

On Listening Hill

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature in America was awarded this year to Kate Seredy, for *The White Stag*. Miss Seredy illustrated as well as wrote the book, which is published by Viking.

The Review is happy to present this sketch of Miss Seredy by another distinguished writer for children, Miss Thompson, who is perhaps best known to teachers as the compiler of *Silver Pennies* (Macmillan), and *With Harp and Lute* (Macmillan).

Miss Seredy is herself a contributor to *The Review*; her article entitled "The Country of the Good Master" appeared in the May, 1936, number.

KATE SEREDY is a difficult person to write about. She is so much like a changeling that even conservative statements about her sound far from truth, but though I hold to strictest fact, my subject cannot but be interesting. Miss Seredy (whose name, by the way sounds as if it began with Sh) looks like a changeling.

She has a certain puckish humor that lends color to the theory, and she draws goblins, elves, and trolls with such a certainty that one knows she hears at times the horns of Faerie. She is small and

slender with dark, wavy hair and blue eyes that seem black somehow. Her hands are quite extraordinary, even for an artist—long, slender, and to clumsier folk, skillful to the point of exasperation. She can cook the most delicious Hungarian dishes, and she knows entirely too much about all kinds of things from wild flowers to politics. Her favorite costume is a boyish little Basque slip-on and slacks, but she will upon occasion (reluctantly, it must be admitted) dress up in

ruffled dotted Swiss or blue linen with an embroidered jacket and look like a little girl going to a party.

Born in Budapest and educated in art there as well as in France, Italy, and Germany, Miss Seredy's most important education came from her father, an eminent and much-loved teacher of boys. From him came her self-discipline, her high ideals, sincerity, courage, and indomitable faith. Her hatred of intolerance, of war and cruelty

came from him too, and the almost superhuman will power that drives her to overcome sickness, fatigue, or any sort of obstacle until she has accomplished what she set out to do.



Kate Seredy

In 1922, Miss Seredy came to America for a short visit, and here she has remained. At first her lack of English was a handicap, but one of the things about her that I find most astonishing, particularly as a teacher, is the way she has mastered our difficult language and now writes a most beautiful clear, and vivid prose that native Americans might well envy. She still argues a bit about tenses, preferring the more arresting "historical present" when she is in the midst of an exciting passage and grumbling a little when it is ruled out by a matter-of-fact proof-reader, but when I exclaim over her linguistic exploits she merely says, "Pooh! It's nothing after Hungarian!" That I am inclined to believe after one brief lesson in Hungarian verbs, never repeated by request.

Getting a start is difficult for most artists, and with the added handicap of an unfamiliar language, Kate Seredy found it doubly hard, but that elfin body housed a human will that would not brook defeat. She did any kind of work, not finding it beneath her dignity even to decorate lampshades or do hack-work of any sort until her chance came to show what really was in her. Willy Pogany, another Hungarian who had already achieved distinction, was one of the first to help her find suitable work, and a start was all she needed. For several years she merely illustrated other people's books, first text books and then more important children's books. At one time, she tried keeping a book store for children which, though a total loss financially, gave her much valuable experience with children and their reaction to books. When a new road cut right through the middle of her shop, she wrote *Finis* on that venture and gave up. In spite of her persistence, she recognizes a steam shovel when she sees it.

After the bookshop interlude, Miss Seredy moved to an old Dutch farm in the Ramapo Mountains in New Jersey, and it was there that I became acquainted with her and with the "animal kingdom" as my young nephew, a devoted Seredy fan, calls her collection of lost, strayed, but I trust not stolen animals. She is an incomparable letter-writer when she chooses to write at all (I remember once asking a more or less casual question as to whether or not Magyars really are Mongolians and precipitating a 24-page letter by return mail. Does that girl know her history!) and the marginal illustrations of cats, birds, dogs, deer, rabbits, or K. S. herself drawing a gun on a startled and repentant hunter are something to turn one's friends green with envy. The old house, to go on with my tale, was practically sitting on a narrow, but unpredictably temperamental river at the foot of a steep, stony hill. The saga of one adventurous year in that house would make a movie serial. Floods that filled the cellar, nearly drowned the cats, and deposited furniture from up the valley right on the front porch; snow so deep that there was no fuel for the oil burner, no drinking-water except melted snow, and mighty little to eat because no tradesmen could plow through; grass fires in the fall and general ructions all through the year produced conditions more conducive to nervous prostration than to book illustration.

When I first visited the farm, something large and yellow that at first glance I took to be a prehistoric animal rose on its hind legs and put two giant paws on my shoulders. That was Kate's beautiful dog, Viking, and after I became accustomed to him he slowly became reduced in proportions to just a good dog size, all except his ears which remain

strikingly large and pointed. (I remember a letter illustration of Kate and a friend trying desperately to paddle a canoe upstream while Viking's ears from his position in the middle acted as sails and carried them downstream!) The story of Viking is interesting, and I proudly come into the picture at this point, too. Miss Seredy had just finished the pictures for my own book, *With Harp and Lute*, and with them in her portfolio went to see May Masee, the perspicacious juvenile editor of Viking Press. Miss Masee, quick to sense Newbery Medal prospects, and putting together the charm of the drawings and Kate Seredy's indubitably entertaining conversational style and wit asked casually, "Why don't *you* write a book?"

