

Chalkdust

Double E, Double F, O, C

Much of my education was acquired before and after the days of school attendance. Of course, by benefit of taxes, I did learn some things. But I began on the three “R’s” before I started to school and I’ve never finished them.

My first reading was done from the family high chair placed beside the kitchen table. That doesn’t prove that I was a precocious youngster. My sister wasn’t born until I was four years old, and she didn’t need the high chair until I had reached the age of noticing the letters on the oatmeal box, the coffee bag, and the newspapers which Mama put under my plate to save the tablecloth and floor.

It was probably to keep me out of other mischief that she would let me sit in the high chair beside the kitchen table while she rolled biscuits with that fat white rolling pin and board, or frilled pie crusts for Papa’s coming home on Saturday nights.

As she worked, I asked questions. In later years she said I’d never get forgiveness for all the questions I asked as a child.

The first literary peculiarities that caught my attention were the two “E’s” on the coffee bag. They looked like little white three-legged stools lying on their sides.

“Who turned the stools over?” I asked Mama.

She had to explain that the two little marks were not stools at all, but E’s, and that they helped her to know what was in the coffee bag—as though she couldn’t tell by smelling!

Next I asked about the turned-over stools with broken-off legs. These she said, were F’s, and they also helped her to know what was in the coffee bag.

I soon learned the O; and then the C, which seemed like the O that wasn’t all there. Then I knew how to read COFFEE—except that I read it always EE FF O C. It seemed more natural and interesting to begin with the turned-over and broken-off stools, then the whole O, and the broken O, or C.

OATS was my second accomplishment. I was attracted first by the O, which was already familiar. Then the S which was funny and crooked. The A looked like a chicken coop. And the T was a post with a plank on top, like the trellises in Grandma Ussery’s grape arbor.

But all my reading and querying were not done in the high chair. There came to our house in those days two periodicals, *Hearth and Home* and *Comfort*. I learned to spell the titles of those, and in the daily papers too, I could frequently find letters that looked familiar—O’s, E’s, A’s, T’s, F’s, H’s, and other capitals. The small letters were just an uninteresting mass.

My first real accomplishment in reading, the first time I was able to spell out two words and put them together, came one day as I was lying on my stomach on the floor near the stove in Mama's room. Mama's room at our house was sitting room, living room, everyday reception room, family room, dressing room, and bedroom. On this day it was also sewing room and library. And from the odor of "middling" meat and white beans boiling on the "air-tight" heater, it had aspects of a kitchen also.

Mama sat at the sewing machine near the window while I sprawled on the floor over a newspaper, laboriously searching out letters I could recognize. Finally I found a whole group of familiar shapes and spelled out slowly, "F-O-R S-A-L-E." Mama told me what the words were, but she had a harder time explaining what they meant.

I had, however, as I thought, learned to read the newspaper; and as soon as the newsboy came each afternoon I ran out to get *The Herald*, spread it out on the floor, and hovered over it, searching out every insertion of the words, "For Sale." Advertisers would have been flattered by my early tastes in reading.



Lead Pencil Publications

Shortly after learning to read, I learned also to write, or rather, to print. With a penny pencil, heavily chewed, and scraps of wrapping paper salvaged from the kindling-box behind the kitchen stove, I began making newspapers, books, and magazines—their total contents running something like this: “FOR SALE OATS COFFEE HEARTH AND HOME COMFORT.”

Wobbly printing it was indeed. And Grandpa Ussery was my sole subscriber, and only reader!

At some time during my very youthful youth, I wrote a poem. It came about this way:

One day in my usual fashion, lying on my stomach in the middle of Mama’s room floor, I was perusing my periodicals, *Hearth and Home* and *Comfort*. By this time I had learned to read even the letters that were not capitals, and to print in the same medium.

Near the back of one of the magazines was a page of “Songs and Poems Requested.” This department was very interesting to me, and more readable than any other part of the magazines—except the ads!

In one issue a reader asked the editor to print a poem entitled “The Dying Girl,” beginning—

“Raise the window higher, Mother;
Air can never harm me now.”

The editor regretted that he did not have a copy of the poem.

My sympathy for editors and readers must have begun there. I would, I thought, obligingly write a poem that the editor could print for the dear lady.

So with stubby brown pencil and a piece of pinkish grocer's paper, I began:

“Raise the window higher, Mother;
Air can never harm me now.”

