Two Notable Women

BY JEANNETTE L. GILDER

MISS LILIAN WHITING'S life of her friend, the late Kate Field, is a most interesting book,* and is particularly interesting to me as Miss Field was one of my earliest and best friends.

With the first money I ever earned I bought three books. They were Lord Dufferin's "Letters from High Latitudes," Lawrence's "Guy Livingstone," and Kate Field's "Pen Photographs of Dickens's Readings." I bought the first because I loved to read books of travel, the second because it was the popular novel of the hour, and the third because it was written by a young woman and was about the author I then held most dear. I was thrilled at the idea of a modern young woman writing a book. I knew that women of another generation wrote books, for I was well grounded in Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, and Charlotte Brontë, but they seemed so far away, and their names were rather suggestive of the blue-stocking. "Kate Field" had a youthful, an almost frivolous, sound for an author. I read the book from cover to cover at a sitting, and though I have not seen it from that day to this, I remember its appearance perfectly, particularly the lines running up and down to illustrate the rising and falling inflections of Dickens's voice. Kate Field was merely a name to me then, and it was not till several years afterwards that I met her face to face. I was instantly attracted by her brilliant conversation and ready wit. She was a new sensation; I had never met just that sort of a woman before, and I was fascinated by the little touch of Bohemianism that gave piquancy to her manner. Then she was so many-sided. It seemed as though there was nothing that she could not do, and do pretty well too. This many-sidedness, I am afraid, was her undoing. She aimed at being too many things—a singer, an actress, a reader, a lecturer, an editor, a writer, as well as the manager of a big business enterprise—the Woman's Co-operative Dress Association. If she had stuck to

* "Kate Field: A Record." By Lilian Whiting. Little, Brown & Co.

writing she would have made the success that by right belonged to her. The pen was her sword. It should have hewn her way to a proud position among writers. As it was, she used it rather as a poker to stir the fire that kept the pot a-boiling. Nothing that she has written will live, and yet she was a much cleverer writer and more brilliant woman than many whose books are well known and will be read when Kate Field is forgotten. Perhaps if she had been less brilliant she might have done more lasting work. As it was, her brilliancy and good comradeship made her more sought after socially than is well for serious work, and inconsiderate friends flattered her into believing that she could do anything she set herself to do.

Never was a woman less calculated to be an actress than was Kate Field, and yet with very little equipment and less experience she produced "Peg Woffington" at Booth's Theatre, playing the title rôle herself. The house was crowded on the night of her début by friends and enemies. The critics were out in force. Some were kind, others cruel. Because she was so versatile, she made occasions in the course of the play to show her versatility. She sang a French song and an Italian song and danced an Irish jig. Her career on the stage as Peg Woffington was short. She appeared also for a short season as Laura Hawkins in "The Gilded Age" with the late John T. Raymond. I have a photograph of Miss Field taken at this time, with Mr. and Mrs. Raymond in the group. All three are now dead and gone.

Miss Field was really a journalist. Her letters from abroad and her special articles were marked by originality, earnestness, and wit. She loved nothing better than to take up a cause and work for it with her whole soul. Whatever she did she did with might and main, and nothing gave her greater pleasure than to fight on the side of the under dog—unless it was to win the fight. She was a loyal friend and a generous enemy, and if her friends had been as loyal to her as she was to them her end would have been very different.

Miss Whiting does well to call Miss Field's life "varied and prismatic," for that it certainly was. It is given to few women to see more of the world, or to come into closer relations with some of the most interesting people in it. Her parents were actors, and it was no doubt for that reason Miss Field aspired to win fame and fortune in the same profession, but she took it up too late in life and without training. She seems to have inherited much of her versatility from her father, though he did not attempt as many careers as she sought to enter. He is said to have been an excellent light comedian, and it was in comedy that Miss Field would have excelled had she taken up the stage as her profession earlier in life.

