



Now a college professor, Russell met his wife Elizabeth at Oxford. They have four lovely children.

A Voice in the Crowd

By ROBERT RUSSELL Author of "To Catch an Angel"

THE EVENT was the 1941 Freshman-Sophomore Day at Hamilton College in Clinton, N.Y., and the contest about to begin was crucial for me. In the heavyweight wrestling match between a freshman and a sophomore, I was that freshman.

My palms were moist and my throat tight, even though I had no right to be so afraid. I had several years of wrestling experience behind me, and my opponent was probably a novice. The fact that raised my fear was this: I had to win if I was to prove to that throng of professors and students that I, who could not see, *would* compete with them on equal terms—and win.

I had gotten myself into this spot by coming to college in the first place, and then by volunteering to represent my class as their heavyweight against the sophomores. There could be no backing out . . .

Eleven years earlier as a child of five, I sat on the back steps of our home at 13 Edward St. in Binghamton, N.Y. The afternoon was all green and gold as I, croquet mallet in hand, halfheartedly played my solitary game.

Digging around among the pansies beside the steps, I picked up small stones which I set carefully in position on the gray concrete walk. Then I sat down on the bottom step and raised my mallet. The stones were nails; I was a carpenter, and the mallet was my hammer. I would drive those nails *just like that!*

And then it happened. The rotten handle split, and a flying splinter pierced the pupil of my left eye. I squeezed my eyes shut in pain, sprang to my feet, and stumbled up the steps, rubbing the blood away with my fists and screaming.

In 1930, doctors could not tell whether an infection in one eye was being communicated to the other. Secretly the poison spread, and a curtain slowly closed behind my eyelids. For me, the sun had flickered and gone out.

When I was six years old, I boarded the train for the 200-mile trip to New York City and the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind. Except for vacation, I spent the next 10 years there, going from first grade through high school. And so, during these critical years, my life was divided between two worlds—that of the Institute and that of 13 Edward St.; the world of the blind and the world of the sighted.

At the Institute, I studied, played, and dreamed with some 250 other blind children. We learned to read and write Braille, in which we did our homework. In the play periods, we developed our

own versions of baseball and football. Our fielding was never up to much because we had to chase the ball by sound—and by the time you hear a ball bounce it isn't there any more but somewhere else. Then, too, our gym instructors modified such track events as the running broad jump and running high jump into standing events. Races were run on a cinder track divided into four lanes by waist-high steel cables on which the runner rested his left hand. Indeed, everything was designed for our safety.

The most important safeguard to our security was a tall steel fence surrounding the Institute. The worst transgression we younger children could commit was to step outside that fence without permission. Because it was forbidden and because I deeply resented being shut in, the outside world was all that I dreamed about.

Though snug and comfortable behind the fence in an environment especially created for those who could not see, I leaned for hours against the cold steel, listening, listening, listening to the whirring traffic, the hissing of the air brakes of buses, and the distant, ominous thunder of trains. I longed to be in one of those cars, on a bus or train, going . . . going . . . going anywhere, because the going would mean I was a part of what was outside.

At 10, I won a place on the Institute's wrestling team, and our occasional trips to meet nearby high schools and even the junior varsity of Columbia University took me through the fence. I was regularly defeated for two or three years, but the pleasure of breathing free air was well worth the humiliation.

The Challenge Beyond the Gate

When I was 13, I was given permission to leave the campus on weekends for several hours at a time, and it was high glory to walk out on a Saturday morning, slamming the gate behind me. The only drawback was that I had no place to go—but a destination wasn't necessary to a boy longing to be free. That whole roaring tumult of New York lay there waiting to be explored.

Over dinner on Saturday evenings, we exchanged stories of our day's adventures while pretending to deal with the week's leftovers on our plates. At one of these banquets, a classmate told me about the escalators at Macy's. The wonders of the moving steps intrigued me, and I resolved to try them. On the following Saturday morning, I set out. When I got off the subway, a girl's voice said: "Can I help you?"

"Yes, thank you. I'm going to Macy's."
"That's lucky; so am I. Come along with me." She took my arm and led me through the shuffling

subway throng, through the turnstile and down a long echoing corridor. Finally, as we went through a door, she said: "Well, here we are. What part of the store did you want?"

"No particular part exactly," I stammered. "That is, I want to go to—the escalators."

"Oh, right over here. Which floor?"

"Oh, no particular one. Just the escalator."

"If you could tell me what you wanted to buy, I could help you better."

"I don't want to buy anything," I hastened, checking the solitary nickel in my pocket that

cool, swift people in the outside world. Their cheeks need never burn with the shame of tripping over an unexpected curb, walking into a lamppost, or waiting for help to cross a roaring street. They were free, easy, beautiful in their independence.

Was I not better off, after all, behind that steel fence among others like me? Safety was there; security and peace. Most of all, there was the freedom from the pain of comparing one's self with the sighted. Shouldn't I forget the escalators and all they stood for?

But her voice, still warm in my ear, said: "You must never be ashamed. Never. Remember that." Gingerly, I put out my foot, then stepped forward, and the stair beneath me rose.

I rode the wonderful escalators up and down all morning, gaining confidence and practicing not being ashamed.

The Words Have Stayed with Me

Who the girl was, where she went, I never knew. She was a voice in the crowd that spoke to my most secret fears, a hand touching me with gentleness. The sound of her words carried me through the fence to Hamilton College and into the ring on that other Saturday morning far from Macy's. The referee's voice was saying: "Ready? Wrestle!"

I advanced toward the sound of my opponent's footsteps. The referee called to the crowd to be quiet so that I could hear. We closed sharply. He was big, powerful, but, by the way he moved, a novice. Counting on surprise, I threw up his arms, dropped to my knees, and tackled his unprotected legs. As he fell, I released my grip, slid up his body, clamped a half nelson under an arm and over the back of his head, and rolled him onto his back. Recovering from the shock, he thrashed violently. With all my strength, I crushed his shoulders into the grass.

The referee's whistle jangled on its chain as he crouched to inspect my opponent's predicament. Though my adversary struggled to shake me off, he could find no leverage. The referee pounded the earth in token of my victory. The crowd cheered as I rose.

As the referee raised my arm, I knew that another escalator, though it was still the same voice, had brought me up to another floor. Other escalators carried me from Hamilton to Yale to Oxford to college teaching and to the publication of my autobiography, *To Catch an Angel*. Each new floor has had its own challenges—but the perils have all been different forms of the one which the girl pointed out at the foot of that first escalator in Macy's.



would take me back to the Institute. "I just want the escalator."

"You do know where you're going?" she inquired kindly.

"Up!" I answered.

"Well, all right," she said. "Here's the escalator, but," and she patted my arm, "remember one thing: you must never be ashamed. Never. Remember that."

"Ashamed?" I said. "Ashamed of what?" But she was gone. She had gently and deftly laid one kind finger on my heart and vanished.

What I had to be ashamed of was so terribly obvious that I had to pretend not to understand. The thing was myself. I was awkward, blundering, maimed, publicly different from all these

Here is a heart-warming story for Thanksgiving: a blind boy, searching for the escalators at Macy's, finds something more important—a wise stranger whose advice changes his life