

MABEL

FAREWELL

by
William Hermanns



Mabel and her husband,
1930.



MABEL'S LAST DAYS

...the following day she was taken to the hospital...
 ...Mabel was loved, she was compassionate, tender, kind, and...
 ...expressed God's love to all with whom she came in contact...
 ...and rejoiced with us in our happiness... These words of...
 ...condolence were expressed to me in a letter from Virginia...
 ...a close friend of hers, during her return from Europe...
 ...about Mabel's last days, she wrote...
 "The Tuesday before she passed away, she talked of William...
 and the wonderful years they had shared together. She told...
 me he was a good loving kind man who to other people...
 sometimes seemed to be impossible. But that she knew him...
 as he was and he knew her as she was...
 ...Wednesday, Mabel went to the dentist. He was amazed that...
 a person of her age could have such perfect teeth. Afterwards...
 she went to the Japanese Gardens in Kelly Park with her...
 friend Edna. She remarked, it was so beautiful and peaceful...
 there just like a preview of Heaven."



"I, the college Santa Claus, give Mabel a potato as a symbol of her duty as housewife."

"Mabel was love. She was compassionate, tender, kind. She expressed God's love to all with whom she came in contact, and rejoiced with us in our happiness." These words of condolence were expressed to me in a letter from Virginia, a close friend of hers, on my return from Europe.

About Mabel's last days, she wrote:

"The Tuesday before she passed away, she talked of William and the wonderful years they had shared together. She told me he was a good, loving, kind man who, to other people, sometimes seemed to be impatient. But that she knew him as he was and he knew her as she was."

"Wednesday, Mabel went to the dentist. He was amazed that a person of her age could have such perfect teeth. Afterwards, she went to the Japanese Gardens in Kelly Park, with her friend Edna. She remarked, 'It was so beautiful and peaceful there, just like a preview of Heaven.'"

"I called her on Thursday, and she told me she'd prayed and meditated and was feeling quite well. She said: 'Why, I got to the bank in seven minutes by cutting across the parking lots.' She had also had her hair done, and when we went to our spiritual circle that evening she looked absolutely beautiful. After the meeting, I took her home, and we sat in the car and talked for a few minutes. She said, 'You know, sometimes life doesn't seem worth the struggle. But it is. Yet, if God has something for me to do somewhere else, I won't mind. Whatever happens to me, we'll never lose each other, we'll all be together again.' Then she took my face in both her hands, kissed me on the lips and said, 'Goodnight darling, see you.' I waited while she opened the door. She turned, threw me a kiss and went inside."

"Friday, Mabel had made an appointment to go shopping with Rick, a young student friend. There was no answer when he went to her place in the morning, or when he telephoned later in the day. On Saturday afternoon he tried to contact her again, but seeing the mailbox filled with letters, he became alarmed. He immediately telephoned me to come. When I arrived he had already climbed through the window to find Mabel, still dressed, slumped on the floor against a chair. She looked as beautiful and peaceful as she had on Thursday night. Her hallway light was still on; her Bible and purse were lying on her bed."

"Mabel had always wanted to slip away quietly, and her wish was granted. Indeed, this thought of leaving us must have lingered in her during the final weeks as she had made a note of what she wanted read at her funeral and put it in her purse. This note was found by the coroner."

Her last conversation with Virginia and her unchanged routine in her final days showed me that Mabel, true to her belief as a Christian Scientist, felt that death had no reality, that it would simply change her consciousness from one plane to another. She alone knew how close death stood at her door, but never gave in outwardly. Every afternoon she would change her dress and put on a different necklace. It was as if she were saying to death, 'You don't impress me much;

I'm carrying on here as long as I can, and when you knock at my door, I'll open it and step out to another level of my consciousness." Wherever she is now, I am sure she has found the complete fulfillment of her favorite saying: 'I am no more than I am, but I am all that I need to be.'

Mabel's ashes had been held for my return, as I had been named executor of her will. She had wished that her death should be kept secret so as not to cause any inconvenience to those who knew her. Nevertheless, I invited some close friends to this last service, which followed an earlier funeral held for her while I was still in Europe. At the cemetery we proceeded to the family plot to place Mabel's ashes next to those of her husband.

