



That they may teach the young women ...

Poisoned Paper

Edith Witmer

POISON

Martha's head was in the far corner of Joel's closet when she heard the commotion downstairs.

"Go!" called Joel.

"No," Frieda replied vacantly, as if her five-year-old mind was a hundred miles away.

"I said go!" Joel's voice was a little louder now.

"No!" Frieda retorted.

Joel's voice grew softer, and he began again with a hint of gentle persuasion. "You can go on a zim-zam, or on the cat's tail, or in a bucket. I don't care how. But go!"

"No! I won't go. But I will when I'm done with my picture." There was a hint of tears in Frieda's frustrated voice.

Then there was a loud whack, Frieda was crying, and both children were running up the stairs.

"Mother," Frieda wailed as she met Martha at the stair door, "Joel hit me!"

Martha frowned. "Joel," she said, addressing the little boy who stood before her with bowed head, "did you?"

Joel nodded.

"Why would a seven-year-old boy want to hit his little sister?" Martha probed.

Joel turned huge brown eyes up to Martha's face. "I was just playing Marvin," he said wiping a tear, "and she wouldn't go."

Martha's mind spun. Playing Marvin? Now what was that game? Then she remembered the silly little book she had read the children yesterday afternoon.

After Martha settled all accounts, and the household had returned to normal, she began peeling potatoes for supper. And her thoughts ran on little rabbit trails beginning and ending with books.

"My children are outgrowing them," Elaine explained. "I just want them out of the house. Take them along. You can't lose much, Martha."

"No," Martha laughed, "not for a dollar. My children thrive on books." And Martha had loaded the box into the old minivan, supposing that Elaine would have chosen decent books. What a bargain! All the way home she imagined the delighted faces of the children.

And they had been delighted with the book she had pulled out of the box yesterday.

"Read it again!" Frieda laughed when Martha finished the first time. By the time Martha laid the book down, they had read it three times.

"That is so silly!" exclaimed Joel. "Can I take it along to bed with me to look at?"

And questions had begun to swim in Martha's mind about that box of books ...

Now supper was over. Martha smiled as her husband Sam sat back in the recliner, sighed, and stretched out his long legs. Instantly two children were clambering to sit on both arms of his chair.

"Who comes here?" Sam exclaimed.

"Read to us, Daddy!" Frieda begged, as she snuggled next to him. "Read this funny book."

Sam took the book and frowned. He looked at it for a moment.

"What is this, Martha?" He lifted his searching eyes to his wife's face.

"Oh," Martha replied, "it's one of the books I got at Elaine's yard sale."

He nodded and again read *Marvin K. Mooney, Will You Please Go Now!*

"Read it again!" Joel exclaimed.

"No," said Sam. "Get me one of the Little Jewel books."

Some of the sparkle went out from Joel's eyes. But he obeyed and came back with *God Controls the Storm*.

"I just like that other book, Daddy," he said. "It's so much fun."

"You like it better than *God Controls the Storm*?"

"Yes," laughed Joel. "I like all those crazy little creatures and the funny things they do. Don't you like crunk-cars and zike-bikes?"

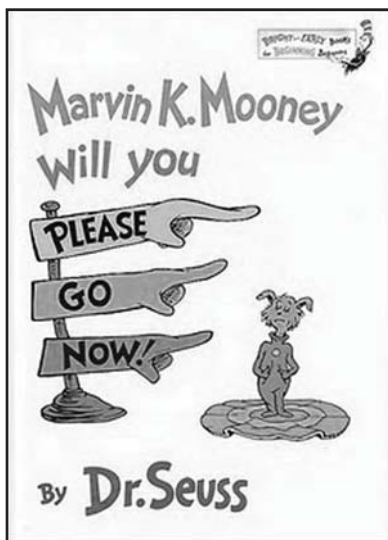
Sam looked thoughtful, but made no comment. His eyes, filled with questions, met Martha's.

