

# THE LITERARY SPOTLIGHT

## IV: EDNA FERBER

*With a Sketch by William Gropper*

AT one time, Edna Ferber was in the gravest danger of letting her cleverness run away with her. It might have been her artistic undoing. She would start a short story so brilliantly that one gasped, fearful for the climax of anything so sparkingly begun. But she got over that, and she got over the O. Henry influence. There may be many who will contradict this; certainly there is justification for the opinion that she was an imitator. But she has learned to write her stories backward. She once told an editor who had praised a certain piece of work of hers, that she was certain it was going to turn out a good story because she was able to put down the last sentence before she wrote the first.

I imagine she writes all her stories that way. Turn to "The Maternal Feminine" in her last collection. I would wager anything that the process she employed was the one I have uncovered. But don't spoil a great short story by reading it backward! Then look up "The Gay Old Dog", if you are a man, and wince at the knowledge Edna Ferber has of the male species. How has she learned so much about us? What divination is hers, that she can read the man heart so clearly, understand the loneliness of the old bachelor, the while she also reveals the truth about the unmarried woman in one piercing sentence? It is little short of genius to put these things on paper. If Emma McChesney leaped

from the page, and grasped your hand, and lived at your house all the while you read of her, there are likewise dozens of Miss Ferber's characters since those happy days who will always hold a place in your fiction friendships.

Edna Ferber came from a small town. She worked on newspapers in small towns in the middle west; and she has absorbed the people of small towns as few writers since George Ade have done. Indeed, she seems to me quite as important as that great philosopher-humorist, even though she lacks his profound observation.

It is but ten years now since her first short story appeared in "Everybody's Magazine"—one of the best bits of character drawing she has ever done, by the way. It was called "The Homely Heroine", and I think it runs to not over 2,300 words. For it she received the munificent sum of \$62.50. She was tickled to death—particularly with the extra fifty cents. She had broken in. The little Kalamazoo girl had arrived. What matter that the check was small? She'd show 'em!

Those who imagine editors are always trying to find ways of keeping young authors in their place, should note what followed in the case of the utterly unknown Edna Ferber. People talked of that yarn. It was passed around in editorial offices, spoken of as the most promising short story since O. Henry's earliest work. There was a mad rush to get Miss Ferber's



Edna Ferber

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next product. I think importunate telegrams were sent to her. But her head was not turned. She was too wise, too poised, too sensible, even at that early age. You see, when you have knocked about on newspapers in Appleton, Wisconsin, in Milwaukee and Chicago, you take flattery lightly. There are bound to be bumps ahead, for all the momentary clear sailing. But Edna Ferber was not a flash in the pan. Her next story was equally good; and "The American Magazine" got hold of her—one of the editors went west to call upon her, to see who she was, find out what she looked like, after the manner of the modern progressive hunter after fiction. He found a slip of a girl, alert, with brown eyes that glowed like live coals, an abundance of black hair which she slashed right back from a well molded forehead, and a skin like velvet on which cream has been poured. He heard a vibrant voice, that uttered terse, sharp sentences. Sometimes they were too sharp and terse; for Miss Ferber likes her own way, deny it as she will, and never hesitates to say just what she thinks, regardless of whether or not it is wise to do so. Here was a keenness of mind that was refreshing. Edna Ferber exuded health and energy; her answers were apropos, discriminating, final. There was little pose about her. She was just a normal girl with a wild ambition—though she confessed even then that she would rather be an actress than an author. I have seen her give an imitation of Bernhardt that was uncanny—she can even look like the great French tragedienne by the simple process of putting a feather boa around her neck and pulling her hair over her eyes, from which the glasses have been removed.

