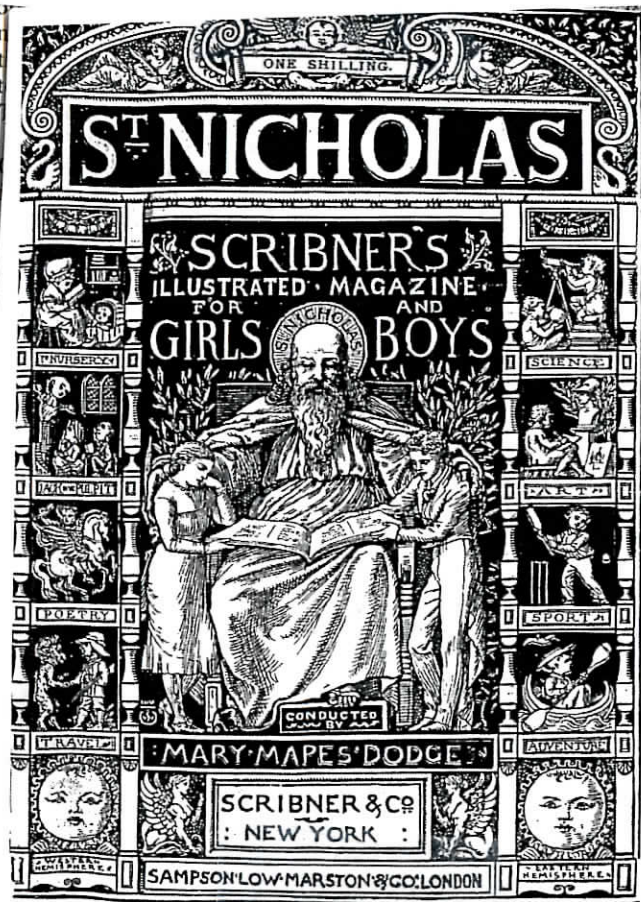


St. Nicholas and Mary Mapes Dodge

*The Legacy of a Children's
Magazine Editor, 1873–1905*

Edited by SUSAN R. GANNON,
SUZANNE RAHN, and
RUTH ANNE THOMPSON



9 Onward and Upward with the Arts: The St. Nicholas League

E. B. WHITE

December, 1934

There is no doubt about it, the fierce desire to write and paint that burns in our land today, the incredible amount of writing and painting that still goes on in the face of heavy odds, are directly traceable to the *St. Nicholas Magazine*. In the back pages of that wholesome periodical, in the early days of the century, there flourished a group of minors known as the St. Nicholas League. The members wrote poems and prose, took snapshots with box cameras, drew pictures at random, and solved puzzles. They submitted the results of their fervor to the League, and the lucky ones pocketed the Gold or Silver Badge of extreme merit.

A surprising number of these tiny geniuses are still at it today, banging away with pen or brush for dear life. A hardy and sentimental old League alumnus like myself comes across their names in odd places—in the fall book list, in the classified phone directory, or among a bunch of Pulitzer Prize winners—and thinks back to that “union of cheerful, fun-loving industrious young people, bound together by worthy aims and accomplishments and stimulated by a wide range of competitions that offer to every member a chance of recognition and success.” We were an industrious and fiendishly competitive band of tots; and if some of us, in the

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intervening years of careless loving, have lost or mislaid our silver badge, we still remember the day it came in the mail: the intensity of victory, the sweetness of young fame, a pubescent moment immortalized by one of our League members in October of 1904, a lad named Robert E. Jones, who wrote to the editor, from Milton, N.H.:

Dear St. Nicholas: My badge came last night and I am more than delighted with it. I shall always keep it, and shall always look back with pleasure to the time "when my first picture was printed." I mean to work hard this summer all by myself, and shall send in more drawings, even better, I hope, than the one which was printed. Thanking you again for the beautiful badge, I remain, Most gratefully yours, Robert E. Jones.

Incidentally, the hope expressed in Robert's letter was fulfilled. He did work hard. Late that same year he was crowned with the badge of pure gold and became an Honor Member. They say he is even now doing the same high grade of work in the field of stage design.

