Julia Darrow Cowles

The Art of Story-Telling, with nearly half a hundred stories

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PREFACE

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In preparing this book the author has sought to awaken a keener perception and a higher appreciation of the artistic and ethical value of story-telling; to simplify some of its problems; to emphasize the true delight which the story-teller may share with her hearers; and to present fresh material which answers to the test of being good in substance as well as in literary form.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Miss Mabel Bartleson, children's librarian, and to Miss Ida May Ferguson, of the children's department of the Minneapolis Public Library, for their thoughtful assistance, and to the authors and publishers of copyrighted stories included in this volume, for their generous aid. Specific credit is given in connection with each story.

J. D. C.

PART I
The Art of Story-Telling

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CHAPTER I
Story-Telling in the Home

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The home, the school, and the library have each a distinct purpose in story-telling. These purposes may be more or less complex, they may in some instances coincide, yet the fields are separate, and each has its own fundamental reason for presenting the oral story to the child.

In the home, the chief object in story-telling is to give content, to satisfy. The child, becoming tired of his toys or of his games, comes to his mother and begs for a story. He wants to be taken into her lap, cuddled within her arms, and entertained. Oh, the wonderful, the far-reaching opportunities held by the mother in such moments as these! The child is in a quiet, receptive mood, and the stories told him at such times will never be forgotten; their influence will follow him as long as he lives. Nothing that he can learn in school in the after years will abide and enter into the essence of his being as will the stories which his mother tells him. Strength of character, purity of life, truthfulness, unselfishness, obedience, faith—all may be made beautiful and attractive by means of stories.

Nor is the directly ethical training the greatest good achieved by story-telling in the home. Nothing else so closely links mother and child in a sweet fellowship and communion of thought. Nothing else so intimately binds them together, nor so fully secures the confidence of the

child. When they enter together the enchanted realm of story-land, mother and child are in a region apart, a region from which others are excluded. The companionship of story-land belongs only to congenial souls. And so the mother, by means of stories, becomes the intimate companion, the loving and wise guide, the dearest confidant of her child.

Not all the stories of the home need be ethical in their teaching, though all stories worth telling have a foundation of truth. There should be a wise blending of fairy stories, mythological tales, fables, nonsense verses, and true nature stories; and the advantage of story-telling is that it may be carried on in connection with many of the household duties, with no diminishing of the story's charm. While the mother sews or embroiders or mends, while she stirs a cake, or washes dishes, she can tell a story which will not only entertain or influence the child, but will carry her own thoughts away from the ofttimes dullness of her task into realms of beauty and delight. Then, too, many a childish task may be robbed of its seemingly tedious character by the telling of a story during its progress, or as a reward when the task is completed.

Let me beg of you, mothers, do not think that you cannot tell stories. Try; try; keep on trying; and ease in telling is bound to come. Do not think of yourself in the telling; think of the story and of the child who listens. Nothing else matters.

It takes time to search out and familiarize oneself with just the stories that are best worth telling, but surely no mother can find a more important or more worthy object

upon which to expend the time. Librarians and story-tellers within the past few years have prepared lists which make such selection, comparatively easy, mid classified lists are included in the present volume.

The very little child can grasp only the simplest story, but the essential facts of any story which he can comprehend, can be simply told. A story for a little child should have few characters, little if any plot, and a familiarity of action or place. Mother Goose and similar nursery rhymes naturally come first for little children in the home. The kindergarten collections of stories contain good material, and these can be followed by or interspersed with the simplest myths and fairy tales.

Just as children love the companionship of animals, so do they love stories of animals; and when these animals do the things that children do, an element of surprise and new delight is added. Children intuitively want the right to prevail. They love the old tales wherein animals talk, and the crafty old fox is always beaten by the good little hen.

Bible stories should be told to children day by day. They can be made very simple in outline, but they should be told over and over, with a distinction made between them and the fables and folk tales. The latter may teach a true lesson, but the former teach *The Truth*. And not only should we tell the Old Testament stories of heroes and of great wonders, but the story of Christ's birth, of his life, his death, and his resurrection, should be made a part of every child's early teaching in the form of stories reverently told. They will make a lasting impression; an impression deeper than the most eloquent sermon heard in maturer years.