What else I wrote will never be known, but I remember thinking at the time it was a very good poem. It had rhymes, some four line stanzas, and everything. And according to the development of the idea, the girl finally got the window up, even though her mother, like mine, was afraid of what the night air would do for sick folks or well.

After much deliberation and continued pencil chewing, the poem was finally completed. Then I ventured to try to read it to the only available audience, Mama, sitting there at the sewing machine.

I started reading, but had no more than finished the first stanza when—I don't know whether it was the telephone or the doorbell or the beans boiling over—there was an interruption, and before Mama ever seemed to realize that I was reading a poem of my own making, she was called from the room.

When she returned, I waited quietly but eagerly for her to ask me to continue reading. But she never did.

After a long time I crept away to the dining-room closet, the dark place under the back stairs, thinking I'd bury my unappreciated masterpiece there. Then I remembered that in the spring Mama would surely clean out the dining room closet; so I was afraid to leave it there.

Instead, I decided that the safest thing would be to slip that bit of paper up under the drawstring of my blue calico sailor-waist blouse. For days, even when I changed to the black and white sailor waist, that poem reposed in my bosom.

After several days I gave up hope of ever finding an audience or being asked to read my poem; so sitting on a stool, alone by the stove in Mama's room, I took the poker, fearfully pried open the stove door, and made a burnt offering of my literary creation.



A Formal Education

On my first day at school I learned, or was told, that the teacher “saw a cat.” I couldn't understand, however, why she thought that was so important; or why she continued standing there by the black wall printing words and talking all the time about how she saw a cat, a hat, a rat—when we knew she didn't.



But I didn't. So I wouldn't.

Then she tried to get me to stand up there by the black wall and say, “I see a cat.” “I see a rat.” But I didn’t. So I wouldn’t! Grandma Ussery had told me I mustn’t tell “stories.” And certainly there was neither a cat nor a hat in the room, much less a rat. I was beginning to get ideas about that teacher. And she seemed to be getting ideas about me.

At last she told me to go back to my desk. She seemed to think that by doing that she was punishing me. But I didn’t mind because that was where I had left my wrapped-up lunch—ham and biscuits, jam and biscuits, pickle and biscuit, and a big red apple. So I didn’t mind at all.

I settled down in the too-high seat, swung my feet for a while, looked around at the other girls with their pigtails and their striped and checked dresses; then I remembered the apple! I took it from my blue denim satchel, rubbed it slick on

my sleeve, and proceeded to bite sweet juicy chunks from its reddest side.

Well, sir, that teacher, rest her soul, stared at me, raised her hands, in horror, and looked as though she had never before seen a little girl put food into her mouth!

She swooped down to my desk, snatched the apple away, and began saying things about not eating in school, and other things. She said so much and looked so frightening, I felt hot all over and put my face down on my arm to cry. I wondered why we had to have school and teachers anyway; and I wanted to go home to Mama.

Once I got up from my seat and started home. But that woman caught my arm and marched me back to that old desk again.

Unending hours, it seemed, I sat there in agony and embarrassment, wondering how much longer I could endure it. Each time I raised my head, the teacher looked hard at me, and the girl across the aisle, the big one with two pigtails and a plaid dress, crooked her finger at me under her desk and whispered, "Shamey, shamey, Cry Baby." Then I'd start crying all over again. I hadn't cried so hard since my rag doll, Susie Jane, was washed off down the gully.

I wanted Mama, and I hated school. But there seemed to be little I could do about either my wants or my hates.

The longer I was there, the more I wanted to go home. At last, when it seemed that I couldn't possibly endure it any longer, the teacher opened the door and let us go outside. What a relief!

The out-of-doors had never seemed so welcome. I set out as fast as I could in the direction I thought was home and Mama. I had not gone far when I came to a fence, a high fence with no gate. Then indeed, I began to cry. I cried and ran, blindly following the fence, and calling as loudly as I could, "Mama, Mama, Mama!" I know how a lost lamb feels.

Then a bell rang. That frightened me even more. So I ran faster and faster, and cried louder and louder, calling for Mama and hunting a gate. Just as the gate came in sight, and as I doubled my speed toward it, two of the bigger girls ran up and caught my arms, one on either side, announcing that it was not time to go home—it was only recess! Another word to be stored among my dislikes was that word, "recess." A word that cheated!