Standing before the huge gravestone where the names of her family are carved, I said: "You did not want us to come here because death does not exist for you. Yet we could not help coming, for we are human and have gathered to give a token of what you meant to us. Perhaps we symbolize the hundreds of others whom you have welcomed into your home. In our 24 years together, the only grief you ever caused me was that you left me. And what a grief! You wouldn't even wait till I returned from Europe, although you often said, 'Man cannot die unless he gives his consent.' Yet you agreed to go while I was away, thus depriving me of the last service, the closing of your eyes. Perhaps you thought that by leaving in my absence I would be spared. It was not to be.

"While in Europe this summer, I had Mabel forward important mail to an old war comrade in Germany. One day I telephoned him from Paris about my mail, and he said: 'A telegram arrived eight days ago; Mabel is dead.' I felt as if a hammer had struck me on the head. I was so stunned that my sister Hilda, who happened to be in Paris with me, had to lead me around for three days before I was able to recuperate from this blow and pack for my return to America. What I felt on my flight back I'll now say to you, Mabel, and to you, my friends."





In Memoriam

You vanished from my side,
Yet every breath I breathe is yours.
From spring to winter we have walked together,
And now you are gone.
Yet my heartbeat has matched yours,
My eyes are dry, my pen shall weep.

Where is the voice now that would echo God's;
"If you rise with the wings of morning, I am there.
If you make your bed in the abyss, I am there."
Your voice has gone, and with it the comfort of these words.
How do I know that you have fused into this God?
When I descend into the dark, are you there?
When I mount the wings of morning, are you there?

Where are you, what have you become?
I ask a void and there is no echo.
What fate is now awaiting me?
I call from a chilling pit.

If only I could retrace the way we went together for so many years,
I would subdue my impatient intellect which perplexed and harrassed
you, and walk on with you holding the lamp of spirit in my hand.

But instead I stand here holding your ashes.
No memory so sweet can give you visible form again.
The past of man, how dead!
More dead than are his ashes.
No miracle, no prayer can retrieve man's last five minutes.
What has been done is done.

Each day your smile, your voice,
your patient ear would tender me
a pillow for my tired head, and now
your cold hands press my head into a mold that smells of decay.

Each day your presence warmed me; you glowed with love.
And now memories hang grey curtains before my eyes.
In pulling them aside, I stir up clouds of dust.
And I am blinded -- blinded as all who try to raise the curtain
of death.

The anemia of loneliness is my fate,
I feel it sap me,
The dust of my years more and more resembles the dust of the earth.
Nothingness looms.

What is man's fate called on the other side?
On this side it is called --
How cruel -- finality.

MABEL AND I

My life with Mabel like a drama, developed around a central idea. What was the idea behind our togetherness? I expressed it to her shortly after we met some 24 years ago. "Wherever I am, my home shall be a tree where the birds can find shelter and build their nests." She, a widow of 15 years, was not delighted. "For only two years did I share happiness with my husband. He was a mining engineer and assured me before his death that he had provided well for me. However, his partner cheated me out of my shares in the business; and if I hadn't had Christian Science to help me, I would not have known how to go on. Now you come into my life and you understand that I long for a home where a third person would be an intruder." There she sat before me with her blond hair and large blue eyes. I had to give her up or else change her outlook. My past had made me a slave to the idea which, in the eyes of a practical woman, had no substance or reality: To bring students who had problems and no love to her to share the warmth of her heart and hearth. I could not jump over my shadow. As a boy of five I had seen my mother feed the poor in her living room whilst Anna, the family maid, arranged parcels to give to these people. After my parents' early death, I was brought up by my Aunt Veronica, who, a religious Jewess, would have me accompany her every Friday afternoon to bring food to the homes of the poor. She would go so far as making me wear wooden shoes so that I was on "an equal footing" with the children I met in those homes already poor, yet still more impoverished by diseases. And she had also established a friendship with the Franciscan nuns to whose orphans she would give dresses and suits for their First Communion. Thus through my aunt, Francis of Assisi entered my life in my early years.

Indeed, when I met Mabel, I, as she then a student of Christian Science, had already been captivated by the stature and message of St. Francis. And I knew there would be a hard struggle, for we wanted to stay together. Yet it was she who had to make all the concessions, and these not easy ones for her; so that she once remarked to me: "When God brought us together he played a trick on me." In spite of her feelings, she tore down the four cherished walls of her home, and so

it came to be that after our long pilgrimage through life together she could say to me, it was the last evening I spent with her before my departure to Europe, "William, do you know that we have about five people dropping in a day; that means that we have about 150 visitors a month, or 1,800 a year. To be sure, many are the same faces, but still, figure out how many then have sat at our table in 20 years." "Mabel," I said, "we may not always have had a beautiful life together, but it was certainly a full life." I pointed at her portrait beside that of her husband. "Look, there you were blond, then at my side you became grey, and now we are both white, but still we have remained young in having so many young people enter our lives. What a rich reward we both had for breaking our bread with them."

