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ALICE
VIRGINIA
COFFIN



ALICE
VIRGINIA
COFFIN

A Biographical Sketch

By

STELLA SKIFF JANNOTTA



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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

ALICE
VIRGINIA
COFFIN



HE COFFINS were essentially a line of hard working pioneers, ever seeking to better their condition, laboring with head and with hand to that end. Viewing the line as a whole, we find them, possibly, rather more successful with head than with hand. In 1660, Tristram Coffin, Alice's immigrant ancestor, was one of ten men to buy the island of Nantucket, where they soon established thrifty homes. Tristram was their first chief magistrate or governor.

The constant intermarrying of these islanders for several generations presents to the biologist interesting studies in heredity through rather close inbreeding. The fallacious notion that cousins should not marry, still commonly held by many laymen today, appears to meet a salutary refutation here. Unless there is a flagrant weakness in the line there is no bar to marriage. Desirable unit characters may thus *increase their strength*. Charles Darwin was a son of cousins. It is said that a friend of Maria Mitchell, the distinguished astronomer of Nantucket and also a descendant of Tristram Coffin, once said to her, "I met a cousin of yours the other day." "Where?" she asked. "On Nantucket," he replied. "Oh, everybody on Nantucket is my cousin," she said. These

Her
ancestry

Ill. Hist. Survey

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

Nantucket colonists have had many brilliant and gifted descendants.

Alice's line leads back to Tristram seven times. Her direct line of descent on the male side was as follows:

1. Tristram Coffin, 1605-1681, and Dionis Stevens.
2. John Coffin, 1647-1711, and Deborah Austin.
3. Samuel Coffin, 1680-1764, and Miriam Gardner.
4. William Coffin, 1720-1803, and Priscilla Paddock.
5. Matthew Coffin, 1754-1832, and Hannah Mendenhall.
6. James Coffin, 1783-1838, and Sally Starbuck.
7. Matthew Starbuck Coffin, 1811-1884, and Martha Ellen Thompson.
8. Alice Virginia Coffin, 1848-1888. Never married.

The real legitimate interest in studying ancestral lines is for the purpose of tracing hereditary family trends. In the tenth generation back every person has 1024 progenitors, a whole village full of ancestors. Each one in that village is of equal importance from the viewpoint of transmitting new unit characters into the blood stream. Twenty generations back, the small village of ancestors has grown to a large city of over a million persons. It is an idle gesture to point to one outstanding ancestor as shedding glory over a descendant when myriads of other ancestors contest that value. In searching for hereditary characteristics, it is too complicated and confusing to go back too far, but closer in one may catch snapshot views of family trends.

*The
justifica-
tion for
geneo-
logical
research*

Among Alice's Nantucket ancestors was

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one William Gayer, who was a younger son of a distinguished English family. In England the law of primogeniture, which gave the great estates and titles exclusively to the eldest son, forced younger sons to seek fortune elsewhere, and young Gayer landed in Nantucket, where he married one of that island's pretty daughters, Dorcas Starbuck.

On Gayer's family line in England, by marriage with de Courtenay and de Bohun lines, we find kings and queens a plenty, with barons, lords and princes thrown in for good measure, all duly authenticated in our best geneological libraries, and amply confirmed from historical records by the family of Echlin Phillip Gayer of Dublin, Ireland. The Courtenay-Gayer branch leads back to Edward the First (1239-1307), King of England, and his wife, Eleanor, daughter of Ferdinand III, King of Castile.

To be "on the Roll of the Plantagenet Blood Royal," with heraldic rights, may have an imposing sound, but it is a meaningless circumstance not worthy of note. It was not mentioned in former editions of this sketch. For heredity, it is entirely too far back on the line to have significance for descendants. Whatever qualities of strength and power in leadership may have inhered in those ancient kings and barons, by virtue of which they attained supremacy, were variously modified in coming down the long, long line. As for prestige, here, in democratic America, the false glamour of far away royalty is not impressive. We deeply cherish the more virile and homely qualities of our pioneer ancestors.

The Nantucket colonists early took to whale fishing, an occupation presented to

*Too
much
sugar
for a
cent*

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

*Rivaling
tales of
fiction*

them by natural emergencies. It made many of the Nantucketers rich, and it was the Nantucket whalefishers who first noted the Gulf Stream. Samuel Coffin of the third generation was an eminently successful whaler, sending his ships into the far reaches of the southern seas. Many are the breath-taking tales which these islanders relate of their whaling experiences. The most arresting story is of the sinking of the *Essex* by a whale in the South Seas, over a thousand miles from land. Only two men returned to tell the tale. The *Essex* sank on the twentieth of November, 1820, and the crew pulled away from the sinking ship in three open boats. Before they were rescued on the eighteenth of the following February their sufferings were extreme. Most of the men died and survivors resorted, by vote, to cannibalism. It is a tale of the sea, gruesome and true, which surpasses all fiction.

*Quaker
ancestors*

Alice's Coffin ancestors were Quakers for many generations, since the gifted daughter of Tristram, Mary Coffin Starbuck, had established the Society of Friends as a fixed institution on Nantucket. Perhaps Mary was the first woman in America who, all unconsciously, represented the cause of woman's right to take part in political council. She was famed for her sound judgment, which was eagerly sought by the islanders. The easy elegance and choice of her language in everyday conversation, entirely without affectation, marked her as Nantucket's selection for Quaker preacher. Her oratory was eloquent. Others of her family followed her occupation. Since then Quaker preachers have appeared plentifully in the family, some of them gifted. The success of an aunt of Matthew Starbuck Coffin, Pris-

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cilla Coffin Hunt, was so outstanding that much has been written concerning her. In 1823 John Ward writes of Priscilla, "Her clear and cogent reasoning, strength of utterance, and beautiful language exceeded expectations. It was the greatest display of oratory that I have ever heard from human lips."

The peace-loving type of mentality which has made the Quakers forever an incontrovertible and perplexing embarrassment to the military-minded historian proved its efficacy once more on Nantucket, where courts were soon established to settle differences, and no Indian was ever killed by the colonists. They used Reason, not Guns. This implies a willingness to see the other fellow's point of view and to concede something to his rights. This type of mentality came down the line to Alice.

In the fourth generation, William Coffin feared congestion on an island that could but meagerly sustain large numbers. He anticipated possible trouble with England when the islanders might easily be severed from the mainland and face starvation. Therefore, in 1773, he joined the migration southward to Guilford County, North Carolina, where new homes were built, and ere long, there was a thrifty and prosperous community of Quakers.