Occasionally a writer or artist, in a fit of biographical confession, jokingly admits to his public that he once won a badge from the St. Nicholas League. His jocosity is to hide his emotion. Nothing has ever taken the place of the League in his life. The Pulitzer Prize was a pleasant reward to Edna St. Vincent Millay, I have no doubt; but it was faint fun compared to her conquest in 1907 when, as E. Vincent Millay, 15, of Camden, Me., she opened her August number of *St. Nicholas* and found, "accepted for publication," her poem beginning "Shine on me, oh, you gold, gold sun." This poem was called "Vacation Song." Here are the first and last stanzas:

Shine on me, oh, you gold, gold sun,
Smile on me, oh, you blue, blue skies,
Sing birds! And rouse the lazy breeze
That in the shadow, sleeping lies,
Calling, "Awaken! Slothful one
And chase the yellow butterflies."
Oh, mower! All the world's at play, —
Leave on the grass your sickle bright;
Come, and we'll dance a merry step
With the birds and leaves and gold sunlight,
We'll dance till the shadows leave the hills
And bring to the fields the quiet night.

Even in 1907 Edna was already an honor member of the League. She had won honorable mention in June 1904, for a prose piece called "A Fam-

ily Tradition." She had scored again in November 1905, February and September 1906, and really hit her stride in the spring of 1907. Three years later, her bureau drawer heaped with all the trophies the League could bestow on an illustrious member, Miss Millay, now a ripe girl of eighteen, sat down and penned her valedictory, published in the October issue:

Dear St. Nicholas: I am writing to thank you for my cash prize and to say good-bye, for "Friends" was my last contribution. I am going to buy with my five dollars a beautiful copy of "Browning," whom I admire so much that my prize will give me more pleasure in that form than in any other.

Although I shall never write for the League again, I shall not allow myself to become a stranger to it. You have been a great help and a great encouragement to me, and I am sorry to grow up and leave you.

Your loving graduate, Edna Vincent Millay

Thus Edna walked stately [sic] out of the League, a copy of Browning in her hand, leaving a youngster named Scott Fitzgerald holding the fort in the same issue with a prize-winning photograph called "Vacation Scene." The poem "Friends," for which she received five dollars, is reprinted hereunder. The editor seemed to have had some vague notion that he was dealing with an authentic talent, for the verses appeared at the head of the League section and were prefaced with this editorial comment: "This composition is a little gem in smoothness and perfection of its rhythm, in its deft use of contrast, and in its naturalness of expression from first to last."

Friends

I. He

I've sat here all afternoon, watching her busy fingers send
That needle in and out. How soon I wonder, will she reach the end?
Embroidery! I can't see how a girl of Molly's common sense
Can spend her time like that. Why, now — just look at that I may

Be dense,

But, somehow I don't see the fun in punching lots of holes down through
A piece of cloth; and, one by one, sewing them up. But Molly'll do
A dozen of them, right around
That shapeless bit of stuff she's found.
A dozen of them! Just like that!
And think it's sense she's working at.
But then, she's just a girl (although she's quite the best one of the lot)
And I'll just have to let her sew, whether it's foolishness or not.

II. She

He's sat here all the afternoon, talking about an awful game;
 One boy will not be out till June, and then he may be always lame.
 Foot-ball! I'm sure I can't see why a boy like Bob — so good and kind —
 Wishes to see poor fellows lie hurt on the ground. I may be blind,
 But somehow, I don't see the fun. Some one calls, "14-16-9";
 You kick the ball, and then you run and try to reach a white chalk line.

And Bob would sit right there all day

And talk like that, and never say

A single word of sense; or so

It seems to me. I may not know.

But Bob's a faithful friend to me. So let him talk that game detested,
 And I will smile and seem to be most wonderfully interested.

