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Lucy Sprague Mitchell

Mary Phelps

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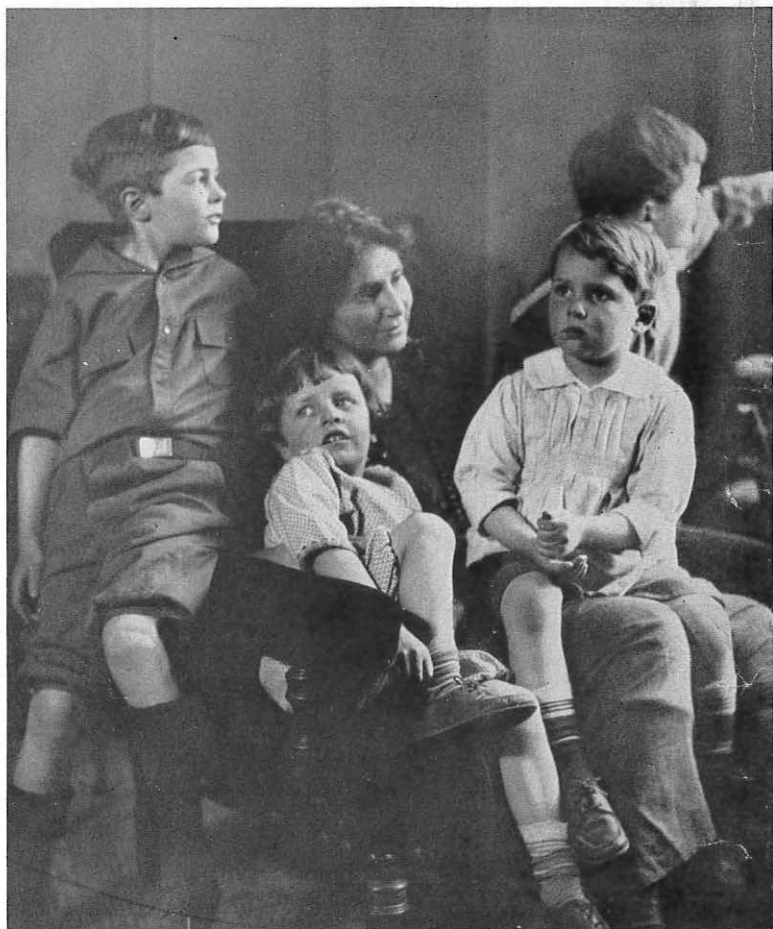
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LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL

By

MARY PHELPS *and* MARGARET WISE BROWN





LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL AND HER CHILDREN

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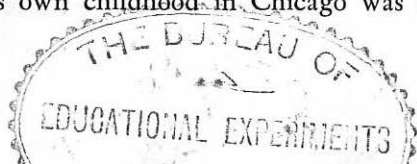
OF all the activities in a many-sided life, it is writing to which Lucy Sprague Mitchell gives first and deepest allegiance. She would say "language" rather than "writing"; for her books grow out of a concept of written and spoken words as more than a tool for clear communication; more than a medium for formal beauty. Language to her is a way for living beings to take in and enjoy the world: a means of apprehending, ordering, and heightening relationships in a way which brings on the experience of new ones. Indeed, through language (as through any art) we not only savor experience: we create it.

That genuine literature for children should do for them what adults demand of art for themselves may be obvious. Yet most writers have understood children's real thoughts and feelings only partially, and we have yet to call out the full response of which they are capable.

When Mrs. Mitchell began to publish, in 1921, there appeared a new kind of author for children. Combining a scientist's command of modern child study with the insight of an unusually gifted teacher, she knew children well enough to understand what is their reality, what their confusion, at different levels of growth. Believing that art experience in all its beauty and delight is their proper heritage, she realized that it can be given them in full measure only by writers in whom creative genius unites with real understanding of how children grow.

Her great discovery about children was that they are, above all, explorers, from the time they are babies soberly or playfully handling everything in reach; that in their "preschool" days, at least, the here-and-now world they can take in directly is big enough, varied enough, to call forth all their young powers of sense and imagination; and that even when older children push out into far-away space and time, and impossible worlds, there is no better base for a take-off than an ardent and active life in this stranger-than-fiction present.

Mrs. Mitchell's own childhood in Chicago was a singularly



confined one, due to illness; so she remembers long hours of story-telling, reading, writing. There were six children in the family, to whom their father used to tell innumerable stories. "Around the World" was one cycle. In Africa they met six little elephants; and throughout their travels, no doubt, the six little Spragues encountered a delightfully hexagonal world.

Much of the time when other children were in school she spent reading. Her father had a large library of classical literature, which she consumed *in toto*, and then moved on to mythology, metaphysics, and oriental mysticism; all the while being an incessant writer of diaries and verse. Who could have foreseen the adventurous gusto of the *Here and Now Story Book* in these beginnings? But its poetry, its love of beauty, were clearly on the way.

In her 'teens, Lucy Sprague went to live in southern California with her invalid parents, still shut off from the world. She read aloud with her father all the classic philosophy texts, from the Greek through Kant; and when later she went East to stay with Alice Freeman and George Herbert Palmer as a student in Radcliffe, she continued to be very much the philosopher; understandably, at a time when James, Royce, Munsterberg, and Santayana were all at Harvard.

