

MY FRIEND, VIRGINIA SORENSEN

By ANNA MARIE SMITH

I FIRST met Virginia Sorensen at a faculty wives' tea at Indiana State Teachers' College in Terre Haute one fall afternoon, in the late thirties. Out of the level of matronly conventionality represented by faculty wives en masse, she emerged emphatically, partly, of course, because she was a newcomer, but more particularly because of a kind of radiance of youthful personality. Almost at sight she stirred, out of the recesses of my subconsciousness, recollections of Willa Cather's character Lucy Gayheart. Indeed, I was impelled by meeting Virginia to go back to look in the novel for her prototype. The townspeople of Lucy Gayheart's town, says Miss Cather, "still see her as a slight figure always in motion; dancing or skating, or walking swiftly with intense direction, like a bird flying home." Or again, "It was her gaiety and grace they loved. Life seemed to lie very near the surface in her. She had that singular brightness of young beauty: flower gardens have it for the first few hours after sunrise." * So I felt it was with Virginia, practically upon first meeting.

We fell into conversation. Virginia told me of her Utah birth and upbringing; of two children at home, Beth, four, and Freddie, two; of an English professor husband, freshly "Ph. Deified" (in his words) at Stanford University. I remember her saying she was working on a novel, and of being interested but not particularly impressed; in the English field practically everybody works on a novel at some time. That was some twenty years ago. Now there are six adult novels and four children's books on my bookshelf with Virginia's name on each title page.

Other recollections of the earliest days of our acquaintance are vivid. Among them is Virginia's pleasure at being granted the privilege of using as a workshop an abandoned classroom far up under the eaves of the College's Old Main. Sitting primly straight on a rickety chair before a ramshackle desk, she would beat staccato music on her typewriter against the background of cooing pigeons under the eaves and the tremendous quarter-hour booming of the clock in the tower a few yards away. Beside her typewriter lay a mounting pile of neatly typed white copy paper.

*From *Lucy Gayheart* by Willa Cather (Knopf).

The only thing suggesting a decoration in the room was a scrap of lined, yellow tablet paper tacked over the desk. This was a "letter" delivered on her plate one morning at breakfast. In a child's first huge printing it said, "Dear Mama, I like you and I love you. I wish you rite a good book. Beth."

I remember, too, the meeting of our "Reading Group" where Virginia broke the routine of round-robin reading of selections of literature "which you have particularly liked" by reading a chapter of manuscript from her own emerging novel, and of the consensus of the word-wise literature professors on the way home: "The girl's got something; we'll hear from her."

When, one summer session, a Writers' Workshop met at the College, Dr. Burgess Johnson came to headline the program. He was burdened with interviews and manuscripts from regular members of the conference, and when Virginia said she had written a novel he asked her whether she could "give the gist of it in one sentence." She told him it was the story of the Mormon town, Nauvoo, Illinois, "the story of a city and a lady." He suggested that she write a letter to Alfred Knopf, saying, "Tell him just what you told me and he'll ask to see it." He looked at the first couple of paragraphs and, that night, told his wife about it.

Interested in the Mormons and bound for a week's holiday at McCormick's Creek Park near by, Mrs. Johnson asked whether she might take the novel along, and in a few days she telephoned and invited Virginia to come down and bring the children. She loved the book and wanted to talk about it. "But you've got to change the ending," she said. "I can't bear having that cat burn with the house." A year later, when *A Little Lower Than the Angels* was published by Knopf, a short sentence toward the end saved Mrs. Johnson's Mormon cat.

Although Virginia is often called a "Mormon writer," she has found from living in many sections of the United States, including the Deep South, and from brief residences in Mexico and Denmark on her two Guggenheim Fellowships, that regionalism, though interesting, is not of the highest significance. People, she contends, share the same sympathies and the same values, no matter where they happen to live. She tells of a college-boy poem written by her son containing the proud line, "My childhood is spread all over." The quality of universality in her projection of human nature was recently reimpressed upon me by the comment

of a young Englishman from Rhodesia. After reading *Many Heavens*, Virginia's novel set in the Utah valley that I am now pleased to call home, he told me that the people and the culture described in the book bear a remarkable resemblance to the people and culture of his own home in Rhodesia.

Virginia has been equally successful in writing for all ages, the very young, teen-agers, and adults. I have found that *Curious Missie*, a story of a little Southern girl who is an inveterate asker of questions, is a favorite of third and fourth graders here in the West. *Curious Missie*, incidentally, is highly gratifying to the prejudices of librarians, since it is a telling demonstration of the influence of books, especially upon the impressionable minds of children.

The House Next Door appeals to teen-agers through its account of the conflict between "gentiles" and Mormons when Utah was struggling toward statehood. Gerry, an immigrant into Zion from the state of Virginia, with the unclouded vision of childhood, comes to recognize what her elders don't always perceive: that basically there is no difference between Mormon youngsters and those she had known in Virginia. Yet the book attests its author's real love for the distinctive qualities of her native West. "I had never particularly thought about how the red and white and blue come from sky-colors," says Gerry as she experiences her first Western nightfall. "In the West you think of such things, somehow, maybe because colors and rocks and sky and land are more important here. You notice more." *

The little girl heroine of *Plain Girl*, notably different in Amish dress and customs from her schoolmates, wins the sympathy particularly of those children in Utah who are conscious of their minority status in relationship to the predominant church group. Virginia's note to me announcing completion of the book says, "Whether it's for children I'm not sure, but it's true." The book won a Child Study Association award, with a citation which reads: "The tender and sympathetic story of a young Amish girl who, in reaching out for the different ways of her schoolmates, still holds dear her love and respect for her family and the traditions of her people." The narrative achieves a considerable measure of interest for adult readers through its sensitive treatment of the inevitable lack of understanding and the conflict in interests between generations.

