch of annual floods began in 1928. Maurits' brother James later wrote "Whenever we were threatened with high rains, we had to get the cattle out and remove our people from their cabins before it was too late. One year, about five years before I went there, they had a heavy winter and lost 200 head of cattle, which drowned. A flood is a terrible thing, and in some ways worse than a fire because after it gets so high you can't do much—and you know it is going to get worse. Any animals that are trapped on what become islands cannot be rescued. I've seen many animals drown which could've been saved by proper action a

few hours earlier, but the trouble was, and is, that you never know how bad it is going to be, and you just can't get scared every time it rains" (JVLS 31).

Rising from the flat lands as broad and gentle as low cello notes, the mountain accidentally named Diablo watches, rests, reflects, and sometimes makes its own weather. Sacred to the Miwok and Ohlone peoples as the point of creation, it began under the Pacific Ocean as scrapings between two tectonic plates, and continues to grow by between one and three millimeters a year, one-twelfth as fast as a fingernail.

As Helen walks or rides along the dikes engineered by her father-in-law (and built by Chinese labor), she notices the night herons, the cormorants, ducks, and swallows by the river. Scruffy willow shrubs taller than houses inhabit the banks, while live oaks and occasional white oaks stand further inland. Slow "snow" drops from towering, shimmering cottonwood trees in the summer. Remote thunderheads build themselves silently, almost apricot-rose in the midday blaze. Far off, a column of dust rises.

Otters, muskrats, minks, beavers and snakes also live along the river, as do osprey. The waters teem with striped bass, salmon, steelhead, sturgeon, and catfish. Pet pigs nibble on wild hyacinth, while raccoons and even coyotes can be spotted swimming between the islands. When fall arrives, Canadian geese make homes along the tall shocks of tule reeds that grow to six and seven feet high and as thick as a human arm. Depending on weather and time of day, the river can be sky blue or dark jade or brown. Blue dragonflies ride the current.

It gets so cold when the ground-hugging tule fog creeps in.

## 11. Flood

I gaze at a sepia photograph of Helen standing at the prow of a roughly made skiff. Her hands, encased in heavy black gloves halfway up her arms, hold an oar that is longer than she is tall. She looks past the frame of the photograph, probably across the watery plain of five thousand acres of what has been, until recently, rich farmland. Seven hundred acres of what had been asparagus, and two drowned fruit orchards. Her thick brown hair is drawn into a knot at the nape of her neck. A brimmed canvas hat covers her hair and shields her from what might be a flat, post-flood sun, in April 1907. She wears what women wear in that era: a linen blouse with baggy mutton sleeves shot through with narrow satiny strips. A black tie. A dark belt around her narrow waist, and a long, sturdy skirt.

Behind her in the boat stands a man, clearly of a different class, perhaps her foreman. It is hard to tell whether he is looking at the back of her or perhaps down at the mud around the canoe, as he leans against his oar, pushing the canoe off from the muddy shore and weeds and into the water of the flood. He stands next to a wide barrel. Perhaps the barrel will hold things that they rescue. Between the boat and the foreground edge of the photograph, tall weeds stick through black water and dirt clods. Behind, I can just make out the very highest point of a dike road, flooded, and beyond that water, and beyond that another thin strip of dike road and beyond that water, and finally the thinnest horizon of Sacramento farmland.

All that can be seen of Helen's face is the soft curve of her cheek. From that, jutting to the left, a perky nose, the faintest suggestion of a bottom lip, and a determined chin.



She is slender, youthful, but already in command of herself. The man's lips are smiling through his short dark beard, but it is hard to say whether the smile comes from joy or in fact is a grimace from the effort it takes to push off. They are setting out on a journey. This is not a pleasure excursion.

Helen is heading toward her home to see what can be done, her new home in the tiniest township of Vorden, flooded. One year earlier, she had given birth to a daughter. A few nights before this photograph was taken, she had rescued a wide green oil painting by George Innes, friend of the family, and other special things from her home, throwing them into a carriage and letting the horses carry her to safety back down at her in-laws' home in Oakland. For twenty-six years the dikes have withstood every flood, but this year. . .

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From the Oakland boat on the Sacramento River, Helen wrote, "My Dear Family: I am on my way back to the ranch—hardly that—back to Vorden which consists now of just a narrow strip of land—the front levee. On one side the river, on the other water, with just the tops of trees sticking up, and here and there a little bit of what was once a house showing.

"The worry began on Wednesday, when they thought that the Randall Island front levee would go, but we saved that for them, working day and night for three days. I don't think any of us really thought for a minute that our district would go. Randall Island was safe, and Sunday morning we were all feeling so relieved. I was considering unrolling the rugs and unpacking the few things I had packed.

“Our own levee was never doubted for a minute. Each ranch owner was to watch his own levee. They were all well built. You know how proud the Pater (P.J.) has always been of his work here, and nobody was worried about them. Sunday morning everything was going well. All the men were out when a message came to me in the office (I never left the office those days—even had my meals sent there) that one man was needed at the Cross levee, that is our lower levee. I managed to connect with our foreman, and he went down and sent back word that he needed fifty or sixty men.

“He got them all right, and word was sent to Maurits. He came down from Randall Island on the ride of his life. Poor little Babe! [Helen’s pet saddle horse]! She is gone now with the rest of it. They fixed the first slump, but about four that afternoon the Pater came hurrying in and told me to get the baby and come: “I give you three minutes; that’s all.” No time for anything but to wrap the baby up (for it was still raining) and we drove like mad to the landing. The cooks and May and her little boy came behind.

“Well, it didn’t break just then, and again they thought they could save it. They could have done so, too, but just at the last, when every man was needed and every bag counted, the men who ought to have stayed dropped their shovels and ran home to save what they could, leaving our little ranch force to fight the fight of their lives. Poor boys, they were so tired. Five days with hardly any rest, and then to have it go! I tell you it hurts.

“Those poor horses! Such beautiful horses! A hundred all gone. They saved a hundred but they were the poorer stock. They got the best ones out on the levee all right, and then I don’t know what happened. Either the watchmen went to sleep, or they left the

horses to get some more. Anyway, the horses did not like the windy levee and turned back. The water was not so high that night but that they could get to their own fields and barns, and in the morning it was too late. They tried to save them. They swam Babe in to lead the other horses out. I don't know just what happened, but she got tangled up in a tree and a wire fence, and they had to shoot her.

“No human lives were lost, for which I am most thankful. Things might be much worse, I suppose. The money loss is tremendous for Papa. It is hard to say just what. You see there will be no crop this year, and the fruit trees may be ruined.

“Monday morning I took the first boat down to Oakland, for I wanted to get the baby away. I arrived with a baby and a suit-case at 1:30 a.m., much to the surprise of the family there, for they knew nothing except what they had seen in the papers. I got together a few dry things for the boys and started off again for the ranch. I did so want to get back to Maurits. He has worked so hard and so long, and the poor boy is so disappointed. He would not hear of my returning, but I finally made him let me. I left the baby in Oakland. Dear me, how I shall miss her! I don't know how long I shall be up at the ranch, or how long it is going to take to get the water out, or anything about it. They say, now, that if they can get it out by October they will be lucky. Think of the devastation! There is a very little chance of any of the houses standing the strain and roads, ditches and everything will be just mud.

“Don't know yet how much was saved from our little home. Most of the silver, I believe, and some clothes, but I guess everything else is gone. They may have been able

to get into the upper story yesterday with boats. I shall know tonight. Verily, lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth.

“However, we are young yet, and I guess we can start again. But the Pater, the poor Pater! He is not young any more, and now he looks years older than he did last week, and last week seems years ago.

“I wish I could describe to you the scenes on the front levee the next morning. Horses, cows, wagon loads of stuff that the tenants had saved, Italians, Chinese and Japanese; some of them sobbing their hearts out, poor old fellows, others cursing heaven and earth, others again roaring drunk; little colts running around between the trunks and bundles, and any number of pigs and chickens, half of them already slaughtered; bright sunshine overhead for the first time in days, and the water coming nearer and nearer. By this time I guess it is within a few feet of the top of the levee on the inside.

“O, well! We will pick up the threads and go on. We are all here and that’s the main thing. It is hard luck, but we are not the only people who have had that.

Lovingly, Helen Adelaide.”

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Years later, their children will love to hear their father and mother tell of the days spent in a boat, trying to save what they could, going everywhere armed with rifles to protect their property from looters who came in launches through the wide gap, of the efforts to pump the district dry, with part of the big pumps (which were in use during every rainy season) under water and all the boilers submerged, and finally of the rebuilding of the home. The main house had been left standing, held down by the heavy

brick chimneys, but it was very much the worse for wear. The ground floor rooms were half filled with mud, with here and there a gray streak—the yellowed piano keys—and the bones of animals that had come in through the broken windows in their effort to escape the water.

As I write, the delta continues to serve as a vast switching yard for much of California's water supply, including drinking water for more than twenty-three million people from the Bay Area to San Diego. The delta is also on the verge of collapse. According to journalist Barry Yeoman, first, global warming could push sea levels two feet higher, or more, by century's end. "Add to this the risk of flooding—also linked to climate change—as a result of increased rainfall and quicker snowmelt in the mountains. Finally, there's the growing chance of a devastating earthquake."

We scramble for solutions which may hold for a while, before the tides ultimately reclaim their land.

## 12. Progressive and Bohemian Influences

Helen and Maurits lived on and off with P.J. and Adele until one day, Helen realized that their three eldest children were speaking only Dutch. Then she “put her foot down,” as family members say, and they moved to Vorden.

Despite her removal, some of the progressiveness prevalent in the Bay Area was very likely to have saturated Helen’s consciousness. While Helen lived in Oakland, Isadora Duncan danced and played Phaedra at Berkeley’s Greek Theater. Her emphasis on nature included freeform movement and running and skipping, often barefoot, often outdoors. At the same time Annie Brigman photographed exquisite landscapes that scandalously (for a woman) included female nude figures, many of whom posed outdoors in the Sierra.

Some grammar schools in the East Bay and San Francisco emphasized contact with nature and freedom of expression as better forms of educating the young, while other parents simply kept their children out of the school system altogether. John Muir’s daughter, Wanda, took a short course to qualify for entrance to the University of California, which represented the totality of her pre-collegiate schooling.

Metaphysical groups made up nearly five percent of Protestants in California by 1906. Unitarians made up another one percent and blossomed in the East Bay, home to several theological colleges. Claiming influences from Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, and bolstered by John Muir’s exhortations to take messages from the Divine in nature, not books or churches, Unitarianism emphasized ecumenism, pacifism, scientific thought and artistic beauty. Helen called herself a Unitarian Universalist.

Raw foods—fresh fruit and nuts and milk—were valued in the Berkeley hills along with baring limbs, casting corsets aside, and sleeping outside. Reacting perhaps against increasing urbanism, modernism, and mechanization, the “Berkeley school” lauded picnics, hikes, and handmade crafts. Meanwhile, the growing Sierra Club offered hikes and camping trips as they do today, while forming committees to protest the damming of Hetch Hetchy, Yosemite’s beautiful sister valley.

Helen may or may not have lived among these bohemian Berkeley hill neighbors when she lived and raised her first toddlers in Oakland. Still, the fever for the natural was in the news, and infused local art, music, and theater publications.

### 13. Fire

Earthquake and flood were not enough calamities; the white house in the Delta must also burn down. There was a beautiful cobalt blue rug in the dining room, and Helen discovered a spill on it, a partial circle of lye from the bottom of a cleaning woman's wet bucket. There were no doubt a lot of unseen problems with this beautiful white house. Termites, faulty plumbing, too much heat in one spot and not enough in the other. The white crescent, like a new moon in the blue middle of the room, must have been a final straw.

The family story goes on to say that an exasperated (and pregnant) Helen stamped her foot down and said, "Confound it, I wish the whole thing would just burn down!" I can see her, with her wire-rimmed glasses and her long skirts and pointed shoe with buttons up the side, stamping that foot on the carpet and startling her four-year old and two-year old. So emphatic, she. She would often lambaste herself for her impatience and her temper.

How did something catch fire that very night? No one was more surprised than Helen to witness the devastating conflagration. Little Ailee was able to walk, and baby Lucy was carried. Helen and Maurits were able to rescue the Innes painting of the deer in the green forest, but this time the wedding silver, stored in the attic, melted to mere lumps in the heat of the fire.

"Item. Ranch house and contents burned last night. All safe. Don't worry," was the telegram message her parents received in New York on November 18th, 1909. She followed this with a letter, writing, "Dear Family, don't worry about me. I wanted thrills



of course. It is hard luck but I never can say I'm not getting them. How those flames did lick things in, Glory! Nell was sleeping on the porch (outside) under me. If she hadn't been there, there might have been no more us. She was awakened by the crackling in the office, had time enough to run up to call me, and that's all, and if the office door had been open there wouldn't have been time for that. "Life, Genevieve, is a dream, Genevieve," with some nightmare mixed in for good measure."

Everyone agrees that this first house had been a little lovelier than the stately mansion they rebuilt on its ruins. They called the new house Amistad, house of friendship, inspired by an old novel Helen and her sister Lucy used to read. My father married into the family quite briefly in the early 1960s. He used to tell me the family story, with great admiration, that Helen would go around the foundations of the new house, baby on one hip and a rifle on the other, shooting rats.

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From 1906 to 1920 Helen would give birth at least nine times, two of the babies stillborn. She had miscarriages between each birth, according to cousins. When I think of an East Coast publisher's daughter working a group of ranches and orchards out in the West in between more than sixteen pregnancies, I wonder if she experienced some kind of energetic drain or bodily exhaustion. The stoicism of the era and perhaps the special stoicism of both her Yankee family and his Dutch family discouraged complaining; my Cousin Meta remarked that even in her home (and we are of the same generation) it was considered a moral lapse to lie around when sick. When Helen's eldest daughter, Ailee,

became matriarch of her own family, she would, for months, run her husband's ranch without telling anyone she had broken her hip.

Around this time, Helen found a good friend in one Mrs. Franklin K. Lane. The Lanes were part of the same social swirl in Berkeley as the Van Löben Sels and the de Fremerys. Perhaps Helen was introduced to the Lanes at a luncheon. Mr. Lane, a Democrat from California, served as United States Secretary of the Interior. He also served as a commissioner of the Interstate Commerce Commission, and had been the 1902 Democratic nominee for Governor of California. Mrs. Lane, apart from being his wife and mother to their Ned and Nancy, was an author and spiritualist. In fact, Anne Wintermute Lane had already co-authored a book with Harriet Stanwood Blaine Beale: *To Walk with God: An Experience in Automatic Writing* (1920). The book, as the title indicates, had been channeled through automatic writing. In the next couple of decades Anne and Helen had several meetings at the Lanes' home, also in San Francisco, and perhaps at Amistad, that would shift the trajectory of Helen's life.

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I will pause now and answer the question, what is automatic writing? The act of sitting still, in a meditative trance, with pen hovering over paper, quietly or perhaps drawing circles until messages arrive, can be considered therapeutic by some and oracular by others. Unlike stream-of-consciousness writing, which is writing without pausing for edits, automatic writing is all about communication with a higher form of consciousness—that is, a consciousness that is distinctly not one's own thinking mind. Automatic writing is referred to in our time as “channeling,” and authors of books on

how to channel seem to agree that entities such as spirits or angels or other forms of the Divine are channeled.

The practice of this particular field of mediumistic trance appears in the British and American press around the late eighteenth century and is a relative latecomer to the oracular tradition. It is far newer than reading tarot cards or reading signs from clouds or spilled sticks or sheep innards, because general literacy and the practice of writing letters are fairly recent cultural developments.

