

DOROTHY CANFIELD: THE LITTLE VERMONTER

By Dorothea Lawrance Mann

NO one has ever questioned seriously the tremendous power in small things. The atom, the electron, even the germ, speak for themselves. They are the Davids and against them the Goliaths of the world have small chance. Consider the unequal contest between a great building and a small stick of dynamite! Little people frequently seem to possess this same driving force, as if their whole being were concentrated will power. Dorothy Canfield once said that if anyone knew what it felt like to live in a small body, in the future he would always choose to be large. There is something quite deceptive about these small people. You would never suspect them of such deadly seriousness. Looking at Dorothy Canfield, it is far easier to believe that she spent much of her youth dancing at West Point than that she has served for several years on the State Board of Education for Vermont. She does not look in the least like the traditional doctor of philosophy, nor as if she learned new languages as a pastime. I believe that Portuguese is the latest of her string of languages, though it may easily be that she has added another in the last few months.

How many people, I wonder, have formulated so definite a philosophy of life as she? Again it is very misleading to think of her as the novelist who lives on the side of a mountain near a little village in Vermont. Perhaps the significant aspect of this circumstance is the fact that her Red Mountain is the

mountain pictured on the seal of Vermont! As a matter of fact she is equally at home in France, where she has lived for years at a time. Once she remarked that having an equal number of French and American friends gave one a nice balance in life, for the French women devote themselves too much to their homes and their families, while American women are prone to give themselves too fully to outside interests. Observing the failings as well as the excellencies of both helped one to balance one's own interests.

Variety is what life needs to be well rounded, Dorothy Canfield once told me. You should know country life as well as city life. You should mingle intimately with people of other countries than your own — living among them, not merely traveling through their cities. As an American, it would be well to have at least part of your education in an entirely different section of the country from that in which you live. This last summer she took her own children to a far western ranch, to give them a taste of a life quite unlike either Vermont or France, and the keen joy of a variety of new horses to ride. I recall her comment that every American should live for a little while in the middle west, for without living there easterners in particular can never appreciate the thirst for culture which characterizes these mid-Americans. Unconsciously Dorothy Canfield is apt to give one the impression that their

own life has been very narrow and lacking in experience.

She herself to be sure had a good start in this matter of varied experiences. Her father was president of a number of colleges in the middle west — one in Kansas, and Ohio State University — while in his later years he was librarian at Columbia University. Her mother, who by the way set her daughter a good example by taking a trip around the world at eighty one unaccompanied by any member of her family — dying on the Indian Ocean, she said, would really be no different from dying in one's bed at home — is an artist and author. She also is a little woman with a dynamic quality about her, but her daughter must have inherited her taste for languages elsewhere, since for all her years abroad Mrs. Canfield has not learned to speak French. She once made a unique trip with one of her daughter's French friends who could not speak English. Though they were quite unable to converse with each other they remained in complete sympathy — proving that after all a great part of our converse is not in words. Part of Dorothy Canfield's childhood was passed in playing about her mother's studio in the Latin Quarter. She once observed that bohemia had no lure if you had known it in childhood! There were other weeks in French convent schools — still another phase of life to add to her collection of experiences. For quite a period in the early days of her marriage she lived in Italy. There was also a year studying in Norway. Since she shared the play as well as the work of her Norwegian friends, she could take a mischievous delight in listening to the comments of visitors from her own land discussing a group of natives, with no knowledge at all that one of the "natives" was an especially clever American.

No one of our novelists has had the charge of writing autobiography laid at her door more frequently than has Dorothy Canfield. It is irritating of course, and yet so completely does she identify herself with her characters that it is not strange. If today she suffers and plans with Mrs. Bascomb of "Her Son's Wife", even more did she laugh and dream and have moods of terrifying seriousness with Marise of "The Brimming Cup". Most novelists use material of setting and incident which are familiar to them. In her case there are the deeper spiritual resemblances. She knows at first hand Mrs. Bascomb's passion for children, and very fully does she partake of Marise's articulateness and her need for analysis. She herself longs to think clearly. It is one of her ideals. Many persons say they desire to think clearly, but either their thoughts are gravely bounded or else they know nothing whatever of the true passion for clear thinking — almost for defining the indefinable — which is hers. Yet with it all she is utterly sane. There will come often her hearty laugh, brushing away the cobwebs of abstractions. The practical side of her also finds echo in Marise and her neighborliness. Many authors live at least a portion of their lives in the country, but they remain apart from the community. Dorothy Canfield has always contributed her share — though I am inclined to doubt her statement that her neighbors scarcely know that she writes, since they see her only as a human being. It is clearly a well worn path which leads up the mountain to "Fishers'". She worked with the other women when they made over the school-house to rent as a summer cottage, using the rent money for school equipment. It was almost clear gain, for the energetic Vermonters furnished the

cottage from their own homes, and did all the not inconsiderable work of the experiment themselves.