A few years after finishing college, she went to the University of California at Berkeley as Dean of Women and instructor in English and versification: the first woman faculty member of that university and first Dean of Women in the West. She was then only twenty-five or six. Gallantly meeting the outlandish variety of problems that awaited her, the young philosopher now left gazing beyond the stars and turned her keen imaginative eyes on the workaday world. To her the most satisfying things she did with the students were extracurricular. She gathered groups of the girls together for informal afternoons of reading and talk, which led to the founding of the Partheneia — outdoor masques written and produced each spring by the women students; and on Saturdays she would go exploring with them all over the city: to the clinics, the poorhouses, the docks, everywhere. So besides the love of literature that was always hers, there began to emerge that spirited interest in the here and now which was to give such an impetus to her writing.

Nevertheless, she became dissatisfied with what she was doing at the university. A chiefly technical approach to language was not enough. As for the girls' total educational experience, on the whole it seemed superficial. Most who graduated went into teaching as a matter of course. Lucy Sprague saw the possibility of investigating other professional fields and of remaking the curriculum in the light of new opportunities; yet she knew that as long as students came to college with such meagre experiences behind them, not much could be done. A real educational renaissance would have to begin at younger levels.

In 1912 she married Wesley Clair Mitchell, who was then professor of political economy at California. They left to travel abroad, and, on returning, went to New York — Mr. Mitchell to become, as professor of economics at Columbia, one of the world's great authorities in his field, founder and director of the National Bureau of Economic Research, and, as chairman for the reports on Social Trends and on the work of the National Resources Board, a leader in one of the most constructive undertakings ever initiated by the U. S. Government — Mrs. Mitchell to begin the work she is still absorbed in: learning to know children, trying to create school environments that will give them the fullest scope for hearty living. Her brilliant trail-blazing, too, has been a more than national contribution. The *Here and Now Story Book*, for instance, is read in more than a dozen languages; and especially the Russians acknowledge her leadership in education and children's literature.

Not alone, but in constant contact with children, teachers, and specialists, in many schools and other groups she has done her work. In 1916 with Caroline Pratt, who had just started the City and Country School, and Harriet Johnson, who was already thinking out her plan for the first nursery school in the world definitely oriented to children's needs, she organized the Bureau of Educational Experiments. It started as a group of specialists in psychology, anthropology, education, social work, and medicine, who joined to study children's growth. Today it is the famous "69 Bank Street" — a sort of coöperative town hall for experimental educators: a center where young teachers are trained especially for progressive teaching; where experienced teachers, research workers, writers, any one concerned with chil-

dren, may come and benefit from the latest work of child specialists; where new studies are constantly extending the educational frontier; where visitors from all over the world come to observe the nursery school that has led the way for so many others. Mrs. Mitchell has been at once the leader and in countless ways a part of this pioneer undertaking. Her work with young teachers and writers, especially, is as refreshing as what she has done with children. Invariably she calls out an adventurousness and an insight at least something like her own.

Having taught in no less than thirteen progressive schools, she has known children of all ages in widely different settings. The daring revolution of the first *Here and Now Story Book* began to brew during her early work with the youngest groups at the City and Country School. She wrote most of it on top of a Fifth Avenue bus; for with four small children at home and all the small children at school, she was a very busy woman.

When she turned, as a language specialist, to children of eight to twelve years, another revolution burst. These children were clearly ready to push outward from the directly sensible here-and-now: to begin exploring the remoter whys of the world around them; to live vicariously in far-away places and other times. How to approach the study of a whole people? On what essential relationships could real understanding be built? In the case of young children, these were clearly geographic. New York six-year-olds discovered that their city was an island, and built around that discovery. Why not the same approach to far-away lands and peoples? Wasn't the Nile, for instance, the key to Egypt; the mountains and the sea, to Greece? Were not all cultures, past and present, a story of human needs answered according to the conditioning locale? So earth forces swept on to the literary scene, and *North America* appeared.

While at work on the recently published *Another Here and Now Story Book*, she was already looking toward a new field: the social here-and-now for adolescents. She plans a book on the use of natural resources in this country as fresh in its attack as her other books. At the same time she keeps an eye on the children for whom *North America* was written and ponders the literary uses of magic and science for them.

This hardly suggests the variety of her life. She has known all

kinds of people, from magnates to backwoodsmen; has wandered like a gypsy, and lived in almost every region of this wide land. She makes beautiful maps; created the modern interior of 69 Bank Street out of a warehouse for yeast; used to invent educational toys when the children she was teaching needed them; knows more funny stories than any three people; can tell you about the habits of the octopus or the economic history of potatoes — in fact, about almost anything the human mind has thought worthy to investigate. But such hasty sketching does not describe Lucy Sprague Mitchell. Only a poet (and here we borrow from one of her favorites) could truly reflect “her great and gracious ways.”

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THE HOUSE OF THE MOUSE*

By LUCY SPRAGUE MITCHELL

The house of the mouse
is a wee little house,
a green little house in the grass,
which big clumsy folk
may hunt and may poke
and still never see as they pass
this sweet little, neat little,
wee little, green little,
cuddle-down hide-away
house in the grass.

*From *Another Here and Now Story Book*. (E. P. Dutton & Co.)