
The Winter Is Past

by Mildred Rhoads Bennett

*The following selection is taken from a book-length, autobiographical manuscript. It is a glimpse into North American Adventism of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Born into a Seventh-day Adventist worker's family, the author is best known to the public for her book, *The World of Willa Cather*. When that volume on one of America's most famous female authors first appeared, it was welcomed with favorable reviews. In *The New York Times* Malcolm Cowley said that "the Nebraska years have been vividly restored," and Orville Prescott added that Bennett had provided "an important literary service." *The Saturday Review of Literature* concurred, saying "this is indeed the 'world' of *O Pioneers* and *My Antonia*."*

A product of Adventist elementary and secondary schools, Mildred Rhoads Bennett went on to receive a B.A. (1931) from Union College, and an M.A. (1938) from the University of Nebraska. In 1931-1932 she was an instructor in English and Spanish at Union College. From 1932 to 1942 she held a variety of teaching posts in Nebraska. In 1934 she married Dr. Wilbur K. Bennett, who also attended Union College. Several of Mildred's family held responsible posts within the denomination. Her father, Bert Rhoads, served as a pastor and departmental director in several mid-western conferences. Her brother, James Rhoads, for many years during the 1960s was the senior pastor of the Pioneer Memorial Church at Andrews University, and her nephew, Dr. Donald Rhoads, was a professor in the Andrews University department of mathematics.

—The Editors

One day I receive a call from Union College. This spring it has been 50 years since I graduated. The college wants to honor me at my class reunion.

"Are you sure you know what you are doing? I left the Adventist church 50 years ago."

"That doesn't make any difference. We want to honor you for your work on *Willa Cather*."

Since 1951 I have given lectures at colleges and universities all over Nebraska and other states about Willa Cather, but never at Union College. I have decided they are ashamed of me. I cannot believe they want to honor me.

I recall so much of my college days. I remember September 1927 when I am 18. Belle, my older sister, has been at college one year already. We've seen a style where the girls make puffs over their ears. Someone has told us that the prostitutes in Paris wear their hair that way because the ears have rotted off from evil diseases.

Week of prayer in college seems more sophisticated than in academy but I make no progress toward that "giving my heart to Jesus." I decide to pray all night and maybe I will get a vision. Belle has gone to sleep before I creep out of bed and kneel. I don't know how long I have been there when I hear Belle's voice, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!" I get into bed.

On Fridays we have to clean our rooms thoroughly. This week I take my turn and while I am dusting I knock over a lamp that Gerald Minchin, a ministerial student from Australia, has left with Belle. I am horrified.

"You'll have to write and tell Gerald yourself

about breaking the lamp. I won't." Belle says.

I do write him and tell him how sorry I am. His reply says not to worry. "I'm glad nothing more than a lamp is broken." I like this Gerald.

I adore going to school. My classes keep me busy, but I also have a job cleaning the president's office. This work pays 25 cents an hour, much better than the usual 10 cents.

One day my left breast itches, then swells, then hurts. Finally, I go downtown to a doctor, who says I have an abcess under the left breast and he must "attack it locally!" I have a mental picture of him slicing my breast open right through the nipple. Elder H. U. Stevens, one of the college Bible teachers, takes me to the Lincoln General Hospital. When I wake up the nurse tells me I have a hole in the lower part of the breast and one on the side. Out of each hangs a drain. But at least they have not split me in two pieces.

Elder Stevens comes to take me home. Do I have some dreadful disease like syphilis? I have heard you can get it from toilet seats but I have been very careful. Finally the doctor tells me the germ came from a common cold. I have kept my handkerchief in my brassiere and germs from that have traveled to the tiny holes in the nipple and gone in to start the trouble. I have scars, but I am again well.

When the first year of school finishes, Belle and I take the train to Topeka, Kansas. Papa and Mama live in an upstairs apartment over the rooms where another "worker" lives. Belle and Gerald Minchin will be married in August. She will be a minister's wife.

That summer Gerald helps in an evangelistic "effort" in Topeka. The preacher with whom he works has a reputation for converting many souls to God. But his advertising methods distress Gerald, who has to play a calliope that drives through the streets advertising the meetings. As if this were not lurid enough, the evangelist wants Gerald to dress up like the devil and crawl over the calliope while someone else plays. At this Gerald absolutely refuses. Enough is enough.