Living in Vermont on the mountain, the Fishers are interested in reforestation. There is a fine tract planted and preserved in memory of Dorothy Canfield's father. The work naturally was interrupted by their four war years in France. It is strange to think of their selling their wood in Vermont that they might live in France and do war work there. To both Mr. and Mrs. Fisher France was the second home, and they could not be happy until they were helping. There has been another year in France since the war, and several summers, for the Fisher children must be at least bilingual and their mother wanted them to learn early what she describes as the French habit of good work. The ideal of good work is something to cling to in life. This in itself is characteristic of her, for though her family came out of New England, there is nothing of the transcendentalist about her. She is tiny in physique, but her feet rest very firmly on the ground. Good work which demands care in its every detail is not bad as an ideal for living. Too many Americans are satisfied with shoddy accomplishment and even with shoddy dreams.

Novelists sometimes say that life is harder for a young writer today than it was during their own apprenticeship. Perhaps — but perhaps too in looking back from the heights of their success they forget some of the doubts and disappointments. Possibly competition was not quite so keen as it has become. Reputations certainly were made promptly and definitely. Dorothy Canfield was one of those who worked on "The American Magazine" in its youthful days. She was also secretary of the Horace Mann School for two or

three years. As a matter of fact, "The Squirrel Cage" was not her first book, though it was her first big success. She had taken her Ph.D. in 1904, had married in 1907, and this novel was published in 1912. In a day when most writers seemed to desire the longest and most impressive name possible, she abandoned the "Dorothea Frances" to which she was born for the simpler "Dorothy Canfield".

Her educational books were published later under the name of "Dorothy Canfield Fisher", to the confusion of not a few readers. The educational books have become a thing of the past, but I have an idea that they subtly modified all her work. Her novels are deeply concerned with the training of children. Whatever else her books may contain, the matter of the supreme importance of children always plays its part. Educational ideals were in her blood, since her father was a college president, and from the first she had been hailed as a novelist of ideas. Nevertheless in the early days of her writing career she had spent a winter in Rome, where she became intimate with Madame Montessori, who was having trouble with the translation of her book. The publisher appealed to Mrs. Fisher for help, with the result that after the translation of the book she wrote "A Montessori Mother" for American mothers and children. Her reason for this was that many of the difficulties of Montessori methods in this country arose from the fact that American children advance more rapidly than Italian children. Consequently, large numbers of Americans found Mrs. Fisher's book more helpful than Montessori's own. There was at this time an amusing story of a woman who had enjoyed "The Squirrel Cage" and, seeing a new book by Mrs. Fisher announced, promptly read "A Mon-

tessori Mother", wondering greatly meanwhile at the author's intention! The concentration at this period on educational ideas, combined with the fact that it was the period of the babyhood of her own children, molded Mrs. Fisher's thought perceptibly. The trend was there, however, for we have the teacher who writes novels and the mother who writes novels, without approaching the constructive thinking of Dorothy Canfield.

Ever since their marriage in 1907 in America the Fishers have made their home on Mrs. Fisher's grandfather's farm in Arlington. It was the tenant farmer's house which they took for their own, and Mr. Fisher has done the remodeling himself. Mrs. Fisher can show a series of snapshots revealing the gradual changes made in the bare little New England farmhouse. The postwar generation has set a standard for radicalism hard to match for those who preceded them. Nevertheless it is to be borne in mind that Dorothy Canfield started life as very much a radical. She was an unconventional and strong minded person, who would do nothing simply because it was the customary thing to do. One of her children had a boy for nursemaid. He proved fully as devoted to the baby, and much stronger when it came to lifting him. She might live in New England, but Mrs. Fisher vowed she would never allow herself to be bound, as so many New England housewives were bound, by mere possessions. A home was a necessity, but it should not be so precious that one could not use it or leave it. Life meant more than things! Consequently Dorothy Canfield would have nothing in her house on which she could not easily turn the key when the spirit of wandering came upon her anew. The fine art of living she felt was something more than car-

ing for a house and the dusting of furniture. She must have lived up to her creed, for the little house on the mountain has been closed for a year or more at a time. It was empty several years at the time of the war, and the key must have been left in Vermont, for when the family came home from France they found the house open and a supper awaiting them — though their neighbors had shown the tact to let them enjoy their homecoming unobserved.

