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FOR GIRLS

BY
Helen E. Starrett



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AFTER COLLEGE, WHAT?

FOR GIRLS

BY

HELEN EKIN STARRETT

TENTH THOUSAND

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AFTER COLLEGE WHAT? FOR GIRLS.

BY HELEN EKIN STARRETT.

FOUR daughters had graduated in six years at Vassar College, two or more among the "honor girls," and all with a standing that ranked them among the most thorough students in their different classes. And now they were all at home; and the most perplexed people in the State of Illinois were their good old-fashioned parents, especially their good old-fashioned father, as to what was to be done with such a body of the "higher education" in a little town of three thousand inhabitants, that was surrounded by a simple, agricultural population, and that never had any good travelling entertainments or lectures or concerts because it had such a little, miserable public hall.

"I'm not so certain about this 'higher education' for girls and women," said the kindly old

father to me one evening, as he sat in the big arm-chair in his great cool old-fashioned parlor, “for the reason that I don’t see what they are going to do with it, especially if they stay at home. I am not certain that it isn’t a mistake, and that it doesn’t unfit them for the place in life that they were designed to fill. Now look, for instance, at my girls. Of course their mother and I wanted to do the very best we could for our daughters, seeing that we had no son; and we concluded one of the best things was to give them all the education they would take. We had plenty of means to do it with, — farms, cattle, horses, money just accumulating in bank, and no particular use for it; and so we thought we’d send all the girls to college, especially as they all seemed anxious to go. Well, the first that went was Sarah; and after she got over her first homesickness she kept writing how much she was enjoying it, and what a grand life of study it was. And that just fired the other girls to get prepared to enter; and so one after another they all went. And now they are all through, and blest if I know what to do with them! There was Sarah, that got through first; and she came home, and I kind of thought she ought to do a little housekeeping — learn those things that a woman needs to do in a home, and I told her

so. Well, she was real sweet and good about it, and turned in and helped her mother first-rate; but I could see she wasn't exactly joyful or happy over it, and one day when I came in and found her sweeping and dusting, she said, as if half in fun and whole in earnest, 'It seems to me, father, that it's a very poor use to put a three-thousand-dollar education to, just to do the work that any uneducated foreigner would be glad to do for three dollars a week.'—'Well,' said I, 'Sarah, there isn't any need for you to do a stroke of work if you don't want to; I'm able and willing to hire every bit of it done, and I guess we'd better get another girl right away.' And then she sat down in a chair, and I thought I saw tears in her eyes as she said, 'But, father, I must do something; I shall shrivel up and dry away without something to occupy my time. Oh, dear! I wish I had my college-days to live over again.' And then she just broke down and cried. Well, I thought it all over, and really I could see a good deal to sympathize with. Here is this little town—nothing going on, nothing to do, nothing to talk about that would interest a girl that's been to college. All the young men among the storekeepers or the rich farmers around, who might have been agreeable acquaintances, and that would have made good

matches for ordinary girls — why, they have nothing in common with a girl that's spent four years studying Latin and Greek and history and literature and the sciences. The girls don't take any pleasure in their company, and the boys are afraid of them; and, as a consequence, I guess I'll have a lot of college-educated old maids on my hands. But still," said the old man, as if speaking to himself, "that would not make so much difference if only the girls themselves were happy and contented; but I see they are not, and that is the puzzle. I declare, it's all a muddle!"

The good, kind old father had in his plain, sincere way stated a problem that will inevitably confront the parents of all college-bred girls, but that has its deepest import for the girls themselves. It is a problem that should receive far more serious recognition than it does at the hands alike of parents and educators, and especially should it receive earlier recognition than it does in the years of life spent in college. The life of an earnest college girl is usually a happy and contented one, and this for very obvious reasons. She is busy; she is regular and systematic in the employment of her time; she is experiencing day by day the delight of agreeable mental activity, the joy of acquiring knowledge, the conscious expansion of her intellectual powers, the widening

of her horizon of life, and all this in the cheerful and stimulating companionship of her college-mates.

“Each morning sees some task begun,
Each evening sees its close;
Something attempted, something done,
Has earned a night’s repose.”

Thus all unconsciously does the college girl pass happily through the four years of college life; and at its close she finds herself suddenly confronted with blank nothingness, especially if she is the daughter of parents in easy circumstances, and lives outside of the large cities.

Were the secrets of hearts revealed, it could surely be shown, that in the case of thousands of educated girls and women, not only of our own day, but of all the years that have gone by since anything worthy the name of a liberal education was afforded to women, the first year or years after leaving school or college were years of deep and perplexing unhappiness.