I felt that I had replaced the bond of marriage with a spiritual bond which had an intrinsic pattern that can be expressed in the words, "Come you who are weary; here you find the secret of life." Mabel had no material wealth but she could well have said, as did Peter and John at Jerusalem's temple gate, "Silver and gold I have none, but what I have I will share with you."

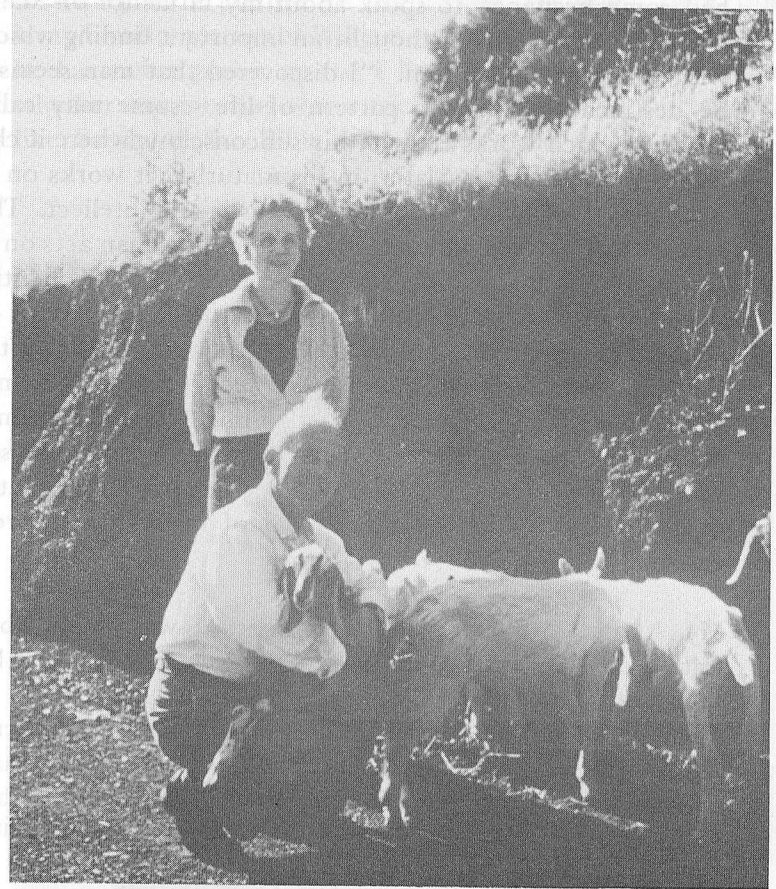
When Mabel was 70 years of age, she went with the full expectancy of a young girl to Hawaii, and years later, with hair snow white, joined me in Jerusalem -- she called it the crowning glory in her old age -- to retrace the life of Christ which she knew so well from her Bible.

How wide Mabel's interests had grown through the years: at Christmas she would join me for the Midnight Mass; in spring, we would go together to a one-day retreat; she would listen to sermons of an Episcopalian priest who was often our guest. There was no worthwhile play at the college, from Shakespeare to Shaw, which we did not see together, nor a German opera in San Francisco to which we did not go with the students of my class.

And at home she didn't limit herself to the usual readings of a Christian Science practitioner. Instead, she came to share my interests in studying the writings of Einstein and Churchill.

Under the heading "Instantaneous realization that man is the perfect expression of the Infinite", she wrote in her diary: "Einstein said Mozart was the greatest composer of all. Beethoven 'created' his music, but the music of Mozart was of such purity and beauty that one felt he had merely found it -- that it has always existed as part of the inner beauty of the universe waiting to be revealed." Of Churchill she wrote: "When he was in a tight spot as a youngster, he opened the Bible and there he read: 'I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. Be not afraid, neither be thou desolate for the Lord thy God is with thee wherever thou goest.' From then on Winston Churchill used this Bible quote every day until his death. What an example for us."