All novelists must take their material from the life which they have known, but more than most Dorothy Canfield's work reflects the varied aspects of her life. "The Bent Twig" revealed the life of the university town which she had known in childhood. "The Brimming Cup" was so vivid a picturing of Vermont that all sorts of amusing anecdotes could be told of the persons who believed firmly that she had written her own story. It was certainly a naive touch to believe that a woman who had decided not to leave her husband for a more prosperous lover should confess the fact to the world in a novel! The little American Marise had grown up as a child among French people. Dorothy Canfield herself used to tell of the church on the hilltop which she saw when she first approached France, and the thrill she found in thinking that this was "foreign parts". Never again, she admits, did any portion of the world seem foreign to her. Neale Crittenden — the Neale of "Rough-Hewn" — owes certain aspects of his prosperous, well established youth to memories of Mr. Fisher's boyhood. "Rough-Hewn" stands out to me as an extraordinarily interesting example of the story one is always longing to unravel. So many writers must have yearned to know why it was that their characters, wandering to

each other from the far ends of the earth, ever found and loved each other. No other author, so far as I can recall, has ever worked out the problem. I should say that the writing of it must have required two distinct processes. Taking her Marise and Neale of "The Brimming Cup", those happily married people from their totally different environments, she must first have reasoned back from the Marise and Neale whom she knew to their beginnings. This process was not on paper. The story she tells in "Rough-Hewn" is the story from the beginnings to the night on Rocca di Papa when they discovered their love for each other. This book was not nearly so popular as it should have been, proving no doubt that the public does not care to know too much about the characters of fiction. As in the case of "Raw Material" — where she presented the incidents from which stories are made instead of the stories made from them — it is quite possible that readers never wholly fathomed the significance of her experiment.

Within recent years Dorothy Canfield, the short story writer, has been almost completely superseded by Dorothy Canfield the novelist. Once, however, it hung in the balance in which medium she would excel. There were two volumes of Vermont stories published before the war. "Home Fires in France" and "The Day of Glory" were volumes of war stories actually written while the author was engaged in war work in France. The last of these books was an especially memorable event in her career. These war stories must have been struck off at white heat. There is no other accounting for them. Today there are secretaries, naturally. In the old days there was always the little one room house in the Vermont field with its

desk and stove, near enough to her home so that she could look out of the window at her children at play. In its early days the little house was used alternately by Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, while the one not writing would take over the responsibility of running the home and watching over the children, that the other's writing hours might be uninterrupted. In France everything was hopelessly different. Mr. Fisher was driving an ambulance. He went over in 1915, if I remember rightly, and his family followed him in a few months, despite the protests of grandparents against taking children into the war country. Not only did Mrs. Fisher throw that large energy of hers into various types of war work, but there was seldom a time when her house was not crowded with children in need of care and shelter. When her own little girl had been seriously ill with typhoid fever, her mother took her to the south of France to recuperate, but even under such conditions she could not escape the demands on her sympathy of other children who had suffered in the war. And even in such busy days as these she found opportunity to visit in the hospital another American novelist whom she had not previously known. That apparent leisure is one of her characteristic qualities. She never seems overburdened nor driven for time, like most of the modern world, though her days are extraordinarily full.

Her house in France was always filled, and in spite of it she managed to write some of the finest things she has ever done. Very early I discovered that Mrs. Fisher's characters are real people to her. She talks of them as she talks of her friends. I observed it first when she was talking of Barbara Marshall and her children Sylvia and Judith in "The Bent Twig". Bar-

bara Marshall remains one of her finest, most balanced characters, while the petty snobbery of the western university town remains a vivid memory. Sturdy little Judy and wilful, luxury loving Sylvia have lost nothing of their reality, though in the last twelve years Mrs. Fisher has written of many other children. One reason why I believe her characters are so vividly realized is the fact that they are always in families, and they have all the human connections which real people possess. As a rule there is an almost equally definite background of community life which seems to plant the characters firmly. They are quite tangible. It would not surprise me to find myself talking with Barbara Marshall or Marise Crittenden, or even the formidable Mrs. Bascomb. Could anything be more definite evidence of this than the volume of protest against Mrs. Bascomb and her high handed treatment of the situation which was menacing the chances in life of her beloved granddaughter? I have seen readers almost speechless with rage over Mrs. Bascomb, which after all is very fine appreciation of Dorothy Canfield's ability at character drawing.