Lots of evenings Gerald talks with us. He has studied the early books of Ellen White in the New

York Public Library. He has found that these books tell about cohabitation of men and beasts and the monsters thereby conceived and brought forth. In the later editions, this material has been deleted, but at the opening of the book, the publishers make a statement that not one word has been changed from the original. Gerald thinks this practice of the church dishonest. He also

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thinks some of Mrs. White's writings may have come from human rather than divine sources. Papa and Mama do not like this sort of talk. I am much interested. I can't wait to learn more. I am bothered, yes, but I'd like to know the straight of it. But before long Gerald ceases to discuss these topics with Papa and Mama. I think Belle does not hear what he is saying.

Belle and Gerald do get married in August. After their honeymoon they return to attend the Kansas camp meeting. Mama has made Belle and me yellow dresses with black polka dots, exactly alike. In mine she has sewn short sleeves since I am going back to Union College and the rules prohibit sleeveless clothes. She has left Belle's dress sleeveless, but a large Bertha collar covers her arms. At the camp meeting the wind blows Belle's collar up and someone sees her bare arms. Some old lady censures her for immodesty and Gerald almost explodes with fury. What business has anyone passing judgment on his wife's clothes?

Soon I am back in college for my sophomore year. We have a new college president, Elder P. L. Thompson. My roommate, Ruth, and I do not get along. Ruth's father, as president of the Kansas Conference, has priority over my father, the superintendent of education. Her father says, "We must dictate to the people." He is old-country German. Papa resents his attitude and as usual makes his objections clear. We girls have inherited this antagonism. When we quarrel Ruth

says I look just like my father. Eventually we stay in separate rooms for the rest of the school year.

I carry 20 hours and sometimes I think I cannot endure the year and make high grades. I am majoring in Romance languages: Spanish and French. My language teacher asks me if I would like to correct papers for her, and I am happy to do so. Every cent I can earn helps pay off my tuition, board, and room. Also Miss Couch, the psychology teacher, asks me to correct papers for her, and I find time.

Papa and Mama can afford only two years of college for each of us. They would like me to stop school after my sophomore year and teach a couple of years to earn money for the rest of my schooling. I don't want to quit now, and I ask if I could borrow \$500, which with my work will finish paying my last two years. I am confident I can repay the huge debt as soon as I finish school. They agree.

I am monitor on South Third and lead a prayer band once a week. One of the other monitors has found *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. Because it sounds beautiful, I guess, she thinks it is religious, and reads some of it each week to her group of girls. Why doesn't she listen to the words? Certainly they are lovely, but they do not say anything that an Adventist should believe. I certainly won't tell her the difference.

In psychology class we study the part that heredity and environment play in one's life. I can't see any place for free will in the theory. I can't see any place for God, either, but I do not want to think wicked thoughts.

My Spanish and French teacher, Lulu Blanche Hiatt, asks me down to her room—a double one on the first floor—to eat crackers and fancy spreadable cheese. I adore her, so petite, so tiny. In French class we get to read Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*. I know I can never attain the compassion of the priest who gives Jean Valjean the other

candlestick and so frees him from the gendarmes.

Each year I have looked at the new college boys. This year I see a tall handsome boy, Reinhold Bietz, and ask him to a party girls can ask boys to. Reinhold pays me back by inviting me to go down to the University of Nebraska to see a musical program on *The Ring of the Nibelung*. With the music they show moving pictures.

When I write home about having seen moving pictures I get an immediate reproof telling me I have betrayed the family, the church, and myself. I begin to think how dreadful I have been and I write Reinhold a letter telling him I am sorry I have gone to the movies, that I am really not that kind of person.

In Union College we have four brothers who sing together for chapel and other public meetings. One day Julius Humann, one of the brothers, comes into the psychology classroom to talk with Miss Couch. They discuss the Bible and he draws an outline on the blackboard to show that the Old Testament shows a growing revelation of God as the Jewish people thought about him. He thinks the Old Testament should not be taken as scientific.

His ideas astonish me, but they make sense. I have never liked the story of how God told the Israelites to kill everyone in a village and to dash the children's brains out against a stone. Maybe the Israelites just thought God wanted them to do that. I don't like to believe God does cruel things. I don't like the story of Abraham getting ready to kill Isaac. A God who demands that a father kill his only son seems horrible to me, but I feel guilt at my thoughts. I must reread the Old Testament in light of what Mr. Humann said.

In psychology class we study the part that heredity and environment play in one's life, and I can't see any place for free will in the theory. I can't see any place for God, either, but I do not want to think wicked thoughts. But questions nag at me all the time.

I am reading the Bible and I find the apostle Paul saying: "If they speak not according to these words, there is no light in them." By what right does he command this? He is a human being like the rest of us. But I am filled with condemnation. How dare I question the Bible? But I do.