The fact that World War I took the lives of so many, followed by three national sweeps of a horrendous, wolfish influenza epidemic, inspired a widespread yearning from many parents to contact their dead children “through the veil.” Mrs. Arthur Conan Doyle and her husband famously used automatic writing to reach their dead son. I have found plenty to read and study about the history of automatic writing, but it’s important to know that because it was impossible to scientifically prove, and because the yearning was so strong on the part of clients, the practice of transmitting a message through automatic writing and Ouija boards quickly became a parlor trick, and a market loaded with chicanery and quacks. So much in the growing Spiritualism movement was suspect. The Conan Doyles were later embarrassed to have been caught believing in fairies that were “seen” through base tricks of photography, while the great magician Harry Houdini made it his own mission to expose fraud by mediums wherever he could.

There’s a subtle difference between automatic writing and what you might call inspired writing. In ancient India, the holy *vedas* (knowledge) appeared to *rishis*: poets, seers and sages who meditated deeply. In a meditation center where I practice, the head

teacher, Ellen Grace O'Brian, writes daily aphorisms or sutras. These brief nuggets of inspiration in the yoga tradition are usually written in chalk on a blackboard next to an outdoor fountain. One of my favorite writers, Natalie Goldberg, is another famous meditator in the Zen tradition. She meditates deeply, then writes furiously and her books inspire other people to write. Thomas Merton meditated and wrote. The venerable Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, meditates and writes. The Dalai Lama meditates and writes. His books inspire thousands, perhaps millions. All of this could safely be called inspired writing, not because these people are transistors receiving the thoughts of higher beings, but because they have dipped down into the temple of silence within to find a higher and better wisdom.

Were the showings of St. Julian automatic writing, channeled writing, inspired writing? The works of St. John of the Cross? It seems likely that the Qur'an (literally the Recitations or Revelations) poured *through* the humble, forty-year old merchant, not from within. Closer to our contemporary times, books written through Jane Roberts, such as *Seth Speaks*, had been voiced by Jane while in a trance and then transcribed. That's not quite the same thing as inspired writing. How about the highly influential *A Course in Miracles*, written over a dozen years?

But now I get a little ahead of myself. Before exploring Helen's mediumship and writing more deeply, there is more to know about those years when she simply tried to be a good wife and a good mother. Sensitive, permeable, a psychologically medial woman, Helen was empathic enough, and determined enough, to become exactly what her husband and children needed.

#### 14. On the Pursuit of Power

*Do not try to jump into a class that is far in advance of your present spiritual condition. Take the class that is right for you and make yourself perfect in every little thing. Nothing is too small, nothing of so little account that it does not serve either to keep you back or to help you on your way.*

*The execution of your duties in the very best manner is a good way in which to gain power. Take everything that comes to you every day, study how you can make it serve to make you more perfect, so that when you meet the same situation again in another form you will meet it more perfectly.*

*Take if you wish this mantram, 'I am perfect.' But remember the more powerful your mantram, the more you must strive to live up to it. Else you harm yourself and gather no profit from the effort. When you say these words, 'I am perfect,' realize why you are perfect. Because you are a child of God. And then you must strive with all the power there is within you to live up to your appreciation of your state. To know yourself for a child of God and then to act, and think, and be anything else but a child of God brings with it grave consequences.*

*It is not an easy path to follow, and in the hurry and scurry of everyday life it is hard to keep the perfect balance that must be yours if you would attain. But it is so well worth while! When you work with this aim in view—to bring yourself into harmony with the Absolute, to attain perfection, you step into the ranks of those who are striving for Mastership, of those who work with open eyes and who realize a little of what lies before them. Listen to this lesson and profit by it.*

## 15. An Interlude in New Hartford

Helen was home with her own mother, her sister Betty, and Aunt Carlotta, at the summer house, Esperanza. Fifty guests had just enjoyed tea and a piano and violin concert. W.W. was most likely working in New York City, preparing the fall issue of *St. Nicholas Magazine for Children*, and Maurits couldn't get away from the ranch in Sacramento. Helen had made the train trip with her two girls, to stay from July through September of 1910.

The violinist, who was a teacher at Juilliard and a soloist with New York Philharmonic, stayed at Esperanza for a month. A crowded house! One can imagine that it must have been comforting for Helen to be with her mother in her childhood summer home, although it might also have been a little too small with the constant visitors. On one hand, she could take her daughters everywhere that she had played as a child, and release them to the trusted house staff when she craved rest. She could wander through the house picking up books and examining the curiosities she and her family had brought home from voyages.

On the other hand, her husband was out West. She missed him, and missed the rhythm of *her* ranch and *her* home, different from the stately rhythms in Connecticut.

Cousin Betsy, reading about the house concert, mused: "Think of the maids and cooks involved. What a different way of life, to have service (and to be able to afford it), and to have service from people with whom one had long-standing and affectionate relationships. And also what a difference, to have those long guest stays. Speaks to the difficulty of travel, if nothing else. Once having accomplished a cross-country trip (for

Helen, pregnant with her third and two toddlers in tow) one would be less likely to want to flit off within the week.”

Her parents’ annual visits to Vorden of sometimes two to three months at a time were a tonic for Helen, who managed the child rearing, cleaning, mending, and housekeeping among the perpetual seasons of the ranch: now asparagus, now summer tomatoes, now Bartlett pears. She also oversaw the cooking for eighty hired hands, three meals a day. Chinese men worked the orchards and white men worked the ranch and drove the teams.

Helen could talk with her father about books, theater and music, and her mother was a constant cheerful and sympathetic presence when W.W. ventured forth to lecture at colleges or secure future lecturing opportunities. He would give more than three thousand talks during his lifetime.

## 16. Gasoline

I hesitate to relate this next story, it is so odd. But the family keeps returning to it, and when I finally read the memoir of my Great-Uncle Maury, the person to whom these events actually happened, I relented. He wrote that, in conversation with his aging mother, Helen, she “harked back to the day in 1912 that, as a toddler, I attempted to drink a glass of gasoline.”

This occurred near the barn, the one-and-a-half year-old toddler out with his father, Maurits, tinkering with the automobile. The gasoline must have been in a glass bottle, clear but with a distinct shimmer and a wonderful sharp aroma. After all, it looked like the bottle baby Maury drinks from every day. Then: “My father came running into the house, the baby (me) in his arms, the baby turning blue; and Maurits with all his masculine ‘can do’ was reduced to whispering, ‘Helen, the baby’s dying.’ A sad story, a scary one. But not so unusual. Children find and drink poison every day.

All seemed lost. But then, “She, bethinking herself what *she* could do, hauled off and did it; said, ‘Lord, if you must take my child, take *this* one,’ striking her belly that was great with seven months pregnancy; ‘Leave me *this* one!’ meaning me; how I sputtered, gasped, came back; how that night she miscarried.”

What were the odds that the boy would be saved and the unborn child would die? And did this have any connection at all to this woman who earlier stamped her foot and said, “I wish it would all burn down,” —and it did?

“A moving account,” continues Maury in his memoir, “and powerful, powerful with the pressing presence of the inscrutable—who can know what actually transpired, what



brought about what? But I know this: There's power in the women of the Palmer-Smith-Ellsworth line. And let not any of that line forget it!" (MJVLS).

It cheers me when an ancestor reminds me of inherited power, "powerful with the pressing presence of the inscrutable."

Cousin Liddy remembers hearing how the entire family was on cow's milk until baby Maury showed an intolerance to it, perhaps with a rash, "and so what did she do? She bought some goats and they all switched over to goat's milk and she started making her own goat cheese!"

## 17. On the Pursuit of Knowledge

*You ask if French verbs are 'constructive reading.' Most assuredly, any real work is in which you are interested. Something that you can take up, as it were, mentally when you go about your work, and let your thoughts gather about and contemplate. History, biography, all these matters of interest; perhaps not all at the same time but enough so that your mind is constantly busy.*

*I suggest a notebook at your elbow and a singing chant as you work of what you wish to impress upon your mind. Make less effort to follow the topics of the day and get into the habit of taking up the subject in which you are interested wherever you are, and let the expression of your mind be one of search for knowledge along the chosen line, so that within that subject at least, you know what you know thoroughly. You 'make it yours' as we say over here.*

*Even though, as a woman of the world you consider it your duty to read the daily paper, make that reading as sketchy as possible and feed your mind just as you do your body on only the very best.*

*Take that dictionary that lies at your elbow and take fifty words beginning with the letter A. Know them, together with their meaning and how to spell them. Out of the 50 there may be 10 with which you are unfamiliar, there may be only five, or there may be none. Be able to give a good definition of every word. Make them familiar. . . After you finish 50 in A, advance to B, C, and so on. Later, return and take more under that first letter and go over them again and again until you are as familiar with the entire English language in a while as you are now with only a very limited part.*

*Start a spelling book. Head it with the word LOSE. And learn its meaning. Then comes LOOSE, and find out what you can about that. Every time you look up a word write it down in the spelling book and go over it every day until you make the words yours. You make the same mistakes again and again. Put the words down and learn them so you will never have to look them up again.*

*Take a poem—or an essay—and pick out the first word that you come on that you do not understand fully. And make this yours. . . Take this up whenever you have the time. . .*

*Do not stay with simple words. Spread out a bit, enlarge that vocabulary. The best English is written in the simplest form, but that was not because the essayist was compelled to stick to words of one or two syllables. You are not to be poor in anything. . .*

*Your dictionary must become your faithful companion, and . . . have another which can be left on your desk. Mark with a colored pencil the word that you decide to study and then use it in your daily vocabulary. For the present take only those that are usable and leave the others until a later period. Spring them on your family. I am sure you will get much entertainment from the work. And as you learn them put them into sentences where their use sounds proper and reasonable. . . . What is it we wish to attain? First we desire above all else in our work with prose that we are accurate with what we have. . . . Let your written page be the expression of your mental vision. Let the words you use be the expression of your mental processes of thought, clear, exact, careful, giving due emphasis wherever emphasis is due, using the infinite care in this work that you must learn to make a part of your character.*

## 18. Children on the Ranch

Maurits and Helen raised Percheron horses to enable them to farm sugar beets. Percherons are taller and more than a thousand pounds heavier than average horse breeds, and highly intelligent. Eighty teams of horses and eighty teamsters handled the farming operations.

Maurits also raised beautiful Arabian horses, and a few donkeys and ponies. Helen would later describe their ranch life in her lightly fictionalized children's book, *The Blue Jays in the Sierras*. "The children took care of their own ponies. It was a simple matter. They were turned out in a big field nearby, where there was plenty of grass and water, and a big haystack in the corner gave them the necessary dry feed. The only difficulty came when they refused to be caught, which they did periodically. Armed with barley, the children generally could persuade them to stand still until they had them bridled" (Ellsworth, BJS, 16).

For running about on the ranch, all her children wore *brokjes* (breeches), a one-piece play suit of sturdy blue cloth with short sleeves, short pants and leather sandals. No white pinafores or hair ribbons for Helen's daughters: the feminine was quite missing from the picture. These children were "ranch kids."

The top step of the old ranch house, shaded by a walnut tree, looked out over acres of green bean fields. About a quarter of a mile away were the ranch-barns, the horses and the hired hands. There were also orchards full of Bartlett pears. Maurits worked hard, and he worked his men hard as well.

In an early chapter of *The Blue Jays*, the mother enters the wide, screened-in porch carrying an overflowing mending-basket. She settles herself into a wicker chair and snaps on an electric fan. Helen described her own children in the book, but gave each child character a first name that starts with the letter “J.” Thus, they were the Blue Jays, and Helen and Maurits name their Sierra summer camp “Blue Jay” as well. During afternoon lessons, young “Jane” brings her reading book and little chair to settle beside her mother, while her older sister “Juliet” practices music for an hour. The younger boys spend most of their mornings together in the garden in a huge sand pile under a spreading palm tree. In the heat of the afternoons, the children play in a big room in the basement of the house, “a sort of combination playroom and schoolroom which was always cool. Here they had plenty of toys and books, more than enough for a week’s entertainment.”

Helen was her children’s first teacher, grounding them in the basics. There’s evidence that she knew about Maria Montessori’s methods, and that she sent away for whatever other materials might help her. Cousin Dor remembered “many boxes of Milton Bradley’s teaching cards: telling time, money, math operations, fractions, story cards, sentence builders, silent reading seat work, etc.”

The large, fragrant barn contained, aside from horses, a huge quantity of hay, grain, dried beans, and two dozen white cats who kept the building mostly free of rats and mice. Maurits bought only white cats, saying to an *Oakland Tribune* reporter “As rats can see white cats at night, I figured that they would be of double value, for while the black cats can catch rats and rodents during the day, they can’t scare them off at night.”

All the children rode horseback without saddles; a blanket held by a surcingle (belt) was all they were allowed to use. On the left side of the surcingle was a loop which they used for mounting when there was no nearby fence. Helen related, in *Blue Jays*: “Once their father had seen them using this loop as a stirrup when riding and the penalty had been no horses for a week. It never happened again. Riding in this way there was never any danger of their being dragged. Falls there had been in plenty, with tears and big, bad bumps, but so far nothing more serious.”

## 19. Summer Camp

In the summers, Helen and Maurits and the hired hands would herd the giant Percheron horses to green meadows about a hundred and fifty miles into the Sierra Mountains. They brought the children in a caravan that included an automobile and a large, canvas-covered wagon. The first camp was a three-mile horseback ride from where they parked the automobile, after riding up a steep mountain. After resting there a week, they took a horseback trip across the mountains to where they had camped the year before. It took three days to ride to the final camp.

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I remember my own early childhood in Blue Jay camp: sighing wind among tall pines. A cobalt sky with bright clouds. Enormous black ants scuttling across pale, sun-warmed granite. My family kept everything in small, musty smelling wooden cabins with sharply-pitched green roofs, but we slept in bags outside. My grandfather and uncles, laughing and relaxed, would produce piles of trout in the morning to be cleaned and gutted before pan-frying over the coals. My mother and aunts were also laughing, washing the dishes and preparing food. There were always chores to do, but I also remember some stolen hours alone, leafing through brittle issues of the New Yorker magazine (dating to the 1940's) that had been left in the outhouse. At night we'd sing old songs around a large fire, first a really silly song that all the men would dance to and slap their knees while reciting as we roared with laughter, and then later, very soft and sad songs to the guitar, listening to the wind, while giant stars shimmered overhead.

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Helen was very probably excited to get away from the daily throb of electric pumps, the hum of telephone wires, the bleat of the radio, into the Big Silence. To give her children room to explore, play, do nothing, and grow. But as the mother, she had a load of work to accomplish first, naturally, with baby in arms. The covered wagon carried camp supplies, including case after case of food. “There’ll be two men in camp this year,” wrote Helen, “and the children must have plenty of the right kind of things to eat; otherwise, it won’t do them much good, and they might better stay at home. You know six weeks, with no source of supply, is a long time. Of course, where we are going this year, we could get things from the hotels near Tahoe, but everything costs much more up there and we are accustomed to doing it this way. Last year the nearest post office was forty miles away. . . Oh I have lists and every year I revise them a bit. Of course we hope there will be plenty of fish, and maybe a deer or two, with grouse when the season opens, but I’ve learned not to count on it.”

Goats, at least two, would accompany the family to give fresh milk for the children. They rode in crates fastened to the running board of the automobile. On top of their crates went blankets, butter, fruit, suitcases, five sacks of flour, two sacks of sugar. “Our cowboy is going to hate the whole-wheat flour, but he’ll have to get used to it, for I won’t have the children eating that white stuff.” This bit of writing shows the influence of having lived in the East Bay hills, where fruits, nuts, and whole grain flours were already highly valued as a path to health.

The year before they brought one of the maids because the youngest child was a baby, but it didn’t work well. “Life doesn’t appeal to them, and besides, it’s better for the



children to learn to depend on themselves. Camp cooking isn't hard; there's so much canned stuff, and we have the fireless." A fireless cooker was a wooden box with a metal inner pail, surrounded by insulating sawdust.

As Maurits drove the family up in the car, the cowboys took eighty colts, the children's ponies, and eight or nine extra saddle horses through the ranchlands to meet them. At the head rode Helen dressed in dark gray corduroys, mounted on her pretty bay saddle pony. To the rear, the hired man Dixon pulled the heavy canvas-covered wagon with four strong ranch horses.