But the stage was not for her. She

took to the pen—or the typewriter, as they all do nowadays—as a Salvation Army lassie to a tambourine; and she sailed in bravely and wrote a novel. It was called "Dawn O'Hara". Miss Ferber herself would tell you not to read it now, she has gone so far beyond it. It was crude and forced and jerky. She was, in those days, essentially a worker in miniatures, and after the near-failure of this maiden effort, she was wise enough to revert to the writing of brief short stories on the order of "The Homely Heroine". They seemed to flow from her pen—typewriter, I mean; but they didn't do anything of the sort. They were the result of most assiduous work. She plugs away every morning of her life, whether she feels like it or not. When she is living in New York, at an uptown hotel, she hurries out before breakfast and gets a brisk walk around the Reservoir in Central Park, to freshen her brain, and think over what she shall do that day. When she is in Chicago, it is the shore of Lake Michigan that feels the patter of her rapid feet as she takes a constitutional around Jackson Park. She divides her time now between these two great cities, and has never been able to say which she likes the better.

Though she lives in hotels, with her mother, she is the most domestic person you can imagine, and she almost resents the prepared food she eats. For she loves to cook, and knows all sorts of tempting recipes. But she says she and her mother cannot be bothered with servant problems; and so they go on living at comfortable apartment hotels, free to come and go as they wish.

For Miss Ferber likes to travel; but she doesn't like to pack her bags without an object in view. Therefore, whenever she decides that she wants a

trip to the coast, she arranges a neat little reading tour for herself. In this way she appeases that never dormant desire to express herself histrionically. And how she does read her own stories! Women's clubs who have been lucky enough to capture her, have always felt more than rewarded. She knows "The Gay Old Dog" practically by heart. She merely puts the book on a table near her, as an orator places his notes by his plate for occasional reference, and then plunges into the story, like the true artiste she is, and gets her effects through dramatic pauses which many a professional actress might do well to study and emulate. She can imitate almost any dialect; and shop girl slang is heaven to her. I really think that the stage lost a great character actress when literature claimed Edna Ferber.

After the immense vogue of the McChesney stories, it was inevitable that they would be dramatized. George V. Hobart collaborated with their creator; and Ethel Barrymore played the leading rôle for two years, with enormous success. Since then, Miss Ferber has written but one play, and that again in collaboration. Newman Levy and she got an idea-of-the-moment in the small salaries paid to college professors in American universities; under the title of "\$1,200 a Year" they tore off a comedy that was tried out and came to grief on the road; but it lives within the pages of a volume, and is well worth looking up. Parts of it are astonishingly clever. I think the trouble with it was that too few people, immersed as they all were in their own tragic financial difficulties, gave a hang what salaries college professors were paid. It is not what might be called a burning question. And it was not an altogether actable play. Maybe it was written too hast-

ily. It is curious how many fiction writers think that a play is an easy method of expression.

There are those who abominate Miss Ferber's cocksureness, her too-scintillating phrases, her measured determination always to be apt and smart. I can see perfectly how certain of her stories would grate on certain people; but beyond that surface glitter and shine there is always, to me at least, a realization of her understanding of, and sympathy for, the plain folk she writes about. She loves humanity, and is unafraid to reveal her love. A waiter, a manicure, a tired Cook's tourist, an ex-convict, a seamstress, a milliner—all these claim her heart; and she can put them on paper in blinding, vivid paragraphs, and cause you to exclaim, "Why, I know a person just like that!" Sometimes she is too photographic; and then again often she slurs over some character in whom you have become greatly interested. For some reason he or she has not held Miss Ferber, and so it's out of the story for that unfortunate. I am thinking particularly of the poet, in "The Girls". There was not nearly enough of him.

And speaking of that flaming novel of Chicago, how Miss Ferber must be chuckling at those critics of hers who have insistently reiterated that she was not big enough to write anything sustained. Oh yes, they were prompt to praise her collections under such titles as "Buttered Side Down", "Half Portions", "Roast Beef Medium", and "Personality Plus"—a goodly showing, when you come to think of it, even though the titles might be found fault with by the discriminating and oversensitive. Is there a little cheapness in such names of books? I have heard critics deplore her tendency to be downright common. She has played

to the gallery, they contend; she is too fond of the newspaper method, too anxious to seem to know it all. "She's fresh",—and I use the word in its double sense,—was the way one critic put it. All her books have gone into several editions, and there is no doubt that Miss Ferber could go on indefinitely reaching a loyal public through her short stories alone. But she is not content to remain in a groove. "The Girls" formed in her active brain as a cameo; but it got away from her, swept her off her feet after she began it, and she found page after page rustling from her machine. Then one day, having shut off the telephone for weeks, she discovered on her desk a full-fledged novel, which "The Woman's Home Companion" wanted as a serial, at a most gratifying price. And now the astute reviewers of the land are hailing it as one of the finest novels of the year—Heywood Broun, F. P. A., Percy Hammond, and a host of others are loud in their praise of it.

