CURRENT SHORT STORIES

By Gerald Hewes Carson

HENRY FIELDING furnishes us a recognizable archetype of today's magazine reader in the person of Miss Sophia Western.

"I love a tender sensation", cries Miss Sophia to her aunt, Mrs. Western, "and would pay the price of a tear for it at any time."

We still have a large market for the same commodity, and we still pay the same price without demur. The short story writers, and all other creators who work humanistically, are, in this affair, at the mercy of the American temperament. It, unfortunately, possesses too much complacent sensibility, too much emotion for its mind, too expansive an imagination for the real, astringent values of the artist who sees life steadily and whole. "Literature" — and why should we exclude magazine literature? — "must always have a supreme care for those original elements of human passion, and of human sentiment, which knowledge trains, and experience educates, without changing their essential quality. Life, in contact with the passions and with the emotions of men, and so provoking their minds to expression, is the occasion, the origin, of literature."

This has been said frequently, though never with more grace and earnestness since Lionel Johnson said it in 1892. It represents what is most nearly an absolute standard of critical judgment, and indicates the business of criticism, which is (Lord Morley speaking), "to separate what is accidental in form, transitory in manner, and merely local in suggestion, from the general ideas that live under a casual and particular literary robe".

I have surveyed the current magazine fiction in that spirit, and ventured first to select what seem to me the ten short stories which best escape the robes of the accidental. All men do not see living truth alike. But what one man feels deeply cannot escape those others who share his experience. And so, in this manner, you, or I, or anyone, may come upon what is good even though we do not always agree that its guise is, to us, fortunate.

W. D. Steele more than justifies a reasonable anticipation in "'Lost at Sea'" (Pictorial Review, May). It is one of the Urkey Island stories, beautifully filled with the original elements of human passion and sentiment, and packed with fine, close writing. The theme, how love transmuted a stonecutter into a sculptor, is too fine in its essence to be given away baldly by summary.

Zona Gale often treads the narrow path between sentiment and sentimentality. But her touch is sure in "The Biography of Blade" (Century, July). Blade, editor of the Muscoda "Republican" for twenty five years, was approaching the tremendous task of writing a five line story of his life for the county history. When he heard the banker's niece sing, his heart stirred. He remembered, with a wistful touch of the absurd, that he had once played second flute. He must revise his "copy" for the county his-

tory. His life was too gorgeous, too shimmering a thing to be summed up in five untheatric lines. But the singer left town too soon for Blade's emancipation. His biography stood without addenda. Thus by the sparest of narratives Miss Gale reveals a soul's cataclysm, and publishes again her rebellion against the stuffiness of the American environment she knows best.

The same interplay of character and environment, born of the same rebellion, appears in Melvin Van den Bark's "Two Women and Hog-back Ridge" (Midland, June–August). A country school teacher was persecuted because she dared to walk on a Nebraska sandhill at night. It is the story of the eternal lash which torpid men lay upon the shoulders of the more sensitive. Mr. Van den Bark realizes his locale with a success to which anyone who knows the midwest cannot help but pay tribute.

Grace Sartwell Mason joins the same theme to mystery story technique in "The Closed House" (Red Book, April). After the old Whipple house burned, it developed that Miss Almira Whipple was not away at the sanitarium. She was — well, bones were found. The mystery announced, the story shifts to Narcy Jethro, a young drug clerk. He was timid, sensuous, "palely indeterminate". He was the butt of the town wits, who took care to crush all expression of his vague love of beautiful things. So he spent recklessly for glorious silk dressing gowns and the like, which he hoarded in secret. He had another secret — the ghastly knowledge that he had drugged himself, killed Miss Whipple, and burned the house which was sheltering his crime. The town doctor guessed the truth but he never told. For it was his distinction to know that the smart alecks of a village can distort the soul of an artist.

Hugh Walpole's Billy Gabriel, the prosperous banker in "The Etching" (Good Housekeeping, April), experienced the same sort of spiritual awakening that came to Miss Gale's small town newspaper editor. Gabriel bought an etching quite by chance, and others followed. The placid surface of his spirit took on riffles, developed an impetuous new current. But his wife, ridiculing his etchings, would not have it so, for he was hers — all hers. She practised the tyranny of love exquisitely, until she overstepped herself. One day she tore up a Whistler print

THE BEST SHORT STORIES

The following ten short stories are selected for special mention as mirroring the best elements in current fiction as it has appeared between April and July. When the stories selected are not by American authors they are, nevertheless, the work of writers so familiar to the American public that they are important influences on our own creative effort.

"Lost at Sea." W. D. Steele. PICTORIAL REVIEW, May.

The Biography of Blade. Zona Gale. CENTURY, July.

Two Women and Hog-back Ridge. Melvin Van den Bark. MIDLAND, June–August.

