

# The Importance of People

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*The editor had sworn off on animal stories when along came the Stanley boys with the following materials about cats, dogs and a man in Wyoming with suede shoes. The more or less strictly cat trouble comes from Edward by way of the Yorktown Herald, Westchester County, N. Y., a newspaper published by Ed's wife, Pauline, and by further way of Lamar's Newport News Public Schools Staff Bulletin No. 4, September 29, 1950. The shrewd comments on reading come from Lamar's own pungent pen.*

Harold Benjamin

## Concerning Cats, Dogs and Reading

### Well, Cat Trouble

A GROUP of conspirators, operating largely by stealth and under cover of darkness, have introduced a black cat into this household. Every corner of it. He is named Rhubarb, in honor of H. Allen Smith, and resists all efforts to elevate his moral outlook and sense of duty. He growls when people try to stroke his silky feathers. Rhubarb also bites you. Name comes from the Greek, means barbarian, too. That's our Rhubarb, to a whisker.

What can you do to straighten out a 90-day-old cat who stomps around the house with his tongue hanging out? If he wore a hard hat you should rap it down smartly over his nose. But he doesn't. He wears a cap. Also he torments the dog. I think he takes dope, marihuana, catnip, stuff like that.

Knew a man in Cheyenne, Wyoming, once whose wife was giving him a bad time. She went off to talk to mama about her troubles, leaving him to take care of a Persian monster the size of a sheepdog and harder to get along with. They were both against him.

Anyway, there he was, trying to cook himself a hamburger and not in command of the situation and this cat bouncing around the kitchen trying to trip him and break his leg. In an effort to save his limb he gave the cat

a, well a shove with his foot, as he put it, and the cat slid across the linoleum and wound up under the refrigerator with a soft, furry clunk. The next time he looked, there was the cat, colder than a biscuit. Out like a light.

Well, this was catastrophe. He grabbed the cat and ran out to his car, which I think was a LaSalle, and with a wild clashing of gears dashed off to the vet. He stuck around quite a while because the vet had trouble restoring signs of life, in Peter Pan. When he got home the firemen were there. He had left the hamburgers on the stove and the neighbors called the department.

I got into town a little later and we went out to eat, some place on the Lincoln highway east of town. The man who owned the place had a mutt dog he wanted to get a Carnegie medal for. He had a small hotel in town and the night it caught on fire the dog raised a ruckus and woke him up so he got out, along with his wife and the girls that were living there and so on. Somebody told him the dog ought to have a Carnegie medal, and that was what was on his mind. If you've never had a dog you wanted to get a Carnegie medal for you don't know what it is to be helpless against the complexities of the Twentieth Century.

Also, once in a while I know the time to shut up, but this wasn't one of them. "They don't give 'em to dogs," I said. That spoiled that dinner. I was against dogs.

The guy got the cat back from the vet before his wife got back, but Peter Pan was never quite right in the head afterwards, assuming he ever was. He had spells when he walked in circles. Eventually the Mrs. ran off with a man who had the first pair of suede shoes in the state of Wyoming and took the side-wheeler cat with her. I always figured the cat gave himself a rabbit punch, just to get the guy in trouble. Shows what the wages of duplicity are, doesn't it? Fine moral lesson. Well, that must be all of 15 years ago. I'll bet that cat's still dizzy.

### **Cat Trouble and Reading**

And what has this to do with education? Well, since I'm not entirely sure about what education is, I'm not quite certain about that but I think it has an idea for reading. This piece was funny. It caught people before they knew it. Caused them to take sides. And that's reading. Of course, it's writing, too, but we're talking about reading now. You weren't thinking about words as you read, you were thinking about this insane cat. And that's reading. When you have to make yourself pick up a book, don't bother; you can't read it anyhow. It's when you have to make yourself lay a book down, then you are really reading. If reading is part of an act of communication then its message must flow smoothly into comprehension, an emotion be created, or an idea developed as though it had been the reader's own all the time. If we will just stop to raise this particular little board, we will find lurking underneath it most of the little bugs that bother us in our reading program. Most of our

instruction is really just a reading program. We're getting away from it, to be sure, but we haven't gotten too far yet.

