

The Poetry Contest

Nancy Baxter

IF IT HADN'T been for Robert Southey, P. S. 61's Girls' Softball Team probably would have won the City Softball Championship in 1946.

Seven games the team had won, with my sister, Estelle, her long braids flying at right angles to her head, grimly flinging the ball at Helen Schwartz, who cowered behind the plate.

Estelle did everything intensely. When she made up her mind to win the competition for pitcher of the team, she spent twenty-eight days throwing a ball at a purple bullseye she had painted on the shed door. She wasn't even surprised when she was chosen. When she made up her mind, she was as determined as a truant officer at the Bijou matinee.

Another thing she took seriously was the Poetry Contest. It was a reciting competition, and in her eight years at P. S. 61, she had won it three times. Her best friend and bitterest competitor, Felice Pangrell, had also won it three. This was their last year, and April, the contest time, was approaching.

Estelle's nerves were beginning to fray, and so were the nerves of the rest of the family. She never said much; she just banged doors and rattled dishes at us. Her slightly buck teeth were set in a little tight line as she petted the dog or read *Clarissa Harlowe*, her great literary love at the moment.

"I don't think Estelle is going to let Felice beat her in the contest this year," my brother said one Sunday night. He had been trying to tune in "Amos and Andy" and Estelle had switched off the program with a testy snap.

My mother just sighed. She was used to the gale-like fury which roared through the house at the time of the Poetry Contest each year. It had been an institution in her own days at P. S. 61. It seemed to be as eternal and irrevocable as the Principal, Miss Hildebrand, who picked her way like an inflated hen through the halls and classrooms and screamed into a megaphone with an astonishing voice for a person her size, calling for one moment of silence in tribute to our boys on Armistice Day.

The Poetry Contest had sprung from the brain of Miss Hildebrand over twenty years ago; and each year she announced it anew at assembly time, her fuzzy, honey-colored hair standing out like a halo around her face.

The rules were always the same. Each room would choose two representatives by vote; there would be ribbons awarded for first, second and third in three age categories.

I stifled a yawn as she announced it; the contest never excited me. I always recited something easy like "Abou Ben Adhem" or "Oh Captain, My Captain."

Besides, the Poetry Contest always seemed a little the same to me. You could predict. Joey Lanski would do "Gunga Din," pointing his finger wildly on the "Din, Din, Din," and leering and smirking on "I'll get a swig in hell from Gunga Din." Two girls, at least, would choose "Still sits the schoolhouse by the road, a ragged beggar sunning," and their voices would crack a little on the part about "dear girl, the grasses on her grave have forty years been growing." We would be ridden under our desks with "Sheridan's Ride," "Paul Revere's Ride," and "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix."

The day Miss Hildebrand announced the contest, Estelle came whirling in and slammed her geography and arithmetic books down on the oilcloth-covered kitchen table. I was sitting having a peanut butter and pickle sandwich. Mother started to ask her about her plans for the contest, but she shouted, "I've got a game at the schoolgrounds," and took the stairs two at time.

She reappeared in two minutes with her blue jeans and sweat-shirt on and dashed off. The softball game was to be with Pear Tree Academy, and although they were supposed to be "easy outs," Estelle wanted to be there early for warmup.

She was elated when she returned. P. S. 61 had swamped the Pear Tree Girls 10-3 and Estelle had six strike-outs. She bubbled at the dinner table. "I won't have as much time to practice my poem because of the games, so I intend to start learning it tonight. That way I can have a head start on Felice."

"What makes you think you and Felice will be chosen?" my father asked. "Aren't there any other declaimers in the eighth grade?"

"We're the only ones who have had elocution lessons, and they always choose us," Estelle said with a shrug, adding a request for more meat. Winning always made her hungry.

My father gazed at the blue morning glory wall paper behind the kitchen table. "Let's see. Didn't Felice Pangrell win the contest last year? What was it she recited?"

Estelle stared darkly at the cauliflower on her plate. "She did 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.' It took her twenty-two minutes, and she didn't miss one line."

"Oh, it was dumb," our older brother Jerry interpolated gallantly. "Sing song prissy, 'Water, water, everywhere,' I felt like dropping a bag of it on her head."

Estelle looked at him with a flash of gratitude but felt she must protest some sort of loyalty for her friend. "Well, it wasn't as good as the year she did 'America, America, America for me.' She kind of leaned over the audience then." Estelle was lost in admiring reverie. "Tis fyeen to see the oeld world and travel up and down," she muttered to herself.

"You did win that year with 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,'" I reminded her.

"Yes, but now you have to have something new and different to win." The teachers were the prize committee and they were getting tired of Longfellow and William Cullen Bryant.

"What poem have you chosen, dear?" asked my mother, starting to clear the dishes away.

Estelle put her hands on the edge of the table and looked at us intently sensing our expectation.

"The Cataract of Lodore," she said, her black eyes flashing.