The Closed House. Grace Sartwell Mason. RED BOOK, April.

The Etching. Hugh Walpole. GOOD HOUSEKEEPING, April.

The Violet. James Lane Allen. HARPER'S, June.

Making Arrangements. Elizabeth Bowen. EVERYBODY'S, June.

A Story Ordered. Edna Bryner. CENTURY, June.

The Devil's Instrument. Paul Green. ATLANTIC, July.

Potowatomis' Daughter. Johannes V. Jensen. OUR WORLD, May.

in a fit of passion. In ten minutes her husband had gone. He never came back, and she never knew why. She only remembered that it was "some silly little quarrel about a drawing or a print".

James Lane Allen turns an obscure historical episode into "The Violet" (Harper's, June). Catherine the Great saw the earliest violet of spring, and ordered a sentry to guard it. He, in the mood of spring, kissed a nursemaid and his sweetheart saw him. In her rage and despair she tore the violet from its roots. With her it was a jealous, personal retribution. With him it was the end of life itself, a betrayal of trust. When the girl returned penitently that night she crept under the firs and came upon a gun. Her heart leaped. He was there after all! Then she touched the bayonet. It was slick, horridly wet. And beside it, "Two sentry feet — quiet." One feels the God of Thomas Hardy in this tragic ending. The story incidentally reveals Mr. Allen's effectiveness with a theme very remote from the Kentucky life he knows so well.

Elizabeth Bowen is a newcomer, but not one of the parvenues of literature, or of life. Her "Making Arrangements" (Everybody's, June) traces with delicacy and power the convulsion within a cultivated, self disciplined man in the throes of a tremendous moral shock. Hewson Blair's lovely wife took French leave with another man, then wrote him to send on her wardrobe. Once at it, the scarlet and silk and silver overwhelmed him. In a red rage he tore the beautiful fabrics thread from shred, and sent thus the shimmering, dead mass to his wife, conceiving it his answer. Miss Bowen knows the power of restraint, the fine, true economy of omission, and achieves thereby a singular kind of vehemence. Edna Bryner has written in "A Story Ordered" (Century, June) "the story of a person who grew up happily, married happily, and is now living along happily, in a normal way". Like Zona Gale, and Mr. Van den Bark, Miss Bryner asks more of life than this. That is why the life of her friend seems to her bare, futile, trivial. The portrait of Mariana is shrewdly done, with deft little strokes which illuminate obliquely the gospel of work; for surely no life could be less enviable than Miss Bryner's picture of the life which has no struggle, pain, or disappointment.

We move on a different plane when we come to the stories of Paul Green and Johannes V. Jensen. The mood is relaxed, the touch lighter, the excellence of a different order. Paul Green's amusing story, "The Devil's Instrument" (Atlantic, July), has two protagonists. It deals with the conversion and subsequent relapse into sin of two backwoods dance musicians. But Mr. Green manages to develop with the most subtle emphasis the eternal dualism of human nature which he finds implicit in the rustic virtuosi — the things of the mind and spirit which make a man a Calvinist and a pagan, at once a John Knox and a Tannhäuser.

There is a deal of false writing being done these days about nature and wild life. But "Potowatomis' Daughter" (Our World, May) by Johannes V. Jensen, the Danish novelist, is a charming fantasy and a model of legitimate romanticism. The episode starts out as a duck shoot. But an old Indian legend, suggesting itself to the author's mind, turns the incident into a thing of mystery and enchantment. Mr. Jensen has the real sense of the unreal which crops up in a poetic man even when he is devoted to a shotgun.

The authors who write out of their

sentimental impressions of wild life are frequently entertaining, if highly artificial. It is their formula to treat the processes of evolution with solicitude, to touch them with the humor of the pathetic fallacy. Bears enjoy human creature comforts. Mothers fight for their young with a noble maternity. All the animals court and mate with as much punctilio as though they were licensed by the state and married by the church.

Kenneth Gilbert celebrates the motherhood and death by violence of a wolverine in "The Devil of Spruce Glooms" (Sunset, July), but with the artificial sentiment handled better than usual. The wolverine goes on a foray for food, leaving in her wake a dead lynx, a porcupine, and, in the fight in which she herself goes down, a huge timber wolf. This is wild life with real fidelity, the life of gloom and mystery, with cruel death by tooth and claw ever lurking in the fir shadows. Courtney Ryley Cooper in "Nosey" (Delineator, July) shirks his responsibility. He details that a circus bear, free in the open with wild orphan cubs, will draw to herself a mate, and stick to the man made world. H. Mortimer Batten's story of "Johnnie" (McClure's, July) shows a real appreciation of the humor implicit in a bear's slavery to habit. Johnnie spent his cubhood with men who taught him to drink cold tea from a bottle with a Highland label. A year or two later he took refuge in a strange lumber camp, and finding a bottle with the familiar red label at hand, promptly drained it. But this time the tea was Scotch, and Johnnie was soon dumped without ceremony into a snow bank for a three months' sleep. It is particularly pleasant for me to record in Mr. Batten's favor that when spring came Johnnie didn't show his gratitude by saving any little girl's life or raising the mortgage on the old farm. He just ambled off thinly. And that's just what real bears do after a hard winter.