A pathetic figure in the memory of my own childhood is that of the return from a famous female seminary of the daughter of a farmer who, greatly to the astonishment of the neighbors, had sent his daughter to school till she had graduated, the neighboring custom being, if daughters were sent away to school at all, to send them

for only a year or two. The daughter, a fine-looking, dark-haired girl of twenty-two or twenty-three years, rode in the family carriage, in which I also had a place. Even now I can see the sad silence of her face during that long day's ride home over the hills of Western Pennsylvania. I remember what a marvel she was to me as a "graduate," and how I wondered that she did not talk more, and at the tears I occasionally saw glittering in her large dark eyes. We arrived at her father's house at the close of a hot June day, and after the usual sincere but undemonstrative welcomes we were soon seated around the bountiful supper-table. The daughter was plied with many questions, all of which she answered kindly and seriously. At last the good old farmer, her father, pushed back his chair from the table, and said, "Well, Amanda, I reckon ye've just got home in good time. Harvest begins next week, and there'll be a lot of hands to cook for; and I reckon now you're through school and hum to stay, we won't need to keep any extra hired girl any more. I s'pose your seminary learnin' hain't made ye forget how to bake and cook and wash and iron;" and then he added, seeing that her face was not responsive, "I suppose ye'll be glad to have a chance to pay back a little for yer education." I chanced to remain for a few days at

that farmhouse, and consequently had an opportunity to observe how "Amanda" took to farm-work after being at "the seminary." Her mother was a wiry, dark, petulant, arbitrary little woman, whose one watchword was, "Drive the work!"

And before noon the next day no one would have recognized in the overheated, bare-armed, coarse-aproned girl, helping to cook for a dozen farm-hands, the serene, dark-eyed girl of the evening before. Though but a child, I comprehended dimly the great change it must be for her, and felt my heart beat with sympathy as her driving mother frequently emphasized her vigorous directions with, "Come, now, and let us see that going to the seminary hasn't spoiled ye, and made ye good for nothing." I sympathized with her as I observed how at different times when the evening twilight had brought a little moment of quiet and repose, she would wander off by herself among the great trees and flowering bushes of the yard, and return after a while with reddened, downcast eyelids to seat herself on the porch, and make an effort to join cheerfully in the talk about the affairs of the farm and the prices of the markets.¹

¹ The sequel to the story of Amanda I learned during the Columbian Exposition at Chicago. There I met in one of the Musical Congresses a very interesting young woman from

Life is not quite so hard and mysterious a problem for women now as it was then, but there are still many sphinx-riddles confronting the educated women of to-day. [I have said that at the close of her college career the average college girl, daughter of well-to-do parents, usually finds herself face to face with blank nothingness in so far as worthy occupation of her time is concerned. Her brother, who may have graduated at Yale or Harvard at the same time, is perhaps decreed an additional year or two of foreign travel before settling down to the real purpose of his life; but his education and his travel are both accomplished with an important and definite object in view; viz., the fitting him to take a strong, firm hold on the life-work which unquestionably lies before him, even though what that life-work is to be may not be clearly defined.]

Probably the first realizing sense of dissatis-

the far Northwest, who was in charge of the musical department of a flourishing academy in that region. I learned, almost by accident, that she was the daughter of Amanda, who, a year or two after her return from the seminary, had married a young clergyman who had been called as pastor of a neighboring country church. Together they had gone to the far West; together they had established a school, which had grown into the academy which this young woman represented. They were still its joint head, and had been the means of providing excellent educational advantages for thousands of young people in that far Western State. Truly Amanda's education had proven "worth while"!

faction and painful perplexity will come to the college girl from the breaking up of mental and physical habits that have in four years' time become a kind of second nature. Here is a psychological fact that parents should understand and be prepared for. It is always difficult, and to a certain extent painful, to the human being to adjust itself to new relations, and to change habits that have become at all fixed. This pain in adjusting herself to new relations constituted the "homesickness" of the girl when first she entered college, and it is in a large measure the cause of her "homesickness" for college after her return. She has become habituated to doing things by system and rule; to mental application during stated periods of the day; to accomplishing *something definite* every day; and to be suddenly deprived of this habitual motive and stimulus is to be made conscious of a painful void. No expression is more frequently heard upon the lips of the college girl who has completed her college course than that "the hardest kind of work is doing nothing."