A careful choice of the kind of stories told to little children lays not only a sound moral foundation, but a foundation for good literary taste.

A child brought up from its earliest years on stories from the Bible, Anderson, Aesop, Stevenson, and Field, will instinctively detect and reject trash when he begins to read for himself. But the supply of good literature must be kept at hand, for children *will* read *something*.

What sweeter bit of verse can a mother repeat to the child she is hushing to sleep than this:

Sleep, little pigeon, and fold your wings—
Little blue pigeon with velvet eyes;
Sleep to the singing of motherbird swinging—
Swinging her nest where her little one lies.

In through the window a moonbeam comes—
Little gold moonbeam with misty wings;
All silently creeping, it asks: “Is he sleeping—
Sleeping and dreaming while mother sings?”

The stanzas are from “A Japanese Lullaby,” and are selected from a host of similarly dainty verses in *Lullaby Land*, by Eugene Field (Charles Scribner’s Sons).

Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Child’s Garden of Verse* is another storehouse of treasure for mothers. Some of his rhymes, such as “Good and Bad Children,” are quite equal to Mother Goose in their good advice administered in quaintly merry form, while his “Foreign Lands” and “My Shadow” teach children to idealize the everyday happenings of the home life.

How could a mother better remind her small boy or girl that it is time to waken than by repeating his lines:

A birdie with a yellow bill
Hopped upon the window-sill,
Cocked his shining eye and said:
“Ain’t you ’shamed, you sleepy-head!”

When a mother habitually repeats to her child stories and verses of the character outlined, she is not only forming his taste in literature along right lines, but she is helping to enlarge his vocabulary.

“What does ‘embark’ mean, Mamma?” is sure to follow the first or second recital of Stevenson’s “My Bed Is a Boat”:

My bed is like a little boat;
Nurse helps me in when I embark;
She girds me in my sailor coat
And starts me in the dark.

And “gird” will also need interpreting. These words will soon become a part of his normal vocabulary. He may not use them in his everyday speech, but he will not need to have them explained to him when he comes upon them in his later reading. Teachers invariably know when a child comes from a home of culture and of good literary taste, by the foundation already laid. The child’s own forms of expression and the range of his vocabulary are unmistakable evidence of the home influence and teaching.

A literary sequence which will give the child a knowledge of literature as a development or a growth—not as a vast accumulation of unrelated parts—can be carried through his

reading and study. This subject is taken up in the chapter upon “Systematic Story-Telling,” and while it is essentially the work of a teacher, the foundation for it may be laid by the wise mother who starts her child along right lines through the medium of her story-telling.

It has already been said that all stories worth the telling have a foundation of truth. The story with which this chapter closes is a beautiful example of a nature story which embodies a higher truth. It is found in Mrs. Gatty’s *Parables from Nature* (The Macmillan Company):

A Lesson of Faith[1]

A mild, green caterpillar was one day strolling about on a cabbage leaf, when there settled beside her a beautiful Butterfly.

The Butterfly fluttered her wings feebly, and seemed very ill.

“I feel very strange and dizzy,” said the Butterfly, addressing the Caterpillar, “and I am sure that I have but a little while to live. But I have just laid some butterfly eggs on this cabbage leaf, and if I die there will be no one to care for my baby butterflies. I must hire a nurse for them at once, but I cannot go far to seek for one. May I hire you as nurse, kind Caterpillar? I will pay you with gold dust from my wings.”

Then, before the surprised Caterpillar could reply, the Butterfly went on, “Of course you must not feed them on the coarse cabbage leaves which are your food. Young butterflies must be fed upon early dew and the honey of flowers. And at first, oh, good Caterpillar, they must not be

allowed to fly far, for their wings will not be strong. It is sad that you cannot fly yourself. But I am sure you will be kind, and will do the best you can."

With that the poor Butterfly drooped her wings and died, and the Caterpillar had no chance to so much as say "Yes," or "No."

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, as she looked at the butterfly eggs beside her, "what sort of a nurse will I make for a group of gay young butterflies? Much attention they will pay to the advice of a plain caterpillar like me. But I shall have to do the best that I can," she added. And all that night she walked around and around the butterfly eggs to see that no harm came to them.