The situation in which the dénouement is precipitated by casual incident, or chance circumstances evoke new traits of character which control the climax, affords an inexhaustible source of fiction material. Our instinct is sound in this matter. It teaches humility to reflect that virtue is not always commensurate to the reward. It is civilizing to know that Lady Luck has no ethical imagination. Patrolman Donoghue of Rochester's "finest", George Brooks tells us in "I. O. U." (McClure's, June), caught a safe blower with $10,000 in trying to collect a two dollar loan. Stevie Glenn, the hero of Richard Connell's "The Hero of the Devil's Kitchen" (Saturday Evening Post, May 3), owed business promotion, the mayoralty of his home town, and his wife, to a physiological fact: he had fainted during a German raid, and was given the Medal of Honor for conspicuous bravery in face of the enemy. In less theatric case was Chet McAusland, of "Horse Sense" (Saturday Evening Post, June 14) by Ben Ames Williams. Chet helped his worn out old horse Charlie get on his feet in his stall every morning for years, just as he had helped his indolent relative, Lew Windler, to pay his taxes for years. But one morning when he was irritated by Lew and castigated by his wife he lost all patience with old Charlie and fetched him a sharp buffet. Charlie got up. The episode was suggestive. He tried the same tactics on Lew. And Lew, well, you know what Lew did. He, like Charlie, learned to "git up and git". To take another instance, turn to Elmer Davis's "Beef for the Lions" (Collier's, June 14). Green-

wood was a young artist, the kind that scorned commerce and preferred to "struggle". While he painted a lion purple (because that was the way he saw it) he met dyspeptic old Franklin Barr who came to watch the big cats eat their beef, and who observed in them the first great commandment of life — adaptability; "before one can live well, one must have learned to live at all." Greenwood got the point. It led him direct to an advertising agency — and the girl.

Walter Millis builds his story by the same technique in "The Rolling River" (Harper's, April) but attacks it more seriously. Young Rowan, an engineer upon a construction job, was "seduced by a river". Rowan was a young demon for Facts. But when he looked at the river — at night, the rolling flood seemed to hint to him that life was subtle and confusing, and that not all realities were as tangible and simple as they might have been if God had had a good stiff course in civil engineering.

One night Rowan talked with a night storekeeper, who mixed the information that his wife was dying with a narrative of simple pride in his warehouse. The man was dazed with grief — but carrying on. In that chance encounter Rowan discovered human personality. Mr. Millis has skilfully lifted the veil of the commonplace; his story has all the high quality of spiritual adventure. Really, he shows the birth of a soul in a man. And that is an admirable enterprise for any author.

Thomas Boyd, chronicler of the war as the doughboy saw it, handles the same irony of circumstance that attracted Mr. Connell, but he takes occasion to sharpen it to a tragic point. Lieutenant Wilfrid Bird lavished affection and humane care upon his men. Then one night he heard himself rated as a coward by the company malcontent, and died because of the chance remark — sullenly trying to prove his courage to his men.

Of the characters and fortunes of the women portrayed by the short story authors whose work has appeared in the current months, it would be possible to speak without end. Between the best and worst of the stories there is crammed a deal of human nature for our amusement, amazement, and tutelage. One can learn how naïveté and subtlety and demureness abide in one little girl from Thomas Moult's "The Third Chicken" (Bookman, July). One sees the very heart beat in a little maid who had learned early not to cry, in Miss I. A. R. Wylie's story "Little Fräulein and the Big World" (Good Housekeeping, June). It is written with an exquisite sympathy and simplicity, and achieves what few adults ever recover, the point of view of a child.

One can learn how one woman thought a kiss from a man engaged to another was equivalent to a betrayal — and how another didn't, in Katherine Mansfield's "Violet" (Bookman, June); from Rose Wilder Lane's "Autumn" (Harper's, June) how girlhood's lover may look to a woman of maturity and experience. The lyric joy of a girl in love is caught and fixed happily in Henry Meade Williams's promising story, "Tides" (Scribner's, July), as well as the self anæsthesia which enables a woman to take up life's burdens dully and efficiently after sudden grief. George Madden Martin suggests the agony of a highly civilized woman, about to become a mother, who learns that her husband is inbred, a poor white who has helped to lynch a negro. Glenway Wescott, bent on pressing the boundaries of fiction back to the limits of life itself, sketches in

"In a Thicket" (Dial, June) the flood of thought and feeling experienced by an adolescent girl who both hopes and fears her undefended home is going to be invaded by a black man.