I suppose there exist a few adults who never even heard of the St. Nicholas League — people whose childhood was spent on the other side of the railroad tracks reading the *Youth's Companion*; whose fathers didn't give them a subscription to *St. Nick* and who consequently never knew what it was to stand, as we League members stood, "for intelligent patriotism, and for protection of the oppressed, whether human beings, dumb animals or birds." I well remember how vital to one's progress in the League was kindness-to-animals. Without kindness-to-animals, you didn't get far in the St. Nicholas League, unless, like Edna Millay, you were really talented. (A lot of us boys had no perceptible talent, but were just sissies who stayed indoors and read magazines while normal kids were out playing I Spy.) It was a buddy of mine two houses up the block, an observant child named E. Barrett Brady, wise in the ways of the world, who put me on to kindness-to-animals in its relation to winning a silver or a gold badge. Barrett said it was worthwhile to put plenty of it in. As I look back through the numbers and examine my own published works, I detect running through them an amazing note of friendliness toward dumb creatures, an almost virulent sympathy for dogs, cats, horses, bears, toads, and robins. I was kind to animals in all sorts of weather almost every month for three or four years. The results were satisfactory. I won both the silver and the gold badge, and I was honorably mentioned several times. This precocious anticipation of an editor's needs is a sad and revealing chapter in my life; I was after results, apparently, and not writing, or drawing, for Art's own sake. Still, the League motto was "Live to learn and learn to live."

Membership in the League was anyone's for the asking. The first thing that happened when you joined was that they sent you a copper button, engraved with the League's name and the League emblem (the stars and

stripes) in colors (red, white, and blue). This button was, as advertised, "beautiful in design and workmanship." Sweet as it was, it was just a starter, just a taste of what life was to be like. That was the beauty of the League — it came through handsomely every so often with some tangible reward. Each month six silver badges and six gold badges were distributed among the twelve successful adolescents of the month, for the best two drawings, the best two poems, the best two stories or essays, the best two amateur photographs, the best two puzzles, and the best two sets of answers to the puzzles in the previous issue. These puzzles, let me say, were sons of guns. It was a never-failing source of wonder that anybody ever managed to get all the answers. Someone always did, though. A child named Ringgold W. Lardner was on the honor role for puzzles in April 1900; and Stephen Benet, John C. Farrar, Alan Dunn, Wilella Waldorf, and Louis Kronenberger all made the puzzle award in their time. Each month subjects were suggested for drawings and poems (or you could choose your own subject). In the drawing group there was always the chance to try a "Heading for January" or a "Heading for September" or whatever the forthcoming month happened to be. There were no dues of any sort, which perhaps accounts for the League's piling up some two hundred thousand members in thirty-five years of existence.

We Leaguers were busy youngsters. Many of us had two or three strings to our bows and were not content till we had shone in every department, including wild-life photography. Little Robert Benchley was an exception. He was elevated to the roll of honor in September 1903, for a drawing called "The Dollies' Lesson," the same month that Newman Levy won distinction in drawing and Conrad P. Aiken was mentioned for a poem called "A Lullaby." But although Benchley got in near the start of the League (it was organized in 1899), he showed no perseverance. "The Dollies' Lesson" was his only appearance. He dropped out early and was never heard from again, reminding one forcibly of one of the tenets of the League, that "book study alone is not followed by the best results. Direct friendship with the woods and fields and healthful play are necessary to the proper development of both mind and body." Benchley, knowing little of the woods and fields, and nothing about kindness to animals, was an ephemeral member.