Indeed, like a lamb to the slaughter, but not a meek lamb, I was dragged back to the schoolhouse between those two "Judas goats." I'm not sure I ever liked either of those girls as long as I knew them.

That was my first day of suffering. Others followed until I became actually ill. How much of the illness was mental and how much was physical, I don't know. But it was welcome as long as it kept me away from school. My first grade education was acquired in a matter of a few misery-filled days.

In the second grade I must have become either callused or interested. At any rate, I seemed to bear up better. In the second grade I scored one on the teacher. Although I had learned in the first grade that a little girl mustn't eat in school the apple she brought to school, in the second grade I learned that it is all right to eat the apple if you can do so when the teacher isn't looking. The girl across the aisle taught me that and helped with the eating.

It was in the third grade that I memorized the states and their capitals. A long and monotonous process that was, for I had no idea what states or capitals were. I got them down, however, from Maine-Augusta, to California-Sacramento. I could sing them off like multiplication tables, and I understood them about as well.

That state chant, however, was an awful nuisance. Every time company or some of the kinfolks came, Mama would call me into the house, no matter how busy I was with mud pies or doll houses, to say over and over again the states and their capitals. My school-acquired knowledge was a wearisome burden indeed, a distinct liability!



The Playwright

In the fourth grade I wrote a play, not that the teacher could be directly blamed for that; fortunately or unfortunately, she never knew. Some of the older girls—I always played with older girls—thought we ought to have an entertainment; but they bemoaned the fact that we didn't have a play, and the teacher wouldn't get us one. I didn't know much about what a play was, but I felt sure I could make one if I could understand what it ought to have.

I had, remember, made a piano.

They finally explained how one ought to go; so after much hard thinking, I filled four pages of my tablet with "play writing" and passed it over to the other girls, Lola, Maggie, Mabel, Louise, and Frances. There were six of us in all, and the play was made to include the crowd.

I had planned that each one of us should be dressed in a long-waisted white dress with stand-out skirt, a very much stand-out skirt. We might have to wear as many as four petticoats to make our skirts stand out as much as I had planned.

Each of us would wear a crown of daisies on her head, and a chain of daisies around her neck, and we would hold hands! I think I had seen a picture like this somewhere. I drew some pictures along with the play-writing to show the girls just how we would look with our daisies and wide, short, stand-out skirts.

But alas, the poor play never had its “first night,” nor even its first Friday afternoon. None of us had the courage to show it to the teacher.



No “First Night.” No Friday Afternoon.



The Lie

It was in that same fourth grade that I accomplished my first lie—the first I remember; the last I admit. Nellie Mai and Chester, two of the classmates who were more friendly and understanding toward me than most of the others, had acquired some wonderful animals they called guinea pigs. And guinea pigs, guinea pigs were the talk continuously. They were shocked that I had never seen any guinea pigs.

I must have suspected after I admitted that I hadn’t, that honesty might not be the best policy. But the real lie evolved eventually and indirectly.

Each afternoon Nellie Mai and Chester begged and pleaded with me to go by their house and see those pigs. “It wouldn’t take more than a minute, certainly it wouldn’t,” they said. Their house was hardly a block out of my way, and the guinea pigs were right in their front yard, near the sidewalk. I could look over the fence at them. It wouldn’t take a minute.

I hesitated long before yielding. It must have been several days, perhaps a week that I refused. I knew well, for Mama had told me many times that she watched the clock from the time school was out, and she knew how long it ought to take me to come home. And if I didn’t get there by the time I should, she’d know I’d been fooling along the street somewhere, and when I did come in I’d certainly “catch it!”

It never did occur to me to tell Mama about the temptation and how very much I wanted to see those mysterious animals. Mama just didn’t seem to be the kind of person who could appreciate a guinea pig.

Finally, the tempters won. And circumstances seemed to favor us. We were dismissed a few minutes earlier one afternoon, and Nellie Mai, Chester, and I agreed that the fates were for us, although that isn’t the way we thought of it or expressed it. We ran every step of the way in order not to lose any of the precious tell-tale time.

I arrived. I saw. And I thought the sight was worth whatever “catching it” I’d catch. But a guilty conscience told me all the way

home that I'd stayed too long, I'd be found out. I'd better think of some way to fix things up. I thought easily and quickly.

The minute I put my foot on the first step, my excuse for being late left my lips.

"Had to stay in," I announced nonchalantly.