The next generation was again impelled to pioneer onward, and this time it was to escape the pernicious effects of human slavery. In his book of *Reminiscences*, Levi Coffin relates harrowing details of the scenes which they were forced to witness in North Carolina, the selling of children from heartbroken mothers, the cruel entrapment of slaves trying to escape and the hourly brutalities which the slave chain countenanced. Such daily scenes were be-

*Their
type of
mentality*

*From
Nan-
tucket
to North
Carolina*

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*From a
slave
state
to a
free
state*

*Alice's
parents*

coming unendurable. These conditions, coupled with the difficulty of free labor competing with slave labor, impelled Matthew Coffin of the fifth generation, with his children and grandchildren, to join the covered wagon caravans and brave the long and dangerous journey over the blue Alleghenies, thru the Cumberland Gap, to their new farms near Salem, Indiana, a free state. They cherished the privilege of an atmosphere of freedom and liberty. This was about 1815.

It was in Salem in 1841 that Matthew Starbuck Coffin met and married Martha Thompson, a daughter of Judge John Handley Thompson, a successful lawyer and judge, who served the people of the state of Indiana as their representative in the General Assembly, as president judge of his circuit, as senator and secretary of state, and as lieutenant governor of the state. His public service covered a period of thirty years, and he finished with an honorable and unblemished record. He did not accumulate wealth, but he acquired what was far more valuable, the high respect and esteem of his constituents. He was a ready talker with a fund of interesting anecdotes ever at his command. His home was in Indianapolis.

Martha's mother, Margaret McLoney, was a writer for magazines, and Martha was an excellent letter writer. She attended Mrs. Tivis's School in Louisville, Kentucky, having both some ability in music and talent with her brush.

Matthew Coffin was engaged in the commission business in New Orleans, where they lived in the first years of their marriage.

On March 29, 1848, in Louisville, Ken-

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tucky, there was born to Mr. and Mrs. Matthew Starbuck Coffin, a baby girl, whom they named Alice Virginia. America needed that little girl. Otherwise, she would not be remembered today. In her home, she found awaiting her and eager to play with her, a little sister, Mary Frances, about five and a half years old. Alice was the fourth child. Her mother anticipated her coming in some anxiety, as she had just suffered the loss of two little boys. She believed that their death was due to the adverse climatic conditions of New Orleans, so they sought another home for their children in Louisville, the scene of Mrs. Coffin's school girl days. There she was in the midst of many old friends.

*Enter
Alice*

On March 12, 1848, she wrote from Louisville to her husband in New Orleans.

“I have been quite well since you left last week, which I consider indicative of my approaching accouchement, and hope earlier than I expected to write it is all over. Oh, if only you were to be with me, to console by your gentle and affectionate sympathies! . . . but I must try to prepare myself to bear it without the happy presence of him whose place in that trying hour none other can fill. Oh, that fate could have been satisfied with what she has exacted of us heretofore, without this painful separation, but I fear she presides over my destiny with her wand dipped deeply in sorrow and disappointment, and is insatiable; perhaps intended to teach me, if I would enjoy permanent happiness, not to place my affections on things of earth. . . . However, active exertion and almost constant company for the last three weeks have served in a great measure to dispel melan-

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choly feelings, and I find myself indulging in dreams of future happiness, though not accompanied with the satisfaction such anticipations used to afford me, before I had been so thoroughly schooled in sad lessons of disappointment."

The little Alice proved to be vociferous and lusty, a great comfort to her parents.

LETTERS OF LONG AGO

"The thin paper is yellow
And mellow with age;
The handwriting is delicate
And fine
As a convent-lace design;
This fragment
Of loveliness and love
Is a letter.

In romantic Kentucky,
In 1848,
From her Louisville home,
Stately Mrs. Matthew Coffin
Wrote to her friend, Madame Honoré,
Announcing the birth
Of blue-eyed, golden-curled
Alice Virginia Coffin.
At the top of the page
Is a hand-painted wreath of flowers.

Felicitations were received
From Madame Honoré.

In 1849,
Madame Honoré wrote
To her friend, Mrs. Matthew Coffin,
Announcing the birth of a daughter,
Wee, beautiful, Bertha Honoré.

Felicitations were received
From Mrs. Matthew Coffin.

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In that lavender long ago,
Little did that young mother
Know
That wee, lovely Bertha Honoré
Was to be Mrs. Potter Palmer,
Who gave fine service
To the World's Congress of Women,
In Chicago.

In that lavender long ago
Little did that young mother
Know
That Alice Virginia Coffin
Was to be one of seven girls
To found the P. E. O."

—Frances Coffin Boaz

In his commission business in New Orleans, Matthew found it advantageous to become half-owner of a steamboat, *The Monroe*, plying up and down the Mississippi River, between New Orleans and St. Louis. These were the days when feeling ran high on the problem of slavery. Abolitionists were strongly advocating the freeing of negro slaves, and some of the Coffins were playing a prominent role in this movement. Levi Coffin, an older cousin of Matthew, was a prime mover or so-called President of what was known as "The Underground Railway," a system of spiriting runaway slaves to safety in Canada. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the originals of the kindly Quaker couple who assisted Eliza and her little boy after crossing the Ohio on the ice were Levi Coffin and his wife, portrayed as Phineas and Rachel Halliday.

Lucretia Coffin Mott, whose line leads back to the Nantucket Coffins, was a gifted Quaker preacher and orator, and it was in 1848, Alice's birth year, that she, in conjunction with Elizabeth Cady Stanton,

*The
Coffins
were
Abolitionists*

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called the first Woman's Rights Congress ever held. She was impelled to do this because she was refused the privilege of speaking, simply because she was a woman, at a conference of Abolitionists held in London, where she had gone with a flood of eloquence locked within her against the system she abhorred. In those days it was believed that women should be seen and not heard.

In the operation of his business, Matthew Coffin found it necessary to employ a husky negro slave, Charles, to do his draying, paying his weekly wage to his owner. One day Charles begged Mr. Coffin to buy him and give him his freedom, promising to repay every dollar. Altho at that time Mr. Coffin could scarcely afford to spare such an amount, one thousand dollars, he finally acquiesced, and Charles, deeply grateful, faithfully fulfilled his promise to repay the money.