But occupation of time alone is not enough to fill the "aching void" in the breast of the earnest college girl; it must be occupation that amounts to something — accomplishes some worthy result. The round of social duties will not

do this: the greater or smaller share she may take in the duties of the household will not do it; for as the good old man's daughter of whom I have spoken, argued, she will be apt to feel that it is not very good economy to use a three-thousand-dollar education doing three-dollar-a-week work. It is not reasonable to expect that she will at once take to Sunday-school and mission work to an extent that shall fill and satisfy her heart, though Sunday-school and mission work have their place, and a very worthy one, in the life of any young woman. The eager cry of the healthy, aspiring young soul is the same as that of the eager, healthy young child, I want *something to do*.

Now, what parents, educators, and college girls need to recognize is that this unrest and longing are the result of a spiritual law of being. That law is, that action, progress, achievement, are the essential conditions of a satisfying, not to say a happy, life. The human being requires as an essential condition of contentment, not to say happiness, variety, change, fresh mental nutriment, and opportunity for useful activity. It wearies of the most beautiful surroundings if it is deprived of these, tires of the most heavenly music, loathes the most delicate viands. This is a psychological as well as a physiological fact, and we

must adapt ourselves to it. The question for all is how to adjust our lives to this law.

Of course there is but one adequate adjustment; and that is to seek and find some worthy occupation for our time, talents, and energies. The world is brimming over with things to do and needing to be done, and there is joy and an "exceeding great reward" in the doing of them. But it is a pity to wait till the end of a college career to find this out by painful personal experience. Far better were it for parents and professors to teach and emphasize this truth, this law of being, from the time that the young soul first begins to regard life with eagerness and interest. [All through the college course the thought should be emphasized that the object and aim of the education there acquired is to enable students to use their acquirements as effective tools with which to carve the fortune of life for themselves. They should be taught that one of the supreme joys of life is the joy of *doing*—a joy which comes to many a young woman as a divine revelation and as one of the beautiful results of the cultivation and expansion of her intellectual powers. Becoming familiar with the statement of this truth, the college girl will learn to think ahead, to prepare and to plan for a life of definite and useful activity after she leaves college. She will not

be left to face with dumb dismay the experience of an unsatisfied, longing heart, or the dead monotony of nothing in particular to do.

But where in the plan and aim of a college girl's life is to come in the possibility of her marriage? That is a happy and beautiful possibility that may come in anywhere; but the less it is watched and waited for, the more likely will it be to come in. Most college girls have the social opportunity within a year or two of the close of a college course to form acquaintances that will determine whether an early marriage is likely to be their destiny; but in the meantime, the other aim must be held steadily in view as a strong probability set against an uncertain possibility. If the college girl marries, why, God bless her! there is good promise of the founding of that most precious thing on earth, — a happy home. She may for a long stretch of years find all she needs of useful occupation of her time and talents and best energies in its conduct and the care of her children.

But for our college girl who does not marry within a year or two of the completion of her college course, there remains the inexorable law of worthy occupation as a condition of happiness; she must find something to do. Parents must recognize and yield to this law, even if it neces-

sitates that the daughter or daughters shall forsake home and the small town in which home is located in order to find wider scope for their cultivated powers and their eager mental activities. As to what the particular line of occupation shall be, that must in all cases be determined by individual talents and preferences.

Here is where the value of having beforehand thought out and planned a course of action becomes apparent. Nearly every one has some special aptitude for some special work, and this aptitude should be the guide. The great and noble and, to those who love it, the most inspiring occupation of life, that of teaching, must, for many years to come, offer to the college girl the quickest and surest path to a rewarding profession, because, as yet, college-educated girls are in great demand for the higher positions in our best schools and colleges. Indeed, it must, in the nature of things, be many years before the demand for college-educated girls for teachers can possibly be supplied. For those, then, who can with pleasure look forward to the profession of teaching, what a stimulus to select some special department of study (for all our best teaching is now done in the line of specialties), and to prepare for that work! After teaching, a score of delightful and rewarding occupations suggest

themselves,—art, music, literature, the learned professions, and, finally, there is that profession which needs and demands the best talent of the best educated women of the land,—the profession, the overshadowing importance of which civilized humanity is but beginning to realize,—that of the kindergarten.

