

Chapter XVIII

MY FIRST LOVE

With the passing of the Reconstruction Saturnalia peace settled over our world. Since the dawn of memory I had lived in turmoil, upheaval, violence, riot, secret Leagues, and Klans. Out of this I suddenly emerged into beauty and sunshine. I became conscious for the first time of the charm of nature in the whole Southland. The soft sensuous air thrilled me. The night winds bore messages of a mystic future in which I was about to enter. I took to poetry and music. It was unbelievable how happy one could be. Our home life ran smoothly. My mother was well, Delia was jolly and bright as a cricket and Addie was growing into the most beautiful little girl I had ever seen. My brother A. C. had graduated from College, gone to the Theological Seminary at Greenville, S.C. and had just been called to the pastorate of the Baptist Church at the University of North Carolina. I had always worshipped this big brother of ours and was proud of the honor of this call to one so young.

Aunt Barbara died in the spring while on a visit to one of her people. And I did not grieve at her going. She had grown quite old and helpless and her face shone with unearthly joy when she spoke of the Lord calling her soon to glory that I had grown to share her feeling of release when the call should come. She had lived a beautiful life of faith and service and had gone to her "father's house of many mansions". I always thought of her in a poetical vision in heaven reading her Bible to the saints. And I rejoiced in her reward.

Rowland made me a little sad at times. He had aged rapidly the past year. The hair around his eye lashes had turned quite gray. His back was feeble and he walked or ran with increasing difficulty.

A surge of joy filled my heart when my father announced to me that work days were over and I should start to school with the opening session at the new Academy and not stop until prepared to enter college.

The morning I started I'll never forget my shocking ignorance. I

had tried to brush up a little on arithmetic. I wrote a column of figures that came to 20. To save my life I couldn't tell whether to put down the nought or the two. I had attended ~~xix~~ five schools of various degrees of inefficiency, still I couldn't believe I knew so little.

I quickly discovered that I had entered a remarkable institution in which study ceased to be a task and was inspiration. I was a little over thirteen and eager to learn but the two great teachers who became my life long friends made learning a joy. Their names were Rev. J.A. White and Henry Sharp. They had rented the Academy building and organized a private school for youths of all ages. The youngest pupil was eight, the oldest boy twenty nine. The building was a poor bare brick structure, housing a single great room which the four walls enclosed. But I have never seen a better school, North or South. It was great in spite of its inadequate physical equipment. Great because of the spiritual powers of the individual teachers.

Life rapidly becomes richer because of the companionship of the boys and girls who became my friends....my friends, through all the years....my friends today.

The boy I liked best of all was Bob Ryburn whose home was just around the corner from the Academy. I was a daily visitor after school hours. His mother made the best cherry pies and delicious cakes I ever ate. We formed a strong friendship that has never once weakened with passing years. Moved by the bitter memories of the days of turmoil, upheaval and outrages through which our childhood had been passed we wrote out a covenant of loyalty and friendship and signed it in our blood. He was a year older than I and showed me how to open a vein in my arm from which I filled the pen. I still have the document written in Bob's handwriting.

When we finished the second year under White and Sharp he was ready to enter Davidson, being a Presbyterian and I was ready to enter Wake Forest being a Baptist. The remarkable thing was that I had begun with an absolutely blank mind and in two years was ready to enter college, the

second year advanced in mathematics, the second year in Latin and the first in Greek. I had finished Geometry, read Caesar, Ovid and Cicero in Latin... the Anavasis in Greek.

At fourteen and a half years of age I began the experience of my first love. The boys sat on the right of the center aisle, the girls on the left. Out of the corner of my left eye I could see her seated beside a window that looked out over the Blue Ridge Mountains, her exquisite face silhouetted against the azure of the sky just over the deeper blue of the mountains. She had brown hair that looked almost black until you saw it shot through with the sun's rays. The warm afternoon sun seemed to curl with heat the ringlets about her neck and over her shell like ears. Her eyes were a soft blue, her voice low music. I hadn't spoken to her yet but I had heard her at recess talking to other girls while I hunted around close to catch the sound of her voice. No cameo was ever more perfectly lined than the profile of her face which I saw against that window day after day. I lost a lot of time out of that left eye, but I spent it freely. I made up the work at night after I got home.

The thing grew on me until it became a secret obsession. I was alarmed one day to see Charlie Blanton, who sat two rows directly behind me, also looking at the window. I frowned at the idea. If he should cut in I'd have a dangerous rival. He was the best looking boy in school and wore the finest clothes. In fact he wore shoes all summer, while I was one of the first to shed them in the spring and the last to resume shoes in the fall.

I made up my mind that I should get acquainted with her as soon as possible. The next day I managed to summon courage to tip my cap, and murmur her name in greeting. She blushed and answered sweetly. She knew me, of course, as well as I did her. Her father was a dentist and a member of the Baptist Church. I had often watched her at church seated beside her mother and father. But I made no further progress.