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Helen showed the children how to cook breakfast on the first day, and explained how they should cook it every morning for the rest of summer. There was an alarm clock in her suitcase that each cook would take to bed. The fire must be made by six in the morning and breakfast would be expected at seven. Mush (oats or corn and water) went into the fireless at night and only needed to be warmed. There was a coffee percolator.

Helen also told them, "I would like the table set for dinner and the dishes washed. You can take turns at that too; I will cook dinner and your aunt will get supper." Maurits and Dixon looked after the wood supply and milked the goats when not busy with the horses and their trail work. The smallest child carried wood and peeled potatoes. There was plenty for everyone to do.

On the first day of camp all the boxes and sacks from the wagon disappeared into the supply tent so that the cook could see at a glance just where everything is. Helen would write a few years later: "Beyond, near the lake, was a rock fireplace, with the huge

cauldron, black from many camping seasons, resting on top. Here was the hot water supply for all hands, and just beyond that was another pile of rocks to hold the washtub.” I was one of generations of babies bathed in this washtub on sunny afternoons.

The children helped Maurits and Dixon finish the cannery, a deep hole dug near the kitchen where all the empty cans and other things that don’t burn are thrown, to be buried out of sight before the family leaves. Mornings were usually reserved for work. Maurits was his father’s son, driving his own boys through tedious road clearing, shingle hammering, load lifting, to where none of them, as adults, could remember these summers without a certain memory of exhaustion. Maurits liked to say, “Work of a different nature makes for a fine vacation.”

The afternoons, though, were a different matter. The children rowed and fished and walked, returning with arms full of Mariposa tulips and Columbine. They tried to catch chipmunks, and they gathered snow from the foot of a glacier and mixed it with lemon juice and sugar, eating the icy treat from their tin camping cups. They shouted to each other when they found deer and the tracks of mountain lions. They were allowed to swim every day but they had to wait for at least an hour after the main meal. Ten minutes was all they could stand of splashing in snowmelt, and Helen would make hot chocolate as a surprise for them, then send them off for a walk to warm up. The children filled their pockets with dried prunes and crackers and went out all day, sometimes getting lost for a while. They found a sack to use on the snow slides. Coyotes barked in the hills at night.

“Health by the spoonful, I call it,” declared grandfather P.J. when he visited for a few weeks. “Just to think that I have lived in California all these years and have never known

there was such a spot as this! I don't wonder that my son keeps coming back here every summer, instead of searching out new places.”

The men often hiked up to the high peaks nearby where they could look all the way down to the Pacific Ocean. Thunderstorms grumbled and echoed from far up the mountains. That summer, a dog was spooked by a porcupine, and a black bear tried to steal a hanging killed deer.

Maurits was not much of a fisherman, preferring to shoot ducks back on the Sacramento River, or deer in the fall. He was mostly preoccupied with the road filling and cabin mending necessary on the land, and the work that called him from the ranch back home. Still, all the horses and other animals minded him and trusted him like no other.

All summer long there were bonfires and singalongs, roasted marshmallows and deer meat and baked potatoes—hot and crisp—with ice cream for dessert. One night Grandfather P.J. told the gathering a story about one of his own childhood summers in the Netherlands. “It took us an hour and a half of driving for our carriage and horses to reach Arnham, then a half hour more to put us in Elst. Arrived at the farm, we piled out, and there we found great heaps of the finest and the ripest cherries, fresh picked for our delight. Soon—or so it seems—lunch was announced. And what a lunch! We all trooped into the best room, and there we surrounded a big table groaning under its load of chickens, hams, rich bread, roast beef, coffee, cake. It was a point of honor for the guests to eat; for the landlord to urge us on, himself leading the way. Heaven only knows how

we survived. My uncle Jan was always sick for days afterwards, and he always provided for that contingency.

“After lunch we all took a walk—a nice slow walk—through the orchard. There we saw men and women picking and packing cherries for the market, and we boys were allowed to climb into the trees to eat more cherries, and to throw some down to the ladies and girls who watched from below. For at that remote period no female of a good repute would have thought to climb into a tree, or would’ve been allowed to do so. For it might have been discovered that she had legs!

“And yet, all things considered, the supreme moment—the most exquisite enjoyment—came with dusk. Then, our carriage loaded once more and the horses ready to start for home, to each of us children the farmer would hand a tiny basket with a tiny handle, made especially by his own people and loaded with fare-well cherries. These baskets and their contents, you understand, were to be our very own special individual property. I remember pecking away at mine during the long ride home, really half asleep and unable to eat another thing. I doubt that it is of record that any of these baskets ever reached our home in anything but a state of absolute emptiness.”

He was silent a while, and then added soberly, “I remember a time before we Dutch adopted the English Sabbath: a time of Sundays which accepted reading, walking, visiting, traveling; which looked with favor upon romp and play. Now all that is wholly sinful. They do not even make exceptions for what we call here ‘work of necessity or emergency.’” He sighed. “‘Remember the Sabbath, that thou keep the state holy’—that means: dress; have the cooks and servants do the usual labor; go to church—and in a

carriage if you can afford it. But no traveling. No mail. Practically no *anything* except going to church one or more times to hear the Gospel preached, to sing hymns, and to read or listen to dull sermons.”

“Look at what your magic storytelling has done, P.J.,” said Helen. “You have put every single one of the children to sleep.”

Did Helen, in her very rare moments alone, commune with the vast mountains and the great skies? Did she have any intimation that the bottom would soon drop out of her life, revealing a new depth and dimension? What turns a person with an ordinary life into a mystic?

Later in the summer she started teaching morning school to the children at camp, which made the afternoon doubly precious to them. Maurits had to return to the beginning of the busy bean season on the Amistad ranch, when the crop was cut and threshed.

Eventually the children gave up their daily swim, for the air was crisp and cold, and then in the mornings they found ice on the little brook. Then, for a day or two, the wind blew fiercely, dishes were swept off the table, and everyone had their meals in the supply tent. One morning they woke to find their beds covered with snow. That’s when Maurits, watching the weather like a good father, sent the horses to bring them back home.

## 20. *On the Topic of Teaching*

*Make a daily effort to inspire your children and make their lesson full of interest. Take the grammar more slowly. One sentence a day parsed, analyzed and diagrammed is plenty. And do that for a month before going further. You can review the nouns, adjectives etc., daily in this way. Your son, Peter, must be helped to concentrate. Go backward, rather than forward in the arithmetic until the whole over which you have passed, is so familiar that he meets it with pleasure and not distress.*

*Go on with the history. Take other histories and review, and give him sidelights from your outside reading. Make that second period one of pure joy. He will delight in the grammar once he understands and knows that there is no more than a very little every day.*

*You must not hurry a child's mind. Never make the mistake made in so many schools, of crowding. Such a folly, and so stupid. Better to give them too little. A mental digestion is more easily upset than a physical one — and I am sure of that.*

## 21. Governesses

The inaugural issue of the *Women's Who's Who in America, 1914-1915* describes Helen: "Kappa Kappa Gamma. DAR. Recreations: Country sports. Universalist. Favors Women's Suffrage. Progressive Republican."

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Likely to have been used in the Amistad kitchen: a tin breadbox, iron and an iron stand, a meat grinder, washing powder and a washboard, glass milk bottles and milk pail, a Dutch oven, a long metal carpet beater, a flyswatter, glass jars for canning, small brown bottles of liniments and extracts.

The East must have represented culture to Helen, and her in-laws' Oakland home the joys of moving about in society. Back in the Sacramento Delta, settled in with her children and household responsibilities, I strongly doubt that Helen had chances to venture from Vorden to the Bay Area to hear Ina Coolbrith read her poetry or Jack London give a Socialist lecture, or join the California Writers' Club, take an art class from Douglas Tilden, or indeed any class at the new California College of Arts and Crafts. Still, I imagine that some handmade pieces of copperwork or ceramic made their way into Amistad.

I hope very much that Helen was taken by family or friends to the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco. Nearly nineteen million people from all walks of life thronged through the turnstiles of the fair, including author Laura Ingalls Wilder, the horticulturist Luther Burbank, the inventors Henry Ford and Thomas Edison, former

president Theodore Roosevelt, the escape artist Harry Houdini, and the educator/activist Helen Keller.

Imagine gazing at the newly-built Tuscan red dome of the Palace of Fine Arts— dwarfed by even taller glittering towers on the midway. Behind the dome was a long, curved gallery with a hundred and twenty sectioned rooms where the walls were covered, floor to ceiling, with paintings! Imagine being able to watch famous educator Maria Montessori conducting classes, based on her famous system, to a room full of very young students at her “Glass Classroom” in the Palace of Education and Social Economy. Helen was already using some Montessori techniques in her own home schooling. How fun it would have been to see the orderly boys in sailor suits, the girls in white dresses with floppy white bows crowning their bobbed hair.

As yet, there is no indication that Helen made it to any of these events.

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My mother and I sometimes muse together across telephone lines, she resting in the first floor of her house in Newfoundland, or curled up on the couch in her home in Santa Fe, me pacing barefoot in the grass of my backyard in Campbell, California. We wonder about Helen and how the events of her life took a mystical turn.

Mom tells me, “She must have been so overwhelmed. With the pancreatic cancer (if that was indeed the mysterious illness), with so many children both living and dying, and of course the loneliness.” There had been so many parties in Oakland and back East; there was nothing like that in Vorden. Mom points out, “Her children were never allowed to play with the “river” children. It was a class issue, so she had no women friends



nearby. She wasn't even allowed to attend the local church; it was considered beneath her station! I just don't think she could talk to her husband."

I didn't think so either. Years ago, in a dream, I saw a white oven with four legs, and in the oven sat a pile of letters. The letters had something to do with Helen and her husband. Many years later, my mother mentioned to me over the phone that she had dreamed about a box of letters from Maurits to another woman. Other people mentioned a dalliance with a governess.

I'm mulling over how Maurits might connect with the French governess at Amistad. Maybe she is petite and delicate where Helen is large boned, a tall horsewoman. Maybe the governess lived briefly in Geneva where Maurits summered and wintered with his brothers and sister as a child. Maybe she asks Maurits about his travels. Then she adds, sly minx, "Et Madame, elle a habitée au Genevre aussi? *Has Madame also lived in Geneva?* Non? Oh, tant-pis. . ." *Too bad.*

Maybe then the girlish, clever governess starts to describe the sunset or the sunrise behind Mont Rigi, painted so well by Turner, and Maurits feels a flash of kinship, of secret understanding not shared by his Yankee wife, who is pregnant again, and maybe this fuels his desire for something new.

And maybe when a couple of trysts have occurred in that white mansion of many rooms, Helen passes by the school room one day, folded clean clothes in her arms, on the way to the linen closet. The governess sits with the children as they chant, "Le loup (*the wolf*) mange la souris," and young Peter cries out, "Poor little mouse!" In that instant when her brain is quiet, Helen suddenly knows. Maybe Mademoiselle's laugh is a little

too rich and loud, or Helen catches, from the corner of her eye, Maurits watching the corset-bound form as the girl bends over the children.

Helen realizes that he has not visited her at night for a long time. This betrayal of the young feisty, adoring couple they were at Cornell, in his parents' Oakland home, falling into the grass behind the pump works, all this time — this is how it feels. Not intellectual at all, but as if an ice pick were shoved through the top of her stomach, a single blinding point of entry, that lodges, burning and freezing, and stays. She can hardly breathe.

## 22. Blue Jays

At sixty-five years old, P.J. set out from Oakland in a 1916 Buick for an historic ride across the continent. He made it, despite poor roads and October snow, and continued his voyage by selling the car and sailing to Holland. Back at the ranch, heavily pregnant with her fifth child, Helen began to write her book about summer camp in the Sierra. I like to think she was encouraged in this pursuit by her father and mother on their visits. She may have borrowed W.W.'s camera, for the book is illustrated by photographs of her own children. That type of illustration must have been quite cutting-edge when published.

The Century Company, her father's employer, published her book, *The Blue Jays in the Sierra*. She used Helen Ellsworth, her father's last name. I can almost hear him warn her that under the foreign-sounding van Löben Sels, the author might lose part of her audience. A cousin remembered that Helen was at one point chided by an editor to make the story more compelling. I find traces of her book, called "a juvenile," for sale in 1918 catalogues.

I wish I could converse with her about her experience as a fellow writer. Her father, aunt, and other family members—they all wrote and published books. At last, she had written her book, which was also published. But her family's world of letters and arts was so very far away from this ranch. She walked by the river sometimes to think through the book's sections and structure problems. *Solvitur ambulando*. The thing is solved by walking—one of my favorite mottos and I'm guessing she knew it too, at least from her father. Or she would ride along the levee on a favorite horse. In the morning and at dusk the water was alive, the willows dancing and bristling with birds. But other times, like the

dead of afternoon, all that came to her was the god-damned flatness of it all. Water and land take up only two fingers of horizon—the rest, empty sky.

And if she were to climb a riverboat or a windmill and look over the riprap of the levee, what would she find? More flat levees, glimpses of water, more willow shrubs, the occasional rusting metal barn roof, the black silhouette of cottonwood raining silent fluff across the hard-packed earth. And the mountain, indifferent, guarding its secrets.

### 23. On the Topic of Poise

*You are apt to let the unrest of those about you react on your spirit. Hold yourself above any of these matters. If the atmosphere about you is disturbed by angry passions, or hurt feelings, make your own consciousness the more secure by realizing that by permitting his passions to rise man hurts himself far more than he can hurt you. If you can aid, do so, but do not permit yourself to be upset. Keep your poise, and let it stand for something to those about you; let them realize that nothing that is done, nothing that is said can in any way upset the sweet tranquility of your spirit.*

*Bear in mind the force of words and think more of all you say. Be a little more careful in all that you say. Be a little more silent if necessary. Think of the probable reaction of your words and change your tone accordingly. Keep [your spirits] on a high level and do not condescend to step down for anything or anybody. There are certain influences at work here trying to move you from your serenity, making it a little more difficult for you. You can afford to smile at their efforts for you are now on a higher plane and soon you will go even a step higher. Do not let them even come into the outer circle of your aura.*

## 24. Published Writer, Army Boys, and Ouija Boards

*The Blue Jays in the Sierra* was published in 1918. Helen was finally beginning to use her own voice, penning her observations and opinions on paper, carving out time to polish her work, and keeping her sites fixed on a public audience—all while supervising the care and feeding of nearly a hundred people. Whether or not she held a party, whether her accomplishment was lauded or ignored in Vorden, Oakland or New York, the satisfaction of holding the little navy-blue bound book must have been immense.

U.S. Army boys were already dying in the great World War, and had been for four years. Cousin Fred says, “Even though the U.S. wasn’t officially in it, many boys [including one Ernest Hemingway] were in the American Field Service driving ambulances. Certainly England and Holland were in it from nearly the beginning.”

Helen’s brother, Brad—who learned his knots from the sailors when they voyaged to Europe as children—went to war. He nearly came home unscathed. Just before he left the battleground the Germans launched a chlorine gas attack. He ran back into a building to save someone; for that he gained a medal and severely burned lungs that troubled him the rest of his short life.

The deaths from World War I and the three waves of “Spanish” flu epidemic touched everyone. John Barry, in *The Great Influenza*, remarked that before this worldwide pandemic faded in 1920, it “would kill more people than any other outbreak of disease in human history.” But that was not the most horrifying thing about this deadly strain. Average annual bouts of flu tend to prey on the elderly, the weak, and children. This flu, nurtured in the battle trenches and in army hospitals, was different. “Roughly

half of those who died were young men and women in the prime of their life, in their twenties and thirties,” said Barry. “As many as eight to ten percent of all young adults then living may have been killed by the virus. And they died with extraordinary ferocity and speed.”

Cousin Cinna remembers looking at Maurits’ great ledger in his office, and during 1919 in line after line, after each ranch worker’s name, in his magnificent sideways script, the word *Influenza. Influenza. Influenza*. Maurits himself grew very sick with the flu, and had a resurgence of the old mastoiditis that had laid him flat in his early twenties. He had a hole behind his ear for the rest of his life.