I try to find what things the Bible says that are true for me: "He has shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:7). "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this: 'To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.'" (James 1:27). This much makes good sense to me and I will take these precepts for my rules. Being worldly doesn't concern wearing a flower in your hat, or a ring on your finger; it means acting ugly, hateful, and selfish.

Miss Couch sometimes talks to me about boys. One day after psychology class she startles me by asking if I kiss my brother-in-law on the lips. I say, "Yes." She tells me that I am doing a great wrong and will get into trouble. So, the next time I see Gerald I turn my lips away. I see such bewilderment in his eyes that I want to cry.

We are all home in Topeka for the summer. I sleep on a cot in the living room; Belle, Gerald, and Dorothy, their baby girl, have the extra bedroom. I have a million questions I want to ask Gerald about the idea of the Old Testament being a growing revelation in the minds of the Jewish people. I follow him to ask more questions. He will visit with me for a long time, but usually, if company comes, he retreats behind a book.

Mama takes me aside. "Do you want to cause trouble between Belle and Gerald? Do you want to break your sister's heart?" I guess she says something to Belle too. One morning as I am sleeping on the living room cot, I hear someone coming and then Gerald's voice. "That girl is as innocent as a newborn babe."

Later in the summer a boy asks me to go to a party with him. By then I am staying with Miss Terwilliger, an old maid Bible worker. When my date comes to pick me up for the party Miss Terwilliger tells me, "Have a good time!" Nobody in the world has ever told me to have a good time. I wonder how this dear old lady knows anything about good times.

Back in college for my senior year I think our college president gives very interesting chapel

talks. One day he reads a poem by Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win
We drew a circle and took him in.

But President Thompson is resigning this spring of my graduation. He has written each of us an innocuous letter, but I know why he's leaving. He can no longer accept the tenets of the church.

When I go to talk with him, he tells me, "The board wanted me to stay, even after I told them I no longer believed the church doctrines. They wanted me to stay because I am good at raising money for the college. I couldn't believe it."

In this class which tries to prove Christianity, all evidence comes from some authority. I no longer trust authority.

Why could money be more important than a man's conscience? He has to do what he knows is right, and the board ought to do what they say they believe, or admit they don't really believe.

This semester I have a class called "Evidences of Christianity." I don't like the class or the teacher. He likes to hug the girls who come to ask a question. "Now, dearie, if you'll just pray and read the Scriptures," here he hugs a little tighter, "you will understand." He has told us in class that every man is rotten to the core. He likes to read all the obscene parts of the Bible, and asks us if we know what it means when it says, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come." Do we know what the lawgiver is? Do we girls know? He disgusts me.

In this class which tries to prove Christianity, all evidence comes from some authority. I no longer trust authority. I am supposed to read two other books for outside work but I can't make myself touch them. I do read Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. It stands on the forbidden shelf in the College library. Since I am such a "good girl," and have such a pure reputation, the librarian

gives me the book without any questions. I read it in one sitting. But I still can't bring myself to read the assigned theology books. They put out the same inadequate explanation that the text uses.

Graduation approaches. Papa and Mama, Uncle John and Aunt Blanche will come.

I go to the Bible teacher and tell him I have not read the two outside reading books, and to just give me a grade, whatever it might be, so that I can graduate. I wonder if this low grade will cost me the valedictory, but I tell myself I don't care.

We are at a picnic in Antelope Park the day of graduation when a friend comes out. "Middy, do you know that you aren't going to get your diploma tonight?"

"No. Why not?"

"Your Bible teacher has given you an incomplete in 'Evidences of Christianity.'"

"But I told him. . ."

"He hasn't done it. Come with me and we'll find him."

My friend and I go to the teacher's house. Yes, he has given me an incomplete. "But I want a grade. Give me a 'D' if you can, and let me graduate."

He gets out his cards and changes my grade. "What would I have had for a grade if I'd read those books?"

"An 'A' of course." I'm right. This perverse honesty will cost me the highest honors.

I return to the picnic.

Back at school the president of the college asks me to teach Spanish during summer school. I am delighted. At least I have a job for the summer. My students are all older people, except for Carl Moyers. He has come back to finish college next year. He was kicked out a couple of years ago because he and a theological student rigged up a microphone and let it down an air shaft to listen to a faculty meeting. No one would ever have known but the ministerial student, after he has passed his exams and secured his grades, but before Carl has his, gets such a heavy conscience that he goes to the faculty and confesses. Carl is thrown out without his grades, and only now been allowed to return.