"We'll talk about that later," he told Joel. And he pulled both children close to him while he proceeded to read the Little Jewel book. After that, Sam read a Bible story. But Martha noticed that Joel's eyes were glued to the cover of *Marvin K. Mooney*, on the floor beside him.

After Martha had finished praying with the children and giving them their last kisses, she headed directly to the hallway closet. Picking up the box, she deposited it on the dining room table.

"What do you have, Martha?" Sam asked, as he stopped beside her.

"That's what I am wondering. This is the box of books I got from Elaine. She said I couldn't lose much by buying them all for a dollar. Do you think we should look through them?"



"I like all those crazy little creatures and the funny things they do. Don't you like crunk-cars and zike-bikes?"

"I do," said Sam. He pulled out *The Cat and the Hat* and read it quietly.

"That one's out," he said.

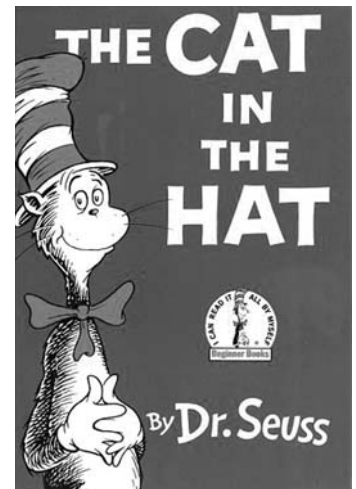
"What's wrong?" Martha asked.

"Here, read it," Sam answered. "It teaches that parents are to be questioned and disobeyed, and that if you can do something fantastic enough, you can get by with disobeying. It also teaches magic, and acquaints the children with weird, beastly creatures."

Martha dropped the book into the trash can.

Sam pulled out another book. "*Green Eggs and Ham*," he muttered. "I think I remember reading this one at my

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cousin's house." He held the book out for Martha to share with him.

"Well," said Sam when they were done, "what do you think about that one, Martha?"

"It's a lot like *Marvin K. Mooney*, with weird creatures and unrealistic pictures. And again personal boundaries aren't respected." Martha stopped. "I can't see much of a worthwhile lesson. Did I tell you how Joel was trying to play Marvin today?"

Sam listened, and nodded quietly as she recited the episode of the morning. Then he reached for another book. "*Bears on Wheels*," he said.

"What do you think, Sam?" Martha asked when they finished reading it.

"Well, it does teach the children to count," he replied. "But I saw you doing that with carrots while Frieda was helping you get supper. Do we need beastly creatures that jump out of trees to do that?"

That one went into the trash can too.

"You can choose the next book," Sam nodded to Martha.

Martha pulled out a big book about the Berenstain Bears. It seemed Mother Bear had decided the family should eat a healthy diet, while Daddy Bear grumbled and wanted to eat cookies instead. Martha waited for Sam's reaction.

"Eating healthy food is fine," said Sam. "But do we really want to teach our children that fathers are dumb, and that mothers need to teach them, Martha?"

There was another "clunk" as that book hit the bottom of the trash can.

"*Curious George Goes to the Hospital*," mused Sam as he pulled out the next book. He and Martha read quietly until they reached the last page. "Interesting," Sam smiled. "But do you know what I see, Martha? It's like the Amelia Bedelia books. Where is personal responsibility? George can't help it that he does bad things. He's just so curious that he has to. Then how do he and Amelia Bedelia get out of their scrapes?"

"They do something wonderful that makes people love them," Martha smiled, "and the original problem isn't generally corrected." She paused. "And they don't learn, either."

"I wonder," said Sam, "if it wouldn't be good to look at the books on our bookshelf. Tomorrow is Saturday. What do you say if we keep going until 12?"

"Fine. The house is quiet now." Martha pulled absently at the worn threads on the arm of the couch, and a thought flashed into her mind. "Sam," she said, "we have saved almost enough money to buy that new couch now." Martha's eyes were shining as she looked up into his face."