Suddenly the parlor game, the Ouija Board, became very much in fashion. So many parents longed to hear from their children on the other side of the veil.

That may be how the Ouija Board found its way into Helen’s life. She was most probably visiting her friend Anne Lane in San Francisco. Maurits would have enjoyed talking local politics with Anne’s husband, Franklin K. Lane. “Helen started getting lots of alphabet letters coming to her in a hurry,” goes the family story. “She wrote them down. She couldn’t make sense of them. Someone (cousins say it was Maurits) looked at them and said, “The reason you don’t understand it is because it is in Dutch.”

When the words were translated, they formed this message: “This is not a game. This is a dangerous thing. You don’t know who might be coming through. It could be a being with a bad intention. Don’t play around with this.” Another family member remembered that the planchette spelled out the words very quickly under Helen’s hand. Much more quickly than normal.

## 25. Listening for the Masters

Helen persisted with the Ouija board for five years. Family conversations also mention a crowd of ghostly military men trying to get messages home that they are all right, that they did not suffer so much. It seems that Helen was able to travel to San Francisco and “gather messages” with her friend Ann, and even to act as an informal and unpaid medium for some of Anne’s friends. This was a new avenue into society. From that same era I’ve found, in Helen’s box of notebooks, an in-depth article about “Hindu meditation,” carefully detached from a women’s magazine, holes punched, preserved in a binder with passages highlighted.

At some point, Helen found she could meet the “Masters” using automatic writing. From Helen’s earliest notebook, I found a passage where the Master of Mind explained the process.

*And here I am, the Master of Mind.*

*Now for a few directions. . . Relax more and write more freely. Do not feel that our force must move the pencil. Let your hand glide over the page and give us a little assistance. You are so desirous of getting this thing that you hold yourself back and that is one reason that you are slow at realizing your dream. Relax.*

*Say the mantram demanding force and power, and then write anything and everything that comes into your mind. You need have no fear of not getting it; fear that you strive too much rather than too little. Wait after each sentence just an instant and then write on, and do not pay much attention for the first week to what you get. During the second week you will get less.*



*The messages will begin to take more form and [soon] you should be able to get short direct sentences. Relax more and feel that we are there beside you. You should sense us more. A little practice on your part here and you will be seeing more and more clearly.*

*Look at this thing from the standpoint of a lesson and not a miracle. Go at it just as you would a French lesson. Put aside from your mind all the unusualness of this thing and take everything that you get in the most natural way. Do not discuss it with anyone if you do succeed more than you have succeeded. Do not even write about it. When you speak of these matters you get into a state of excitement that holds you back.*

*You must practice that serenity of mind and spirit that we demand from all our pupils; and until it is absolutely a part of your nature, the best way to acquire it is not to permit yourself to speak of anything that excites you in any way.*

*Calmness is absolutely essential to your success in this thing and you must practice it. Take this lesson to heart.*

Helen would later write, “Much of my work with the Masters has become mental, so that the pencil is not a necessary feature, but often I am asked to answer a question with others present, or am directed to make a note of some statement. When I started this work, I had absolutely no idea what the next word would be—and the writing was almost illegible. That, too, has changed and often the words come faster than I can write them down showing, I think, that more and more the mind is called into action.”

\*

Because Helen did *not* play a public, professional “medium” and deliver specific knowledge (that we know of) to strangers, who could later testify that there was no other

way she'd have known about the specifics she'd conveyed to them, we can never know whether Helen's automatic writing was entity-driven or psychological. But knowing that psychology in itself is a field less than a hundred and fifty years old, I'd like to offer that we may eventually find a new paradigm and new precepts that might better explain her process. Not just entity, not just psychology, but some of those and perhaps more.

Here are some familiar names of nineteenth century people who claimed scripts delivered by automatic writing: Goethe, Victor Hugo, William Blake, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. In the twentieth century, Margaret Cameron, the Conan Doyles, and Ruth Montgomery. Fernando Pessoa, author of *The Book of Disquiet* and creator/inhabitor of more than seventy literary personae. Georgie Yeats, wife and muse to the great Irish poet. Contemporary theosophists Helen Blavatsky and her student Alice Bailey decried "communion of Spirits" as "one of the most dangerous of abnormal nervous diseases," yet they wrote volumes of what they called telepathic channeling from two living teachers who lived in Tibet, on the other side of the planet.

Then there was Edgar Cayce, a churchgoer and Sunday school teacher who found that when he lay on a couch and closed his eyes, he could access what he called Superconsciousness—enough to deliver readings on more than ten thousand different recorded topics. I can almost see him relaxing like the Hindu god, Vishnu, dreaming entire worlds and then awakening to start the whole process again. In one of his readings Cayce described "inspirational writing," a concept that inspired Helen Schucman, a psychologist working at Presbyterian Hospital in New York City, to follow the advice of her inner voice and begin to take notes on what she was hearing. What resulted was *A*

*Course in Miracles*, a three-volume work. Another “inspired” best seller was Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

Where does Helen rest within the canon of automatic writers? Or was she an “inspired” writer? I know one thing from my studies. There is the act of simply channeling material, and then there is a nobler art of growing from applying the material to one’s life. Helen left evidence in her notebooks and in family stories that she received the writings from her Masters as lessons, and applied them daily to her life in order to grow; to grow smarter, become more loving, and free her spirit to act unencumbered by habitual thinking. To my knowledge, she never did this for fame or external power.

She published her book, *Master to Disciple*, only within the family who apparently met it with mixed reviews. Indeed, some of her children might well have wished that the whole strange thing that made their mother behave oddly would just go away. After much contemplation, during my initial transcription project (described in the preface), I realized it was not my place to republish that book more widely. Instead, I took what I had transcribed and privately bound 35 copies in cloth and leather, and sent them again to family members. Once again, some liked it, some did not, and others refused to accept the book at all: “Witchcraft. Nonsense. Insanity.” It seemed as though the divide in the family opinions reached down through generations.

It appears that she did this writing process in silence, regularly, and soon, in addition to the Masters, she was transcribing messages from her mother-in-law, then her deceased father W.W., then her deceased adult daughter, and others. She once semi-joked about trying to reach her ancestor who created the American dictionary, Noah Webster, and

how he was extremely cross that she'd summoned him just to clear up her own spelling errors, something she could have done by opening a book.

## 26. Horses

Maurits had been known to trust associates and acquaintances rather too easily, and to fall into very bad business deals, especially with his speculation in mines. Times grew very rough indeed, such as the month they could not pay their eighty hands. During such a time, Maurits consulted with no one.

Cousin Deb wailed: “He sold her favorite team of horses *without asking!*”

\*

What exactly contributed to Helen’s illness, which mysteriously appeared when she was nearly forty-two? There’s no confirmation of what it was—only that it was deadly, though not communicable. Was Helen exhausted? Had trichinosis laid her low? Did she indeed have a cancer? Was it the loss of so many babies? The selling of her horses?

So many significant losses were happening to her over a short period of time. Some teachers might say she was being prepared for the “spiritual fire” of mediumship.

Helen’s parents had only four children, and Maurits’ parents had only five. Why did this couple embark on so many pregnancies, adding at least two more stillborn children to the seven who lived, and still more miscarriages? In fact, *eighteen* pregnancies in all, according to my mother, and even speculation about two very small boys lost to the frightening irrigation ditches.

Some of the miscarriages are in family lore—the episode in the barn, or the night Maurits insisted on driving to Lake Tahoe, a passel of kids in the back seat, Helen asking

him over and over to please stop, she wasn't well. He, not listening. And her losing the baby next morning.

Was keeping her pregnant a form of taming this spirited woman, every inch his intellectual equal, and perhaps more so? Contraception during the Progressive era might have been withdrawal, douche with vinegar water, a sponge with spermicide and a string, the condom, the rhythm method. The first diaphragm-manufacturing company in the United States would not open for three more years, and Margaret Sanger was fighting legal battles to disseminate information about birth control in the mail. We hear that when Helen was forty, the last live birth safely accomplished, she began to lock her bedroom door.

That action, plus Helen's unusual behavior after the onset of her mysterious illness (refusing the grey oil, taking so many hot baths, keeping an odd silence), may have precipitated Maurits' decision to have her carefully examined by doctors, psychological doctors, and sent to an institution for the insane, if need be.

## 27. On Caring for the Temple

*And I am here, the Master of Health.*

*Stimulants of any kind are to be avoided. Do not stop at once but gradually. . . The drinking of tea and coffee is never wise but remember I say stop gradually. Make your big meal at noon. Do away with all meats—also gradually—and eat only such vegetables as have little if any starch. And use, instead of hot bread, brown toasted bread.*

*Let your evening meal be simplicity itself. A soup—clear—or with a very little vegetable, a dish such as cereal prepared, milk if you will but never more than one glass, and cooked fruit. Never any sweet of any kind, never any cake or prepared desserts.*

*You will not care for these changes but your body will respond like a thirsty plant, and you will make your years twice as full of real work because the flesh will not have to be considered at every turn. In a word, live with the thought always in mind that what you do, you do for God. And when you do that you cannot, you literally cannot, put anything in your body that does not tend to build.*

*Now rest, and by that I mean give your body the chance it needs to keep pace with any activity you undertake. Give yourself a chance and you will never regret it.”*

## 28. DAMN Sane

A breeze lifts the lightest sheer curtains in the dining room. Upstairs, a crystal doorknob turns. Dr. Renz is coming out. The doctor's measured footsteps make their way downstairs and he enters the room to stand in front of Maurits. The doctor's eyes are clear, calm, level. "Well?" snarls Maurits.

"I have examined your wife, Mr. Van Löben Sels. I have given her every test that it is possible to give and I have satisfied my own curiosity in a most thorough way. Mr. Van Löben Sels, your wife, Helen, performed with winning colors in every single test. Helen is not only sane. She is DAMN sane. She is one of the sanest people I have ever met."

"But what about all her antisocial activities of late?" Maurits sputters. He is deeply relieved to hear that his wife is once again with him, again part of his team, drawing the entire estate in a single direction, as it should be. The relief is deep, vast, relaxing all the tightly held muscles within. But cresting over the edge of this moment is a twinge of annoyance. Because if she is not mad, then he might have to take her actions seriously. Such as the bedroom door.

The doctor walks over to the window and looks out. Through the treetops he sees the American flag flapping and some of the palm fronds have begun glittering in the small breeze.

"Let her do as she must. We don't understand her actions, but they are not hurting anyone in the family. And they are not hurting her. Far from it. You and I know that Helen was on the doorstep to her Maker. And yet, despite every fact we know about her physical illness, she lives. She is not ailing and frail under the covers in her room, but



insists on walking twice a day. Her pulse is strong. Her eyes are clear. I have studied medicine all my grown life. I am a scientist, sir, and yet I cannot explain why she is not already dead. We must assume that whatever she is doing is working.”

Then there is no more to say. The gentlemen shake hands and Maurits escorts the good doctor to the door. Maurits pours a small brandy when he returns to the living room and sinks into a large wood and leather chair. He is shaken, utterly. Up until this moment, Helen was either his beloved helpmeet or an invalid certain to die, or even a mad woman. There are common social rules for dealing with any one of those. This new Helen does not fit any of those molds. This new woman who follows instructions he cannot hear, does mysterious things that do not comfort him, yet remains as strong and sane as he.

\*

That same year, the 1920 Democratic National Convention was held at San Francisco’s Civic Auditorium. Flags and bunting fluttered gaily from downtown windows on that sparkling June day. It was no ordinary national convention—this was the year American women finally participated in the national vote.

Kathleen Norris, a columnist for *Good Housekeeping*, noted the astonishing new presence of women there: “How much can they understand? I thought doubtfully to myself, as the band crashed a welcome through the great auditorium, and the clear, empty stretches of seats began to be filled with whispering and sauntering people. There were women on the platform, where a few of the speakers and secretaries and specially privileged visitors sat, and there were women in the press gallery, scribbling away frantically among reporters and correspondents.”

Norris described her own mounting fear as they sang the national anthem and settled back to hear the first speaker: Would she even begin to understand this complicated thing called politics, this thing that men had experienced for centuries?

“A wild and desperate regret rose in me that I had not read more, studied more, got a handbook of political economy and another of international relationships,” she said. But then the speaker began to describe the issues, and like Alice in Wonderland, she came to the sudden realization that her own tormenting fears had no more solidity than a pack of playing cards. “Well, you’re nothing but men, after all, husbands and brothers and fathers like mine, men like the men for whom I have cooked breakfasts, and sewed on buttons, advised and scolded and admired and blamed all my life, and your problems, the great bugaboo problems of Tariff and Tax and War and Peace, are only the little problems that I have taken you, and you have taken me, magnified here in the mass by a million hearts and brains to be sure, but no bigger to each individual heart and brain than they were before!” (Norris, *GH* Oct 1920, 12)

Unlike Helen, the journalist Norris was discovering her power within a wonderfully large and historic community of women. Very much like Helen, she was beginning to trust the authority of her own experience over the traditional authority of her father, husband, and male society in general. Cousin Liddy remarked about Helen, “Why did she find her voice most in the Masters? Maybe it was something that was so untouchable that her father didn’t have any authority or words to say on it, and we can see that Apapa couldn’t touch it either because he tried to bring in outside help. . . .”

From that empowerment within comes an ability to use one’s own voice, one’s vote.

## Part Two: Taking the Pencil

Courage is the price that life exacts for granting peace.

—Amelia Earhart

## 29. Helen Explains

In the summer of 2016, I finally opened the last dusty black notebook that had been waiting in the bottom of one of the boxes from Ailee's (Helen's eldest daughter's) barn. *(Hand-written in the margin: "Work begun in 1921 June")*

"Lessons from the Masters, given to Helen Ellsworth"

These lessons are a part of the messages that have come to me through automatic writing, during the last three years. They were given by the Masters, those spirits who are the teachers of man in his changed estate which we call "Death." They stand ready to reach out over to this side and help us here to prepare ourselves for what is to come, so that we will realize more the meaning of life and so that our lives may be filled the more easily with faith, hope and love.

The Master of Mind came to me first and wrote: *"I am a spirit of good, known to my pupils as the Master of Mind, and I can do much for all mortals. Use your minds, men and women! Do not let them rest. A mind grows dull with disuse; keep your minds bright and shining."*

He told me much of the work he wished to do through me, but said that it would take months, years, before I was prepared. He was patient with my mistakes and suggested ways in which I might improve my mind. Sometimes he spoke directly to me, and sometimes as if he were addressing a number of people through me. . . .

He helped me with my children, and once, when I had lost my temper after an annoying incident, he met me with: *"Use your will. Enter into the circle of will. To*

*achieve well means complete self-control. You are being given constantly an opportunity to exercise your will. Be glad of the opportunities.”*

*“Every hour of the day you have a chance to prove that you walk with the Masters. ‘Let your light so shine...’.”*

And over and over again he wrote:

*“You were not living with the Spirit on top but with your subconscious self in the lead. You must live on top. The spirit must lead. Let nothing — absolutely nothing — depress you.”*

He introduced me to the Master of Health and that great spirit lost no time in upsetting very nearly all my ways of life. He did not spare me, as the reader will see, and he was frankly impatient with the way in which I was wasting the health God had given.

*“You will get nothing but plain truths from me,”* he said among other things the first morning that he took the pencil. As was the case with the Master of Mind, until he knew me personally, he spoke in a general way.

*“Men and women,”* he wrote, *“change your ways. You are living the lives of animals whereas you might live as gods. You indulge in your passions; you eat and drink and deport yourselves as if there were no time of reckoning. Look at your bodies, are you well? Are you strong? Do you think it was meant that the temple which has taken ages to build should decay and rot? Do you think it was meant that man should grow old and feeble; should lose one after another the gifts of his youth until he comes over here a wreck of his former self?”*

*“Know, then, that you come exactly as you are. Not one thing is changed until you yourselves realize the truth and so change the order of your existence that the difference is manifest in your being. I am the Master of Health and I say this: What you are now you will be until you yourselves order a change. Death is not a liberator, but it opens the way to understanding. Why not understand now, and live your lives fully to the glory of God?”*

### 30. Becoming a Mystic

Helen was called to behave differently. Her daily life was affected; she made time to meditate alone in her office and receive messages. She made time to work, alone and with her friend Anne, to fashion the messages into a book. These hours, plus the time she spent physically doing her housework but mentally thinking about this spiritual conversation, made for an extremely unusual and perhaps even antisocial life, as antisocial as one could be with a house-load of family and responsibilities.