"Oh, I couldn't," said Kate, startled.

"Go home and try it," said Miss Masee.

And she did—*The Good Master*, the story of her own childhood in Hungary, that made an instantaneous reputation for her. Oh yes, Viking! Well, on the very day that Kate signed the contract for *The Good Master*, a lost, lonely, yellow puppy with huge police-dog ears came to her door and lifted sad eyes for sympathy. She promptly adopted him and named him Viking Junior in honor of the Viking Press. And that's the story of Viking.

Then there are cats. Lucky, a huge black velvet fellow, turned up about the time that Kate's luck was changing, hence his name. Dignified beyond description, Lucky regarded guests with a baleful eye, but Pins and Needles, identical twins apparently, are friendly to the point of going on long walks with anyone who seems to be out for a stroll. If you pick up fifteen pounds of glossy black cat and it sticks you in twenty separate places, you know that you have Needles. Pins

politely pulls in his claws and curls up for a nice, purry nap without doing any damage to your feelings. Last of all comes Thimble, better known as the Brat. When Lucky disappeared never to return, it seemed as if Thimble, a scrawny black kitten, had come to take his place. Now sleek and fat, he looks exactly like Pins and Needles, but he became the Brat because he is always under people's feet or in some kind of trouble. (Just as I finished this article a letter came telling me that poor Thimble is no more. Some infection attacked him, and there is mourning in the animal kingdom). Kate Seredy loves animals. She would protect a frightened deer with her life, and to see her taking time from her busy day to try (unsuccessfully, alas!) to feed five baby swallows abandoned by their mother is to realize her deep love of nature and of all natural beauty.

Listening was written while Miss Seredy was still living on the Old Dutch farm. It is the story of a little girl who visits there and learns the history of the old house. The tale is interspersed with lively anecdotes of the animals which gave the artist scope for her delightful drawings of dogs, cats, as well as rabbits, deer, and other less domestic animals. All Hungarians are by nature farmers, and it was not long before she began to yearn for a farm of her own. About two years ago she became the proud mistress of a beautiful farm far enough from New York City to insure that peace and solitude which an artist must have and yet within not too unreasonable a distance in case of necessity. It would be difficult to imagine a lovelier spot, with gently rolling hills, broad meadows, fruit trees and walnuts, and even a tractable river that stays put where it belongs. The house is set on a pleasant knoll, and once while studying some old neighborhood maps, Kate found the name "Listening

Hill" which she promptly adopted most appropriately for her own new home where she works with her magic pencils, plays the piano, stops to feed the cats, or goes out to rest by giving a little casual care to her flowers or riding around the fields on her beautiful yellow tractor, Cleopatra. When I was there last summer, the rye had just been cut and lay in golden bundles in the fields. By the gleam in Kate's eye I knew that she wanted to shock some of her very own rye with her very own hands. With a sigh of resignation, I went with her and in the broiling sun we set up six shocks. Two of them were pretty good. Rye is a scratchy grain, and I was glad when she yielded to persuasion and returned to her drawing board. That night the rains fell, and the rest of the story of this year's rye is too sad to tell.

Of course, nobody is perfect and it must be admitted that Kate Seredy has a weakness. It is auctions! Her lovely old house just cries for old furniture and glass and stone jugs and china and it gets them. A dilapidated old chair, sold for ten cents at an auction, becomes in her skillful hands a thing of beauty. She sandpapers and scrapes and mends and polishes and behold, a delectable corner cupboard or a table just right for a special corner with a colorful bit of Hungarian embroidery made by the clever fingers of her mother in Budapest.

The studio, of course, is the heart of the house. There Miss Seredy sits at her drawing board sketching, meditating, finishing and laying aside one after another meticulously executed drawing, sometimes in the later processes working directly on the glass, a fatiguing and exacting process requiring strong light under the glass and infinite precision of line. Nobody who has never seen an

artist at work has any conception of the hours of hard labor that go into the making of book illustrations. When I saw Kate make the lovely soft color illustrations for *Bible Children*, the book that we did together, I realized for the first time the number of separate drawings that have to be made, a separate one for each color, and the patient experimenting with shades and hues to get the exactly right combinations.

It was at Listening Hill that I read the *White Stag* in manuscript, with a sketch in color of the brilliant black and crimson jacket standing on the mantelpiece. I read it at one sitting, lost in the marvelous, moving prose and when I saw the double page picture with horses and riders in action (such horses!) I knew that here was a book. Although Kate Seredy is now an American citizen, she still loves her native Hungary and the *White Stag* is an expression of her belief that, as she says, "one day the light of faith will again outshine the flaming red light of intolerance." It is her own creed of faith, courage, and belief in a guiding hand. As she says, ruthless grasping for power and needless bloodshed were the downfall of Attila, but she looks forward to a day when that faith symbolized by the White Stag will conquer hatred and intolerance, not only in her beloved Hungary, but in the whole world.

And now the *White Stag* has won the Newbery Medal for the most distinguished contribution to children's literature in 1937 and Kate Seredy, after the long and sometimes bitter struggle is glad, but to her, I believe, it is not a goal but a stepping-stone and we all look forward to many more stories from her gifted hand. She has seen the White Stag and will follow it with unbroken faith in a great purpose.