Although born in St. Louis, Kate Field was educated near Boston, and to those who knew her best she seemed imbued with the New England spirit rather than with that of the West. She was a bright scholar in those studies that she liked. She loved music, literature, and the study of languages, but mathematics was never to her taste. After

her father's death there was some talk of her becoming a teacher. Kind fate ordered otherwise. She was invited by her aunt, Mrs. Milton Sanford, to accompany her and her husband on a trip abroad, and as to visit Europe was the dream of her life she accepted the invitation. Determined to earn her own living at the very earliest moment, she arranged to write letters to the Boston *Courier*, whose editor armed her with introductions to some of the best-known men and women of letters abroad. Miss Field was twenty-one years of age when she met the Brownings in Italy. After meeting with Robert Browning she wrote to her mother:

"Mr. Browning is the person whose good opinion I am most anxious for, and to whom I am already very much attached. He feels music, and I should like to sing before him."

Miss Field soon became the pet of the circle in which she moved, and a brilliant circle it was—Landor, the Brownings, the Trollopes, Harriet Hosmer, Vedder, then struggling and unknown to fame, and many others. The young American girl's cleverness and vivacity made her very popular. Girls of her age were not as emancipated then as they are now, and the fact that she was the correspondent of a Boston paper added to her interest. Then she sang and played for her friends and made herself generally agreeable, seasoning her agreeable manners with a sauce piquante that added to her attractions. No wonder that she loved Florence, for it opened up a new and beautiful life to her. And yet in the midst of all this she seems to have had a premonition of the days of hard work and disappointment that were to come, for she writes to her aunt: "I am obliged to learn self-denial. Not a bad thing for me, as I expect my life to be anything but a bed of roses."

In those Florentine days she studied Latin with Walter Savage Landor, who composed complimentary verses to her. They were forwarded to her by Mr. Browning, who wrote:

". . . I know somebody who is ready to testify to double the extent at the same cost to you, and do his best too. And you also know

"Yours affectionately,

"R. B.

"Kindest regards from Ba, as well as myself, to Mrs. Field. The servant waits for this, and stops all expansion of soul."

Landor loved to exchange witticisms with the young American, some of which she records in a letter:

"'Pray tell me, Mr. Landor, how many times does a man fall in love during his life?' 'Well, every time he sees a pretty woman,' and at this witticism he shouted lustily, then resuming, 'Not that I ever was as fickle as that. Oh, no, I never loved but *twice*. I married to get rid of love, but found *this did not answer at all.*' Once speaking of women, he said, 'Women are all good. I never knew but two bad women in all my life—ah, stop, stop,—I mean *three—I forgot my wife.*'"

George Eliot was visiting in Florence while Miss Field was there, and the latter says of her in a letter to her aunt:

"Last night we went to the Trollopes and there met the authoress of 'Adam Bede,' and Mr. Lewes, the Life-of-Goethe man. Miss Evans, or Mrs. Lewes, is a woman whose whole face is of the horse make; but there is something interesting about her, and you feel impressed with her importance. They say she converses finely, she is very retiring—and talked all the evening to Mr. Trollope. I liked Mr. Lewes, who is a very ugly man, but very charming in conversation, so that you forget his looks."

Miss Field was in Florence when Mrs. Browning died, and she was among the few who followed her hallowed remains to the grave. "It was agonizing," she wrote, "to look on Mr. Browning—he seemed as though he could hardly stand, and his face expressed the most terrible grief. The poor boy stood beside him with tears in his eyes, and when I glanced from them to the pall where their loved one's remains lay, it seemed as though the sorrow was too much to bear."

Soon after this Miss Field returned to America and took up journalism as her chosen profession. But, as I have already said, she tried too much. In the early days she got a great deal of happiness out of her work. She was young, enthusiastic, and her business took her among the people with whom she cared most to associate. She was devoted to the theatre at its best, and wrote some notable criticisms of great actors. She should have ended her days in peace and plenty, for her aunt, Mrs. Sanford, was rich and childless, and Miss Field was like a daughter to her. There was some trouble between them, however, and in the end Mrs. Sanford left the money that her niece had a right to expect to the trained nurse who attended her during her last illness. Miss Field told me all about it one day when I happened to meet her in a theatre in New York. It was the last time that I saw her. She was looking very tired and worn. She should have been able to shake off the harness then and there and take a well-earned rest. Instead of that, she buckled it on tighter than ever and went off to the South Pacific, where she died.