One summer day he says, "I'm going to drive down Prescott Street about two o'clock this afternoon."

I look at him. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I mean you could walk along the street and I could accidentally see you and pick you up and we'd take a ride in my Chevy."

I see. It would be a chance meeting. No one on the faculty would approve of "joy-riding."

As the summer goes on Carl and I see a lot of each other. We walk along the grassy lawn that extends from the bridge on Sheridan Boulevard north to Antelope Park. Carl begins to hum the wedding march from *Lohengrin*. I know he teases. He will marry a stable, dependable girl whom his mother likes. "You only like me the way you would bread and butter," I say.

"No, I like you the way I do cherry pie and ice cream."

He gives me Walter Lippmann's *A Preface to Morals*. I read it with a sinking heart. I do not see any reason for moral conduct if moral conduct is only an end in itself without any progress toward some kind of future. We talk about whether or not there's a life hereafter. Neither Lippmann nor Carl believes so. I think I could accept personal death if the race were to continue.

Carl says, "I don't want to believe death is the end. I would like to put my head in Mama's lap and have everything be all right. But I can't anymore."

Carl and I often meet on Saturday afternoon in the Lincoln public library, where we talk. But one day Carl breaks his ankle. He and his mother live in an upstairs apartment. I go to ask him if he wants any books from the library. I also will pick up his copy of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, which he reads each week. His mother comes to the door and greets me with a hostile look. She does not want me in her house. But I just stand in her doorway, and finally she lets me come upstairs. Carl seems glad I stopped, but I also sense that his mother's attitude makes him uncomfortable. I state my errand and get out of there.

When Carl's foot has healed we drive to Crete and take a boat ride. As we are about to dock the boat and go ashore, Carl turns and kisses me on the mouth. I am astonished and frozen.

“By the way,” he says, “it takes two people to kiss.”

“I’ll try,” I say.

We do better, but I am so dizzy that when I start to step on the pier, I fall into the lake. Carl catches me before I go under and drags me out. How awkward and embarrassing can I be? I guess I have no limit.

This summer I have extra time to read papers for Elder H. U. Stevens of the Bible department. His method of thinking and teaching appeals to me. He gives me books that sound reasonable, books that no other Bible teacher would use. One book on the parables makes such eminent sense. We talk every day about religion. He thinks the Ten Commandments are not equally important. For him, keeping holy the seventh day does not have the weight of “Thou shalt not kill.”

We are discussing parables. “I can’t understand why the wise virgins won’t give the foolish virgins some of the oil,” I say. “They seem very selfish to me.”

“But, you see, what the wise virgins have cannot be given. Each person has to find that inner light for himself.”

“How? How do I find it? I have been trying all my life, but I don’t have it.”

“I think if you study the books I can get for you, and keep on trying, you will find it.”

The church wants us only to read Mrs. White. Elder Stevens knows other religious books that cast new light on belief.

One Friday evening two of the college students go out “joy-riding.” They have a flat tire and while the boy fixes it, another car hits and kills him. The next morning the campus buzzes with comment. Did God punish him for “joy-riding” on Friday night?

This Sabbath day we have heavy rain all day. I walk in the rain until I am soaked. I find myself at the door of Elder Stevens’ house. His wife lets me in, and he takes me into his study.

“Do you think this boy was punished for what he did on Friday night?”

“No, I don’t think so. God does not act like that. When I was a missionary in South America, I lost my first wife. As I bent over her when she was dying I felt she had a choice to stay or go. And I

learned one thing. ‘In death there is nothing to fear.’ ”

Mrs. Stevens asks me to stay for supper. The rain has stopped and they are planning on going to an outdoor lecture by an astronomer from Drake University in Des Moines. When they ask me to go with them, I accept, because they are kind and Elder Stevens does not mind when I question meanings of Bible texts.

One Friday morning as I come up to the en-

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trance of the Main Building, Elder Stevens waits for me. I can see he is upset. He tells me that all the preachers from this area have gathered because someone has reported that he teaches heresy. These 40 men have come to judge him. Only one has stood up and said, “Let’s not be hasty. I’ve known Brother Stevens from our work in South America, and I know him to be a godly man.” The other 39 have voted to kick him out of his position without compensation.

“If they had only given me a little time. I have a master’s in science and I could have gone back to the university and studied and then found another job.” Then he adds, “They are going to question you, too. They know you have been studying with me.”

“What shall I do?”

“Tell the truth.”