Living as she does in this day when money is the universal measure of so much of the high service rendered to the world, it is natural and desirable that the college-bred girl shall work for money.¹ Happily the sentiment, nay the deep conviction, of the best men and women of our time has changed in regard to the earning of money by women. We are learning—we have learned—that money is only a form of power, and that to work for and desire it may be a noble ambition. Money is, indeed, the most

¹ One suggestion seems pertinent here as meeting an objection nearly always offered when the question of college girls working for pay is discussed. It is said that young women who do not need to work for money should leave paying work for those who do need it; that to take a salaried position in almost any department of work is to take the bread out of some needy woman's mouth. The fallacy of this statement becomes apparent as soon as we apply it to young men who do not need to work. To say that rich men's sons should not work because they may thereby deprive some needy young man of employment is an absurdity on its face. The truth is, that all honest work makes the world richer, and that every idler is supported at the expense of some one's toil. Nevertheless, it is a point to be considered

subtle and easily wielded form of power that civilization has ever contrived. The history of civilization is but the history of the extension and distribution of power from the higher and stronger to the humbler and weaker classes of society. The invention of gunpowder first made all men equal in the physical contest for life and liberty; the invention of money gave to woman her first instrument of defence against social injustice. Nearly all the legal rights and privileges that women now enjoy were first conceded to them as property rights. But not to dwell further on this point, it may safely be asserted that the earning of money, the accumulation and the care of property, is now regarded as a perfectly proper and womanly occupation for any girl. That college girl has the problem of life half solved for her whose parents and friends are willing from the outset that she should earn money if she so chooses.

whether the superior education of the college girl should not enable her to find work in new directions, and inspire her with ambition not to displace any other worker, but to organize new departments of work for herself — perhaps with the beautiful possibility of providing employment for others. Professor William T. Harris has told us that the most useful intellectual power in the world — and the rarest — is that precious directive power which can organize enterprises and open up new avenues of activity for the vast masses of humanity who can follow but cannot lead. Herein is a suggestion worthy the earnest consideration of every college girl.

My observation leads me to conclude that the more highly educated the family, the more assured the social position, the readier the assent of parents to this wish, if it be a wish on the part of their college-bred daughters. I have in mind two instances which illustrate this point. Circumstances gave me the pleasure of a short visit to the family of a wealthy banker in one of the smaller cities of Illinois, where I found the most charming and refined family life in a home spacious and elegant perhaps beyond any other home in that city. One of the early pleasant surprises was to learn that the eldest daughter, a recent college graduate, was with her father in his bank as one of his most useful assistants, on a regular and handsome salary. Expressing my pleasure and approbation at this, the father, himself a college graduate and a courteous and refined gentleman, said, "I felt that it would be a great deal better for our daughter, and make her far happier, to have something to do; and," with a fond glance at the bright-eyed, happy-looking girl, "that is true, is it not, Florence?" Her smiling and hearty response showed only too plainly her pleasure in the useful and honorable part she was allowed to take in life. Returning from that visit, I met on the train a gentleman whose occupation was that of bookkeeper, who also had a

daughter, to whom he had afforded the advantages of a college education. Inquiring for her, I said, "Miss Margaret told me she wished to teach, and that a fine position had been offered her in B—— Institute. I suppose she will accept it." The father's face flushed with positive anger as he replied, "I have put my foot down on all that nonsense. Never as long as I can earn money to support my family shall my daughter go out teaching." — "But," I replied, "what will Miss Margaret do with all her splendid energy and vitality? She must find something to do in order to be happy." — "Let her do what other girls do, stay at home with her mother," he replied in a tone of such annoyance and irritation as warned me not to pursue the subject further. But in my mind's eye I saw the earnest, enthusiastic face of his gifted and finely educated daughter, thought of her in the neat and pretty but necessarily small home with all her powers "cribbed, cabined, and confined" in the monotonous round of daily trifles and petty personal interests. Equal to the position of the best among teachers, fitted both by nature and education for a broad sphere of useful and happy activity, capable of becoming a fountain of strength and helpfulness to others, she is doomed, for the time being at least, to bear the pain of imprisoned capabilities, unused energies,

and the dull, monotonous round of days without any special interest or special purpose. Poor book-keeper's daughter! Happy banker's daughter!

But while the finding and entering upon some regular and honorable occupation, and the earning of money thereby, is an excellent and noble thing for a college-bred girl to undertake, it is not necessarily the only or the noblest thing. To seek happiness is one thing, to follow the narrow path of duty is sometimes quite another and far nobler thing. Oftentimes the unquestionable duty of the college-bred girl is in her home and to her parents and younger brothers and sisters; and there may be no possible compensation but that of affection and the consciousness of duty performed. Often it is the plain duty of the girl who has finished a college course to take upon herself the task of lightening the burdens and assuming the cares of the too often over-burdened mother who has so patiently borne them for many years that the daughter might be free to acquire the college education. That college girl's education is defective in a vital point who has not been led to realize the overshadowing authority of that "Stern daughter of the voice of God," Duty; and that college education is a failure that makes the daughter impatient of, and petulant

under, conditions of home-life that are uncongenial, or that require self-denial. Did she but realize it, here is a new and noble kingdom for her to conquer. To change and better those irritating and unhappy conditions; to reorganize, refine, inspire, elevate,—this is a work that often calls importunately to the college girl for accomplishment; and it is often a work that may extend outside the family circle, and include neighbors, friends, and even an entire village or town, in its scope. The call of such a duty or duties should never fall unheeded upon the ear or the heart of the earnest and worthy college girl.

