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The Big Book of Virtues

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“By then I thought / I must find out / How men
were truly men. What meant courage, where lay
honor, why did heroes make their stands?” Stories
in answer stirred imagination. It was me who car-
ried the warning of approaching peril. It was me at
the rudder while others peacefully
slept. It was me who fought for the
weak and innocent. In my thin armor
I defended all in need with justice on
their side.

In maturing, I left Aesop to sit
bewildered before “Ozymandias.”
But before I collapsed below the
Theban colossus, I stood with
“Horatius at the Bridge.” I was one
of the “happy few” who heard
“Henry’s Speech at Agincourt.” “The
Little Steam Engine” I deserted for “Robert Bruce
and the Spider.” And I was spell-bound by
Churchill’s, “We Shall Fight in the Fields and in
the Streets.” The toy soldier of “Little Boy Blue”
succumbed to “The Story of Cincinnatus” and the
“Concord Hymn.” The tales fed my mind and were
as much of me as growing bone and muscle. All
accompanied me into manhood.

The readings began again when I became a
father. Then it was at this knee where the little chil-
dren sat. As they grew, they also spent their rainy
days in stories ever new. Now they are men and
women. For two years I have had a grandson. He
will be read to. His father called me recently and
said, “I want a copy of the book, that anthology, for
my birthday. I think it’s The Book of Virtues by
William Bennett. It’s recently out; you showed me
your copy—the one that has the fables and the sto-
ries in one volume.” I responded, “You shall have
it.”

When I read the stories now, I need to take
down just one book. How different from when I
was a boy. I can have Bronte, Bulfinch, Defoe or
Dickinson, and Faulkner’s in there, too. I scan the
chapters to determine my interest: Compassion,
Courage, Responsibility, Honesty, Loyalty, Faith,
and others. I can read Donne or Chuang-tzu,
Jefferson or Wollstonecraft, Bacon or even Frost. I
am no longer cowed by “Ozymandias.” But as often
as not, I’ll choose the one about the gingham dog
and a calico cat or a tale about a little tin soldier.

The Big Book of Virtues that Wasn’t a Book ‘Til Now

Randy Scarborough

*I heard them at my mother’s knee,
I still have not forgot;
The virtues gently played therein,
The lessons that they taught.
Then I read them to myself
As often as I sought,
To while away a rainy day
In pleasures that they brought.
Then, when eight or maybe ten,
Or twelve, it might have been,
I picked them up and sat me down
And read them all again.*