My father looked puzzled. Then he probed his memory. "By Tennyson? No, Southey. But Estelle, that thing is a freak. All that weeping and creeping and falling and calling and rhyming and chiming."

"That's exactly it! It's so strange it will hold their attention. And the trick will be to get expression in all that endless description of the brook coming down." She flung down her napkin and picked up her book. "I'm starting on it now. Take my turn at dishes, would you, Maria?" We sat looking after her in contemplating silence. Estelle always left a certain humming vacuum hanging over a room she left.

The Poetry Contest went its routine way in my room at school. The only new thing was that Miss Potter decreed, after five boys chose it, that "Casey at the Bat" had struck out in our room and was no longer available for selection. So we all began to practice in preparation for the final secret ballot before the contest. I could hardly get excited over the day when I would race tonelessly through "The Village Blacksmith" while staring at a gray glob of chewing gum on the floor, then sink grateful and red-faced into my seat. Elocution was not my line.

But it was Estelle's. The days she didn't have a softball game she spent marching up and down the hall with a glassy expression in her eyes, muttering, memorizing.

The trouble was, she was having to split her time, and it was making her as nervous as an outfielder with a bee in his hair. The Poetry Contest and the softball championship were running a race and Estelle was trying to drive two carts at once. And it looked like both would cross the finish line at once and run her over if she wasn't careful.

She almost lost a game, and the coach had sent in a relief pitcher. Her other schoolwork was suffering. All she did was wander up and down the stairs like a ghost murmuring "flittering and frittering" and bumping into dressers in her distraction.

The contest was a week away. The word around the school was that Felice Pangrell was reciting "The Highwayman" by Alfred Noyes. The grumbling that Estelle did about how long it was and how she "overdid" it made us realize Felice must be very good indeed this year. Her classmates voted her into the contest as expected, and we all breathed easier when Estelle was chosen from her room. She had fumbled two verses. Southey had made the poem too



repetitious; it was difficult to remember. She didn't have time to worry about it, however. The decisive game for the softball finalists was being played the same day. The team managed to win easily and Estelle began to feel some of her old confidence.

We got a soggy start the day of the Poetry Contest. April torrents slanted and sluiced over the cracked asphalt in front of our house, and Mother insisted on taking Estelle and me to school. Estelle bit her fingernails and rehearsed silently as the Plymouth chugged over the slippery streets. She came booming out with the last line, "And this way the water comes down at Lodore," with something like gratitude.

"If I can just get through this and win, then I can concentrate on the softball games," she sighed sadly, watching the windshield wipers cut a swath through the droplets on the window. I looked at her. She seemed tired, with a few wisps of her chestnut bangs in her face; and I felt sorry for her for the first time in my life.

I didn't see her until the contest at one o'clock. The younger children had gone through Rose Fyleman and "The Raggedy Man" earlier. Now the older grades assembled. Douglas Paden, with his earphones tucked beneath his horn rimmed glasses, was operating the intercom as we filed in. The poems were to be piped to the other rooms over the P. A. this year.

Miss Hildebrand introduced each of the contestants. Her blue knit suit reached far below her knees; size fourteen was too long for ladies four feet ten. She beamed at us as she introduced Jerry Hocker for his rendition of "The Charge of the Light Brigade." It was a disappointment. He rolled his eyes around from the basketball backboard to the sign marked "Exit" intoning all one phrase, "Halfaleague halfaleaguehalfaleagueonward." His voice was high and strange. Ellen Browder stood up and minced up to the podium, then grasped the microphone and began "Barbara Fritchie." She marched Stonewall through Fredericksburg well enough for a third prize, I guessed.

All this time, though, Estelle wasn't paying much attention. She had her feet twisted around each other (she had worn her red strapless slippers for the contest and they were too big and slipped off) and she kept looking out the window at the drizzle, then back to the podium. I sat up to see what it was she stared at. It wasn't Sonia Smeedescamp, who by this time was nasally urging, "Sail on! sail on! sail on! and on!"

Estelle was staring at the microphone. She wore a look of bewilderment and mounting fear. She had never spoken into a microphone before, and she was shaken by it. I knew she was wondering whether it would boom or rasp.

She didn't have long, however, to consider its inscrutable mechanisms because with a self-assured, bouncing gait, Felice Pangrell was mounting the steps to the podium. In her best elocution class style, she waited "to get the audience into the palm of her hand"

before she began. Finally she said, "‘The Highwayman’ by Alfred Noyes" slowly and clearly.

The wind was a torrent of darkness
Among the gusty trees
The moon was a ghostly galleon
Tossed upon cloudy seas. . . .

Her voice became stronger as she unfolded the story of the daring robber, his love for Bess, the landlord’s daughter, and their doom.

One kiss my bonny sweetheart
I’m after a prize tonight.