*From *The House Next Door* by Virginia Sorensen (Scribner).



The Sorensen family in Edinboro during a typical winter. Left to right: Young Fred, Beth, Dr. Sorensen, Virginia Sorensen.

The warm family relationship of *Miracles on Maple Hill* bears a strong autobiographical imprint to one who, like myself, has had the pleasure of observing Virginia in her role as mother. Delight in even the smallest manifestations of nature, such as the appearance of the first spring flowers, has always been shared by all the Sorensens. Going cycling or hiking with the family is a lesson in responsiveness to the simple and the significant, whether in Indiana's state parks, along the high line ditch outside Denver, up the steep ascent of Utah's Mt. Timpanogos, or through the maple groves around Edinboro, Pennsylvania, which most directly inspired the *Miracles*. On such Sorensen family nature jaunts the most childishly (in the Wordsworthian and best sense of the word) delighted member of the group is probably the father and professor.

The Sorensen children, from infancy, have been imaginative and creative; I recall my own particular pleasure in introducing them to books like *Mary Poppins* and *I Know a Secret*. Freddie,

when taking his first piano lesson at the age of six, was told by his teacher that one must cup his hands over the keys as if he were holding a gold button or a butterfly; and it seemed as if the child in his complete abandonment to imagination was actually seeing butterflies and gold buttons. Virginia's responsiveness to this imaginative capacity of her own children early convinced me that she could and must turn at least a portion of her writing talent to the child reader audience.

The strong poetic quality in *Miracles of Maple Hill* — indeed in all of Virginia's books — reflects a bent which she apparently has had since her earliest childhood. Her mother tells me that Virginia, as a very young child, always had pockets filled with her own verse creations which she loved to share by reading them, particularly at meal times, to a not always appreciative audience of brothers and sisters. She has continued to write poems for and about her own children. The following were enclosures with a Christmas letter that came when the children were six and eight.

BETH AT CHRISTMAS

The baubles on our Christmas tree
 Were colored mirrors filled with me,
 As scarey-thin as shells of eggs.
 Our kitten stood on her hind legs
 And pushed a blue one. Then she caught
 Her claws among the boughs. And what
 Became of all that shining blue?
 I told the kitten all I knew:
 Like bubbles, see? or like a thought
 I had this morning, and forgot.

FREDDIE AT CHRISTMAS

If you stretch your head inside
 And kind of squint your eyes
 You can see things twice as wide
 Or high or any size.
 Lots of days this year I've seen
 A string turn into rope;
 A bent match on my submarine
 Is a periscope.

Now that the children are grown, they reflect the time Virginia and her husband spent with them in their childhood. Last Christmas when Fred (Freddie no longer) was getting his train ready to give to a child, his mother asked him if it made him sad

to be repairing his train for another child after all his joy in it. He looked at her in surprise and said, "No, of course not. I had a good childhood: it's fun to remember, not sad at all." Reflected here is Virginia's own soundness — as she expresses it, "the ability to meet changes in life without regret for lost things because of their own goodness."

Of course, she always took great delight in reading as well as writing. A family anecdote concerns the fact that as a child she read with such concentration that she wouldn't hear anything that went on around her. This so concerned her father that he took her to the doctor for a hearing test and was mightily relieved to learn that her hearing was perfect.

This ability to concentrate has proved a most valuable asset to Virginia in her dual role as writer and housewife. Much of her writing has been done on the dining-room table with the family dog underneath and once, when I visited her in Denver, with a family of kittens on the table. It is characteristic of her to have felt sorry for Pal, when a lovely maple drop-leaf table was substituted for the old one and the dog could no longer lie at her feet with any comfort. When she first began to write in the quiet at MacDowell Colony, Virginia says, she had a hard time doing so in the isolated studio and had to return to Colony Hall and do a bit of washing before her thoughts got going.

In talking of an experience which she and I had in common during the lean years of helping our husbands earn their Ph.D.'s, Virginia said, "When I look back upon Stanford days I wonder why we were so anxious to be 'through.' There is no being through really, and nothing in the world is so wonderful as having something before you, looming like heaven, and struggling to it. If only one could run after a star always, sensing some distance behind." Virginia has now caught up with one star, the Newbery Award, but she will certainly go on writing. After publication of her third book, she said:

"I think I know something about writing novels now. I do it like breathing, it is a part of each day and each night for me like the other functions of my living. Because I would cease to be alive if I stopped doing it, as well as if I stopped breathing or eating, I do it over and over. I do not expect any fanfare because I go on living other ways — so why for this?"

The Newbery Award is certainly a fanfare, and is most gratifying to us who have known and loved her and followed her work through the years.