It seems to me that most little folk, at least moppets that have been or still are in my own family, do read. Read, that is, on their own level. They seem to think they think it up themselves. Then they want to tell you about it. Up in Maury School in Richmond, I once heard a little beginner recite a whole primer before she learned a word. Thought she was reading. She was really just telling us. How unconscious! Perfect. I must find out if she is becoming a fluent reader.

Then somewhere along the line, they leave us. They don't care any more what happened next and they are not interested in telling anybody about it. The other day at home a little second grader dropped in to see us while we were at lunch. Would she have a bowl of soup? No, thank you, she had just eaten. Well, perhaps just a little bowl? Well, perhaps, just a little one. So over the soup I said, Mary had a little goat. No, no! And so on. Great fun. She knew it letter perfect. "And yet he lingered near." It was a picture in her mind. I'll bet when she is studying U. S. History about 1960 and I come up—if I'm not down for good—with "The Missouri Compromise was passed in 1898," she won't come up with anything. Who will care then anyhow? Who cares now?

We might take a lesson from some political shenanigans now going on in Ohio. Certain persons who exhibit a hostile attitude toward Senator Taft hit upon the idea of circulating comic books, purported biographies, portraying the Senator in an unfavorable light. Derided at first these comics now cause concern. They cause concern not because of the truths or untruths they

contain, but because people read them. What politicians do and say and print is one thing but when people take to reading—that's dangerous. If the reading process is too natural, too unconscious as a process, people might get ideas.

All along we have been talking and worrying about pupils that can't read when the big problem may be about pupils that *don't* read. Grown-up pupils too. Also teachers. Our worst fault has been that we fail to apply what we could observe about our own reading to what we are trying to do with children. Ninety percent of our pupils can be taught and are taught the mechanics of the printed sentence but not ninety percent become real readers, at least not of the stuff we give them to read. And what dreary stuff it gets to be! Pretty good in the third grade. There people try to write so that pupils will want to read. "O look!" said Chicken Little. Well, when you holler, "Look!" everybody looks. Imagine seeing "O look!" in a biology text. Yet I remember the great botanist Charles Edwin Bessy saying just that in a lecture some forty years ago. He said, making a rapid sketch on the board, "But look! Just look!" I remember what he drew, too.

G. B. Shaw has an article in the October, 1950, *Atlantic Monthly* which is worth thirty-five cents of any teacher's money. Never mind the library, you really have to read this. The redoubtable Mr. Shaw winds up with this para-

graph. Don't read it with your tongue in your cheek but use the ruminative method. (*Webster's New International*: Ruminative; a, inclined to, or engaged in, rumination; also, marked by careful consideration: fully meditated.)

"A cockney who pronounces French in the accent of Stratford-atte-Bowe is actually more intelligible in France than the phonetic virtuoso who pronounces all but perfectly, barely a hundredth of every vowel being off the mark. The foreigner whose school-taught English is excellent the day he arrives here speaks broken English after a year's residence, finding it quite sufficient for his purposes and an innocent amusement for his neighbors. All teachers should bear in mind that better is the enemy of good enough, and perfection not possible on any terms. Language need not and should not be taught beyond the point at which the speaker is understood. Not five minutes should be wasted in teaching a chauffeur who says 'Them hills is very deceiving' to say 'These mountain gorges are very deceptive.' An English child who says 'I thinked' or 'I buyed' is just as intelligible as an adult who says 'I thought' or 'I bought.'"

Just look at them cats and suede shoes!—*Edward Stanley*, historical novelist, manager of Public Service Programming, National Broadcasting Company; and *Lamar R. Stanley*, director of instruction, Public Schools, Newport News, Virginia.



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