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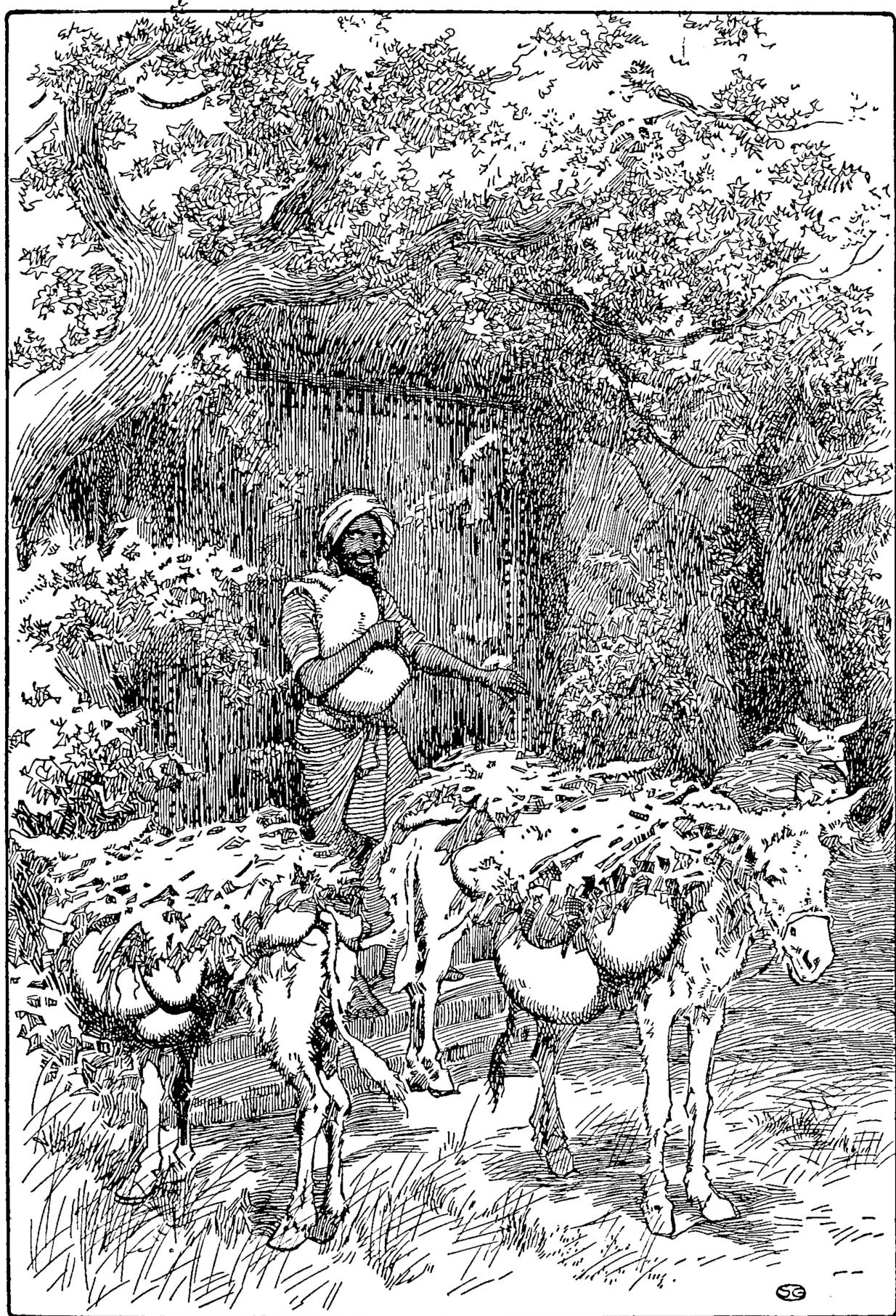
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“SHUT, SESAME”

SHORT STORIES OLD AND NEW

Selected and Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Every short story has three parts, which may be called Setting or Background, Plot or Plan, and Characters or Character. If you are going to write a short story, as I hope you are, you will find it necessary to think through these three parts so as to relate them interestingly and naturally one to the other; and if you want to assimilate the best that is in the following stories, you will do well to approach them by the same three routes.

The Setting or Background gives us the time and the place of the story with such details of custom, scenery, and dialect as time and place imply. It answers the questions *When?* *Where?* The Plot tells us what happened. It gives us the incidents and events, the haps or mishaps, that are interwoven to make up the warp and woof of the story. Sometimes there is hardly any interweaving; just a plain plan or simple outline is followed, as in "The Christmas Carol" or "The Great Stone Face." We may still call the core of these two stories the Plot, if we want to, but Plan would be the more accurate. This part of the story answers the question *What?* Under the heading Characters or Character we study the personalities of the men and women who move through the story and give it unity and coherence. Sometimes, as in "The Christmas Carol" or "Markheim," one character so dominates the others that they are mere spokes in his hub or incidents in his career. But in "The Gift of the Magi," though more space is given to Della, she and Jim act from the same motive and contribute equally to the development of the story. In one of our stories the

main character is a dog, but he is so human that we may still say that the chief question to be answered under this heading is *Who?*

Many books have been written about these three parts of a short story, but the great lesson to be learned is that the excellence of a story, long or short, consists not in the separate excellence of the Setting or of the Plot or of the Characters but in the perfect blending of the three to produce a single effect or to impress a single truth. If the Setting does not fit the Plot, if the Plot does not rise gracefully from the Setting, if the Characters do not move naturally and self-revealingly through both, the story is a failure. Emerson might well have had our three parts of the short story in mind when he wrote,

All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone.

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