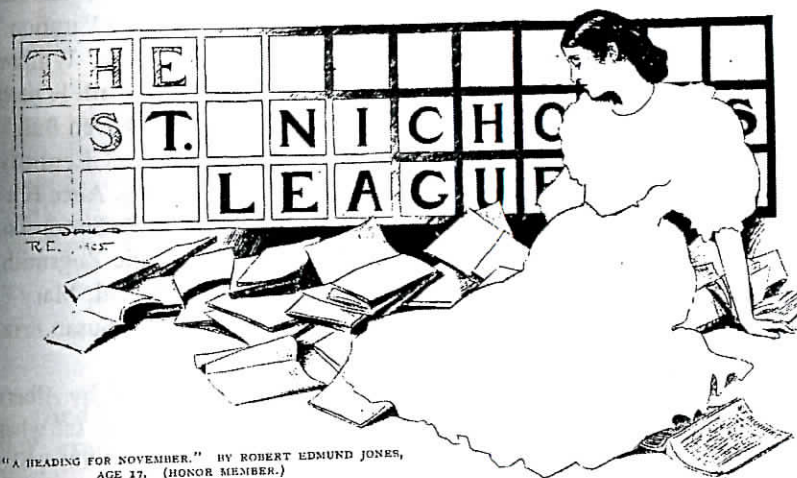
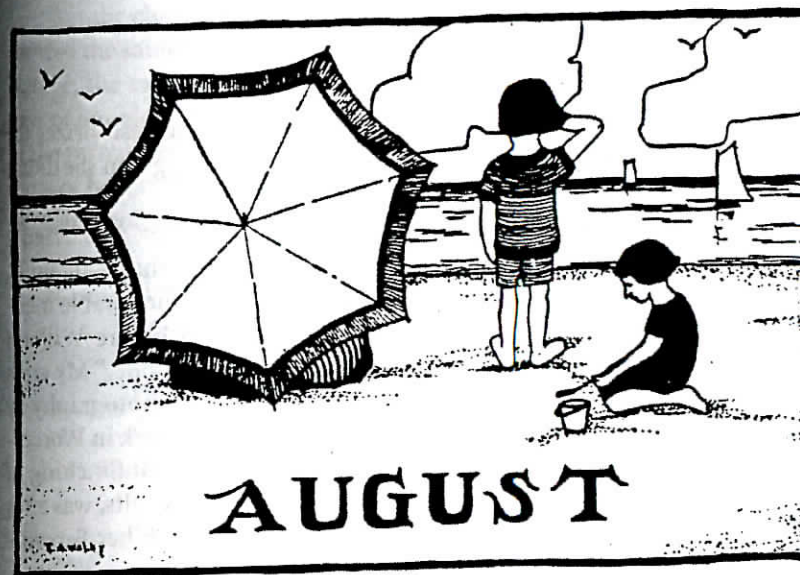
Most of us were stayers. Aiken appeared in print four times in 1903 and once in 1904. E. Babette Deutsch rang the bell no fewer than nineteen times during her childhood; John C. Farrar twenty-two; E. Vincent Millay twenty; Susan Warren Wilbur twenty-one. Joseph Auslander made ten successful appearances in two years, and was twice publicly reprimanded by having his name published on the "Careless Roll" — once for no address,

once for sending in a contribution without the proper endorsement. (All League contributors had to get a parent or guardian to write on the back "This is Joseph's own work" and sign it. If you forgot to, your name was published among the Careless.) Morris Ryskind was careless twice in the spring of 1913, but later redeemed himself with a poem, "Dawn," and a prose piece, "A Family Tradition," both of which would have been published had space permitted.

It would have been unsafe to predict the professional future of the Leaguers from the type of work they turned in. Viola Beerbohm Tree drew pictures for the League and turned out to be an actress. Benet wrote several prose pieces and turned into a poet. Elinor Wylie (Elinor M. Hoyt) distinguished herself twice, both times for drawing; and that young comer Ringgold W. Lardner gained double honors—in verses and in puzzles. (Note: his poem was not considered good enough to publish, and was merely mentioned.) Cornelia Otis Skinner wrote a poem. J. Deems Taylor and Janel Flanner, in a Mad May of 1901, rose to fame together, each with a drawing called "Household Joys," a suggested subject. Master Taylor scored again later, copping a silver badge in December 1901, for his photograph "Moonrise in December," a snapshot of an extremely peaceful snow scene. Alan Seeger succeeded with a photograph "From My Best Negative." Sigmund G. Spaeth, with his eye on timely topics, wrote a poem about the first springtime of the twentieth century. John C. Mosher took signal honors with his camera in 1906, and, had space permitted, would have enlivened the January 1906 issue with his pleasing photograph "The View from My Home." Norman Geddes was mentioned in 1909 for a drawing, "My Best Friend's Favorite Occupation." And so it went. They were happy days.