And there is still another field of useful activity which has proved strangely attractive to a large number of college girls during the past decade of years, especially among those so fortunately situated in life in regard to money matters that they have no need to consider for a moment the earning of money as a necessity for support. That field is the field of human benevolence. It can be nothing less than the inspiration of the Divine Spirit of Love that has turned the hearts of so many in high places to consider the sorrows, the needs, the distressing environment, of the poor and ignorant; and that has led them to devote time, money, health, to the bettering of their condition. Surely it is “God manifest in the

flesh" that has brought to pass the now countless agencies for the uplifting of the human race from the abysses of degradation and suffering in which it is found in all large cities; that has organized "university settlements" and "working-girls' clubs," and "homes," and has duplicated Toynbee Hall of London with Hull House of Chicago, and similar institutions.

When the college girl is truly inspired with this "enthusiasm of humanity," this divine love for her fellow-creatures and a desire to help them, she has found the best and highest that there is in life. It is among the saintly women who have from choice devoted their lives, or a portion of them, to this work that has no reward except the doing of it, and the blessing it confers on other lives, that we find those serenely happy faces that make us think of the beautiful Madonnas of the great masters of old. This inspiration of devotion to the work of uplifting fallen humanity seldom comes to the young and happy except as the result of some great blow to the heart or wrecking of the ordinary hopes, loves, and ambitions of youth. When it comes as a result of such wreckage it is the message of divine healing. It is the transforming and transmuting power that changes the selfish, exclusive love of one and of self, to the beneficent, inclu-

sive, healing love of all. It is the Gethsemane experience of the soul that enables it to understand and appreciate the words of that great suffering yet triumphant philosopher who said, "Learn to say to happiness, 'I can do without thee,' for with self-renunciation, life begins;"¹ or better and more simply, "Not my will, but thine, be done."

And since the lesson of what to do with a college education when it is gained is of such vital importance to the college girl, how great is the moral responsibility of those who occupy the position of instructors and mentors during the years of college life. I once heard a paper upon the Higher Education of Girls, written by one who was in the best sense a woman of the world; that is, she had had every advantage that wealth, education, culture, foreign travel, and association with the learned and great could give. In it she stated that the ideal college or university for girls should have three specially endowed chairs filled by women. The first of these should be for physical culture, including culture of the speaking or conversational voice; the second for instruction in the history, principles, and practical application of art; the third should be filled by a woman who should be general adviser as to the

¹ Carlyle.

conduct and aims of life. The average girl, the writer said, or words to that effect, at twenty-one had no more idea of her own needs, capabilities, or of the conditions necessary to her happiness, than a child; and during this chaotic, formative period of character her greatest need was an adviser of her own sex who was wise enough, strong enough, and experienced enough to help her, or at least to restrain from hasty decision or action that might wreck her whole future life.

It will probably be long before we can have any such special chair in colleges for girls, or in universities where they are admitted as students; but fortunate is that college or university that numbers among its instructors or professors wise, helpful souls, who love out of their own full knowledge of life to impart of the highest to the young souls with whom they are brought in contact; who understand that deepest, most inspiring, most consoling of all truths, that "rest for the soul" is to be found only when our powers of mind and body are actively engaged in harmony with, and as part of, the Divine Life and plan in helping to bring about all that is good; who can open up life in a new and wonderful and heart-satisfying way because it has thus been opened to their own vision; who can help others to solve the problem of life because they have first solved it for them-

selves; whose lives are a practical exposition of that prayer, voiced by the sweetest hymn-writer of modern times:¹ —

“Lord, speak to me that I may speak
 In living echoes of Thy tone;
As Thou has sought, so let me seek,
 Thy erring children, lost and lone.

Oh, lead me, Lord, that I may lead
 The wandering and the wavering feet;
Oh, feed me, Lord, that I may feed
 Thy hungering ones with manna sweet.

Oh, strengthen me, that while I stand
 Firm on the rock and strong in Thee,
I may stretch out a loving hand
 To those who breast life's troubled sea.”

When such instructors, such professors, such inspired helpers and sympathizers and advisers for the young, are found, let colleges and universities cherish them, for they are the ones who will best help our daughters to answer that momentous question, — After College What?

¹ Frances Ridley Havergal.



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