"I wish that I had someone wiser than myself to consult with," she said to herself next morning. "I might talk it over with the house dog. But, no," she added hastily, "he is kind, but big and rough, and one brush of his tail would whisk all the eggs off the cabbage leaf.

"There is Tom Cat," she went on, after thinking a few moments, "but he is lazy and selfish, and he would not give himself the trouble to think about butterfly eggs.

"Ah, but there's the Lark!" she exclaimed at length. "He flies far up into the heavens and perhaps he knows more than we creatures that live upon the earth. I'll ask him."

So the Caterpillar sent a message to the Lark, who lived in a neighboring cornfield, and she told him all her troubles.

"And I want to know how I, a poor crawling Caterpillar, am to feed and care for a family of beautiful young butterflies. Could you find out for me the next time you fly away up into the blue heavens?"

“Perhaps I can,” said the Lark, and off he flew.

Higher and higher he winged his way until the poor, crawling Caterpillar could not even hear his song, to say nothing of seeing him.

After a very long time—at least it seemed so to the Caterpillar, who, in her odd, lumbering way, kept walking around and around the butterfly eggs—the Lark came back.

First, she could hear his song away up in the heavens. Then it sounded nearer and nearer, till he alighted close beside her and began to speak.

“I found out many wonderful things,” he said. “But if I tell them to you, you will not believe me.”

“Oh, yes I will,” answered the Caterpillar hastily, “I believe everything I am told.”

“Well, then,” said the Lark, “the first thing I found out was that the butterfly eggs will turn into little green caterpillars, just like yourself, and that they will eat cabbage leaves just as you do.”

“Wretch!” exclaimed the Caterpillar, bristling with indignation. “Why do you come and mock me with such a story as that? I thought you would be kind, and would try to help me.”

“So I would,” answered the Lark, “but I told you, you would not believe me,” and with that he flew away to the cornfield.

“Dear me,” said the Caterpillar, sorrowfully. “When the Lark flies so far up into the heavens I should not think he would come back to us poor creatures with such a silly tale. And I needed help so badly.”

“I would help you if you would only believe me,” said the Lark, flying down to the cabbage patch once more. “I have wonderful things to tell you, if you would only have faith in me and trust in what I say.”

“And you are not making fun of me?” asked the Caterpillar.

“Of course not,” answered the Lark.

“But you tell me such impossible things!”

“If you could fly with me and see the wonders that I see, here on earth, and away up in the blue sky, you would not say that *anything* was *impossible*,” replied the Lark.

“But,” said the Caterpillar, “you tell me that these eggs will hatch out into caterpillars, and I *know* that their mother was a butterfly, for I saw her with my own eyes; and so of course they will be butterflies. How could they be anything else? I am sure I can reason that far, if I cannot fly.”

“Very well,” answered the Lark, “then I must leave you, though I have even more wonderful things that I could tell. But what comes to you from the heavens, you can only receive by faith, as I do. You cannot crawl around on your cabbage leaf and reason these things out.”

“Oh, I do believe what I am told,” repeated the Caterpillar —although she had just proved that it was not true—“at least,” she added, “everything that is *reasonable* to believe. Pray tell me what else you learned.”

“I learned,” said the Lark, impressively, “that you will be a butterfly, yourself, some day.”

“Now, indeed, you are making fun of me,” exclaimed the Caterpillar, ready to cry with vexation and disappointment. But just at that moment she felt something brush against

her side, and, turning her head, she looked in amazement at the cabbage leaf, for there, just coming out of the butterfly eggs, were eight or ten little green caterpillars—and they were no more than out of the eggs before they began eating the juicy leaf.

Oh, how astonished and how ashamed the Caterpillar felt. What the Lark had said was true!

And then a very wonderful thought came to the poor, green Caterpillar. “If this part is true, it must all be true, and some day *I* shall be a *butterfly*.”

She was so delighted that she began telling all her caterpillar friends about it—but they did not believe her any more than she had believed the Lark.

“But I know, I *know*,” she kept saying to herself. And she never tired of hearing the Lark sing of the wonders of the earth below, and of the heavens above.