In other words, Helen expanded her life as a writer, and thanks to her relative wealth and the help of Maurits who, willingly or not, protected her solitude, she actually enjoyed the lifestyle of a male writer—by which I mean, her time and room were available to the work. Some women writers of this period no doubt had to leave family or forego family altogether in order to establish and maintain the deep interior dialogue one has with one's books. To “wrestle with the angel.”

Helen was also called to apply the lessons to her life as much as she could, moment to moment. In this she was now leading the life of a mystic: having direct experience of what appeared to be overwhelmingly positive Wisdom, and allowing that experience to change her day-to-day encounters. Recent neurological research shows that when moments of enlightenment occur, the back of the brain (the unity and connectedness area) lights up with activity, while the frontal lobe (decision-making and planning) settles down. We can safely assume that the actual wiring in Helen's brain was changing through repeated applications of this mystical encounter. An encounter which, I believe, is available to anyone who wants it—and makes the time and silence for it. I use the word

*enlightenment* with caution. As Dr. Newburg describes in *How Enlightenment Changes Your Brain*, there's small 'e' enlightenment, like when the solution to a puzzle becomes obvious, and there's the large 'E' Enlightenment of saints and sages (45).

I remember my own initial perception of the infinite as an eleven-year old, standing silently alone on the side of the hill. The combination of meadow, late afternoon sky and quiet surrounded and then flooded me, and I was so moved I nearly wept. Later, as a young adult, I remember visiting California's Salt Point State Park with a good friend. We took a small dose of dried psilocybin and spent a happy hour or two examining ferns, then ventured out to the cliffs overlooking the coast and sat down. We were old enough friends that there was no need to converse—we sat in silence. I remember the internal shift that occurred as if it were yesterday. I was flooded with an understanding that my life force, and the force of the living lichen on nearby grey boulders, and the dancing of the ocean, and the tenderly caressing sky were all active, joyful parts of a larger Great Wholeness. My cells vibrated; the peace I felt was immense. It did not last, yet it changed my life. No subsequent use of drugs ever brought me close to that. One day during a week-long intensive meditation retreat I had similar, but milder, results.

Had Helen lived in a distant, more religious past, there might have been easy acceptance of her gift—or she might have been persecuted as a witch. If she lived now, there are plenty of both psychological and New Age bases for accepting channeled writing. But she was living in the rational, scientific days of Enlightenment, so her enlightenment was an awkward thing the family felt like hiding. I have no wish to determine whether Helen's enlightenment was with a small or large "e." Nevertheless,



living with messages that both comforted and inspired, and living with the daily joy of working on her writing, I believe her life became far richer and more enjoyable than it would have been otherwise. She was operating from a foundation of connectedness, hope, and right livelihood.

From roughly this time, family stories arise about how Maurits began coming around to the idea of the Masters. One day he told Helen about a terrible thousand-dollar debt that must be paid the following day. They could not put their hands on the money. The Masters told Helen to go to a hotel in the Delta and sit in the lobby. She protested, but they insisted. Maurits, completely baffled, drove Helen to the hotel only because he saw no alternative solutions. Helen had sat in the lobby an hour when a wealthy friend entered. She saw Helen's face and cried, "Dear me, Helen, are you in trouble? Is it the mines? How much do you need?" Before Helen could say a word, the woman walked over to a desk and pulled out her purse, rapidly writing a check. She handed it to an astonished Helen. "Will a thousand dollars do?" It was exactly the amount they needed. No more, no less.

A complicated relationship appears in the notebook between Helen-as-a-book-author and the Masters. The Masters appeared to be telling her what to write and how, even contradicting editorial advice that her father gave her. As an author, I didn't care for these passages; I don't like being told how to write. I wouldn't like to give over that much of my autonomy. The Masters frequently acknowledged her desire to publish more of her writing. They remarked that her spirit was already writing and she had been a writer in an earlier life, but her mind was not yet capable of creating great literature. Ouch! They

promised her that she would, in time, become a very well-known writer. So far, history has not agreed. Their insistence that she would “become great,” but not yet, and the lack of evidence of much writing later in her life, raises questions for me.

They are similar to questions my own mother asked me when I started to write this book: “What about *your* story, *your* voice? You just published your first book! Why are you now giving voice to these entities and not to your own self? Why give your writing voice over to their agenda, their schedule?” I didn’t want to hear those questions at first. Now I realize she was asking me because she supports my voice, my authorship. I don’t know if Helen’s parents asked her similar questions, though it might have helped her feel supported if they did. Far more likely, part of their collective times, they didn’t talk much about the writing process at all.

That said, W.W. published a book titled *Creative Writing* around 1920, in which he greatly supported and encouraged every young writer—assuming, of course, that the book’s readers were male.

### 31. A Completely Different Mother

In this passage from Helen's 1924 notebook, bound in black leather, one of the Masters speaks about the changes that have ensued in Helen's life.

*Let us turn for a minute to your daily life. Let us see just what these ideals are for which we strive. And what better way to express them than to take the names of the Masters who are working with you, and with that as our guidebook work out a chart of ideals for which to strive. I came to you first and we will use my name to head that list. I am the Master of Mind. Mind! That tool of the spirit about which we have taught you much. Mind. The tool that God has given his children so that their lives can be full, so that they can realize the good and evil in their life here; so that in their free will they will be guided aright.*

*Now take your mind. We found it dormant, sleeping, if you will. The daily life was full enough for it so that you were not conscious of any need to stretch out and fill it from every corner of this wonder world. And what did we do? We woke it up; we burnished it; we unlocked doors long closed, so that they rushed in with the dammed-up flow of years, and you began to stretch out and realize life, so that you were not satisfied with what you were doing. Life took on a wider meaning and you began once more to grow.*

*Now we will take the name of the next master who came to your need—the Master of Health. What did he find? A woman weary and spent. With a body that was so worn from the childbearing that it had undertaken that it was near the breaking point. And what did he do? He built it up with loving care and tender teaching. He brought it back to the*

*strength of its youth and he taught the need of care and the use of foods, so that the body and the mind could work together.*

*Now we come to the next—the Master of History. He found you—well! We will call it rusty—he used an even stronger expression—and he is using strong means for bringing to you a sense of the value of knowledge of the lives of those who have passed on before your time; of the rise and decline of nations, of men; and the realization of truth, and repetition in history.*

*And the Master of Art. He came at my bidding to teach your eyes and hand to see, so that you could use what we could give. The Master of Poetry is here to give you the thought of rhythm in words; to make your work more perfect and to give you the means of expression when you will have reached the time of having so much to express that prose will not be adequate.*

*And now we turn to the Master of Prose. He has been with you more often than you realize and has watched with satisfaction your growing interest in words for the words' sake. The infinite care that an artist gives is perhaps not recognized by the reader but is felt in a more subtle way. And so must it be with you. Words are the tools of your trade and you must be an adept in their use.*

*And so you see that if you try to live up to what we offer you, you cannot fail to grow and come to that perfection for which you strive, and in the coming years you will realize far more than that ambition you expressed [to become a great writer]. You will be so far above the woman you now are that you will wonder whether it is the same person, and*

*you will realize it to the full what it is we offer and what it means to be a Son of the Masters.*

\*

I see how Maurits might have been upset by these changes, and Helen's questioning of what was up until then a perfectly decent life. Helen was different than she had been. The mortal illness from which she suffered gradually went away. Some of her older children agreed, later, "It was like having a completely different mother."

This is a statement I ponder a lot, since I also had a different kind of mother. Mine chose to move to New York when I was six, and develop a new career and a new life, and not to bring me along nor send for me. The very long, slow understanding that my presence was not wanted, wounded my life. After I raised a child of my own, keeping her with me through both good and tough times, I began to heal. I can now have a good friendship with my mother, an extraordinary and gifted person who lacked mothering abilities.

Who is more present: A mother who gazes at her child while silently repeating mantras that have nothing to do with the child, or a mother who writes letters to her child who lives three thousand miles away? Who is more like a ghost?

Was it kind of Helen to raise her children to listen to the Masters? There is a vague indication that others might have thought she was no longer fit to raise them, but that interval was brief.

Is a child who watches daily hours and hours of television being raised by ghosts, voices, and shadows? How about the child whose only friends are library books? Are the voices of compassionate writers very different from those of Masters?

\*

In another passage the Masters addressed how, by changing, Helen was feeling more awkward among others, and her behavior was being questioned:

*First let us consider the letter from home [from her parents?] which speaks of your work as something which keeps you from the world, the daily intercourse of your fellow man, and as perhaps an unhealthy thing. I know all that you are bursting to say but let me speak. Are you less of a woman than you were three years ago? Is your mind a little more dull? Do you see the world around you as through a glass darkly? Do your children, does your husband, suffer from your contact with us? Has anyone suffered in any way? The anxiety last year, has it done you any permanent harm? Has it not on the contrary made you stronger? Do you not feel more able to cope with any emergency that may arise? How often have your eyes been full of tears in the last two years? Consider all these things and then answer that letter from home.*

*The doctor of psychology who was here for the weekend may be needed at some future time — to assure the world that you are absolutely sane, that he is not needed now and you, yourself, are the answer to that letter. You, just as you now stand, full of energy and delight in the daily instruction of the children.*

*Choose your reading matter from the best books on your shelves, how many light stories have you read during the last three months? Two, and that is absolutely all. Now*

*stories have their place. I am not decrying stories, but your reading was a bit overbalanced when we first met you, if you will remember back that far.*

*And look at your body. The lines are returning to the lines of a young woman. Your color is not what it will be. You tire easily, but just think what that body has been called upon to perform during the past years. If you were a confirmed invalid lying on your couch three quarters of the time, not because you are sent there by command but because you were bound there — not half, no, not a quarter of the anxiety would be displayed by those who love you as has been, and as will be displayed over this obsession of yours — if we use the term that others give it. You are on the road to understanding and you will enter into the life about you far more fully than you ever entered before. We light a torch and put it in your hand and it remains for you to hold it high and follow its gleam as it shines down and lights up the step ahead. So many will say just what your father has felt, “this thing cannot be healthy. This thing cannot be normal, and Helen will certainly become odd if she keeps it up.” Let them wait until they see the first signs of oddness in your daily life. If to speak with us is odd then of course you will qualify for that description. But let us push that to one side and let them put their finger on one thing about you that is odd.*

## 32. Living with the Masters

In 1925 the Masters agreed that Helen had freed her own spirit enough to lead her ego, rather than the other way around, and she appears to have decided to turn over her daily affairs, and the ordering of her time, to their counsel. At that point, the Master of Universal Knowledge said,

*“As you walk in God’s path you may step neither to the right nor the left without losing just that time, just that step that you strayed away.”*

This line stays with me still. I remember my surprise and relief in learning that the Greek word for ‘sin’ meant, at its root, an arrow that missed its mark. There’s no shame in making mistakes, but there are consequences, what Buddhists might call the results of “unskillful living.” I know that when I stray from doing what I know to be right, I lose my health, energy, time, and relationships in direct proportion.

\*

The Masters stayed with Helen, and continued to advise Maurits, when he would listen. In 1932 Maurits was ready to sell off his holdings in the Murchie Mine in Nevada City. The Masters insisted to Helen that they wait. I’m sure it was agonizing to Maurits to rely on this advice, but somehow he resisted an opportunity to sell. About a week later, the Masters encouraged him (through Helen) to put the holdings onto the market. A bidding war rose between two new parties, and the sale (to Empire-Star) was realized at a far greater profit than they had imagined possible.

\*



Working at home, writing perhaps daily with the Masters, Helen was urged to train her capacity for thinking and remembering. She wrote lessons about the aura, and color therapy, and creating harmony when things are troubled. The Master of Health, practically wouldn't stop talking about how she and her interested friends should bathe, eat, exercise and rest. The Master of Knowledge advised on how to teach reading and math to the children. The Masters parsed the Ten Commandments. Helen had frequent check-ins with them about how she got along with remedying her most glaring faults: No More Speaking in Haste. Create Harmony. Model Poise. These slowly grew into the Seven Purposes (Awareness, Manners, Pursuit of Power, Pursuit of Knowledge, Teaching, Poise, and Care of the Temple) that she described in her privately published booklet, *Master to Disciple* (1938).

The Masters gave mantras to repeat while she was dressing, walking, gardening, cooking, riding her horses. For years she worked hard every day on harnessing power both within and without. Within, she was freeing her spirit and becoming aware of her restless thoughts, harnessing them, and her feelings (especially irritation). From without, she was encouraged to draw power from the force surrounding her and constantly demand (not request) help. She was told that soon she would see the Masters as well as she saw anybody, and this carrot was held in front of her for months—if only she would work harder, not be so lazy, be more prompt!

According to the notebooks, the Masters demanded more exercises and that Helen think about specific lessons while getting meals ready, cleaning, and while schooling Adele, Maury and Peter. Young Carel was temporarily living with another household

closer to a hospital while undergoing eye operations, the older girls Ailee and Lucy were at school, and “Little Ellsworth” (Will) was toddling around. I think she lost her servants for a year, whereupon the Masters gave lessons on cooking, nutrition (taking into account the new canned foods) and doing housework most efficiently. Meanwhile, they urged her to play tennis (aerobics), stand on her head (yoga), study history, study the dictionary to become a better speller, try to “sense” other people, improve her eyesight, and of course, she was strongly encouraged to consult her spirit at all times.

The Masters advised that in “seeing” them and the spiritual plane, she would also see some terrible, evil things, things over which she had no control, and she would be besieged by ghosts trying to use her to get messages to the people they loved. I think this flooding by spirits must have happened to poor Sarah Winchester, the obsessive house builder in San José. In order not to go crazy, said the Masters, Helen must build absolute faith in them, do exactly what they said, and not associate with any spirits that were not brought in by the Masters. By the end of the notebook for 1925, she still hadn’t “seen” yet, but her earthly eyesight had vastly improved, as had her amount of energy.

In addition, she was charged with calling on the Masters for help in every little thing, and maintaining high spirits within the household, especially as Maurits was frequently depressed and disheartened, both by crop failures and his own difficult, judgmental family back in Oakland.

W.W. Ellsworth, incidentally, thought of all mediumship as hogwash, as did—and do—several members of our family. Nevertheless, in a later notebook, some actual spirits of the departed appear briefly, including a dead friend of Helen’s father—with a message

that W.W. should knock out half the Bible references from his most recent lecture; that it would be much more interesting with more of his personality added, and people would be provoked into reading the Bible for themselves! The friend also remarked that he and her father's other dead friends were having a good time and were looking forward to being with him and teasing him when he crossed over.

It reminds me of my own father's joke, "I don't believe in reincarnation—and I didn't believe it in any other of my lives, either."

### 33. The Alice Bailey Letters

Although she had given voice to the Masters, Helen's voice was not necessarily fully developed at this point. To an extent, she was now being used by them, for highest purposes, perhaps, but still driven by an external authority. She carried authority with others but as a medium, not from her own genius. For many, this is perhaps enough, especially because it is in service to others. But as a child of therapists and counselors, brought up with Abraham Maslow's model of whole human actualization, I would be disappointed if becoming a medium were the end of Helen's story. Fortunately, it's not.