Contributions came even from across the sea. A little English girl named Vita V. Sackville-West, bursting with an ancient pride, wrote in 1902 from Knole, Sevenoaks, Kent, England:

Dear St. Nicholas League: This story about my home is quite true, and it may amuse you. The archbishops of England possessed Knole first. Then it passed into the hands of Queen Elizabeth, who gave it to my ancestor, Richard Sackville, who was Thomas's brother. It then became the seats of the dukes of Dorset, and then it belonged to the earls of that county, and from then the Sackvilles have had it. There are 365 rooms in Knole, 52 staircases, and 7 courts. A priest's cell was found this year. The altar in the chapel was given by Mary of Scotland just before she was executed. Knole began to be built in 1100 or 1200 up to 1400. Most of the kings and queens of England have made Knole a present. We have here the second organ that was made



As E. B. White points out, "It would have been unsafe to predict the professional future of the Leaguers from the type of work they turned in." Eudora Welty won her Silver Badge at ten for this quaint beach scene. SN 47 (Aug. 1920): 951. Robert Edmund Jones, one of the greatest innovators in twentieth-century stage design, sent in drawings of fashionable ladies—though by his late teens, he was already incorporating them into bold, semi-abstract compositions. SN 33 (Nov. 1905): 80.

in England. There are 21 show rooms in the house, Vita V. Sackville-West.

And another little English girl, Stella Benson, was taking cash prizes for her verses, and writing thank-you letters to the editor telling him she didn't really deserve any money.

We Leaguers even grew up and married one another. I married a League girl (silver badge for prose); and I see by the files that William R. Benet did, too. His girl was Elinor M. Hoyt, who received honorable mention for "A Heading for March" in 1901, three months before William received honorable mention for a poem "When School Is Done." My girl's sister was a gold-badge holder: she won it in the wild-life photography by sneaking up with her camera on an affable duck in a public park in Worcester, Mass. And speaking of photography, one of the most unflinching of the League's camera enthusiasts, judging from published results, was a tot named Lois B. Long. Apparently she was banging away with her Brownie from morning till night, and as a result we have, credited to her, a picture of a girl standing in a wheat field, a picture called "Face to Face," another called "At the Corner," and another called "Where I Spent My Vacation."

We were a hard and versatile lot, all right. There were William Faulkner, Alice Hughes, Norman Klein, John Macy, Corey Ford, Frances Frost, Ward Greene, John S. Martin, Margaret E. Sangster, Niven Busch, Jr., Robert Garland, Peggy Bacon, Faith Baldwin, Margaret Kennedy, Clarence C. Little, Reginald Marsh, Bennett Cerf, Kay Boyle, Alice Harvey, Frieda Inescort, Weare Holbrook, Horatio Winslow, Lee Simonson, Marjorie Allen Seiffert, Richard Whorf, Anne Parrish, Leane Zugsmith, Clement Wood, Edmund Wilson, Lyle Saxon, Marion Strobel, Mary F. Watkins, all the Benets, Jeanne de Lamarter, Henry Dreyfuss, Susan Ertz, Elizabeth Hawes, and how many others I'll never know.

For ten years (from 1899 to 1909) the League was edited by Albert Bigelow Paine. I bought a copy of *St. Nicholas* the other day to see what changes time had wrought. The magazine is now grown tall and limp, like *Colliers*—strange to the touch. The format is changed, but the league goes on, in its fashion. The proprietors have, it seems, eased the bitter problem of silver, gold, and cash awards by tying up, in the approved American manner, with manufacturers of the indispensable tools of the arts, fountain pens and drawing materials. I noted, uneasily, that a current minor named Ruth Blaesing, 13, was receiving for her "Ode to the Earth" not the silver badge of courage but the Waterman Pen Company's award of a fountain pen. And that Rose Doyle, 13, was receiving, for her drawing, the "First Higgins' Ink Award."

But the cheering thing was that the contributions in the current issue showed the same tenderness for life, the same reverent preoccupation with Nature, the same earnest morality that we early Leaguers showed in the days of our glory. No graduate can read over the old copies without a lump in the throat; for beneath the callow phrase and the young solemnity, the roots of beauty sometimes throve. Listen to the Miss Millay of November 1908, and you can already hear the singer singing:

How lovely is the night, how calm and still!
Cool shadows lie upon each field and hill,
From which a fairy wind comes tripping light,
Perching on bush and tree in airy flight.
Across the brook and up the field it blows,
And to my ear there comes, where'er it goes,
A rustling sound as if each blade of grass
Held back a silken skirt to let it pass.