Perhaps the sharpest reason for our present disregard of the radical quality of Dorothy Canfield's ideas is that the radicalism of the postwar generation has centred so largely on sex problems. It would be asking a little too much that they should succeed in setting ablaze the older generation—even though they have brought them to knee length dresses and the Charleston!

Dorothy Canfield's sense of humor is keen but she has not wit. Neither does she indulge in the epigram. She has done very effective scenes but she is not a quotable novelist. It comes back, I should say, to the fact that with her the story is the thing. Very

earnest people are seldom witty. They have not time to indulge in sideshow. Wit is for those with time to play upon words. Dorothy Canfield is concerned with ideas and with people. She has chapters of passion and beauty, but you must take them as a whole. I personally never lose my delight in that fine love scene on Rocca di Papa. Love scenes may possibly be easy to act, but they are proverbially hard to write. This particular love scene has the added difficulty of opening the book, so that the reader is wholly without emotional reaction with regard to Marise and Neale.

There is neither fear of criticism nor fear of ridicule in Dorothy Canfield. In "The Bent Twig" she tackled that very delicate problem of the little girls with the modicum of colored blood who tried to pass as white children and who disappeared overnight when it was discovered that they were of mixed race. She has a clean literalness in dealing with a situation of this kind—which means that she gives her full meed of sympathy but does not let her sympathy run away with her. One cannot ignore a fact, however much one may sympathize with the victim. Similarly, in "The Home-Maker"—the first of her books to be put on the screen—she refused to ignore that the father was a better home maker and the mother a better business woman. What case has mere convention beside facts? Some trace of Puritanism lingers in Dorothy Canfield. She might, I think, be very lenient if she could discover a human being who had no other human being's claims upon him. The claims of children she places paramount, and with her an adult has no chance at all if he or she is hampering the course of a child's best development. If it is for the best interests of the children, the

father should stay at home with them, no matter if the neighbors would laugh at him. If it serves the best interests of Mrs. Bascomb's granddaughter, it is quite justifiable that the mother should spend her days as a nervous invalid. Life sweeps relentlessly on. Because you were scanted in your chance at life is no excuse for scanting a child.

This belief in the supreme right of children has grown on Mrs. Fisher. It has taken the place of her earlier belief in the right of the individual. In "The Brimming Cup" Marise made her choice between her husband and the man who could have given her a renewal of youth and wider opportunities, without excessive emphasis on her children. Vincent Marsh is scarcely reproved when he suggests that Marise is wasting her time doing for her children things which a nursemaid could do as well. Vincent Marsh would doubtless have had a harder time of it with the present Dorothy Canfield!

There are many things which might be said of Dorothy Canfield's work. Her gallery of children is made up of very human little persons, with scarcely a brilliant one in the lot. Some of them are the stolid little Vermonters with their red cheeks and with the fair hair we see in so few sections of the country today. They are real individuals for all that. Her portraits of

women are equally noteworthy. It would be hard to find finer, more gracious and lovable women than she has created. There is, I think, an element of the feminist hidden in her which prevents her men from being equally impressive. They are likely to be the weaklings of the story. At least, they serve as backgrounds for their more vital women and children. As a matter of fact, equality between the sexes does not flourish in literature—if it flourishes anywhere. We are born with our inclinations and prejudices.

The later Dorothy Canfield is a trifle breathless and a trifle breath taking, as though she found life bounded for the promulgation of her ideas. A case of the dynamite again. There is such dynamic force in her. Something has to happen. She will not let you be leisurely and complacent. Life is so short and there is so much to be experienced and enjoyed and accomplished. It is the fundamentals of living and not the fashions and bywords of the moment which concern her. Perhaps too it is because she lives away from cities and refuses to be harried by the unimportant. She is modern and she has been a radical, but life is more than either, and she sticks close to the eternal truths. That is why she can be so completely fearless. That is why she holds out both hands to life.

WILD GEESE

By Robert P. Tristram Coffin

BEAUTY is coming north again,
Slanting, eager as the rain,
With necks like arrows on a bow
Across the sky the wild geese go.

Beauty is coming molded by
The high winds of the upper sky
Into wings that burn to be
In a patterned symmetry.

Loveliness comes like a host
Of swift ships headed for a coast,
Every sail and every keel
Pointed at a common weal.

Comeliness in company,
Every wing where it should be,
The great wild geese with necks like kings
Help each other with their wings.

Keen and clean a young desire,
Straight as tongues of evening fire,
Beauty is coming welded bright
From the anvil of spring's might.