Very different has been the life of the other one of these two notable women.* Julia Ward Howe was born and brought up in luxury. Unlike Miss Field, who was an only child, she was one of a large family. Her youth was gay, even if her father was inclined to be strict, and she had all that society could give. Samuel Ward, her father, was a rich banker, and when his daughter Julia was born in 1819 he lived in New York in a fine house in Marketfield Street, near the Battery. Later, he moved to the city's limit, Bond Street, and so pleased was he with the neighborhood that he bought a plot of ground on the corner of that street and Broadway, and erected what was then considered the finest house in town. I remember it well. It was very

* "Reminiscences, 1819-1899." By Julia Ward Howe. Houghton, Mifflin & Co.

much like the houses that now stand on North Washington Square. Bond Street was one of the most fashionable streets in New York forty years ago, and those who owned houses there were very loath to be turned out even if they made money by the operation.

As an illustration of the primitive customs of those days we are told that the Wards, who were people of wealth and fashion, only used silver forks when they had dinner parties. At other times they used the three-tined steel fork that is now seldom seen even in kitchens. "My father," says Mrs. Howe, "sometimes admonished my maternal grandmother not to put her knife into her mouth. In her youth every one used the knife in this way." And yet she was a lady born and bred.

Entertainments were simple in those days, and people would invite their friends and have a good time without the aid of champagne and Hungarian bands. Literary men were much sought after, and Washington Irving was a social lion.

Mrs. Howe's brother, the well-known "Uncle Sam" Ward of lobby fame, was very fond of literary society, and among the friends he introduced into his father's house were Longfellow, Sumner, Professor Felton, and Dr. Howe. "Sam" Ward married the eldest daughter of the Astor family, and a very gorgeous wedding they had.

Mr. Astor, the bride's grandfather, was very fond of the society of literary men and scholars. Among the latter was Dr. Joseph Green Cogswell, to whom was largely due the founding of the Astor Library. Dr. Cogswell made his home with Mr. Astor, and many were the anecdotes he told illustrative of the peculiarities of that gentleman. One evening the two friends were taking supper together at a hotel recently opened.

"'This man will never succeed,' said Mr. Astor, speaking of the landlord.

"'Why not?' inquired Dr. Cogswell.

"'Don't you see what large lumps of sugar he puts in the sugar-bowl?'

"Once as they were walking slowly to a pilot-boat which the old gentleman had chartered for a trip down the harbor, Dr. Cogswell said: 'Mr. Astor, I have just been calculating that this boat costs you twenty-five cents a minute.' Mr. Astor at once hastened his pace."

Although Mrs. Howe was brought up in society, she did not regard life as most young women in her circle regarded it. She found it fraught with serious purpose. Early in life she married Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, a man much older than herself, and one who had a great work to perform, and who performed it thoroughly. Mrs. Howe at once became absorbed in her husband's work and in the intellectual life of Boston. She fitted into it as gracefully as though she had been born under the shadow of the State House dome instead of under the shadow of Castle Garden's walls.

Dr. and Mrs. Howe made the tour of Europe soon after they were married, and they met nearly all the literary folk in England, including Carlyle, Dickens, Sydney Smith, and Richard Monckton Milnes, afterward Lord Houghton. One afternoon, at the Carlyles', the hostess, who was suffering from a severe headache, failed to appear, and Mrs. Howe was asked to pour tea.

"Our host partook of it copiously, in all the strength of the teapot," she writes. "As I filled and refilled his cup, I thought that his chronic dyspepsia was not to be wondered at. The repast was a simple one. It consisted of a plate of toast and two small dishes of stewed fruit, which he offered us with the words: 'Perhaps ye can eat some of this. I never eat these things myself.'"

Mrs. Howe, like Miss Field, was an enthusiast and a reformer. She threw herself heart and soul into every great movement of her time, and by one inspiration of her pen thrilled her country from ocean to ocean. The story of the writing of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" has been often told—how it came into the mind of the writer in the night after she had retired, how she sprang out of bed and, striking a light, dashed it off just as it was printed.

I think that Mrs. Howe was the first distinguished person that I knew personally. She visited a sister in Bordentown, N. J., when I was a youngster, and, though I was too young to attend her morning lectures, I used to hang over the fence and follow her with wondering and admiring eyes as she drove past my home. And when she called there I was thrilled as one might have been by a call from Harriet Martineau—or Queen Victoria.