All the next week I wait for someone to tap me on the shoulder. I have been sitting on the platform for chapel, but I will not do that again. On Friday of that week Elder Stevens chooses for the hymn “Does Jesus Care?”

Does Jesus care when I’ve said “goodbye”
To the dearest on earth to me

When my sad heart aches 'til it nearly breaks,
Is this aught to him? Does He see?

I can hardly make myself stand for the music. Does Jesus care? Nobody cares! This man is being crucified and nobody cares. They are driving in the nails. I look around me with bitter hatred. What does their religion mean, anyhow?

On Sunday Papa comes for a teachers' institute. He has heard about Elder Stevens and wants to go over to question him. Reluctantly I go with him. We find Elder Stevens walking back and forth under the trees on his lawn. He is so nervous that he can hardly stand to talk. Papa fires questions, all of which Professor Stevens can answer without incriminating himself. Finally satisfied, Papa shakes Elder Stevens' hand and says, "I am with you, Brother Stevens." But I know that Papa would not approve of the thoughts and studies we have made. He hasn't happened on the right questions for entrapment.

On Monday Papa finds me and tells me that they have taken Elder Stevens, out of his mind and cursing God, away to a mental institution. I get away from Papa as soon as I can.

I receive a royal welcome on the beautiful campus. I cannot believe that in 50 years I have come full circle, and kept my integrity. I am still myself, yet Adventists accept me. Would Papa and Mama be proud of me now?

Somehow I live through that long day. Night comes and I try to sleep alone in my room, but I am terrified. Finally I take a thick quilt and a pillow and go down the corridor to the room of a couple of girls whom I know. I tell them I need their company, and I will sleep on their floor. They laugh. They think—and I am happy to let them think—I am making a joke.

I lay my quilt on the floor, talk with the girls—light-hearted stuff. Finally they turn out the light. Soon I can hear their heavy breathing. I lie there and wonder if I can keep my sanity. Can I hold together until morning? Elder Stevens was the

finest, most spiritual guide I have known. He is gone. I am alone. I can talk with no one.

Night crawls on. Time creeps. Dawn delays. Then I hear something under the floor. This old building has rats between the walls. I once saw one in the elevator shaft. I *know* they are rats. Of nothing else am I sure. The church in which I have grown up and for which I intended to give my life has turned upon a good man and driven him mad.

Then word comes that Elder Stevens has died. I am glad he is out of it, but I am stricken for myself. Who can help me now? I attend the funeral. The preacher says that the kind Father in his mercy has taken our dear brother away. I mutter to myself: "Murderers. You killed him. You broke his heart." The preacher says that his last words mentioned "the Sabbath day." To me the man is saying "God took him before he could do any more mischief." A bitter taste floods my mouth. I will leave this place. I will go out into the world where people do not pretend to be God's Chosen People. But, I also know, I must be able to support myself. Otherwise I will end up in a mental institution myself.

Back in my room I write:

Let not these walls confine.
I will not stay
Seek not to hold me here this passing day.
Call me not back to you.
Because I know
It is the law of life
That I must go.

As long as possible I put off going down to see the widow. I have no comfort to offer. She comes out on the porch to meet me and enfolds me in her arms. "You poor child." I appreciate her kindness. She knows what I have lost.

At the 50th anniversary of my graduation from Union College my fellow alumni elect me president of the Golden Club, those who have been graduated for 50 years. That means I must go back in 1982. That will be the anniversary of Carl Moyers and Gerald Minchin's graduation.

When I go back for the 1982 reunion, I read the list of all those who have died. The two most important to me, those who have had the most influence on me, are Carl Moyers and Gerald

Minchin. Carl, a star medical student at Loma Linda, died in 1937 of cancer. Gerald, after a career of teaching theology in Adventist colleges, died in Singapore on a trip. I ask for a time of silence in their memory and then their class president says a prayer.

That same year Union College asks me to come and lecture on Willa Cather. Dr. Everett Dick, one of my former teachers, grown old in the college, tells me how proud he is of me, my family, my father, my brother, my nephew. I cannot believe that I am an accepted person on this campus.

In 1983, I receive a telephone call from An-

draws University. They want to give me an honorary doctorate. Will I accept it? I say, "Yes."

Then I begin to think. The authorities there cannot know about me. I call them back. "Do you know that I have not been a Seventh-day Adventist for over 50 years?"

"Oh, yes, we know. We give honorary degrees to persons not in the church."

I receive a royal welcome on the beautiful campus. I cannot believe that in 50 years I have come full circle, and kept my integrity. I am still myself, yet Adventists accept me. Would Papa and Mama be proud of me now?