She often said: "William, I would not have changed a bit of our life even though I have had some grief with you and through you." Grief she had indeed, and she would carry the cross for others unflickingly to the end. Here are a few examples of her last year. A student who was drunk came to her place and got her out of bed in the middle of the night so the police wouldn't pick him up, and she had to telephone me to come over to take care of him. On another occasion, a student interrupted our togetherness before the TV -- how she loved the funny and the pathetic in Jackie Gleason, in Colonel Klink of Hogan's Heroes, and, of course, the classical productions of Berstein symphonies for youth -- but this interruption she met with the largeness of her heart. The student had thrown himself on the floor screaming, "Don't look at me; I am not worthy of being looked at; I wish I were dead." It took Mabel, kneeling on the floor beside him half an hour to lift his head and dry his tears and three more hours of caring for him before he, numbed by drugs, could walk to his place. Then, there was a third incident one afternoon. A former student barged into my home crying: "Professor, if you had not been here I would have committed suicide." He pulled out a needle and heroin from his pocket and showed me his needle-marked arm. He stayed in my guest room, stretched on the bed for hours, while Mabel kept faithful watch until his father, whom I had telephoned, arrived from Los Angeles eight hours later to fetch him home.



Looking at the portrait of Mabel and her husband, and the many photographs of the two of us together, on a boat, with students, horses, dogs and goats, and then the pictures taken in Jerusalem when we walked together the Via Dolorosa or when we daily visited the Wailing Wall, I feel God had not played a "Trick" on Mabel. He had sent me to her, and the four walls of her home had fallen, but only to extend them as it were to the Wailing Wall, perhaps the oldest sanctuary of prayer in the world.

One of her closest friends, Richard Mowry, said to me on his visit of condolence: "We who knew Mabel for thirty years are amazed that you lifted her from the narrow confines of the life of a Christian Science practitioner to wider horizons. How did you do it?" It took me a long time to find an answer. I

had some hesitancy to speak about my influence on Mabel, yet I had made what I thought an important finding which I wished to share with him. "I discovered that man seems to be destined to follow a pattern of life - some may call it karma - which works first on his subconscious where it challenges man's instinct; later, in his maturity, it works on his conscious mind, where it challenges reason and intellect. Thus tied to this pattern which gives him identity, man acts on his surroundings, and it is up to his free will to use his identity, for good or evil. As I see it, this was Mabel's uniqueness - to adapt her life pattern as a Christian Scientist to my life pattern as a Christian Scientist, but also as a Jew, a Franciscan, and a Yogi, to help others, not isolated, but in unison with me." Mabel felt that she took the place of my Aunt Veronica, so it was not surprising to me that I should experience a situation at her funeral which paralleled that of my aunt's 40 years earlier.

My Aunt Veronica's funeral procession was made up of Catholics, Protestants and Jews -- a pastor had said that had my aunt been a Catholic she would have been a saint. At Mabel's funeral, in which college professors of Lutheran, Russian Orthodox, Jewish, and Catholic faiths participated a Catholic professor said before her urn: "The best tribute I can give Mabel is that she loved people, human beings, everyone she met. She found no fault with people; she found only good. So I am going to say a little prayer, not to Mabel, but with Mabel. 'From where you are now, help us to love human beings as you have shown us how. And some day we will see you face to face.'" A Christian Scientist then whispered in my ear: "If we had saints, she would be one."

A student once asked me, "Professor, what is Mabel to you?" And counting on my five fingers, mischievously slow, I said, "A friend, a guide..." "Is that all?" interrupted Mabel. "I am your prop, too, Anna the German maid, and your Aunt Veronica, and don't forget, above all your mother." The student then asked, "What is he then to you?" "I could answer that with three words," she smiled, "He is William! - nothing more can be said. I have made him write down his childhood memories which I read sometimes to friends."

Reaching for a picture on the dresser, she said, "Here, this is my favorite picture of William, when he was seven years old; he has never grown up, so I have never stopped to wonder whether our meeting was a trick of Providence. I often feel like Sarah of the Bible who bore a child in her old age."



"William," Mabel once asked, "What do you understand heaven to be?" I said, "Heaven for me would be to have every day those thoughts which I would like to have on my deathbed." No doubt, unlike me, Mabel was able to demonstrate those thoughts of love and forgiveness in her life on earth. When she was found two days after her death her face was still unchanged with that motherly smile on her lips.