It is so far ahead of "Fanny Herself" that one wonders where Miss Ferber will go in the next ten years. If she can travel that fast, there's no telling what broad highway she may take. For her art has ripened; and in depicting the manless household of the Thrift girls, on Chicago's South Side, she has torn down not only one wall, but all four, and allowed the whole world not to peep but to see openly those three generations of lonely women. The story mounts with every chapter; and Miss Ferber's clean-cut style, held beautifully in check, exactly suits the material at her hand. She pounds in her effects, makes these "girls" walk down the streets with you, turn windy corners with you; and she causes the old Chicago to pass in a panorama before your eyes. The scene wherein the sol-

diers of the Civil War march away from the Lake City is tremendous—a whirlwind of action. And all the threads are finally gathered up—as the critics all said a mere short story writer couldn't gather them. They are not only gathered, they are tied in a deft knot, and one is left with a feeling of complete satisfaction. It is Miss Ferber's triumph that she has accomplished this tour de force. Yet was it artistic to cover so long a period of time in so short a compass? There are moments in "The Girls" when you feel the nervous desire of the short story writer to whittle to the bone. It might have been a greater book if she had expanded more, and compressed with less anxiety.

Edna Ferber is known for her reliability in her dealings with editors. If she is asked to finish a certain piece of work by four o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon, at four o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon the completed product is on the editorial desk. She says it is just as easy to be businesslike as not. Her newspaper training, no doubt. Her letters accompanying her manuscripts are often as clever as the manuscripts themselves. Her abrupt beginnings and endings are a joy. There's never a wasted word.

She motors in Chicago as if she had done it all her life—loops around the puzzling Loop with ease and grace; and her passenger doesn't even hold his breath when she swings into throbbing Michigan Avenue and darts out to the South Side, or over toward Evanston.

Like all successful authors, Miss Ferber has had innumerable offers to write directly for the screen. What captions she could do! She spent a few months in Hollywood, wrote a fine article about her impressions of that mad little colony, and incidentally sold

the motion picture rights to two or three of her books. But her mother was almost killed in a motor accident on one of the boulevards, and they experienced a definite trembling of the earth; and altogether Miss Ferber felt she would be more at home in the middle west; so they packed up and shipped back to Chicago. She says, very wisely, that if any of her material is suitable for screen production, there it is to purchase; but she hasn't the time nor the inclination to spend her energy on scenarios. It is the right attitude to take; when every author realizes that it is foolish to try to serve two masters, both books and motion pictures will be all the better.

Miss Ferber has many friends. I heard her say, with her usual frankness, to a good-looking young man, "You're handsome, yes—but you're stupid." Afterward he told me that he was afraid of her, but found such candor refreshing. She will dance, when she is seeking copy, in the lowest of Chicago "dives", with Carl Sandburg or Ben Hecht or Harry Hansen or young Gene Markey; and the next evening she will be at the smartest dinner, talking brilliantly

with these same men, enjoying each party with equal gusto. She likes Fanny Butcher's Book Shop, and all the people in it; and when she comes east she hobnobs with Franklin P. Adams, William Gillette, Rutger Jewett, Albert A. Boyden (when he isn't in Poland), Julian Street, Charles Hanson Towne, Alexander Woolcott, and many others who make New York the shining spot it is. But much as she cares for social life, she cares more for good honest hard work. That is why she is one of the highest priced short story writers in the whole country today. She refuses to produce too much, believing that the best one is capable of cannot be written hastily to meet the needs of waiting markets. I know of one editor who, eager for her work, left a signed blank contract with her. She had but to fill in the figures and return it to him. She confesses that the temptation was great; but she did not feel that she could do her best under such conditions and so the contract went back—unsigned by her.

Do you get a picture of Edna Ferber from that little story?