Helen was not always alone in her spiritual quest. We know that after her book-writing relationship with Anne Lane, she gained at least three adept levels with The Arcane School, which was a correspondence course developed and run by British theosophist Alice Bailey and her husband, Foster. Despite Helen's eagerness to study and learn, the relationship began to experience bumps when she applied to go into "fourth-degree" work. One letter from Alice Bailey indicated that she disapproved of how Helen was pursuing a certain (kundalini) method of meditation. I could hear the exasperation underlying her urges to stick with the same program as the rest of Helen's group, and imagined the difficulties of being an occult teacher—if a wayward student were to lose his or her mind, or becomes violent, the teacher could well become liable.

I found a copy of Helen's twenty-one-page letter to Alice responding to some rigorous questions and strong statements put forth by an anonymous committee from the Arcane School.

“Your letter has had my most earnest attention,” she began. “Many questions concerning those reports sent in from time to time have been raised. I shall do my utmost to clarify my statements, and to outline a little of the progress made since I answered that long questionnaire. . . .

“My first reaction to much that the letter contained was: ‘How badly I must have expressed myself, to have given anyone the thought that those whom I call the Masters were *subconscious reactions*, or *the desire body*, or that my need was to *be de-hypnotized from their suggestions, if, indeed, they had any existence outside my mind.*’” Helen then began to respond to each point the committee had raised. I only include the highlights here.

“How do I know these Masters, of whom I have written, to be ‘Spirits of Just Men made Perfect?’ Have I proved them? This proving was done early, in my contact with them, so emphatically as to permit no doubt on my part, or on the part of those who were in closest association with me, that those who call themselves Masters were highly evolved beings, far in advance of any I had met on this earth plane. They were willing to teach those who had the desire and ability to learn from them, and who, in putting into action what was taught, made it possible for these teachers to reach into their pupil's consciousness and continue their instruction. . . .

“[The committee has said,] ‘You are quite confused, and do not comprehend the distinction between the Soul and the Master.’

“ . . . If the message is such that it is of the quality of the Masters’ teaching, if I can see that my desires are not involved, if I can recognize the difference between a

subconscious impulse and a superconscious surge, then I am satisfied. If, however, I mixed my desire mind into one of their messages, then I must be on my guard. If I am worried, nervously apprehensive (which, of course, as their pupil I have no business to be) and turn to them for help, I must stop and ask myself: “are they getting through to me, or am I blocking the channel?” A serious situation may come up with some member of the family: what is the wise course to follow? Questions not easily answered even when you make the effort to tune into the Highest you know, yet questions that have been most wisely answered many times when I have been willing to be still, not consciously seeking anything more than a communion with Spirit.

“Character lessons leave no uneasiness in my mind. I do not see that it makes much difference whether it is the Master or the Higher Self that sends along the concepts. . .”

The committee asked Helen to distinguish between a Master and his Astral Replica, and between a Master and his disciple. They questioned the numbers of Masters Helen claimed to have worked with, and posited that the Masters of Wisdom have no time to give to persons like her, that they are wholly occupied with world affairs. Helen responded, “I cannot, from what I know of these Masters, consider them limited as to time, or deny them contact with individuals because they are too busy! That they are limited in what they can do for us is true, but we are the ones to establish these limits. Not long ago came a telegram from a friend in a distant city, something like this: ‘Daughter very ill, in great pain. Doctors are unable to stop pain while they work with her. Please ask master of health to give name of some drug to help us.’”

“There are certain things that had to be done to that child. My friend knew this, she did not ask for a miracle of healing, she asked for help. The answer was prompt. ‘I cannot possibly put the name of the drug through you,’ said the master. ‘Telegraph Dr. —— to telephone name of drug that he has had in his mind all morning to Mrs. ——.’ Later I heard from the doctor, who is much in sympathy with this work, and who comes at times to the ranch to talk with the Master of Health, that he had waked up that morning with this particular drug in mind, thinking of how it might be used. He knew the mother and the child, who had been in San Francisco a few years earlier. Coming from him, these other doctors were quite willing to follow the advice, and the drug did its work. Such a roundabout method! But the Masters could not get through to the doctors in charge of the child, and so they followed this method. My service here was merely that of a relay station.

“Who are these Masters? Do they belong to the Great White Lodge from which have come the teachers of the ages? That is for them to answer. Long ago they said to me: ‘Do not try to justify us, we can take care of ourselves. Your part is to live the instructions we give.’ . . . .”

Helen also referred to the literary exercises she was undertaking with help from the Masters: “The short stories written in my sleep, afterwards dictated to me by a Master, or one of their students, were different from the “Blue Jays.” The first one so written, my earliest effort in imaginative stories, was returned in the form of disconnected paragraphs, which made little sense. It was such a disappointment, for I had been promised a story to show that I *could* write. Acting on the advice that I get my scissors, cut up the

manuscript, and put the paragraphs together properly, I found a good short story! It so pleased my father, for many years connected with the Century Publishing Company, that he could not resist sending me a telegram of congratulations.

“The reason given for their strange method of dictation, was that, if they had built up the background, and handed me the characters, my Habit Mind would have run away with them, and my story would not have been the one that I had written in that superconscious state.”

In page after page, Helen defended her process and her direct experience (the very thing that makes a mystic) to the learned and deeply skeptical theosophists. “It would seem to me that my whole effort has been directed in bridging the gap between the personality, this Habit Mind, and the Higher Self. As the Tibetan Brother puts it: ‘In learning to be Soul Controlled, in living in the Presence.’ [The Tibetan Brother she referred to was a teacher living in Tibet, from whom Alice Bailey claimed to psychically channel many volumes’ worth of spiritual lessons over many years.]

“That is, I take it, the aim the Arcane School has set itself, in working with its students. I do not see where I have not played ‘cricket’ in going ahead with that bridging, and in using all that has come to me.

“The words of power that have troubled you are only a technique of action. I use them for cleansing and stimulating my mind, as a shortcut to a higher vibration. Any ritual is simply a piece of psychological machinery which helps to develop one or another type of energy. If one is after spiritual energy, then one uses certain forces. . . . Our



brother, the Tibetan, speaks of a new, coming, science of sound. It may well be that those dictated power words will be explained in this science.

“You feel that the mantra are dangerous. Are they not a means of stretching one's imagination, and would you not agree that mantra-yoga is a science of prayer of which the petitioning prayer is only a part? . . .”

Helen concluded, “Realizing that your letter was written in the most helpful spirit of wishing to put me straight, I am not answering in any argumentative mood, but am trying to faithfully picture the leading force behind my growth in consciousness, such as it is. The Arcane School has always seemed splendidly free from any inclination to bind, but if you still feel that I need to be restrained in my contact with this force, and that I am in any way endangering the group, do not hesitate to say so. Surely we are both at the stage where personality cannot be hurt, and if our not seeing eye to eye here means that it would be wiser if I were no longer a member of the School, then I shall accept your conclusions with regret, with gratitude for what I have learned as one of its members, and with understanding.”

To be questioned and criticized by an anonymous committee must have hurt very much, even for one who had grown so confident in her own experience of the Divine. Helen had answered as best she could. A little later, Alice responded, from Tunbridge Wells in England:

24<sup>th</sup> April, 1939. “Many thanks for the two books which reached me safely. It was so good of you to send them to me and I much appreciated them.

“Thank you also for your very long letter which reached me also by the last mail. When I had finished reading it, I said to myself that to discuss the pros and cons that grew out of my letters to you in connection with the Long Questionnaire would be profitless. You are far enough along the Path to work your own way through to understanding, and your understanding may be quite different to mine. It does not really matter provided we always watch out for glamour [egotism] and hold always the position of the humble server, so let us go on together along the Path. Whatever I have to learn, I shall learn, and whatever you have to learn, you will learn, and that is the thing that matters the most. With my love, affectionately yours, Alice Ann Bailey.”

Helen later joined the Academy of Parapsychology and Medicine, a group that in 1972 published *The Varieties of Healing Experience: Exploring Psychic Phenomena in Healing*. That year, Helen turned ninety years old, lived in an apartment in Sacramento, and was still swimming a few laps at six o'clock every morning, rain or shine.

### 34. A Turning Point

Helen and Maurits raised their seven children to adulthood. They weathered tough times on the ranch: P.J. had died in 1927 owing more than a million dollars on the property, and the bank holding the note foreclosed, so that most of the land was auctioned off to the highest bidder on a spring Friday in 1931, at the front door of the Sacramento County courthouse. Maurits was able to hold on to six hundred acres throughout the Depression, and fortunes were somewhat restored by a purchase of highly fertile acres along the river in Yolo County. Cousin Fred remarked that this phase of Maurits' career, which involved using forty Caterpillar two-tons to cultivate sugar beets and slowly pay off his father's debt, broke him down physically. "They were not poor and they were not broke," said Fred. "They just had to live under a large load of debt."

Then there were Maurits' hot-and-cold silver and gas mining ventures in Nevada City and Butte County, nevertheless, they were able to employ governesses and send their children to Thacher (a private high school in Ojai), Stanford, and Cornell. Maurits was quite proud of leasing a new Cadillac every year. With dogged persistence, Helen finally won Maurits' approval to send their daughters to two years of boarding school as preparation for college, and the girls graduated from Stanford and Cornell. The family took vacations, and built cabins in their camp in the Sierra Highlands. Helen's life had become deeply grounded: Ranch, children, grandchildren, horses. Later, when she recounted stories about her life, she told them with a deep, full woman's voice (nearly a baritone), with a lot of humor.

According to a letter Helen wrote to her eldest daughter, Ailee, around 1936, she and Maurits went on a Biblical study retreat and spent pleasant afternoons sailing on a lake after their studies. It does seem that she and Maurits lived fairly happily, raising each child to adulthood, coming to terms as an older couple. Of course, the Masters were not the only disembodied voices echoing around the ranch. The telephone was probably in constant use, and could be rented for as little as five dollars a month. Periodically the family would go and enjoy movies: flickering shadows and voices and music. And while Helen channeled writing, Maurits listened intently to every baseball game that emerged from his magnificent mahogany radio, his great back slowly hunching over the years, and large hands slightly shaking on the oak armrests of his chair. Then too, were the letters that flew across the country between Helen and her family, so many paper birds a month, and others that were delivered sometimes daily to Ailee in Santa Barbara.

I can't tell you what it was like for Helen the day she channeled this particular letter, in January, 1959, which was the last piece of paper I found among the boxes. I pulled it out and read, with difficulty, her round, loopy script. "And I am with you—your Master Jesus."

It felt like an electric shock through my fingers. It took most of a day to translate her handwriting. Then I spent weeks thinking about the letter.

\*

The morning begins like any other. Helen, now seventy-seven years old, rises from a sound slumber and does her morning thought exercises, followed by vigorous stretching and swinging of her long limbs. She rinses herself in cold water, throws on a warm

sweater and walks downstairs and out into the fresh morning air to check on the horses. Back in the house, she graciously greets family and household members as they arrive into the kitchen, oversees the making of breakfast for the family and the hands, plans the menu with her Chinese cook (who has been indispensable for decades), inspects the barns with a foreman, and meet with Maurits in the study regarding some business.

Maurits has mellowed regarding the Masters, particularly since they have given him specific instructions, through Helen, that have twice saved the ranch. He has even come to admit an interest in his own dreams and emotions, working for a time with a Jungian psychologist. Before she leaves him bent over his papers, she smooths the hair over his brow and kisses him, giving his gnarling shoulder a small loving squeeze. And then, as always, she leaves the big house and crosses over to her small house above the laundry, climbing narrow wooden steps to her office with its single window and desk. She sits at the desk breathing deeply and enjoying the silence. Taking her pen in her right hand she begins, as always, drawing circles and circles and circles. Once the voice introduces itself, the day is no longer like any other day.

\*

*And I am with you—your Master Jesus. (I said that I was not worthy of his attention.)  
And that part does not disturb me in the least—you were one of our number when I was  
on earth last time!*

*So much has been written into my life which was not as short as your historians have  
made it. I was well over 40—and not much under 50 when I was teaching. I had spent  
many years studying the law and that I knew my [scratched out, unreadable] more than*

*those about me made it possible for me to call on all the forces of the universe to aid me in my work. I knew of course a little of what could come of my teachings but I did not realize how often evil would be done in my name—and that is one reason I must do everything in my power to undo some of the mischief that goes on even now pervading men's minds so they do all manner of foolish things.*

*The teaching was of the Masters—I could see and hear from infancy and the ability did not fade as it is apt to do in your civilization. I was taught by many of the Masters whom you know—and I was sent to different schools for further teaching in what men already knew, just as you have been.*

*You are to make clear to the men and women of today that I was a man even as other men. I had lived many times before and it would seem that I must live again if all this false teaching is to be removed—and straightened out in men's minds. I am not unaware of the difficulties that I shall encounter, and I can see where it is to be a very difficult assignment.*

*You are to write soon—not a religious book, but one that people will read, stating the facts as you know them. The book will have a wide sale and you will be called upon to meet many who do not believe that you speak the truth. The thought of God and God's only son—is so [unreadable: unquestioned?] in men's minds that it will be difficult to change—*

*God is everything—all is God—and every one of his children are God!—Hard to clear up this thought. The kahunas of Hawaii taught that there is in everyone the possibility of the Father within—and this possibility must be made a fact by calling on the*

*Father—by taking the Father into one’s consciousness and making it possible for the higher degree of wisdom—force—consciousness that is the Father to work with you. You consciously can do only what you have built up the ability to do—you and the Father can do anything. It was my union with my Father that made possible all that I did.*

*Why the return after death is given such prominence—and the utter disbelief in the return of anyone else—is hard to understand. . . The church may find it difficult to accept the fact that I was born as others are and that I grew up a man—that I died a man and that I was able to return after death as have many thousands of other men! I’m coming soon again—and now I bless you—and thank you for giving me your time and strength—I can see you clearly—and I am to be seen in just the same way. And now I leave you—.*

\*

I don’t know how Helen reacted. The boxes that I searched did not contain any notebooks or notes or letters from any Masters after this one. There was no book about Jesus. There were Christmas Cards from Helen and Maurits to the family, and birth announcements—even one for me, her first great-grandchild, in 1961. Every Christmas card contained a brief Bible passage that either had to do with Christ or joy. There were more notebooks for correspondence courses with a college of theology in Florida, and some exercise books. But no mention of Masters.

I’m confident that she continued to listen to the Masters, her ethereal school teachers, the rest of her life. Cousin Sal says she spoke with the Masters up until six months before she died, and that she was forlorn when she could no longer hear them. Yet, there’s no record that she pursued publishing her “Masters-work” again. Why?

My sense is that she didn't *need* to identify with her ability to do automatic writing as much anymore. The language of the Masters was spiritual, intellectual. There was very little laughter, softness, or comfort there. It was an arid part of life, devoid of the juicy feminine. The Masters had been so strict, demanding, even relentless. My mother had commented on the notebooks, "To me it is pure spirit, with almost no soul left." But this letter from Jesus had soul. Jesus was about love, and humanity. How comforting. Perhaps, in a way, it broke the spell of the Masters.

Her glorious, larger-than life father, her beloved larger-than-life husband, the several Masters, even famed psychic Alice Bailey—what authority did Helen need from them by this time? She could trust her own authority, this woman who had briefly communed with Jesus.

I suspect that the message she received that day was as comforting as its tone. Life recurs. No loss. Neither did she necessarily need to be seen, heard, published, respected, or sought out any more. She had no point to promote and no one to convince. Everyone would either find out what she had learned, or they wouldn't, in their own time, and all of it was perfectly as it should be.

In my mind's eye I see her on that day, lost in thought after that letter came. After a timeless time, she smiles in the pale sunlight coming in through her window and once again feels her senses drawing back to her life at Vorden, the rustling of the palm fronds outside, the neighing horses, the chatting between cooks outside the main house. It is all utterly beautiful.



Helen rises from her desk, scoops her many papers into a single pile and puts it in one of the empty boxes. One of those pieces of paper holds the outline of a book she meant to write someday, a book about her time with the Masters and the lessons she learned. At the top of the outline, she had written, "How did I begin?" Now it is swept into the box with its fellows. She gathers her pens into the pen jar, sweeping dust off the desk with her arm. She tucks her chair back under the desk. The office is ready for her, though she's not sure when she might come back. Her daily labors might look different from now on.