It was into such an atmosphere that Alice was born. Her father always inveighed against the iniquities of slavery, fostering in his children a profound love of liberty for all whether the color was fair or dark. In 1849 Matthew purchased from the rest of the heirs his father's old farm, a mile out of Salem, Indiana, and there with two little brothers added to the family group, Charlie and Matthew, Junior, the children grew robust and mischievous.

When the problem of slavery arose the Coffins were particularly clannish. There was not a man in the Coffin family who would not gladly assist a runaway slave on his way to freedom in Canada and of the same mind were his sisters and his cousins and his aunts.

At one time, a slave boy escaped from

*Matthew
bought
his
father's
farm*

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Kentucky and landed in Salem. Soon his pursuers were after him. They met George Starbuck, an uncle of Matthew Coffin's.

"Oh," said Starbuck, "is it a black boy wearing bluejeans that you are looking for?"

"Yes," they answered eagerly.

"Why, I saw him just this morning by Matthew Coffin's spring house, sitting on a bench under a willow tree," and he gave them specific directions how to go there. They went off in hot haste after their prey, but presently returned, angry and crestfallen not to have seen him even at the vanishing point.

"Well, you found the spring house, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you found the willow tree, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"And you found the bench, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, three truths out of five statements is pretty good for a Starbuck on this occasion," said George, and turned away.

The slave got away.

On May 11, 1852, Martha writes to her husband from their farm home out of Salem:

"HOME, SWEET HOME"

"On this lovely afternoon, after a refreshing shower, which seems to have enlivened and invigorated all nature, the merry little warblers are chanting their songs of joy amongst the trees. With the air freshly fragrant with perfumes

*Alice's
mother*

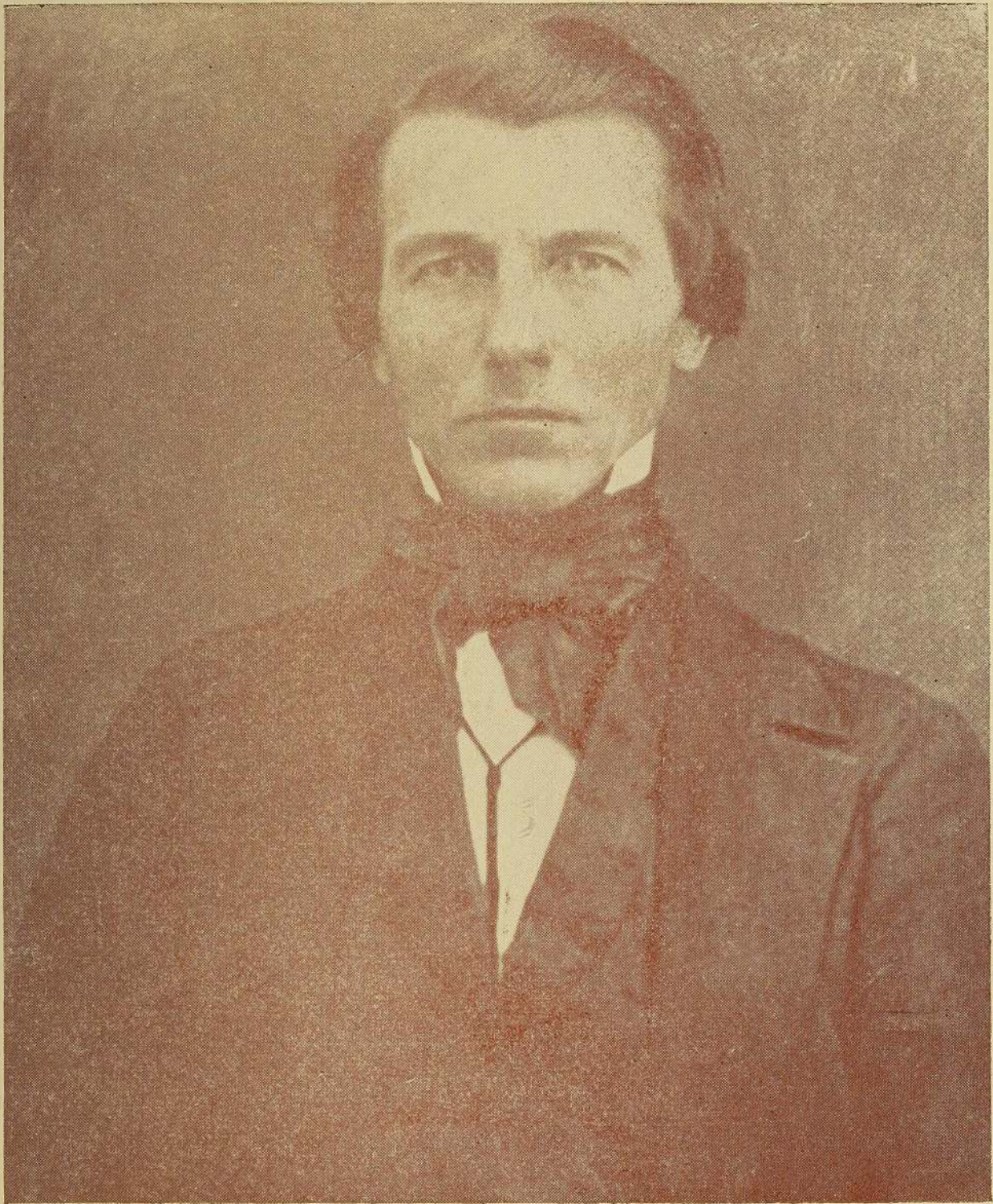
ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

*Maternal
enthus-
iasm*

from the orchard, making it a moment truly befitting the month of May, my heart naturally turns to you, responding to your hope that we may hereafter be permitted to spend the lovely month of May, and all other months, together, with our little band of pledges to cheer us with their happy sports and glee. . . . Never was a mother blessed with a more interesting family than our little group. Although my duties have been of too pressing a nature to admit of my devoting great time and care to the cultivation of their vigorous and inquiring intellects which is a source of deep regret to me, yet I derive great comfort from the thought that they are endowed with the capacity of receiving instruction, which, when directed by a father more competent to impart than their mother, will make them interesting and happy ornaments of our home and of society." Amid extended comments and eulogies concerning all of her children, she speaks of Alice as follows:

"Little joyous Alice is of a confiding, affectionate nature, which greatly endears her to us, despite the little waywardness to which she is occasionally addicted; for like her mother, her joys as well as her crosses partake of the nature of her affections, too deeply they sink into her heart and too ardently to be easily removed."