She flung out her arms with gay bravado as she tossed the highwayman’s lines at us; she tlot-tloted the horse’s hooves. She shrieked her curse to the sky and finished in a ghostly whisper.

Bess the landlord’s daughter
Plaiting a dark red love knot into her long black hair.

She stood for a moment, still in the spell, then sat down. Girls in my row nudged each other and shook their heads knowingly. Boys cleared their throats in token appreciation. Miss Hildebrand’s toothy smile gleamed yellowly as she preened herself over this fine product of her continued experiment in poetic appreciation among our young people. Estelle was going to have to be very good indeed to outdo Felice’s shriekings and ghostly whisperings.

I was watching Estelle. She sat stiffly, with an imitation smile of applause frozen on her face. But she seemed calmer and I saw her sigh and straighten her skirt. It was her turn.

"Estelle Hovitch will conclude our program," Miss Hildebrand breathed and swept aside like a dying swan. Looking blasé, Estelle advanced toward the microphone. I felt in a panic that she might trip over the cord, but she arrived safely. Instead of looking at her audience, she gazed at the rafters in a kind of other worldly inspirational moment. It was very effective, like St. Stephen looking into heaven or something.

"The Cataract of Lodore" she said slowly and clearly, her eyebrows raised and a bright expression on her face to set the tone of the poem.

How does the Water
Come down at Lodore?
My little boy asked me
Thus once on a time;
And moreover he tasked me
To tell him in rhyme.

She started confidentially, almost matter-of-factly. As she began the description of the river’s descent, she emphasized each

word, allowing her audience to absorb the repetition of rhyme and the galloping rhythms.

Here it comes sparkling
 And there it lies darkling
 Now smoking and frothing
 Its tumult and wrath in

Her voice began to rise with a frenzy, and I thought included a little too much tension.

Rising and leaping
 Sinking and creeping
 Swelling and sweeping
 Showering and springing
 Slinging and flinging.

She spat each word at the audience, and leaned at them.

And tossing and crossing
 And flowing and going
 And running and stunning
 And foaming and roaming
 And dinning and spinning
 And dropping and hopping
 And working and jerking

Terribly exciting, her voice rose to a pounding pitch until she nearly shouted, "glittering and frittering" when the microphone gave a terrible shriek about a half an octave below high C and hissed unmercifully.

"Glittering and frittering, flittering and . . ." she said blankly, and with a brief wild look around, collapsed in a faint at the base of the microphone.

I couldn't see her anymore. The podium became a bright sea of bobbing heads and bodies, of Felice Pangrell, Miss Hildebrand, and leaning over all of them, into the microphone, the owl-eyed figure of Douglas Paden, calmly announcing to the third and fourth graders waiting for the rest of the poem, "Due to circumstances beyond our control, this program cannot be continued."

Frantic action was going on around me, but I wasn't budging. During all the calling for smelling salts, wrist chafing and head-propping, I sat there thinking about Samuel Richardson, who always allows ladies to faint when things are not going their way.

What Estelle had not counted on, however, was Miss Hildebrand. No bird brain lodged within that chicken-shaped exterior. They carried Estelle to her office, and after she had "revived" Miss Hildebrand looked quite shrewdly at her.

"My dear, I can see that you are feeling a little poorly." Estelle nodded her head encouragingly.

"We must not try you too much. You must conserve your

talent and energy and, of course, you WILL NOT BE ABLE TO PLAY ON THE GIRLS' SOFTBALL TEAM FOR THE REST OF THE SEASON."

Estelle was crushed, but after all, she could never admit that the faint was all dramatics. Miss Hildebrand insisted that during physical education Estelle should stay in the Principal's office. So Felice Pangrell triumphantly bore home on her beanie the blue ribbon, P. S. 61's Softball team with Helen Schwartz substitute pitching was smashed in the championship, and Estelle spent a sticky spring answering the phone in the Principal's office. And the cataract never did get down to Lodore.

Miss Hildebrand, however, did grant Estelle one boon. She was to be allowed to memorize and recite for her the poem which hung on the wall, "Ain't God Good to Indiana."

This, of course, was a great consolation.

AUNT JANE

Aunt Jane looked through her window
 And saw only finger smears,
 Instead of gray-barked beech trees
 Which had grown two hundred years.
 Her children were to her cut knees,
 Wet pants and broken vases.
 They left her strangers, she had never
 Seen beyond their faces.

She fled the striped throat lily,
 Afraid it was a sneeze,
 Passed by the black wild honey,
 Her sight was on the bees.
 She cursed her fate, beshrewed her mate
 And spent her season fuming
 While by her door a perfect patch
 Of violets was blooming.

Aunt June cast pearls beneath the feet
 Of swinish passing years,
 Refused the bread of hope to dine
 On sour and tasteless fears.
 And so, she passed away from us
 And sleeps in unbenightedness.
 "Here lies a lifelong victim of
 Her own-imposed nearsightedness."

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