

Spring 1959

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Recommended Citation

Wood, James and Hoel, William (1959) "The Stream: A Fable," *Calliope (1954-2001)*: Vol. 6 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/calliope/vol6/iss2/8>

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JAMES WOOD AND WILLIAM HOEL

The Stream: A Fable

There once lived in a woods far away a little boy and a little girl, the children of parents both good and wise. Together they played among the trees, as all children do who have not yet been given their work in the world. Their days were happily spent and they knew no fear, for their parents loved them well.

The woods had long been an object of curiosity to them; the woods and the little stream which ran sparkling through it. At first there had been only the woods. But one day their parents had gone farther than usual into the forest to look for flowers; and they had decided to take their children with them. It was then that the children saw the stream for the very first time.

The parents of the boy and girl would not let them go near the stream, for they were wise as well as good. And so the children asked them questions instead.

It was of course the flowers which first interested them in the stream; their parents seemed to love them so. For some of them they would wade out into the stream itself. Most of them were along the bank though. The two children didn't understand why the flowers were important, but thought that they must be if their Mother and Father said they were.

Naturally there were many questions to ask, such as "Why do you love the flowers?" and "Why do you never go downstream or upstream—there are flowers there too, you said." And the parents answered their questions as best they could, telling them as much as they were able to understand. But they did not understand very much of what their parents told them. They were too young; they had known only the woods and the little house with the flowers around it where they were born and had always lived. They wondered together . . . wondered greatly to themselves . . . where the stream went—what lay upriver—past the bend where they could not see? The flowers were pretty, the ones in midstream.

As the days passed and the two children grew, their visits to the stream became more frequent. Their parents slowly began to teach them which flowers were the best, the ones that would keep longest at home; and the two children watched where they could be found. Some, they learned, were found in the sun and were many in number. Others were found only in the deepest shade, away from the rest and were difficult to find. There weren't many of them and the pair didn't think they were very pretty anyway. Still others grew out in midstream, in the blinding sun, where it sparkled and reflected itself endlessly through all the day; and these, the two children thought to themselves, were the prettiest of all. For they were of brighter colors than the rest, bigger and with many petals. But wanting to avoid the heat and the wet, their parents, "never once," they told the two, "had ventured so far from shore."

Now there came a day, but very shortly after the two children had first been allowed to creep near the bank—it was to watch their mother while she chose the very special blooms for the table on Sunday

("Mother, pick that one. It's the prettiest.")

"No dear, it will die. *This* one is better."

"But Mother—it's not pretty."

"O but it will be dear, it will be. Come now.")

—that the two children did a daring and forbidden thing. Cautiously, so that their good parents would think that they were still playing among the trees, the little boy and girl crept down to the mossy bank of the stream and lay on their stomachs there to watch. How brave they were! For never before had they disobeyed their mother or father.

Close, close! they were to the flowers that trembled in the current

at the water's edge. And if they lifted their eyes only a little they could see the prettiest flowers of all in midstream.

The children gazed for long, tense moments at the brilliance of the colors, the wide, soft petals, their forms—there were many—rising and falling with the stream, nestling gently against each other.

The two children glanced at each other for assurance.

"Tomorrow the petals will fall."

"They will look so much nicer than the others back home . . ."

"They will fill the house with their scent. Smell them!"

". . . it isn't deep . . ."

It was not deep. They touched the flowers with reverent hands, held them gently against their faces, breathing their fragrance deeply, deeply, until they themselves were a part of the scent.

"O look there! that one is so beautiful. Come!"

"It is downstream, sister."

"But it is close."

"My arms are full and so are yours. We can carry no more."

"Silly, silly—watch me. Look, look over there!"

"The bend—the *bend*."

". . . and there—look there!"

"It . . . it *is* nicer than the rest . . ."

"Come!"

"But . . . wait . . ."

A mother and a father, lonely now, still gather the rarest of the flowers from beneath the mossy overhangs. Many times, in hope, they have raised their eyes to the bend. But their day grows old and their young ones have not returned. Not many do, is the truth; and a rare grace has companioned those who have.