Of her family she paints a picture of roseate hues for her husband's willing conviction, and we may pardon the mother's natural bias in the reflection that maternal enthusiasm and loving sympathy are the



Matthew Starbuck Coffin
Copy of an old daguerreotype,
taken about 1853.



Martha Thompson Coffin
Copy of an old daguerreotype,
taken about 1853.



Children of Mr. and Mrs. M. S. Coffin. Mary Frances, aged about eleven; Alice, aged about five and a half; Charles, aged about three and a half.

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greatest assets of childlife, a psychical necessity for the finest development of the race. Every human breast at times feels the need of it.

The little girls were always at the mother's heels as her busy hands fulfilled their daily round of duties. When on baking days the fire was kindled in the great brick oven built outside of the house and into the oven went an array of cakes, pies, bread, pastry and custards for the family's consumption, Mary and Alice added their little patty "to help Ma." They followed Ma as she hurried down the hill to the stone spring house, a beautiful spot, embowered in morning glories and overhanging willows. There, on the rocky bed of the cold spring water, sat the crocks of tempting milk and golden butter. They must "help Ma skim the thick cream." In later years that old stone spring house was an ever fruitful source of happy reminiscence for the sisters. Never was spring water so clear and pure as that which abounded in their happy playground and never were morning glories so glorious, while from the trees the song of the pewee added the charm of its note for their enchantment. Mary Frances went to school in Salem.

In the fall of 1854, finding that farming was not sufficiently remunerative, Mr. Coffin sold his farm and household goods at auction and the family went to the home of Grandfather Thompson in Indianapolis. After recovering from a siege of fever and ague, Mr. Coffin went to Newton, Iowa, a promising location on the wild western prairies. The family followed in May, 1855, and found a small community receiving a constant influx of

*They
help
ma*

*From
Indiana
to
Iowa*

Alice Virginia Coffin

new arrivals which taxed the housing capacity of the embryonic village to the utmost. The family managed to appropriate two rooms to their use, until they later secured a small cottage, which to Martha's city accustomed eyes, fresh from her father's home in Indianapolis, appeared primitive. In company with Jehu Lindley, Matthew opened a dry goods store.

In August, 1856, Mr. Coffin went to Philadelphia to buy goods for his store, and Martha, with her two small sons, Charlie and Mattie, accompanied him as far as Indianapolis to visit with her father and old friends, leaving her daughters in charge of Mrs. Lizzie Matthews, with little Alice mourning at the gate over her mother's departure. From Indianapolis, she wrote to her two little girls, Mary and Alice, letters filled with the love and admonitions of a devoted mother, the last record we have from her pen.

*Family
mis-
fortunes*

*Mrs.
Coffin
died*

The shipment from Philadelphia of fall goods for the store met with disaster through storms, and did not arrive until spring, when it was time to buy spring goods. This meant bankruptcy for the firm. In the midst of this misfortune, Mrs. Coffin died, on July 30, 1857, leaving a baby boy two weeks old who did not long survive his mother. To give birth to a child in pioneer Iowa in 1857 was a hazardous undertaking and poor Martha Coffin, a fine healthy woman, paid the price of the hazard. She died two weeks after the birth of her child, because of unscientific methods in handling such a case in pioneer communities. Knowledge of scientific obstetrical methods was not general at that time.

The death of Martha was the greatest misfortune of Mr. Coffin's life. It was a

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blow from which he never fully recovered. The sparkle of life was gone forever. He no longer had her interest in and admiration of everything that he did. He labored on for his children, but the gray half tones of life settled upon him and he was again much away from home in pursuit of a livelihood. He later built a comfortable brick house south of the "Square." He tried the services of a housekeeper for several years and the children went to school in Newton. Mr. Darius Thomas, in Hazel Dell Academy, was one of their instructors. Many of Mr. Coffin's friends urged him to marry again, but no woman could fill Martha's place. In his memory she lived, vital and steadfast, to the end of his days. In these times of easy dalliance, it is inspiring that Mr. Coffin may bequeath to his posterity that lustrous mental heritage, life-long and undeviating devotion.

At the tender age of nine years, Alice was bereft of the guidance and sympathetic love of a devoted mother, a bereavement which inevitably created its vacuum in her young heart. Nevertheless, that mother had ineffaceably stamped her impress upon the mind and emotions of her young daughter, both in precepts and in natural heritage, a mould which matured and flourished and in turn radiated its ideality and its cultivation. Destiny usually discovers compensations. Potentialities in all of us are myriad and we acquire one development only at the expense of another. Alice's early loss unfolded in her a gradual reliance upon herself which, as she advanced in years, grew in degree to very fine proportions. Instead of the "clinging vine" so admired and sung of poets one hundred years ago, she emerged a self-re-

*Alice
missed
her
mother*

*She
developed
self-
reliance*

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liant, resourceful and capable young woman.

At the beginning of the Civil War, Mr. Coffin was tendered the position of Supervisor of Transportation of Troops and Supplies on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. It was at this time that he removed his family to Mount Pleasant, Iowa, in order that his children might have the privilege of attending the Iowa Wesleyan University. He was determined that if he could leave them nothing else, they should have a good education "for of that," he said, "nobody can rob you. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the man who accumulates the most money makes the greatest success in life. Your real wealth is what you are, not at all what you possess." He fully realized the enhancing benefits of education, and the family remained in Mount Pleasant for several years, the children busy with their school and college work, while the father kept a supervising eye over them. The two sisters early learned to ply the needle dexterously to their advantage, for, otherwise, the adornments dear to the heart of young womanhood would not have been sufficiently plentiful. Today, examples of Alice's needlework would put to the blush of shame the fine stitches of the sewing machine. Exceeding neatness was a distinguishing feature of her personality, and, to her mind, cleanliness was indeed next to Godliness. Her friends well remember the faint and pleasing odor of Cashmere Bouquet that wafted in her wake.