This is the bedtime of the weary day;
Cloud wrap him warmly in a blanket gray;
From out the dusk where creek and meadow lie,
The frogs chirp out a sleepy lullaby;
A single star, new-kindled in the west,
A flickering candle, lights the day to rest.

O lovely night, sink deep into my heart;
Lend me thy tranquillity a part;
Of calmness give to me a kindly loan,
Until I have more calmness of my own.
And, weary day, O let thy candle-light,
And let thy lullaby be mine tonight.

And hark to the William R. Benet, of Watervliet Arsenal, West Troy, N. Y., examining the harvest at the age of fifteen:

Yon lie the fields all golden with grain
(Oh, come, ye Harvesters, reap!)
The dead leaves are falling with autumn's brown stain
(Oh, come, ye Harvesters, reap!)
For soon sinks the sun to his bed in the west,
And cawing the crows fly each one to his nest;
The grain will soon wither, so harvest your best.
(Oh, come, ye Harvesters, reap!)

Hear young Briton Niven Busch, Jr. before he had discovered the cinema, finding peace in August 1919, in a calm sonnet beginning:

Beneath the radiance of the quiet stars
The earth lies beautiful as in a dream.

And search the heart of youth with fourteen-year-old Stella Benson:

Borne upwards on its gold and silver wings
Rises the Heart of Youth,
With its fond hopes and sweet imaginings
It wanders through this sordid world, nor brings
To mind the hard, undecorated truth;
And future cares and sorrows left behind
Are spurned, because the Heart of Youth is blind.

The League is still our white plume. We graduates know what it was like to wear it. These later, slight victories, such as they are, fail to make the heart pound; the twilight of an Honor Member is a dim and unsubstantial time. Give me again October 1914 and my drawing (which would have been published had space permitted) called "The Love of a Mother Rabbit."



ST. NICHOLAS.

VOL. I.

NOVEMBER, 1873.

No. 1.

DEAR GIRL AND BOY—No, there are more! Here they come! There they come! Near by, far off, everywhere, we can see them,—coming by dozens, hundreds, thousands, troops upon troops, and all pressing closer and closer.

Why, this is delightful. And how fresh, eager, and hearty you look! Glad to see us? Thank you. The same to you, and many happy returns. Well, well, we might have known it; we *did* know it, but we hardly thought it would be like this. Hurrah for dear St. Nicholas! He has made us friends in a moment.

And no wonder. Is he not the boys' and girls' own Saint, the especial friend of young Americans? That he is. And isn't he the acknowledged patron Saint of New York—one of America's great cities—dear to old hearts as well as young? Didn't his image stand at the prow of the first emigrant ship that ever sailed into New York Bay, and wasn't the very first church the New Yorkers built named after him? Didn't he come over with the Dutch, ever so long ago, and take up his abode here? Certainly. And, what is more, isn't he the kindest, best, and jolliest old dear that ever was known? Certainly, again.

Another thing you know: He is fair and square. He comes when he says he will. At the very outset he decided to visit our boys and girls every Christmas; and doesn't he do it? Yes; and that makes it all the harder when trouble or poverty shuts him out at that time from any of the children.

Dear old St. Nicholas, with his pet names—Santa Claus, Kriss Kringle, St. Nick, and we don't know how many others. What a host of wonderful stories are told about him—you may hear them all some day—and what loving, cheering thoughts follow in his train! He has attended so many heart-warmings in his long, long day that he glows without knowing it, and, coming as he does, at a holy time, casts a light upon the children's faces that lasts from year to year.

Never to dim this light, young friends, by word or token, to make it even brighter, when we can, in good, pleasant, helpful ways, and to clear away clouds that sometimes shut it out, is our aim and prayer.

Mary Mapes Dodge's letter to her readers in the first issue of *St. Nicholas*.

Frontispiece for the first issue of *St. Nicholas*.