And all the time, the little green caterpillars on the leaf grew and thrived wonderfully, and the big green Caterpillar watched them and cared for them carefully every hour.

One day the Caterpillar’s friends gathered around her and said, very sorrowfully, “It is time for you to spin your chrysalis and die.”

But the Caterpillar replied, “You mean that I shall soon be changed into a beautiful butterfly. How wonderful it will be.”

And her friends looked at one another sadly and said, “She is quite out of her mind.”

Then the Caterpillar spun her chrysalis and went to sleep.

And by and by, when she wakened, oh, then she *knew* that what the Lark had learned in the heavens was true—for she was a beautiful butterfly, with gold dust on her wings.

Footnote

[1] Adapted for telling. By permission of the publishers.

CHAPTER II
Why Tell Stories in School?

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Every lover of children knows that a good story, well told, is a source of the purest joy; but while this of itself is sufficient reason for story-telling in the home and in the nursery, it is not sufficient reason for general story-telling in the school. Happiness is a powerful ally of successful work, but it never should be substituted for the work itself; it may well be made one of the means of attainment, but never the object to be attained. Useful service is a far higher ideal than personal happiness, and it should be the ideal held before the child who enters school.

As all educational methods have for their ultimate object that of making the child of today the good neighbor, the true friend, the useful citizen of tomorrow, so we have a right to question the recent and growing demand for story-telling in our schools. What is its object? Does this object aid in the ultimate end to be attained?

First of all let us consider the well-recognized fact that through story-telling a teacher may come into so close and happy a relationship with her pupils that they will respond to her suggestions and be molded by her influence to a degree not easily attainable by any other means. A story may be told as a means of restoring order in a roomful of restless children, or when some untoward occurrence has brought the tension of school discipline dangerously near to the breaking point. This use of the timely, the appropriate, story

is worthy of consideration by teachers far beyond the primary grades.

Stories may be used as an aid to language work. The diffident, self-conscious child who cannot be induced to talk upon the ordinary topics of school work, can be aroused into forgetfulness of self and made to respond with growing animation to questions regarding a story that has awakened his interest. A “point of contact” may be established with even the dullest child if his interests are studied and the right story chosen for telling. Sometimes the story may need to be improvised to fit the occasion. A story chosen, or especially written to meet the need of some particular child, has in more than one instance influenced his whole after life.

Lessons of unselfishness, of thoughtfulness, of cleanliness, of patriotism, of obedience—of all the characteristics which we wish to cultivate in the children—may be impressed by means of stories. This field of story-telling should begin in the home, but it may well extend on into the school room.

A love of nature and of out-door life may be strengthened by stories of birds and animals, of trees and of plant life, thus leading naturally to essays and poems upon the same subjects for later reading.

The funny story has its legitimate place in the school room, although there are teachers who would as soon think of introducing a bit of fun into a church service as into a school session. But fun is a wonderful lubricant, and there are times when a funny story will oil up the pedagogical machinery as nothing else could.

In the more advanced grades stories may be used to awaken an interest in history, both local and general, ancient and modern. Nothing better can be devised for making the dry bones of names and dates take on life, than the telling of an interesting story of the time and the characters of the lesson. Such stories should not be told as an end in themselves, but as a means to an end—the awakening of interest in historical subjects by giving life and reality to historical characters.

In the same manner an interest in the works of the best authors may be aroused by telling the story of one character in a book, or by telling part of the story of a book and leaving it at an interesting point. There are many children, boys especially, who leave school after passing through the seventh or eighth grade. If they have not formed a taste for good literature, their reading after leaving school is likely to be without value if it is not positively injurious. One of the surest means of leading such boys to read and enjoy good books lies in the hands of the teachers of these grades. Let her tell stories from Dickens, from Scott, from Cooper, from Stevenson; let her tell stories from local history, general history; stories of discovery, of science, and of art. Let her make these things attractive, and show her pupils where more of the same fascinating material may be found.

So thoroughly is the value of this class of story-telling understood that progressive librarians throughout the country are having “story hours” at the libraries for the purpose of reaching boys of this age and bringing them into closer touch with the treasures of the library shelves.