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## Documents Online

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### POETS IN EMBRYO

Since my two brothers, William Rose and Stephen Vincent and I were born of witty parents who were devotees of good literature, it was inevitable that we should know and love books. Our parents who were strong individualists introduced us at an early age to their particular favorites. There was always a Children's Hour in the evening beginning when there were two of us; an hour in which we pulled wicker stools next to our mother's rocker or our father's armchair and gave ourselves over to complete enjoyment. Both our parents had fine voices which would have graced the radio and our mother's had a dramatic tone. It was she who read to us by the hour the cream of St. Nicholas stories (St. Nicholas being then in its prime), and followed them up with Scott's "Ivanhoe" and "Guy Mannering" and Dicken's "David Copperfield" and "The Old Curiosity Shop" and (in due time) Thackeray's "The Virginians." And many and many another tale. How her sympathetic spirit relished those pages with us! There was a plump volume, "The Household Book of Verse" that was our introduction to poetry.

But it was our father who first read us Thackeray's "The Rose and the Ring"-and no one could have imitated the voices of Prince Giglio and Prince Bulbo as he did. Next, being an admirer of Frank Stockton's sly humor much like his own, he promoted "The Queen's Museum", "The Griffin and the Minor Canon" and "Ting-a-ling Tales." He read ballads stirringly and the quality of his peculiar imagination took him and us into odd by-paths of literature. In a set of microscopic brown volumes "Little Classics", there was a story I have never been able to trace, "Herr Hippe, the Wondersmith." The Wondersmith possessed a monkey whose name was "Furbelow". Herr Hippe was a sinister figure whose downfall was direful and whose victims, a boy and his sweetheart escaped from his clutches.

Then there was a book called "Fairy Tales from Brentano", translated from the German and containing the magical feats of a family of three, Gockel, Hinkel and their child, Gackeleia. Another story was the epic of one Brokerina who kept a white fantail pigeon and was the daughter of 'a perfect plain old English cook.' She manufactured a lover out of gingerbread dough and conjured him into life and love. A third heroine was named 'Insolvina.'

Our father was instrumental in making up stories out of -nothing. When our mother was absent on some shopping tour in the city and late in returning home, he would assure us that she had 'followed a wagon out of town.' We children never thought to ask Why but patiently accepted the fact that our charming mother was trotting at the tail of some wagon, longing to reach her home and family but hopelessly lost. A Grimm story in a nutshell if one considers the hypnotic effect of the wagon. When our father took us on long walks, he was warned not to go so fast that we would become overheated. Consequently he would chant, "Nice-slow-walk. Do-not-fret-or-talk. Mother will scold if you take cold. Nice-slow walk."

Once outside the innocent village of Rittersville near Old Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, we passed over a canal bridge on which was a red sign, quite a fearsome sign in large letters, saying BREAD. Immediately there was an impromptu verse composed by our father on the spur of the <sup>and</sup> minute, describing a tragedy.

"The waters closed above her head,  
Rittersville, oh Rittersville!  
With bloody finger he wrote "Bread"  
On the bonny canal at Rittersville."

Utter nonsense but so delightful.

As we grew and through small neighbors became interested in what <sup>our</sup> ~~my~~ father called 'wishy-washy' books, his disgust was great. Rosa Nouchette Carey's "Merle's Crusade" was one of his pet aversions, though the mildest of milk-and-water stories. I never dared confess to having dipped into "Elsie Dinsmore" which I loathed and soon abandoned, terrifie

by her dreadful father. The Henty books were not so unpopular and of the William Rose otherwise 'Billy' had a store. But at twelve years old, he joined his particular 'gang's' secret book club. They read dime novels. One day our father was electrified by finding the parlor sofa's interior was stuffed with "Frank Merrywells", the who-done-its of that day and time. Out fell poor Billy's entire stock upon the floor and the crime was revealed.

When poetic creation began on the part of his elder son, Father was in his element. There was a verse (one of William Rose's early efforts, beginning:

"The ghostly maples gently sway  
As through the boughs the night wind soughs,"

"Oh, no, that word is pronounced 'suffs'" said Father.

"Better change it to "The ghostly maples gently sway  
And beckon like departing toughs"-

which caused the youthful poet acute anguish.

At an incredibly early age did our younger brother, Stephen begin his literary career, teaching himself to read by street signs when four years old. About two years later an aunt read him the Bible story of Eve's creation out of Adam's rib which produced the succinct comment: "That was an inhuman act. No man could live under the circumstances." Stephen always said he intended to write simply and 'in the grand manner'. He must have been read aloud to by each of us in turn but he soon began to blaze his own trails in literature. The classics were covered rapidly and many a lesser book as well. Why should the subject of his very earliest poem have been- a weevil? And a biscuit weevil at that? Yet the verse was entirely philosophic in tone.

"What is the greatest good  
I asked him as there he stood,  
"And what is the greatest evil,  
Tell me, O biscuit weevil."

Though we two elder ones often excelled at school composition, I cannot remember that either of us wrote stories at an early age. But Stephen did. There was the one called "Charles<sup>P</sup> Frogg's Conversion"

in which the hero had 'a drop too much taken' and 'reeled home.' His outraged wife 'went downtown and bought a cat, the duplicate of their cat. She also bought a can of green paint.' When the erring husband reeled home that night, he beheld a green form in the window of his house. "Ten minutes later a badly frightened man handed the pledge to his wife. And the cat understood." A moral tale if ever there was one.

It is sad that I was never able to lay hands on one of ~~my~~ mother's childhood books, tragic in the extreme, called "Louie's Last Term at St. Mary's." Nor to find our father's favorite "Jamie, the English Boy" by the author of "Sandford and Merton."

Where the best is offered and accepted, a certain amount of alloy in literature mixed with the stock of gold is perfectly harmless, and we three who have become writers testified to this. In retrospect I see myself lying on the hall floor one blazing hot summer day, absorbed in a purple volume I had taken out of the bookcase and scanning these fateful words:

"Was this aged weeping woman,  
So pale, so worn, so sad,  
The child once young and smiling,  
The bride once fair and glad?  
What grief had dimmed the glory,  
And brought that dark eclipse (eclipse)  
Upon her blue eyes' radiance  
And paled those trembling lips?"

It must have been some ~~ff~~ effusion of Adelaide Procter's but my taste was not injured. "When half-gods go, the gods arrive."

Laura Benét