

Arlington, Vermont
December 8, 1947

Dear Professor Kohler:

I remember very distinctly all about that book "The Fear that Walks by Noonday" and am glad to set down here how it happened to be published.

When Willa Cather came to the University of Nebraska as a freshman from her small hometown of Red Cloud, my father was Chancellor of the university and my brother was in the same class as Willa. I was in the 8th grade in the public schools in Lincoln. Consequently, I was in an age-group below that of Willa although she wasn't very many years older than I.

The University of Nebraska was small enough at that time so that everybody knew everybody else more or less, and at once Willa's brilliant gift as a story-teller became known and gave her an especial prominence. I saw her first at a football game, on a cold day when she sat on the grandstand a little above where the Canfield family were sitting. At the end of that game as we walked out together, I suggested to her the idea of a sort of modern ghost story, a spirit of a football player who had been killed just before a very important game for his team, coming back in spirit to help his team, invisibly. It is, of course, the commonest of folklore ideas and has reappeared in ever so many forms--but I didn't know that as a little girl of course.

Willa was quite taken by the idea, wrote the story, talking it over with me--to my very great pride, for it seemed to me an honor to be so noted by a university student while I was still not even in the prep-school.

When the story was printed, I think in the Nebraska University magazine, it won a prize--if I remember--of ten dollars. And to my great astonishment and pleasure, Willa shared this with me, saying that I should have half of what the story had received. I realize that this was an act of generosity on her part, and, as that was the first sum of money I had ever in any way you could look at it earned, I remembered the incident.

Willa became a close friend of mine and we did not lose track of each other at all ever.

Then I should say perhaps ten or twelve years ago to my astonishment I had a letter from a man whose name I had never heard of before or since, who said that he was going to make a special printing of that long-ago story. I was in a panic about this, for I knew well enough (although I hadn't

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read it since it was written) that it by no means represented Willa's real gifts, as it was written at a time when everybody in her age-group enormously admired Kipling and was probably more or less an imitation of his style. I wrote at once to Willa to ask, very much concerned, what was the best thing to do. My letter crossed with one from her for, of course, the same man had written to her. She also was very much annoyed by the idea of what she called a "youthful indiscretion" being reprinted at a time when her reputation was at its height.

What could we do? I had just had a very disagreeable experience, together with Zona Gale, with a movie-producer who had threatened to bring out some early stories of hers and of mine, written before there were any movies and hence not copyrighted as to movie rights. His idea was evidently of blackmail ken, for the titles which he proposed to put on the very blameless stories which Zona Gale and I had written in our youth, were highly sensational and sexy.

I was afraid that this was something of the same kind. And I still have the impression that it was something of the same kind but not exactly. The man who wanted to produce the movies was looking for some hush-money from Zona Gale and me, as I remember it. In the end the lawyers of the Authors' League were able to put a quietus on that.

But there seemed to be no way to prevent the publication of that callow story "The Fear that Walks by Noonday." Willa had taken advice from lawyers and her publisher as I remember it, and they had said that they didn't see that it could be prevented. Perhaps the story had never been copyrighted, appearing as it did in a college publication very long ago. I don't remember that detail.

So it was published in a book all by itself. I notice you call it a "miscellany", but I never knew there was anything in it but that one story. Willa probably received a copy and I probably did. Willa's copy may still be available if you could find her executors. Why don't you write Knopf? I'm afraid I haven't the slightest recollection where my copy went you, if I ever had one. The whole incident was rather a distasteful one to both Willa and me, and I forgot it promptly and dare say she did too.

So you see it is nothing that you need to have for any study of Willa because you must have other useful works of hers. I know that Willa would very much prefer to have somebody writing seriously about her, just not pay any attention to that. At any rate it is certainly something you can put off until sometime when you are in person near enough the library at Newark to look at it.

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Since I am not able to help you by sending you a copy of this nor telling you where you can find one available, I'm trying to make up for that by putting in two old photographs of Willa when she was a student at the University of Nebraska. Perhaps you have all the photographs you want. But on the chance that you haven't I'll put these in and will be glad to have them back later on if convenient to you.

The one at her desk was taken by my mother in the little office of the Nebraska University newspaper or magazine which Willa edited. The group picture was a snapshot taken on the campus. Willa is the student directly in front of my father who is standing back of the bench where the co-eds are sitting. She is the one with the straw hat on and the dark hair. Both of these are very good likenesses to her as she was as a student.

I am very much pleased to know that you are seriously working on Willa's work, and will be glad to help you if I can in any way, through my life-long association with her. I did not see her so often in the later years of our lives when we were both absorbed in other matters and I lived a good deal in France. But in our youth we were the closest of friends.

You may be interested to know that the Chicago Tribune recently telegraphed me asking for a "nostalgic recollection" of some Christmas of my youth, for their Christmas number. What came into my mind was a Christmas I spent with Willa when she had just gone to Pittsburgh to earn her living in journalism. So I set down a few memories of that, which are coming out in the Chicago Tribune, I assume, in their Christmas number. Dec. 21 There is nothing of any special interest in these notes, but I'll mention them to you as perhaps part of your material.

With best greetings.

Sincerely yours,

Dorothy Canfield Fisher

DCF/v