"Now that's good. I know you've been wanting one for a long time. You've been very patient."

Sam got up, lowered his tall form, and scooped up an armload of books from the children's bookcase. He and Martha sorted through them. Sam stopped when he came to *The Three Little Pigs*. He looked at Martha and reached for his Bible.

"Martha," he said, "is it true that wolves blow down houses?"

Sam was thoughtful as he thumbed to his favorite New Testament book. "Doesn't Philippians 4:8 tell us how we should screen our children's books? *Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.*"

"If we use that standard," Martha said thoughtfully, "most of the books written for children will go on the burn pile like the books of magic the Ephesians burned. But if we want our children to learn the fear of God, to be serious Christians, and to learn holy values, why would we fill their minds with wrongdoing, or silly filler material that makes good stories and solid values sound dull?"

"I know," nodded Sam. "Joel would have loved to keep on reading *Marvin K. Mooney* instead of reading a worthwhile storybook, or even a Bible story. Did you see how his eyes were glued to the thing?"

Martha nodded. "You remember how we went through my books after we got married, Sam?"

"Yes," Sam smiled remembering. "And you found out that the Bible meant a lot more to you when you weren't reading 'Christian' romances."

"Maybe it's the same way with children. Giving them silly, carnal books dulls their appetite for worthwhile books."

"I am sure you're right, Martha."

"We don't have many books left on the shelf," Martha said, as she stooped to straighten them.

Sam nodded wordlessly. Then he began, "The Dr. Seuss books, and other books like that, use imagination, rhyme, and repetition in a way that fascinates children—and even me. But the devil's bait is on their hooks. We would rather have a few good books than a lot of trash. And we'll try to buy more good books from godly publishers when we can."

Martha frowned. When would that be? Money for things like that was hard to come by. Then her eyes brightened.

"I know!" she exclaimed. "That money we saved up for the couch. Could we use that for books instead? We have Lamp and Light, Christian Light, Rod and Staff, and Green Pastures Press catalogs in the drawer. And I'm sure we can spend every penny of that money on good books."

"And the couch?" asked Sam.

"Mother has a nice slipcover pattern," Martha said. "It would be fun to have the couch. But it would be right to get the books instead. Shouldn't we make all our decisions this way?"

"Yes," Sam smiled tenderly at Martha. "Shall we kneel and build an altar to God?"

"Lord," prayed Sam, "we come to you for wisdom—for ourselves, and for our children. Lord, we see that we want things that gratify our flesh, and we come to You, committing ourselves, consecrating ourselves, and seeking Your blessing. We ask You for Your truth and Your light. Help us to teach our children those values, and to fill their minds with good

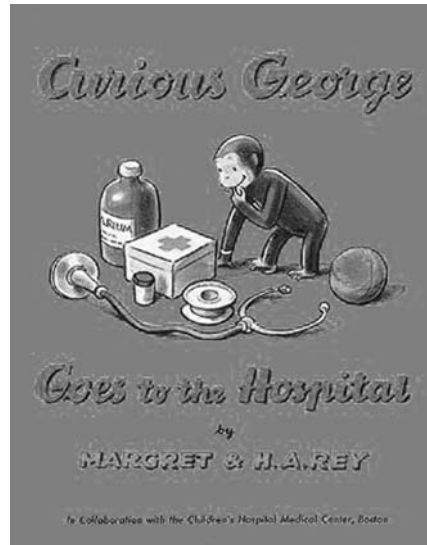
books. We thank You for opening our eyes."

For a few moments Sam and Martha sat on the worn couch, each thinking their own thoughts. Then Martha began to shake her head.

"What is it, Martha?" Sam asked softly.

"Just this, Sam. Elaine and I thought I couldn't lose much for a dollar when I bought that box of books. Not lose much for a dollar, when my children's hearts and minds were at stake? What a tragic bargain that would have been!"

"Amen!" said Sam. ~



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