

# a young man finds his place on campus—and in the world

We sat by the creek, eating our modest lunch. Then Mother turned to me, her voice intense: "Promise you will come to this college."

ILLUSTRATION BY GEORGE PORTER

own boss. He will work at something he is good at, instead of the first job he can find."

Pearl had blind faith. She knew she could offer me no opportunities, for I had begun selling newspapers on the streets of San Francisco at the age of six in order to help her, and I would still be working for my living all through college, if I could ever get into one.

Yet I never again doubted that I should go to this college, and that in some mysterious way it would free me.

I never lost this conviction, not even in the difficult years that followed; for paradoxically, though I loved books and had an insatiable appetite to read, I was a poor student.

No, I never lost either the clarity or the firmness of the resolve my mother had planted in my mind that day by the creek on the University of California campus. I had no money, I had poor grades, I had no friends or relatives who could help me. The doors of any college would obviously be locked against me.

Yet, I knew that I would one day enter the University of California. Had I not given my mother my word of honor?

It is said that God works in mysterious ways His miracles to perform. I can only believe that this is true.

In my senior year, I moved with my mother to Los Angeles and entered a new high school. Here the teachers had a warm and interested attitude toward their students, and I flourished to such an extent that I pulled straight A's. This accomplishment, along with make-up work, got me admitted to the University in 1920.

Riding to Berkeley on the train, I kept my saxophone, through which I then made my living, in the upper berth with me. It kept me awake all night because I had stuffed into the red case my full savings of \$246.

After dropping my bags at a boardinghouse, for the second time in my life I entered the University of California campus. It was the day before school was to open, and again there was not a student in sight. The chimes of the campanile began to play some beautiful music, the peal of the bells filling the warm and fragrant August air. I walked a few steps and stood in front of Wheeler Hall, which I had learned would be the scene of most of my classes.

As I stood gazing up at it, realizing that I knew not a soul on the campus, that I had only enough money to put me through perhaps two-thirds of my freshman year, and that if the University required me to take mathematics and science, I should probably be in serious trouble again, my courage faltered. I had no right to be here. It was as though my mother and I, on that day six years before, had entered into a conspiracy to defraud the school.

Then, as I was about to turn away, feeling lonely, dejected, unwanted, an apparition appeared on the hill above me: a man on horseback, with an enormous head of white hair flowing down to his shoulders, wearing a big black hat, and a loose black cape. I thought for a moment that the shock of entering the campus had created some kind of hallucination.

## The Horseman Speaks to Me

As the figure rode slowly toward me, I perceived that it was one of the most beautiful human beings I had ever seen. There was a warm, gentle smile on his face; his cheeks were red, and his expression alive and excited; he was obviously of considerable age.

The man on horseback pulled up before me, took the black sombrero off his beautiful white hair, swept it before him, bowed to me from the saddle, and said in a magnificently warm tone: "Good evening, sir."

With that, he smiled a broad welcoming smile, put his hat back on his head, bowed to me slightly again, and moved on down the road.

I stood there, literally transfixed. No one before had ever called me "sir." It was not only that I had, by this one word, been transformed from a child into an adult, but also I had been promoted somehow from the lower middle class into a top echelon of gentlemen and scholars.

I had no idea who the stranger might be. As I turned away from the building, a student passed. I stopped him and asked who the gentleman on horseback was. He replied, "Benjamin Ide Wheeler, president-emeritus of the university. This building was named after him."

## The Strange Force of Inspiration

Inspiration does not have to come whole and complete; it can come in many segments, divided by years or miles. My mother, a woman without anyone to help her in the world, had taken her only son by the hand and led him to this strange world of the university. In the blind faith that, through education, he could become free, she had extracted a promise that whatever else happened to him, her boy would attend "college" and graduate.

Yet that half might not have accomplished the whole job. I might have become discouraged through lack of money and friends, and felt that I was not wanted.

But Benjamin Ide Wheeler had come down the path on horseback, amidst the music of the carillon bells, and swept his hat off to me, saying, "Good evening, sir."

Perhaps there is some way for Pearl and President Wheeler to know that their inspiration bore fruit. I have often, and ardently, hoped so.