*To the
Iowa
Wesleyan
University*

*Her
school
girl
romance*

It was during those years at college that a budding romance appeared on Alice's horizon, and the flying moments acquired an added zest. Gradually this friendship deepened until it crystallized into an "en-



Alice Virginia Coffin
Young school girl in Mount
Pleasant, Iowa



Alice Virginia Coffin
Attending the Iowa Wesleyan University,
Mount Pleasant

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gagement," and rosy were her plans for a purposeful life, engrossed with her home and family. He was a handsome fellow, tall and dark, and they were a princely couple. But in a difficult moment, her fair dream was shattered into a thousand pieces at her feet, never to be put together again. A lacerated heart is a difficult experience for man or woman. It was of this time that a friend, Mrs. Babb, wrote of her "tribulations." But if her shattered hopes and girlish pride suffered a deflected poise, time, that great assuager of all griefs, wrought faithfully for her. The elasticity and rebound of human emotions are their preserving grace, and what, yesternight, appeared a hopelessly broken life, with the morning's lifting sun, rises on optimism's lilted wings and soars into the smiling azure spaces. These intenser occurrences of life, receding, leave as their deposit a deeper, shrewder, more sympathetic understanding of the human heart. Because of this experience, Alice carried an enriched perspective to her books and to her further observations on life's checkerboard.

Among the books in Alice's possession was Madame de Stael's *Corinne*. On the fly-leaf she had written *Miss Alice Coffin, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, September 5th, 1867*. Throughout the book, she had bracketed many passages, indicating strong endorsement of the sentiments expressed. *Corinne* is the only book bearing Alice's marks that is still in the possession of the family. There were others, but they are no longer available. The date of her inscription makes the passages she marked as revealing of her inner life at that time as though she had written them herself.

These were the days when she was suf-

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*Alice
speaks
thru her
copy of
Corinne*

fering the disappointment of her young school girl romance. In a decisive judgment that was possibly hasty she had terminated a friendship of which she felt the loss and the clouds of life were dark. In *Corinne*, Alice marks, "Men know not what they do; society persuades them that it is sport to fill a heart with rapture, and then consign it to despair." But at another moment, she notes that grief, so cold and oppressive, "actually ennobles its victims; who has not suffered, can never have thought or felt."

Compensations

Again, "The noble pride of a blameless life is well depicted in majestic Latin; in poetry, august and severe as the masters of the world. . . . But life, I know, belongs not all to love; habit and memory weave such nets around us that even passion cannot quite destroy; broken for a moment, they will grow again, as the ivy clasps the oak. . . . But one learns to view the events of one's own time the more calmly for noting the eternal fluctuations that mark the history of man; and one feels ashamed to repine, in the presence, as it were, of so many centuries, which have all overthrown the achievements of their predecessors."

She is beginning to find compensations.

It had been her purpose to become a school teacher, that noblest of all occupations for women, after motherhood. It therefore remained her purpose.

*Uniting
to form
an organization*

It was during her last year at college that Alice, in conjunction with six of her intimate college friends, united to form an organization which would express their aspirations while it fostered congenial fellowship. The names of the six friends who, with Alice, wished to perpetuate their

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friendship in an association of worthy purposes were Hattie Briggs, Ella Stewart, Suela Pearson, Franc Roads, Alice Bird and Mary Allen. In 1889, Mrs. Alice Babb, who was, in her college years, Allie Bird, wrote of this event as follows:

“Little did the seven of us who organized the P. E. O. Society think, when we did so, of the possibilities of thirty years hence. In fact, we were too young and too happy in the midst of our college girl life to give much thought to such ‘way off’ periods. Our thought was only to crystallize into an association and perpetuate thereby, a beautiful friendship that had developed during our college years. Five of us were seniors, one sophomore, and the other one, though irregular, was well up in the college course. Of course it goes without saying that we ‘built better than we knew.’ To us, it is a matter of no small congratulation that the circle of seven has grown into the thousands and spread into the several states, and that its beautiful friendship and words and works of love have become the delight of not only the thousands of young girls, but also of many older women with young and loving hearts.

“It is only just to all to say that to no one of the seven is any need of praise due more than to another for all planned and talked, and thought, and wrought together. What one did not think of another did, while some parts were the result of the combined work of all. The by-laws and ritual were the work of a committee and required so much time and effort that we did not succeed as we first expected, in completing our organ-

*Inception
of the
P. E. O.
Society*

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Alice suggested their motto

ization at our first regular meeting, but it required several meetings and considerable of time to bring these things as near perfection as we felt was possible before our organization was finished. It was Alice Coffin who suggested our motto, and the rest of us wrought for the suggestion until it embodied our combined ideals."

In describing the personalities of these interesting girls, Mrs. Babb speaks of Alice:

Alice was a lovely young lady

"Allie Coffin was a magnificently formed girl, large, well built, and who knew exactly how to carry and clothe herself. Not one of our number did the star ever adorn as it did Allie Coffin; sometimes it shone from her hair, or glistened in the black lace meshes on shoulder or bosom. She was regal, and life to her was a conflict. Losing her mother when an infant, she had to fight many hard battles alone, unaided, but I doubt whether the wisest care would have improved the lady she made of herself, only she would have enjoyed and appreciated the tender caresses of a mother. She was one who willingly would have poured all her tribulations—and they were many—into that mother's loving ear, and life would have been an easier road to travel.

She suggested the star for emblem

"She was a blonde of the animated type, which is more striking than a brunette. I wish I might portray the queenly presence, that poise of the head, like a deer on a mountain brow that defies the elements—that lovely hand which had all the curves of beauty described by Ruskin, and all the adornings, the well-dressed figure. No wonder it was she



Alice, all in white at graduation. Her friends say she looked beautiful and delivered an interesting oration.

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who suggested no smaller thing than a star for our emblem."

On inviting occasions, she could be the jolliest of the jolly. One of her colleagues testifies that her queenly presence would have graced an elegant ballroom, had the opportunity presented itself. She was fond of the "poetry of motion," and we may not doubt that in those early days her Methodist foot was in grave danger under the spell of rhythmic sound and general merriment. In later years, religious compunction was no barrier to the frank and free enjoyment of the dance, into which she entered with grace and whole-hearted pleasure.