"What for?" Mama asked.

I hadn't thought of a reason, but one came easily. I was supposed to take a new reader-book to school that morning, but the books were all sold out before Mama could get to town and buy one; so I glibly replied, "Because I didn't have my new reader."

That excuse was ideal. It would put that old teacher in a bad light with Mama, I reasoned. Then I gaily went on to the kitchen to see what was left from the noon meal.

I didn't know until later, but Mama went straight to the telephone to "bless out" the teacher for keeping in her child for not having a book when there were no books in town.

The teacher suavely explained that the precious child had not been kept in, but, on the contrary, had actually been dismissed several minutes earlier than usual.

Oh, boomerang lie!

And, oh, the look on Mama's face when she summoned me from the kitchen to her room. Whether she used the hairbrush or razor strap, or whether it was "peachtree tea," I don't remember. But I do know I caught it. I was forced to explain.

Then I caught it again. I got some extra for the way Mama felt about blessing out the teacher.

It didn't help matters any when Mama explained that it wasn't for seeing the pigs, but for telling a "story" that I was punished.

Nevertheless, I've never been able to look comfortably at guinea pigs, even to this day. And I never could read "Pigs is Pigs" after I heard that it contained twenty millions of the creatures.

It was in the fourth grade, also, that I vowed: "If I live to be eighty-nine and have a hundred daughters, never, never will I make one of them wear a "nice little white dimity pinafore apron." Never should a child of mine wear an apron.

You see, my mother, like other mothers, was determined that her child should have the best of everything, especially the things she wanted when she was a little girl, and most especially the things she didn't get.

So early in my fourth year of school, just as I was beginning to bear with teachers, and as I was beginning to feel ever so slightly that I might become somewhat like the other girls, about that time Mama made up a year's supply of nice little white dimity aprons with ruffles and lace and Hamburg embroidery and straps over the shoulders and strings for bows at the back. Along with these she made a generous supply of nice little white sunbonnets with ruffles and starch and even splints of

cardboard slipped into tucks to make them stiff, and strings to tie chokingly under my chin.

However willingly or unwillingly, I donned that apron and fresh white sunbonnet the first morning, I never again donned them willingly. All the other girls who didn't have aprons and sunbonnets—a sum of one hundred percent minus me—laughed at my sunbonnet and apron and called me, Grandma! Grandma! Grandma!

Of course, I rushed home in tears. But Mama merely sniffed or sort of snorted when I told her. She explained that the reason they laughed at me was because they didn't have any pretty white aprons and sunbonnets. Wasn't that just what I had been telling her? They didn't have any. And I didn't want any. I didn't want to wear things that the other girls didn't. I didn't want to be different.

But no. Mama had made those aprons and sunbonnets for me to wear to school. They were just like the ones she had wanted when she was a little girl. They were pretty. They were the very things for little girls to wear, and I was to wear them. She was determined on that. I might as well forget that foolishness.

But I could forget nothing. My tormentors saw to that.

“Grandma! Grandma! Grandma!”

In the fifth grade I learned that a noun is the name of anything. And to me it was a name, merely that and nothing more. Then I learned that an adverb modified (I called it

“mortified”) adjectives, verbs, and other adverbs. I learned, too, that a verb “denotes action, being, or state of being.” But I didn’t understand any more about the “state of being” than I did about states and their capitals.

Oh, education is an awful ordeal when you are very young or very stupid; and it is painful indeed when you are both! Let those who will sing of “happy school days.” I cannot join in the chorus, for I must have missed the happy ones.

In the sixth grade I learned that the blond young man across the aisle was very good to look at. In the seventh grade it was a brunette in a blue shirt. He seemed even more pleasing in appearance. And never, never shall I forget the day he offered to carry my books as we walked home from school. Not to be described was the thrill I had when he took my elbow to pilot me across the mud at the street crossing. I could show you that exact street crossing, even today!

In the eighth grade I learned that Henry the Eighth had six wives, or was it Henry the Sixth who had eight wives, or was it seven? I heard it emphasized, too, that Caesar built a bridge—in the fourteenth or seventeenth chapter, I forget which! And that he crossed the Rubicon; he came; he saw; he conquered; and fell in love with Cleopatra.

I was also exposed to a course of spelling and arithmetic, and to one on how to sprinkle commas and semicolons among words. But those courses, like my smallpox vaccination, didn’t seem to “take.”

