



A Vicarage Family: A Biography of Myself

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'I am the Vicky of this book,' proclaims Noel Streatfeild in the Author's Note which prefaces her first volume of autobiography, now available again thanks to this most welcome reprint. Though she self-deprecatingly declares that she has changed other names in the book too 'because my portraits of the rest of my family are probably faulty?', you would be hard pressed to find a more vivid or charming portrait of a genteelly poor pre-World War I childhood.

Her story told in the third person, Victoria 'aka Streatfeild' is the middle of three sisters. Assuming the role of cuckoo in the nest when compared with her sisters (the asthmatic, but artistically talented Isobel and the beautiful and popular Louise), Vicky is wont to fall foul of her saintly and hard-working father, a vicar who wearily doles out to his wayward middle daughter such tedious punishments for her sins as mending church hassocks.

Despite her frustrations and periodic stabs at rebellion however, Vicky's is a lively and largely happy upbringing, captured here in a wealth of delightful domestic detail; from the catalogue of bibelots the siblings conceal inside Nebuchadnezzar, the striped nursery rocking horse, to the mock Sunday funerals they organise for unfortunate dead animals. Among many other rich pickings, we learn that pancakes were not proper pancakes without a spoonful of snow being added to the mix; and that it wasn't the done thing to wear green hair ribbons.

Idyllic holidays are blissfully described too; flower-picking expeditions; punting parties and giant picnics. But a darker, more poignant note is sounded in the final pages as the blissful innocence of youth comes to an end with the outbreak of war and the departure for the front of Vicky's beloved cousin, John.

For fans of Streatfeild's later writing, it is particularly fascinating to read about the early stirrings of her creative talent, notably through the theatricals she devises for high days and holidays. Even her chronically inattentive mother is moved to observe 'presciently as it turns out - that Vicky 'will be the one to surprise us all'. This is an immensely satisfying read for Noel Streatfeild fans both young and old. I now can't wait for my ballet-shoed 10-year-old daughter to read it so we can talk about it together. And that '100 years on' is the sign of a classic writer.

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