Thus it was that the aspirations of seven college girls in Iowa have touched a strongly vibrant chord in the hearts and minds of many thousands of women today, who perpetuate by their fellowship and cooperation a great humanitarian movement to assist struggling youth in their effort to obtain an education. Many of our greatest Americans, from George Washington down, have rated education as of primary importance especially as it relates to the maintenance and successful operation of our democratic ideals, but the ripening thought of our eminent American sociologist, Lester F. Ward, discerned that *conditions of social progress* toward that *truly constructive civilization* which may in some distant day dawn upon the world are free opportunity for educational advantages. Education increases knowledge, knowledge increases opinion, opinion increases action, action increases progress and progress increases happiness, the end and aim of all effort. No progress is real which does not increase the sum total of happiness. Education is therefore

*Not to
dance
was a
hardship*

*The
P. E. O.'s
were
destined
to
become
a vital
factor
in our
social
milieu*

Alice Virginia Coffin

*Bachelor
of
Science,
1869*

*She
entered
the
teaching
profession*

*Her
religion*

a means to a great end, and it is of the highest significance that a great and growing organization of women in this country are bending their efforts toward extending its benefits.

Alice graduated from Iowa Wesleyan University in June, 1869, and received the degree of Bachelor of Science. After graduation, she taught for a short time in Des Moines, Iowa, then accepted a promising opening in the public schools of Chariton, Iowa, where she remained for several years, winning many warm friends and admirers. Other suppliants for her hand came to her, but to all of them her heart and therefore her lips said "no." In the later years of life she had an offer of marriage that would have given to her the lovely home which she would have enjoyed much, and which she would have graced and dignified with her rich personality. "It is a pity you cannot accept it," her sister Mary said to her. "But I cannot," she replied with decision. "It is impossible for me to marry for a home where my inclination does not lead me. It has always been that way. So," she laughed, "I am resigned to my fate."

It was while she was in Chariton that she definitely severed herself from the Methodism which was bequeathed to her by her mother, and allied herself with the Episcopal Church, the rituals and ceremonies of which presented to her a deeply satisfying mode of expressing her reverence and of communing with Primal Forces. She conscientiously accepted the Christian faith, and when, during her summer vacations, she visited her sister, Mrs. Vernon W. Skiff, in Newton, Iowa, it was a pleasing vision to see her on Sunday mornings arrayed in her fresh and charming lawns,



Alice entered the teaching profession.



Alice teaching school in Chariton, Iowa.



Alice, in Chariton.



Alice was the heroine in a dramatic play
in Chariton, Iowa

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"divinely tall, divinely fair," with a quiet dignity and stately carriage, join the village outpouring to their respective churches, where to her Sunday morning was a real communion with inner heights and an exaltation of spirit.

Miss Ethel Bartholomew, who was one of Miss Coffin's pupils in Chariton, Iowa, pays tribute to her memory. She says:

"The idealism of childhood is the stuff of which the lights and shades of later life are made. The teacher who arouses enthusiasm must herself be the daily expression of those fine ideals which fire the youthful imagination of her pupils. She sets up standards for them. What she is, they want to become. They are plastic under her example. Whatever Miss Coffin did, she did superlatively. We prided ourselves that 'our teacher' did not need to stay in the room. In loyalty to her, we scorned to take advantage if she stepped out.

"Not only did Miss Coffin inspire in us students high standards in our daily school life, but she could play the heroine grandly. The Library Association gave plays from time to time to finance the circulating library, and as we remember it, Miss Coffin was always cast in the heroine role. We thrilled at the finished way in which she 'wiped the earth' with the villain of the play, kindly man that we knew him to be, off stage. She looked the part of the heroine, having a fine physique, with wonderful hair falling far below her waist, and just a glint of gold in it to make it more glorious. In school, on the days when she had a headache, she would sometimes loosen the pins which held the two great braids, and in

*Memories
of one of
Alice's
favorite
pupils*

*She
was the
heroine
in home
plays*

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

some of the 'tableaux' she unbound the braids, and left the shower of hair free. It was wonderful.

"This is the memory that Miss Coffin left with a little group of Chariton girls, which she led from one grade to another until they reached the High School. Now, after all these years, the mere mention of her name brings a thrill to each of them."

There were many of Miss Coffin's friends who realized that real histrionic ability lay dormant within her. On several occasions the talent manifested itself, but, of course, it was never developed. For many years she cherished a picture of Mrs. Sarah Sidons, whose noble and tragic performances gave lustre to the theatre. With Mme. de Stael she felt that "the accents, the looks, the least movement of a truly sensitive actor, reveal the depths of the human breast. The ideal of the fine arts always mingles with these revelations; the harmony of verse and the charm of attitude lending to passion the grace and majesty it so often wants in real life."

Perhaps, had her lot been cast in an environment that could have encouraged and developed her talent for portraying human emotions, she might have made a name for herself on the stage, but as it was, those alibities lay forever dormant within her.

Alice wished to make her permanent residence in her old home town, Newton, where her father resided with her sister, so she secured a position in the grammar school, where she remained for several years, usually living in close proximity to her sister's home, "to be near Pa," disseminating her culture, stimulating her pupils to fresh endeavor, cementing friendships, and practicing her very careful thrift and economies,

*An un-
developed
talent*

*Back
to
Newton*

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

which were exceedingly necessary then, as well as today, as communities have not yet recognized in an adequate pecuniary way the relative importance and high value of the teaching profession to the social welfare.

Of her during those years, the writer, a niece, has innumerable happy recollections before her last year of invalidism and sadness settled upon her and upon us. Chiefly comes to my remembrance her cheery personality. It was always a pleasure to hear her voice at the door. One day my father was walking in the garden with his hands behind him, contemplating his peas and cabbages, when he heard Aunt Alice's quick footstep on the walk. "No thinking allowed on these premises," she said. "I am not thinking aloud, I am thinking to myself," he replied. In this manner, her presence brought such a note of blithesome gayety that we rejoiced at her coming and regretted her going. It was invigorating, like a fresh breeze from the sea.

Good cheer and interesting conversation radiated from her like dew from the flowers on a sunny morning, and if a difficult task confronted us, Aunt Alice was ever ready to lend a hand. One Christmas, my memory records my planning a very elaborate wardrobe for my young sister's doll, but it would never have been finished in time had not Aunt Alice's deft fingers taken hold of it. She found great pleasure in preparing her Christmas box "for Brother Charlie's little girls," baby garments, lovely little dresses, a coat, a bonnet, every stitch fashioned with her own clever fingers, something for each one, and all lovingly and neatly patted and packed in time to arrive before Christmas morning. Her native artistry found expression in them, at

*Her
cheery
person-
ality*

*The
helping
hand*

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

the same time that her maternal impulse discovered a vent.

