

Helen Keating

by Vickie Cimprich

“... founder of [t]he first lay-operated rural Catholic settlement school in Appalachia.”

—The Encyclopedia of Appalachia

Caney Creek school at last! Miss Lloyd came out to welcome me at Hazard. By the time the horses pulled to the hollow's mouth, we were Alice and Helen. The children sang "Once More My Soul" to welcome me, harmonies a bit askew, but not their bows or buttons. Truly, to be their principal and teacher was all I'd dreamed, in Pennsylvania.

After I'd had time to settle in, Alice brought some blooms, redbud she said, and a vase to decorate my sideboard (a traveling trunk, with doily, looked quite well). We chatted. "Pippa Passes" was the piece of Mr. Browning's she admired most. Much she knew by heart. Presently she looked round, admiring the few bits of home I'd brought, the photograph: my sister by my side, our solemn communion. We were twelve. *You must be twins.* Yes, I was proud to own. Her eyes stopped at the pillow. Just two rosary beads. *You're Catholic.* Yes, I am. *I see. You know that mountains people are prejudiced. So it's important no one else should know.*

Two factors were involved in my discernment to resign: She'd said I couldn't be myself. Moreover, she'd sold these people short. Painful and costly though it was, I bought a ticket home. But

God's in his heaven, all's right with the world, chuckled Mr. Browning, Bishop Howard and I, when the bishop and I met and spoke. *Likely you, Miss Keating, are the one we have been praying for, on Contrary and in Covington, to found our mountains school.*

*Here's three hundred.
Let me know. I'm sure we can get more.*