At the doorway she turns back, casting an eye at the neat desk, the sunlit window, the boxes quietly holding all those years' worth of transmissions. Then she steps out the door, closes it behind her, and walks downstairs.

I no longer wish  
To write  
With a pen  
Or with paper  
But in the air—  
On the ground—  
With my life—

*Scrap of a 2016 performance poem by Lien Chao,  
Canadian Chinese poet*

## Appendix: A Temple of Letters

In 1938 Helen and her good friend Anne Lane published a book of the Masters' exhortations and mantras for family and close friends only, called *Master to Disciple*. It was reprinted several times for the family, and you can find a copy of the second edition (signed), and the third edition in Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union, in the inventory of the Mildred and James Gillingham New Religious Movement Collection. *Master to Disciple* was Helen's and Anne's collaboration of the message they felt that the Masters wanted to get across. What I chose for this lyric biography is some of the bits that never got put in.

### *A Diet to Rebuild*

*If your breakfast is light and your supper is light, then you must eat a good noon meal. Why do we insist on a noon meal rather than a heavy evening meal? Because the body is tired. You need rest at night and rest taken by a part of the body only, is no real rest. Plan your suppers with this in mind, 'These things that I now eat must be disposed of before I sleep.' Study the foods more. Depend on yourself. We do not come to weaken. We come to strengthen. You have been given a good mind. Use it. Consider your body in the light of a gift, and say, and think, 'How can I best make use of this gift that has been given?'*

*Heavy foods, greasy foods, must be avoided because you are tired, because you are using up your forces faster than you can store up vitality to meet the calls that come. That is why I suggest cooked foods rather than raw foods [at night]. . . Save yourself in every*

*possible way. Do this as a duty to yourself and others who depend on you for their health and strength. Leave undone all the things that do not count in your well being.*

*If you are really hungry at night you may take a little more than you now eat of the same foods, but if you have eaten a good lunch, drunk all the necessary water, you will not be hungry at night. This feeling of hunger at this time is one that the human race has cultivated and can be entirely eliminated by the proper care and diet. But—and note this ‘But’—until it is eliminated you are not to force yourself.*

*Eat more slowly always. Drink more slowly and as you drink carry the thought with you of what you wish to accomplish with the water. If all your organs are in perfect health then go on demanding perfect health. If one organ or any part of the body is not up to par, then carry your thought in the water you drink, and demand that this part of your body be especially nourished. This is a simple exercise but as you command more and more the power that is about you, that we are helping you to control, it grows more and more effective not only for yourself but for all whom you attempt in any way to aid.*

*Rest all you can, and do not let the calls of social life permit you to forget the debt you owe to that body for the way in which you neglected it for so many years, using your capital, if I may use that term, and putting nothing away on which to draw in time of need.*

#### *Addiction*

*Coffee, tea, alcohol. All these things are medicines and should so be used. If you cannot do without any of them, then break away gradually, and do with a little less every day.*

*(Asking about a friend who is taking morphine) She should be made to realize that only as she limits herself is there any hope for her. This is difficult. The minute a drug like morphine is indulged in to excess the gates are open to all the evil forces in the Universe, and as she goes on she will open wider and wider and she loses all control. Make her realize this. Do not spare her. Paint every terrible picture that you can. She is not free, even when she comes here. She must rise above the desire of the flesh before she can hope for spiritual development and it is much easier to do it now than it will be later.*

#### *Aging well*

*A woman who has reached the age of forty who feels that in many ways her strength is not what it might be, has two courses before her. She may go on getting more and more incapacitated for the daily life about her—gradual though the change may be still she will sense the difference in the passing years—or, may bring herself face to face with the question and demand the truth. Why must this body that has served me reasonably well give out? Why am I forced to consider my strength and limit myself in my daily life to its bounds? And if she is wise she will not rest until she has the answer.*

*Old age is something that has come upon the world like a drug—you see it all about you—people aging on every side. You see animals living their briefer span of life, passing on, and unconsciously you accept the thought that old age is as necessary as birth and death. This is a fallacy. Old age is not necessary as you look at it. You will grow older—or riper, let us say, in perception, but with the knowledge that God has given men, with the means at your command, there is no reason why the body should give out before you are ready to be free of it.*

*It was not meant that men and women should live on indefinitely, but it was meant that while they lived they should not be limited in any way by their machine—their body—the servant of the spirit that is within every human being. The mistakes made in living are so many that we'll not spend time to go into them—we'll consider in this letter how a body that had been allowed to get more and more rusty, if I may use that term, can be brought back to par.*

*First of all there is the diet. . . There are degrees of mistakes, but if you know the right thing to do, why do you let yourself be persuaded to remain in any lower degree? And now another thing—as the body becomes purified and a more fit vehicle for the spirit, the spirit can be more apparent, and that . . . is the desired end. Now lift the stopper—gradually—and let the spirit come out and rule. The conscious self is not aware of its restraining influence, but each one of you has it in his or her hands to admit the spirit to at least an equal partnership. Once make it equal and spirit will look after the rest. Nothing is ever stationary—not the smallest atom. How much less is the spirit stationary! Once given an opportunity to move it will become the leading influence, and whereas before you found yourself restrained on every hand by material things, once you let your spirit lead there is a change. You are consciously linked up with God—you are consciously His child, and you come into your birth-right. Now we will go back.*

*Eat the right foods and none but the right foods. Consider everything you put into your mouth, and when you do that you cannot even go on licking stamps. Now we do much with water . . . water, not to quench thirst, but used as a bath—three or four glasses*

*of water before breakfast, slightly warm—the same in the middle of the morning—and see to it that it is never retained longer than necessary; and again in the afternoon.*

*And you will, of course, if you determine that my directions are wise and worth the trouble of following, give up all in between meals—all—not even a bit a food. . . .*

*Remember this—if the body telephone fatigue to the mind, the call is never to be neglected—and a time of rest preferably after the midday meal is always advisable. Make your nights long, your hours of activity short, until the body has a chance to catch up and undo some of the mischief that has been going on for a number of years.*

#### *Automatic Writing*

*You must make clear to those who ask you of this work that automatic writing has a side far more dangerous than gunpowder. Gunpowder can only blow you up and you come over here and go on with your work, but if in automatic writing you let yourself open to the forces of evil they will lose no time in entering in, and they will so weaken the fiber of your being that your spirit is weakened and the earth lesson is a failure, perhaps a very terrible one. To speak with the spirit who is unknown to you is as foolish as speaking with a man on the street — far more so, for in that case you have something by which to judge your fellow man. In this work, what is there?*

*A flow of words through the agency of the pencil using a force of which you know nothing — and to speak when you are not sure of the one who is directing the flow — is not only a foolish thing, it is a misuse of power for which you must sooner or later pay the penalty. You must demand and know. In your case we are permitting only the Masters to speak with you, with an occasional chat with an old friend. To speak with the spirit of*

*lesser power draws power from you and leaves you weakened. Therefore we do not encourage it. Any spirit who has been over here only a short time — and by short time we mean at least a hundred years of your time — is not any more fitted, except by the added years of experience, to be an advisor than he was on earth. This is the mistake made by so many: they expect advice from this side from those who were not fitted to give advice even in their life on earth.*

### *Convenience*

*I have come this morning to suggest that you use more in your household work all the help that we stand ready to give. You hesitate to use many canned foods, but at this time canned foods could very well play a prominent part in your menu. No reason, for instance, to stand for half an hour and prepare carrots and beets, when they can come to you fully prepared. If you were growing them in your own garden, if they were strictly fresh when they came into your kitchen, I should feel as you do about them. But look at those carrots, for instance, that you prepared yesterday. They were out of the ground at least a week before you bought them. They were in your cold closet at least another week before you had the opportunity to use them, and as you know from experience with canneries and their methods, 'Out of the ground into the can on the same day,' is their motto.*

*It will make very little material difference in your bills. . . I am going to give my word that no one in the household will suffer from the change.*



## *Cooking*

*Make yourself a master of those books on diet, and read them carefully, not just here and there as is your wont. Make a real study of this matter of food. Plan your meals with an eye to calories and combinations that will have the best effect on the children. Your menus are good but make them better. Reach out a little every day and try new combinations.*

*You are restricted to reasonable foods only but here you have an infinite variety of dishes to offer. Cook less of everything both so that the family will not eat the same dish often and so that you will have more practice in the preparing. You can do all this in the time that you take for preparing the usual dinner provided that you have your work planned, and provide too that you have carefully worked out in your mind the exact method of combining the materials and their proportion. Do not depend on books while you are in the kitchen. Do all that book work early in the morning. . .*

*As you read your books, make a plan of the food you would use for any child that came into your hands that was so under-nourished that it was visible to any onlooker. Gather in the data from every available source and keep a notebook. Head another page "Good cures for bodily ills" and keep your facts that you accumulate under their proper headings.*

## *Crystal*

*Crystal beads . . . will help you rather than hinder. This crystal has a tendency to attract power and light. Wear them often, you will not wear them out or lose them.*

*Do not permit your personality to enter into your work with others; if you sense that feeling of irritation—this subtle drawing-in of your aura—closing up your windows, you might say, is particularly noticeable at this time—look down at those beads, and I wish you to wear them constantly, see how they keep their light. Sometimes they are brighter than at other times, but they are always bright. As you wear them they will grow brighter. If you feel irritated, cross as you put it, impatient, glance down and remember that you are far more powerful than a chain of crystal beads. They keep their light, no matter where you put them. Hold them in the light and watch their glitter. Just so do you scintillate and radiate when you are with us, when you let the thought of us fill your soul, when you uplift yourself with the mantras that have been given. Keep yourself bright and shining, no matter what you do, no matter how you are met.*

#### *Demand*

*You must demand more. You must realize that what you use is a voice. The Voice is of God. And He is back of it, but one can have as much or as little as one wishes to draw. Demand. Use your will and ask for the Masters. A Master is one who teaches those who are here. We come when one is ready and if you prepare yourself we can get into touch and you will not lose force but gain. . .”*

*Now you are wondering why you do not get contact. Stop wishing for it. Stop hoping for it. Demand it. . . Wishing and hoping are a weak form of demanding. Make it strong. Sit up straight and look straight ahead as if you saw a vision of the Universe radiating power in every direction, and hold yourself ready to take in the power. Be alert in every part of your body.*

*Turn more to the Spirit, demand aid, demand that you be taught the direction in which the greatest growth is necessary, demand the lessons that will make you grow the fastest, and having been given them, make the most of them.*

### *Digestion*

*Feed the body so that the body is nourished, not over-nourished; so that the drainage is sufficient; so that all the organs will get the rest that the mental part gets during the hours of sleep. Here we find the greatest difficulty to overcome in your modern life. You strain yourselves, and do this and that to regain your health, but the simple act of letting the stomach and the digestive organs rest at night is absolutely overlooked.*

*As soon as the system begins to break down, and in the greater part of mankind we find it breaking right here, this is the part of the body that gives way. So I suggest for anyone who is at all interested in regaining health this simple rule: Eat only those foods that are quickly digested at night. Eat as few of these as possible and still eat enough so that you do not deny yourself the necessary—say, of cooked foods, and these of the simplest for the evening meal. No salads, no desserts except cooked fruit, and simple soups. No milk, unless you cut your whole meal so that the milk becomes the major part. All these are such simple things yet their effect on the human frame is such as to make all the difference between a nervous, irritable and unhappy man and one who is cheerful and has a clear outlook.*

### *Disciplining the Mind*

*Sometimes you even permit yourself to imagine some foolish calamity and you seem to take delight in your efforts to save the situation. Such thinking is absolutely non-*

*productive of good results and serves merely to clutter up the mind and make it difficult to find the really good thought that you strive a part of every day to attain. Can you not see the folly here?*

#### *Don't Hurry*

*Take your day hour by hour, minute by minute, and consider each action. What matter if you do not do quite so much in a day? Do what you do more thoroughly. As you write for instance, form every letter, consider the line. Is it straight? And in the light of this very small example consider your entire day. Consider. Let time go by you for a bit. You will soon catch up. Take my word for that, and you will lose nothing in the losing. Weigh each act. Consider well before you speak, let your words be measured. You will make fewer mistakes. You will have less to regret, and your whole life will take on another view.*

#### *Finding Answers While Sleeping*

*[The Masters speak about an individual seeking help] We stand ready to assist and we can reach him in many ways. What we need from him is the conscious participation in our methods.*

*For instance, when he is about to sleep let him demand light on the subject uppermost in his mind. Let him demand this clearly and out loud, stating the problem briefly, and then as he awakens let him write down all that he remembers. He will at first have only a hazy idea of what has been very definitely given, and gradually it will become much easier for him to remember and get very clearly all that we wish to give.*

*The light is there, and all you need to do is to follow the gleam. It will grow in volume.*

*Now as we work together you will feel our power in many ways. Realize this, that when a man or woman is ready for our help the opportunity is always given.*

*Here is a mantram you may use as you prepare for sleep. . . “Spirit, as I prepare for sleep I give over to your care all that I possess. Use it in such a way as to bring to light all that I am, all that you are able to bring into my being. Make of me a servant worthy of its master and bring me into the fullness of the light.”*

#### *Free the Spirit*

*You have our word for it, an oft-repeated word, that this brief time on earth is just one of the ways of growth and that growth is the aim of the spirit, that in every man there is a spirit, and that if the spirit is freed the growth will be rapid. Then what must you do? Free the spirit. Does that mean so little? Cast aside the things that appertain only to this world—cast them aside as the husks of corn are thrown to one side when the kernels are extracted. Seek the kernel. And in seeking you will find so much that is worthwhile, so much that will amaze you, that you will wonder why you have spent so many years living on the surface.*

*Depend a little more on ‘the hunch.’ You can develop this faculty very quickly and it will often stand you in good stead. It is not our voice, but our force back of the spirit that is within you helping it to express itself.*

*You must work more on freeing the spirit. . . That feeling of joy, of keen appreciation that is becoming more and more evident, must become your habitual state of mind. You*

*must deliberately work for it. If any matter oppresses you, cease thinking of it until you feel yourself strong enough to meet it without letting it depress you. Rise above every little thing that you have let weigh upon you. Enjoy more keenly all you do. Think of us, of our lessons, when you feel the spirit sinking and deliberately lift it up and set it again on high. Give it the chance and it will not fail you and soon you will be lifted up with its strength.*

*Every hour, every minute of the day you must train yourself to let the Spirit have control, and consciously you must remove the conscious and let the super-conscious enter in. You will not be able to keep that high state of spiritual development consciously all the time, but it must become yours more and more so that in everything you do, in everything you say, you feel the presence of the Spirit.*

*I was much amused by your murmured complaint that this consulting the Spirit every other minute (and we wish you would make it every minute) was like being married all over again and having to adjust yourself to another person's likes and dislikes. It is more than that, for you may be married and still retain your faults; in this case you are to be lifted up out of all these faults, and it is only by constant listening to the inner Voice, by constantly following the advice given that you can hope to attain. Once you have reached the point where you have only to listen to get an immediate answer, there is no excuse for any backsliding. So yield gracefully and strive more and more to make you and your Spirit one and the same, giving heed to all the directions so that the Spirit is you, and is free to act for herself.*

*You forgot to consult while you were eating and talking. Go more slowly and make the matter of consulting [Spirit] a game. . . Keep your attention on the game, just as you must keep your attention on any game that is a little difficult.*

*How may you go about it? Take your day hour by hour, minute by minute, give time and thought as to how you have met each lesson that has been presented. Consider well where you have failed, and why you have failed, and use the failure as a stepping stone to success.*

### *Get to Work*

*Gradually you will realize the scope of our work with you but do not let it be too gradual. Open those eyes, my child, and realize this opportunity. You say that those 'Seven Purposes' have helped you in your daily living. Keep then a record every day of the progress made. Keep a separate notebook and do not lose a single day in this study of character building. Make it a duty to measure your day every evening, and do not consider the day closed until this duty has been performed.*