Perhaps the finest flowering of her culture was in the implantation in the minds of her pupils of a consciousness of responsibility in integrity of purpose, a willingness to struggle through difficulty toward noble accomplishment. "Hitch your wagon to a star," she often said to me, and this old saw was so much a part of her philosophy of life that it entered very deeply into her nature. "Never mind if you never attain your star; the effort will be a development." It was thus that she encouraged her pupils.

She spent much time at the Reading Room, the town library. She said one may tire of society, but never of books. She was a great admirer of the word paintings of Ruskin. In writing, her more labored efforts were what today we might term flowery, but in her usual letters which had much the greater charm, she wrote just as she talked, and they were filled with the homely details of everyday life, bountifully enriched with that good common sense which Voltaire assures us is not so common.

During these years, the Newton schools began to take part in the state oratorical contests. One year, Miss Coffin trained her niece, Stella, to take part in the Newton High School Oratorical Contest. Her pupil won first honors, which meant that she was to represent her home town in the state contest. There, also, she won first honors and Miss Coffin's friends realized that she, as a teacher, possessed pre-eminent ability in dramatic representations. After that, she trained many contestants for both local and state affairs and often her pupils captured the honors. She writes of

*"Hitch
your
wagon
to a
star"*

*She
loved
books*

*Again,
dramatic
ability*

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

these preparations: "Well, I have put my whole soul into the work and I hope they will all win prizes."

In many of the young men and women with whom she daily came in contact she took a great interest and enjoyed her verbal joking combats with them. In her letters she spoke of several. "They are fine lads," she said. Of the girls, she noted the high womanly qualities of some of them and their interesting conferences with her. "Oh, well," she concluded, "I guess I love them all."

To Alice, a drive in the country was indeed a feast of the senses, so deeply did she realize with Emerson that "Nature is the circumstance which dwarfs every other circumstance." Beauty in whatever form expressed, whether in literature, in nature or in man's handicraft, enthralled her.

She held high the Greek traditions of beauty and knowledge, constantly urging the reading of good literature. In *Corinne* she bracketed "Grecian religion was not like Christianity, the solace of misery, the wealth of the poor, the future of the dying; it required glory and triumph; it formed the apotheosis of man. . . . The Pagans deified life as the Christians sanctify death. . . . The volcano bears so supernatural an aspect that doubtless, the poets thence drew their portraiture of hell. There we may conceive how man was first persuaded that a power of evil existed to thwart the designs of Providence. Well may one ask in such a scene, if mercy alone presides over the phenomena of creation. . . . Fancy must ever precede reason, as it does in the *growth of the human mind*."

Among the books which were culled from Alice's shelves by her young niece

*"I guess
I love
them
all"*

*She
esteemed
beauty
and
know-
ledge*

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

and pupil were Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh*, the poems of Tennyson and of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, also Madame de Stael's *Corinne*. Her copy of Shakespeare was well marked and much loved.

Corinne is the story of a woman of eminent capabilities, the natural creation of such a woman as was the author, Madame de Stael, who endowed her heroine with the added graces of beauty, youth and romance. Her mind is portrayed as well stored with the reflections of the genius of foregoing ages. Her improvisations in poetry and music won enthusiastic response. In classic dancing, the poetry of her motion breathed the magic of impassioned joy. In her acting, her ability to delineate human emotions was inspirational and marked her as a woman of distinguished and versatile talents. If her abilities were not marred by the vanity of display as were her creator's, it may be credited to the illusions of tales of romantic imagination. The hero in the story is manifestly a woman's man. No man could have created him.

Alice held a strong and very especial pride in the really worthy achievements of women. This phase of her nature was revealed when she urged upon the attention of her niece the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, with emphasis on *Aurora Leigh*. This is a poetic tale of a highly gifted girl whose inward life of the mind was compensation for her unloved and unhappy surroundings. It was such a conception of character as only a woman of high endowments would project. As in *Corinne*, one sees the reflection of the author, but one must not forget that both of these authors wrote at a period when obscurity best became a female. They

*She had
great
pride in
worthy
achievements of
women*

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

were consciously hammering at barriers. They belong to that earlier day when women were not supposed to have opinions or abilities beyond the household needs. In Tennyson's poems, Alice drew attention to *The Princess* and there her niece met "a cause," an epoch-making incident in her "life of the mind," to grow and develop as its later day necessities indicated. She one day joined a minority group working for "suffrage for women" and lived to see the day when that minority became a majority and another barrier was down.

The Princess, beneath its mock heroics, presents that age-old "cause of women," her right "to live and learn and be all that not harms distinctive womanhood." As Abigail Adams proclaims in the early days of our republic, "If we mean to have heroes, statesmen and philosophers, we must have learned women." Tennyson has the same thought:

"The woman's cause is man's; they rise
or sink
Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or
free.
If she be small, slight-natured, miserable,
How shall men grow?"

In Tennyson's poem, after the surrender of the Princess to her Prince, both aunt and niece rejoiced in the words of the Prince,

"For woman is not undeveloped man,
But diverse. Could we make her as the
man,
Sweet love were slain; his dearest bond
is this,
Not like to like, but like in difference.
Yet in the long years liker must they
grow;

*The
woman's
cause*

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The man be more of woman, she of man;
He gain in sweetness and in moral height,
Nor lose the wrestling thews that throw
the world;
She mental breadth, nor fail in childward
care,
Nor lose the childlike in the larger mind;
Till at last she set herself to man,
Like perfect music unto noble words;
And so these twain, upon the skirts of
Time,
Sit side by side, full-summ'd in all their
powers,
Dispensing harvest, sowing the to-be,
Self-reverent each and reverencing each,
Distinct in individualities,
But like each other even as those who
love.
Then comes the statelier Eden back to
men;
Then reign the world's great bridals,
chaste and calm;
Then springs the crowning race of hu-
man-kind.
May these things be!"

*"Go on
with your
gradua-
tion"*

Many of Alice's pupils held her long in grateful remembrance. One, the daughter of a widow who was making a brave struggle to educate her children, said to her, "Miss Coffin, it is impossible for me to go on with my graduation. Mother cannot buy my clothes, and she needs my help." "Go on with your graduation," said Aunt Alice. "I will see that you look just as well as the other girls." With her own hands, she fashioned the garments, inexpensive but charming, and when the momentous day arrived, with her own hands she adorned the girl with fresh flowers and ribbon bows, and felt a glow of almost maternal pride in that vision of young woman-

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hood so resolutely rounding her first milestone.