Things drifted for two months in this silent worship on my part until

I felt I'd die if I didn't see and talk to her and touch her hand for a second when I greeted her. So on a Sunday afternoon when Bob and I were discussing grave problems of the universe, I ventured on the problem of love.

"Great Scott!" Bob challenged. "You don't mean to tell me that you're in love at your ripe age of fourteen and a half!"

"Well, maybe I am!" I firmly answered.

Bob roared: "I dare you to write a note ~~you~~ to your girl right now and ask her to go to church with you tonight."

"I will, if you will!" I replied.

"Good! Sit right down there at my desk and write it. I'll write mine and we'll get a boy to carry them for us."

I hadn't expected to be taken up so quickly but my heart jumped a beat at the thought of seeing her. So without flinching I took pen in hand. I stared at the paper without the slightest idea how to begin.

"Gee, Bob," I confided, "I don't know how to say it..do you?"

"Sure," he nodded taking up a book of etiquette which he had bought recently. He turned the pages, found the proper form, pointed it out to me and copied it. Every word is etched in my memory.

"Mr. Thomas Dixon presents his compliments to Miss Mollie Durham and solicits the pleasure of her company to the Baptist Church tonight."

I sealed the document. Bob sealed his and we delivered them into the hands of a colored messenger. The minutes of waiting dragged until I was in a panic. My appearance with a girl on the ladies side of the church would be a public announcement of myself as a candidate for matrimony. Only boys who were sparking girls were allowed to sit on the ladies side. Church was our only form of dissipation and our chief social function. It was a tremendous thing I'd done on a foolish dare.

I began to perspire and pray. Earnestly and humbly I asked God to ~~help~~ get me out of it somehow. Maybe she couldn't go. No boy had ever gone to church with her. Maybe her mother would have common sense

enough to tell her she was too young and make her decline the offer. That seemed my best way out, so I concentrated my prayers on that line.

At last I saw the boy coming.

"Gee, he got back soon, didn't he?" I gulped.

"Yeah," Bob grunted. "He delivered my note on the way to your girl's home."

The words "your girl's home" made my heart jump. It certainly looked now as if I were in for it. There was still a chance she might not go.

With trembling fingers I tore the note open. On the back of it was my name written by her own hand. The moment I saw it, I had a hunch that she had accepted. I read it with wide eyes:

"Miss Mollie Durham returns the compliments of Mr. Thomas Dixon and accepts his invitation to accompany to the Baptist Church tonight."

Appalled as I was by the tragic position in which I found myself and even while perspiration stood out in beads on my forehead I could but admire the exquisitely formed letters of every word in the note. It was perfection. The most beautifully written message I had ever read.

I didn't wait for any further conference with Bob. I had work to do. I rushed home. It was four o'clock. I told my mother what I'd done, and she smiled approval:

"Well, I'm glad you're going with Mollie, son. she's the sweetest prettiest little girl in town, six months older than you are. But that doesn't matter."

"She is sort of pretty, isn't she?" I laughed with a touch of hysteria.

"I'll help you get ready," my mother said tenderly. "Give a good shine to your shoes and I'll sew the buttons on your new suit that you tore off last week wrestling with Bob Ryburn."

I had hurried home to ask her help me get ready. I knew she would. I shined my shoes until I thought a fly would slip and break his neck if he lit on them. I brushed my clothes. I got out my finest shirt and collar.

I was completely dressed long before time to start to her house. I tried to compose my mind by thinking up something to say to her. I knew my tongue would be paralyzed. To save my soul I couldn't think of a thing worthwhile. All the poetry and romance had evaporated in the heat of a terror that gripped me and wouldn't let go. I took a walk through the woods to cool off and that helped me a little.

Before I realized it I had reached her house. I ventured to the door, softly knocked and her little brother, grinning from ear to ear, met me and said in the friendliest way:

"Come right in. Mollie'll be here in a minute. She's expecting you,"

He showed me into the cool old fashioned parlor and left me. I thought he was a most beautifully behaved boy. He might have given a wise crack or two that would have been torture.

In about two minutes she appeared in the doorway, her lovely face flushed, her blue eyes sparkling, her lips parted in a gracious smile. She extended her hand and as I accepted it I felt a thrill to the tips of my toes.

When we had passed through the gate I half way crooked my arm and she put a soft hand in the curve. I was glad she did. It would have been terrible if I had been forced to ask her to take my arm. The older boys had told me the proper thing to do under the circumstances ~~was~~ was to lift your crooked arm and say nonchalantly: "Will you have a wing?" I had no intention of risking such a vulgar expression. But her quick response to my slight gesture was a great relief.