*When the Master of Mind gives a mantram, use it—use it until he sees fit to change. Write it down in your mind and make it yours. When the Master of Health gives a command let it be your first duty to carry it out. And so on right down the line. We make suggestions, we prescribe, but to what end unless you learn to follow. So realize the seriousness of this thing!*

### *Guardian Angels*

*You all have guardian angels and they are watching you always. A guardian angel may not be a powerful spirit—guardian spirit is a better term—they gain their advance as you gain yours and they shine in your reflected radiance.*

*Force is all about you and it has many outlets which you do not see but you sometimes sense. The names do not matter. Force is force and it is manifest in a million, no, many times a million different ways.*

*Power lies in knowledge. And if you can make use of the forces about you why not do so? You do not hesitate to use electricity, or radio, or a hundred things I could name. All power, all force.*

### *Harness Mood for Energy*

*You will find great painters, sculptors, writers who are impossible companions because of their moods; rising up to great heights only to touch the depths of the other side, and you ask what of these?*

*These writers, painters, sculptors, geniuses are not alone. They are all controlled in some way or another while they are at work, and when the power which for the time has raised them up leaves them and they are left to fall back on themselves, there is not enough force then to hold them up. It is this that they lack. They themselves are not doing the work, it is the forces from this side that have taken control, and they themselves are not getting the development that is their right.*

*We who are the Masters have, on this side, no control over these matters. If a man or woman permit themselves to become possessed, then they must take the consequences,*



*and you see it going on about you constantly. You say, 'But how is one to know if it is one's self who does these things, or someone else? Why am I not possessed when you take the pencil and move it at your will?'*

*First, the first question. You cannot always tell but if you find the man rising to great heights in his moments of creation, only to be cast down and gloomy at almost any other time, then you may be very sure that the man is being aided in his work by a power on this side. But it remains with the man in just how much he will be aided in his character growth by this same agency. If he leans on the outside agency and slumps when its power is withdrawn, then he is losing instead of gaining.*

*Now to the second question. To a small extent you are possessed, but you are being trained by the Masters. We come to strengthen, never to weaken; and if we put in a prop here and there you may be sure that it will remain only as long as it seems necessary. If a part needs strengthening, we strengthen, never the other. . .*

*We are making the matter more clear to you now and you begin to see clearly the absolute necessity for control of moods. You must use this knowledge. . . You must keep to the middle course if you are to conserve your strength, your energy, for creative purposes as is your ardent desire. You must not let your moods control you, but control them.*

### *Healing Others*

*Now there are healers in many stages of development. Some have more power, some less. . . Radiating power is not true healing. When you heal, you use the same force that Christ used—the force of the Universe. When you radiate power, you yourself are the*

*source of the force. You take in what you can and you transmute it and you give it out in a different form. This is why I say you are the source of the power.*

*A true healer merely opens that invisible door and the power flows through him into the one he would heal. Now he, or she, may not do this without suffering great harm unless they will so purify the body that this invisible power meets with no resistance, for the power is a strong one and it is as if you left your finger in the flame. Pass it through quickly and you come to no harm but delay an instant and you carry the scar.*

*And so I say that a true healer may not consider in any way the source of his income. He must live on the bounty of the Lord, and if he be a true servant of the Lord, if he be one of the chosen ones he will be cared for.*

*To take money for healing is [unethical] and utterly impossible. You may take money for teaching; you may take money for helping another to see her mistakes. But you may accept nothing for permitting the current of the Universe to pass through you into the body of another. And when the law is broken, then the angels seek another outlet for their powers.*

### *Health*

*If your cough annoys you, banish it with your own power and the power you can draw from us. Say 'I am well. My lungs are well,' over and over. It is not silly—not foolish. It has a direct result. And if you could see as we see you would not lose a minute. Demand. And do not be afraid of demanding. Health is your birth-right. Follow to the best of your knowledge, add to that knowledge by the study of food, by careful consideration of everything you put in your mouth, and give that food a definite object*

*when you swallow. For instance when you eat that noon meal, 'This is to build. This is to give me strength. This is to make me whole.' When you drink: 'This is to wash—to wash—to wash—to leave me clean, and pure, and sweet.' When you exercise: 'This is to awaken action in my organs, to help them proceed with their proper functions.'*

*Your body is a gift. A gift that was meant to be perfect. Now make it your business to make that body fit—so that you are not ashamed to stand before those who are your teachers and say, 'See what I did with the tool God gave!'*

*Is it rusty? Then polish. Is it worn? Then renew. You have it in your own hands. You know much. Never in any way undo the good you are doing by a mistake. Mistakes happen—but a willful mistake is twice the mistake that an unconscious mistake is, and has twice the reaction.*

### *History*

*You are asked to read a little history every day. Why? So that you will be familiar with the peoples, the countries that you will be passing by in the years to come. You must know when and where and how and why, not only of people but of the world in all its many phases, and we start with History, the study of Man. You must realize with each page you read what you are getting from that page, what is there for you to remember. At the end of the chapter pause a moment and go over in your mind what it is that you wish to remember. And realize more that in reading the history of the men of ancient times you are reading the history of the people that are living about you today, the people who do things today, and the people who were doing things in the past; the power, the ability to shine out above your fellow man does not come in one incarnation.*

*I am sorry to say that characters do not greatly change from one incarnation to another. A little growth, sometimes a very little, and the Spirit goes on, and on, realizing that every little growth is a step ahead and that eventually it will win the character that is its heritage. If you will bear this in mind as you read, it will help you a little in your struggle to remember and to associate the dates and names of history in their proper sequence. Remember too how sadly distorted some of your newspaper stories are of events that transpired the same day in which the account appears, and be careful how you believe all that you read. Hold back your judgment until you have read more fully and give the author whose work you study credit for the statement that he [or she] makes.*

*You have read of great women in history. What made them great? What was it about them that has made historian after historian turn back and look at their lives from every point of view? It is not the woman herself that interests them but only her connection with what she did, her effect on those about her. How then shall we consider that woman? In point of view the same as the historian, or in another deeper point of view? In acting as she did, in pulling the currents here and there, in changing the futures of nations, was that woman carrying out her highest destiny, was she living in the highest possible way — or was she the tool of her conscious self, being led by the men and women about her, turning her back on all inner life?*

*On the great recording it matters not so much what you do as what you have made of yourself; as how you have used the talents God has given you. If you are greatly developed far more is expected of you. You may be the head of a great nation, you may*

*send your young men out to war, you may add to the territory of your nation, and still you may not in any way have fulfilled your destiny.*

*You must first realize what you have wherewith to build, and then the structure may be judged accordingly. The life of a man or woman repeated over and over again has many angles that are never seen by the historian. One whom he calls great may in reality be one who was not half of what he might have been, and one whom he passes over as of no account may be among the greatest souls of his time.*

*So, my child, you may not judge. Withhold that too hasty judgment and look at the character of the man or woman in question from every angle.*

#### *Listen Deeply to Others*

*Keep the conversation going, but let them do the talking and then listen. Listen with your mind as well as your ears. And listen psychically as well, for much that another sends out in thought wave may be taken up by one who senses, and having been caught may be digested at leisure and then disposed of.*

*You will find that while you listen consciously the real you, the Spirit, takes a hand and you will see that you will often be helpful by your deductions. . . I ask that you bend all your efforts in a deliberate effort to study your fellow man.*

#### *Look Your Best*

*You are coming into contact with many people as you pass on your way from one place to another. There is contact even when you make no effort to speak, when you pass by at the wheel of the car and are admired or criticized by those who are constantly looking out for interesting faces. Now you do in a measure try to look your best, but you*

*must do more than you are doing here. You must never leave the house, in fact I would wish that you never leave your room, without being sure that everything about yourself is in perfect order. You say that you need clothes, suits, hats to look your best. . .*

*But until such a time comes do the very best with what you have. Your hair, for instance, depends on no income. Your hands, all the little things that go to make up a well-dressed woman [or man]. We will have our suits and gowns and you will have them soon, but make up your mind now never to appear before anyone until you are as well dressed as it is possible for you to be! Put on your hat with care. Use all that you have now. No need to save for there will be more soon.*

#### *Masses*

*You may not follow the path in masses. Each man must know for himself and seek the truth.*

*The church is the mass formation. That is its greatest danger. Get away from the mass. The lines "I am the captain of my soul" should be expressed in every life.*

#### *No Harm*

*You must make up your mind that in nothing you do, in nothing you say, will you be guilty of hurting another being. You kill an insect. All very well for one who is not trained, but not permitted to you. You exclaim 'What! Flies! Mosquitoes! Fleas!'*

*No! You may not kill. That is among the first rules of the men of our order and if you were to go into the East and do what you did yesterday while you were having your lesson—pursue a fly with vengeance in your eye—your influence would amount to nothing. . .*

*You say, 'But we must dispose of pests!' And you can be quite immune from these creatures and make your children so by a well-directed thought. . . It must go against the grain for you to kill anything to such an extent that you do not act in any way without due thought.*

*You urged the doing away with, a day or so ago, of a ranch dog who you felt was in every way a nuisance, and who made the family miserable with his restless nights. Was this a mistake? No. You were brought to your decision after deliberation. I will not say do not kill then. I will say do not kill without deliberation, and try always my method first—constructive thought.*

#### *Rest*

*The work you are doing requires a certain amount of rest. . . Rest, even a short one, is much better than no rest. If it is to be short, announce that fact and the one who is with you will work the faster and give you the necessary energy to go on. Do not lie down and then suddenly jump up, because when you do that you break the currents and that is not wise. The force must be withdrawn slowly just as it is given.*

*In the first place when you sit up beyond your usual bed-time after you have already realized that both mind and body are too fatigued to be of much use to you, you not only are not making good use of your time, you are deliberately hindering the Spirit, for just the minute the body is in complete repose the Spirit is able to come to us and go on with her studies. . . Secondly, to start to do one thing and then because of a foolish wish to linger in the living room and browse among the stories does not show much strength of character. When you start to do a thing, do it.*

*And thirdly, you have been commanded to let all light literature alone for the present. You have much, much to learn, to remember, and to fill up your mind with an absolutely ineffectual story just when you are preparing for sleep is a very foolish thing to do; foolish, at all times, now that you have so many interesting things to go over mentally, and doubly foolish at this time of day. You finished a good history lesson and instead of taking it with you and working it over in your mind as you undressed, your thoughts were all for the childish tales you read when you should have gone to bed immediately.*

*Be strong, my child, strong in all the little things.*

#### *Service*

*If, because you have found it necessary to give yourself in service to others, you have not been able to do all that you planned or wished to do, do not regret or feel that you are wasting your time. In service there is power, in service there is growth, and it is in service that we learn the lessons that life brings us. Service given without thought of recompense, service because of the love of doing for others all that you can possibly do; these things bring visible growth.*

*The difficulty with much of the teaching that is being presented to the public today [1925] is that in their desire to show how health, strength and riches may be attained, they forget that until the Spirit has been freed, until such a time as the man or woman is worthy of the health, the strength, the riches, they but retard their growth and do not hasten it. The outer shell so often grows hard in the attainment of earthly desires and the Spirit far from being freed is bound more tightly than ever. In service there is growth. Remember this, and as you teach, teach this great truth. Service, given gladly, without*



*thought of self; and in this service growth for the self is attained and the spirit is freed so that it can bring the individual a little further into the light. You are given every day an opportunity to serve, use it to the best possible advantage. See how far this form of lesson will take you on your way.*

### *Simplify*

*And a word from me about the duties of the day. Make sure that you separate the duties from the things that have always seemed necessary but are not, simplifying in every possible way. No man or woman is ever given too much to do! They often bring themselves to the state of utter exhaustion. But it is their doing, and they suffer from their own foolishness.*

*When you permit any sense of worry, fear, restlessness to creep in, you are bringing worry, restlessness and fear upon yourself. These things rest with you.*

*If you are a child of God, why fear, why worry? Trust more. Do your part in every little thing and trust God for the big things.*

### *Strengthening Hearing*

*That is not difficult. Give yourself a definite exercise and follow it faithfully. Take a phonograph—or piano played by someone else—let your ear become attuned to the music, and then retreat—and strain every nerve to hear—to hear—to hear. Do not do it to the point of exhaustion but do it regularly, three or four times a day.*

*Then make up your mind that this thing called deafness is for you not necessary, that you can conquer it, and let your attitude be more watchful of what your friends say. Once the ears go back on us we are apt to let the conversation of those about us slip away and*

*not endeavor to catch their words. This is very natural and often necessary on account of the nervous strain. But a deliberate exercise is nowhere near the strain of an afternoon with friends.*

### *Strengthening Memory*

*You must strengthen your memory. Strengthen it by deliberately learning some one thing every day. Learn your mantras, then take one definite thing that we have taught; learn that. Take a poem, learn two lines. It will help you in your social duties. Consider the forgetting of the name of a guest an unpardonable breach of hospitality. Many do consider it as such.*

*Use your mind more fully, do not read on the surface as much as you do. You can rest just as well with real constructive thought. Take only a little at a time and let your mind play about the subject and enjoy it.*

### *Voice*

*Music may be made to sound in everything you do, everything you say. Keep your voice round and full. Realize that every time you speak you are beating with your [throat] petals, and make the beat harmonious and full. You have a splendid opportunity to practice reading and I am well pleased to see that you are making use of it. Read more slowly. What does it matter if you finish a book this week or next? What you read will linger longer in their ears.*

### *Wearing Linen*

*Linen is by far the best garment and linen you are to wear. Next to the skin a very fine grade of linen which you will change twice a day. Then a little coarser grade that will*

*effectively screen the body but that will be cut in such a fashion as to follow the line of the body, have little weight, and permit plenty of freedom of action.*

*For outer covering linen—a fine camel's hair—or wool, or something of this nature. Fur you may wear but not unless you need it for protection from the cold. Never to add to a costume. The animals were meant to be used but not abused, my child.*

*Silk is an insulator. As your spirit grows stronger you can draw more and more from us. Of course we are not unreasonable, but the time will come when you will not be comfortable in anything but those materials which permit you free access to us and our power, and you will avoid silk as you would a stuffy room, to be endured if necessary but never sought out.*

#### *You Bring Yourself with You*

*Remember that nothing is changed until you yourselves order a change. If you have loved someone, and still love that one, you will go on loving over here unless you find that you would wish no longer to love, as is sometimes the case on earth when two characters grow in opposite directions and find at last that they have little in common.*

*If you have been so foolish as to dislike another, the dislike is in no way changed until you bring about a change. You understand, perhaps, more clearly on this side the meaning of love, the folly of hate; but the change in your character, the act of loving, of hating, remains for you to bring about. Those who come over here expecting all hate, all violence to be wiped out, are disappointed. Those who expect all misunderstandings to be made at once clear and reasonable, are sadly grieved when they are told that only by their own effort can these misunderstandings be made whole again.*

*There is no reason for delay, either in loving, or in making more perfect the relationship one with another. You can do it quite as easily on your side as you can over here, and the idea of leaving this or that until you meet with it on this side is a mistake.*

*If one has been wronged who has passed over, one whom you can no longer reach visibly, then stretch out your mind over the intervening space and make your peace with that spirit, and so order your life that he will realize that you are doing all in your power now to make right any wrong that has been done.*

*Realize that we spirits are not so different from the men and women about you, that you will meet here conditions that you meet every day in your earth life. These conditions may be of your own fashioning or they may be lessons sent. In either case you have the opportunity now of building anew each day and making your character grow. The same lessons will be sent in a thousand different ways until you have succeeded in overcoming them.*

#### *You Count*

*If in the years you have permitted yourself to lose some vital part, ask for it again. Demand, seek and grasp and behold! it is yours, and you have only to reach out your hand to take it in your own. The knowledge that you are of God should be enough to make you realize that you count. What mother, if she loves her child, feels that he does not count? And you have not the means of measuring the love of your Father in Heaven. It is an all-pervading love, taking heed of your failings but always ready to stretch out His hand and say, 'Come, the way is not hard. Give me your hand and I will help you climb.'*

The End

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