Mrs. Ella Vaughan Eberhart, a life-long friend in Newton, Iowa, says:

“Whatever was to be done, Alice was in favor of doing promptly. This was the case on that day when it was first proposed to ‘have a Society of our own.’ Alice said: ‘Let’s meet this afternoon,’ and they did. That very day they named the Society and adopted a brief constitution. . . . My memories of her are many and vivid. She was tall and state-ly, fine looking and always tastily gowned. I recall her genial companionship with pleasure and can hear her voice, even now, as she recounted many interesting occurrences of the past. She was of a cheerful nature, bright, witty, high-minded, well educated, and anxious to be helpful to her friends or pupils, or in the betterment of humanity in any way possible. Her joy expressed in laughter was catching and she kept everyone in a happy mood at such times. Of course she had sad times, too. She often expressed deep regret that she was so early in life deprived of her mother’s love and presence on earth and thus had no home for so many years.”

*Testi-
mony
of a
life-long
friend*

Yes, as the years sped on, there were moments of sadness. Though she realized that the “might have beens” never partake of the imperfections and flaws of realities, an unfulfilled desire for home and family sometimes lingered in her consciousness. On one occasion, as the old year was passing away and the new was ushered in Alice wrote:

“Another year has passed the dial plate of time, another year with its host of

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

*Goodbye,
old
year*

changes is forever gone, and its days have taken their place by the side of the too rapidly multiplying yesterdays. As the New Year is opening before us, the changing scenes of the old yet seem to linger and haunt memory like visions of a well remembered dream.

“As we sit alone and give ourselves up to meditations, the melancholy song of the wild winter’s night tells us, most plaintively, of days when Hope waived her scepter over the mind and showered down in rich profusion her golden dream of a bright futurity.”

*The
happiness
of
parent-
hood
was
denied
her*

Unrecognized, perhaps, by her, these midnight ruminations over the dying year were but an expression of that “cry of the species” which Schopenhauer maintains is fundamental and universal. It may not be thrust aside with impunity. Every budding romance is an expression of this urge. The happiness of parenthood ranks high in the category of human happinesses, in fact highest with some writers, and the man or woman who is forced to forego that fulfillment inevitably suffers a diminished zest in the strife of life. What a superb mother she would have made! The world is, indeed, the poorer never to have known her children! Her abilities, properly crossed, would have borne fine fruitage.

My sister, Blanche Alice, upon whom Aunt Alice lavished that wealth of maternal affection which never was permitted to blossom in her own, had a friend, Mabel Davenport Doud, who cherished with loving tenderness the memories of her inspirational schoolroom days with Miss Coffin. She says:

“Miss Coffin, or ‘Aunt Alice’ as I was permitted to call her, was the embodiment



Alice, teaching school in Newton, Iowa.
Picture taken about 1885.

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

of a child's ideals, beautiful, tall and stately, dignified and sweet. Her courage and her poise never failed, and helpfulness to her neighbor and friend was a part of her very existence. There never was a child in her schoolroom too unattractive to have her interest. Through the years the memory of her high courage has remained and helped me over many a difficult spot."

Miss Doud became an enthusiastic member of the P. E. O. Sisterhood, which she has ably served in many important capacities, first, as treasurer, secretary, vice-president and president of the Illinois State Chapter, and later, in 1934, as the honored and highly capable president of the national organization.

Mrs. Winona E. Reeves, who was at one time President of the Supreme Chapter and has been for many years the clever editress of *The P. E. O. Record* which has a national circulation, speaks of the present status and attainments of this worthy organization of women as follows:

"The P. E. O. Sisterhood founded in 1869 by seven college girls is one of the pioneer organizations for women in America.

"It has fine traditions and an honored history in itself and its achievement in the field of Education.

"In the beginning, like all sororities and women's clubs, its efforts were chiefly social and cultural.

"In 1907, however, P. E. O. began a larger work in the establishment of an Educational fund, the purpose of which is to aid worthy young women to acquire a higher education in the interest of self-

*The
P. E. O.
Sister-
hood is
function-
ing well*

ALICE VIRGINIA COFFIN

support. The fund has in it more than a half million dollars and has aided about 3,000 young women.

"In 1927, the Sisterhood came into possession of Cottey Junior College for Women by gift of Alice Virginia Cottey Stockard, its founder and owner.

"The college property and equipment has a value of \$300,000 and was given to P. E. O. free of debt and with \$20,000 as a nucleus for an endowment.

"In addition to these two educational projects, P. E. O. has built a handsome Memorial Library on the campus of Iowa Wesleyan College in honor of its seven founders. The building was dedicated and presented to the college in 1927.

"The P. E. O. Sisterhood has, in 1930, a membership of more than 50,000 women who seek in life and work to honor the seven girls who founded it."

This organization has added other pearls to its chain of achievements in establishing, in several states, homes where such of their members as may so desire, may find a refuge in their declining years. They are homes of comfort, charm and culture.

Alice's last year was an intensified struggle to regain her vanishing health, sapped by Bright's Disease. Had science advanced to its present height, she might have controlled it somewhat longer. In December, 1887, writing to her brother's family, she speaks at some length of the eventuality of her death and then adds, "But I hope to get well and strong again, in time, with care. The sun has just broken forth, round a rift in the clouds, and then like a sweet modest child hides his face again." Was the sun typical of

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her waning hope? Again she writes, "This is one of my days when it is very hard to keep up and be hopeful. It seems so sad to me that I am an invalid and confined to the house. It almost breaks my heart."

Her last days were filled with courageous and stoical resignation. She assured her family of her confidence in a bright immortality. She died on July 28, 1888, at the home of her sister, Mrs. Vernon W. Skiff, in Newton, Iowa, and was laid to rest by the side of her parents, according to her request, just as the sun was sinking below the horizon. It was a fitting finale to a life which had been devoted to beneficent and cultural activities. She was indeed a woman who was worthy of high admiration: in character, noble, generous, kind; in personality, of dignified but genial charm, not beautiful but comely, with a glance that registered the lofty intelligence of a mind which keenly appreciated the rarest talents of mankind; in purpose, steadfast in her desire to foster all efforts that inclined to uplift her fellow beings; in the discharge of her duties, capable and conscientious. She radiated upon her world a love always loyal, an enrichment of the cultural life of her community, a hopeful courage, a tender and helpful sympathy for distress, and an abiding confidence in the nobility of human destiny.

Finale



Nancy
Hanks
Lincoln
Public
Library