We walked slowly. I did on purpose. It was quite a long way to the church..almost half a mile..and this was my hour in paradise. The moon had just risen flooding the village streets in a shimmer of silver. I tried to say something about the moon, but it stuck in my throat. All I could do was to glance down at her lovely hair and delicate face and glory in the touch of her warm little hand on my arm. I was in a heaven that required no words, but I grew conscious at last of my long silence and

managed to say in low tones:

"It's a beautiful night.. isn't it?"

"Beautiful!" she breathed.

Never in my life have I heard such music as that word spoken by her smiling lips as she glanced up at my taller figure.

On the whole way to church I tried to think of something else to say and I couldn't. I let it go at that and fixed my mind on my first appearance on the ladies side of that church. If the boys should giffle, I didn't know what on earth I'd do. It would never do to kick one of them. It wouldn't do to blush. She'd notice it.

As we reached the steps I saw two or three couples waiting for the prayers to end before entering. I saw that we were late. I'd walked too slowly. A thought suddenly appalled me. Supposed the church was already crowded? Sometimes it was. If we entered and there were no seats we'd have to stand in the aisle helpless before the whole congregation. In which case I knew I'd go right down through the floor.. at least collapse in a lump on it, when the first boy laughed.

I pushed up the steps close behind a friendly fellow I knew.. with his girl, too. It was young Crawford Durham, Captain Plato's brother. He had just opened a law office and I felt that he would help me in an emergency. I drew her in the church quickly shielding myself from view behind Crawford and to my joy I saw two empty seats in the third row from the rear wall. I hurried her into the space and dropped quickly out of sight. Not a boy of my acquaintance saw me, for which I devoutly thanked God.

I finally gained a measure of poise, found a hymn book for her, and listened in rapture to her voice. I didn't know a musical from a promisaey note and couldn't sing if I had. I just watched her and listened in an ecstasy of admiration. The congregation must have joined her in the singing. But I didn't hear them. As I grew happily conscious of her nearness and the fact that for this glorious hour she was mine, I

enjoyed the services. I joined in them faintly. The preacher delivered an eloquent sermon. I didn't catch the text but I knew that his discourse was on love.

I was gloriously happy on the walk home and my tongue loosened up until I talked with some intelligence. I found she had a keen sense of humor and when she teased me a little over my fright on entering the church I was elated. There was already a sense of comradeship between us.

I wanted to write her another note next Sunday but Bob said that would be poor policy. If a girl thought she had you hooked for life, she'd make a monkey out of you. He had read this in a novel and spoke with authority. He said I should wait at least three weeks before asking her again. I maintained that was too long. She might take it for indifference or a cooling of my interest, so we compromised on two weeks.

Without Bob's aid I wrote my second note and asked her to go to Church again with me. I was sure she would accept. She had been so gracious and we had been so happy in the first venture.

To my amazement and grief she wrote that she was sorry but had an engagement. I got to church early and watched the door on the ladies side with terror for the man who was horning in on me. My mind flew to Charlae Blanton at once. But I'd watched him like a hawk in school and hadn't caught him looking at her once.

My misery was complete when she didn't appear at all. I sat at first that she had gone to the Methodist or maybe the Episcopal Church. It couldn't be the Episcopal Church because there were not more than half a dozen members and they had services but once a month. She wouldn't be going to the Methodist Church either. There was sharp rivalry between the Methodists and the Baptists and her father was a deacon in our church.

The alternative was unthinkable but I couldn't get it out of my mind. Some bold boy, in love with her, had seen her first appearance as a young lady with me two weeks before and had decided to rush her. Some older boy who had the audacity to call to see her at home and spend the

whole evening in the parlor or seated on the front porch behind a bank of roses vines that grew on each side.

Heartsick over the mystery, I told Bob and he comforted me with the suggestion that she might not be feeling well.

"Great heavens!" I cried, "you don't suppose she's bad sick, do you?"

"Na," he sneered, "don't be a fool."

Two weeks later I wrote her another note. Again she had an engagement. Wounded pride bolstered my feelings and I made up my mind boldly to ask her what was the matter when I saw her at recess. But my legs wouldn't work when I tried to walk the distance which separated us. I just stood and worshipped her.

In the meantime I decided to cultivate her father. To make him my friend might help. So I told my mother I had a lot of work to be done on my teeth before leaving for college. I got permission to have them thoroughly overhauled.

Of all things on earth I hated a dentist's chair. But I faced it. I entered Dr. Durham's office and told him my teeth were to be put in perfect order--every tooth in my head. He did the job thoroughly and it nearly killed me. But I didn't howl once. I gripped the arm of the torture chair and thought of his lovely daughter. It took two weeks to finish the work and I made a friend of my torturer. At the end ~~if~~ I had the satisfaction of hearing him say:

"You're a great boy. I never had a better patient in my chair."

"Thank you, doctor," I smiled. I would never allow him to know the agony I had endured. I left for Wake Forest College with an ambition clearly outlined. I'd make a record. I'd come back famous..on my way to fortune..and win her!