Mr. Wescott's pleasant little story reminds me that I had intended to make a little collection of notes on the treatment of the "bad" woman in current short stories. But I could not raise a baker's dozen — not half that! And those I found were equivocal, and lamentably insincere. Meredith Nicholson essays the theme in "They're All Alike" (Smart Set, June) but flunks his responsibility. A married woman merely flirts a little, and it turns out that her *vis-à-vis* is in love with her sister. A neglected farm wife turns to the arms of a "hired man" in Weare Holbrook's "The Casanova Shanty" (Smart Set, May), but only to arouse her husband toward a reconciliation. Albert Payson Terhune, for the nonce abandoning his researches into dog life, shows in "Flame" (Smart Set, June) a married woman in a disreputable hotel room with an eager lover. But she is there, like her faithful sisters pictured by Mr. Nicholson and Mr. Holbrook, because of her essential fidelity, because her husband's indifference has aroused her to despair.

Dixie Willson's "The Little White Soul" (McClure's, May) is another Griselda. Taashka Larrimore did actually live in sin for two years. But she loved her husband all the while. And she got into trouble involuntarily through the irony of circumstances, and stayed there only to put food in the mouth of her adored little Nonné. When the chance for redemption came she grasped it eagerly and ended up in an unphilosophical happiness, which is quite unconvincing unless it be something to the effect that kind hearts are more than coronets. George Marvin in "Harbin Night's Entertainment" (Scribner's, April) touches more nearly those women who, in Ben Jonson's phrase, are "ambitious of living backward". As hero-narrator, he penetrates to the bedroom of his host's German mistress. It is furnished in good conventional decadent fashion, sparsely — "There was nothing in it but a bed, a wash-stand, a wardrobe, and a cross." On the bed were two large dolls. The girl bent to them tenderly: "*Diese sind die einzige Kinder die ich ehe haben werde.*" Then, "Come now, let us go back — back to the Hell." The homely beauty and wistful sentiment of this scene must touch every admirer of Little Eva.

If our short story writers evade meeting the issue squarely in this type of story, as one cannot escape believing that they do, can it be said that they really touch women sincerely, even in such a safe field as the business story? The heroine of business is usually understood to be the shop girl or office worker, as distinct from the "home girl", whose shy and modest ways of plain living and high thinking are universally known and applauded.

Yet no consideration of the current story of the business woman, in the exact meaning of the word "business", could fairly exclude Nelia Gardner White's "Jen Culliton's Hands" (American Magazine, May). Jen was busy enough in all conscience. She was a big, raw boned farm woman whose husband died when the children were tiny. But Jen's magnificent strength and courage never faltered. She could be mother, nursemaid, housekeeper, cook — as is the way with farm women — and even "harvest hand" too. She toiled without remission until the children married and moved away. Then Jen grew lonely. Idleness made her sensitive. Her big, capable hands

looked all right around the haft of an ax — but appalling on the lap of her black silk dress. Lacking direction and purpose in life, Jen was preparing to sell the farm when word came from her son, Phil, that Daphne, his wife, needed her while she bore her child, and that Daphne would return with her to the old farmstead afterward. And in that opportunity to serve, Jen's happiness was reborn. Her rough sinewy hands seemed to assume again their beauty, the beauty which attaches to the supremely useful things.

Set beside this story "At Home on the Marcel Waves" by Marjorie Stoneman Douglas (Saturday Evening Post, June 14) or "A Car for Gunga Din" by Robert Emmet MacAlarney (Collier's, April 26) and you get the difference. Mrs. Douglas has a heroine of huge proportions, too. She is an efficient amazon of the beauty parlors. Yet, if she possesses one spark of recognizable humanity it isn't allowed to escape into this story. Mrs. Douglas is not limited by her talent to writing smartly and inflexibly. Has she, perhaps, gone in a bit for literary slumming? Mr. MacAlarney's story does not stand happily beside "Jen Culliton's Hands" either. It teaches that it is worthwhile for a girl to go to college and study psychology because she can learn thereby the super salesmanship which will enable her to sell motor cars to recalcitrant customers.

Most of the business stories use business as a kind of backdrop. Within a few paragraphs they get down to the old love formula. Such a story is Arthur Train's "Miss Wiggin's Love Affair" (Saturday Evening Post, May 3), except that it has a trick ending. The lover wasn't really a lover. He was a swindler, and the astute lady, knowing it all the time, just led him on until she could catch him. Viola Brothers Shore's "Some Good for Once" (Collier's Weekly, May 3) ends upon the tender note, but in its picturesque vernacular it draws a real character — the slangy, gamine little metropolitan shop girl, who mingles an easy sophistication with abysmal sentimentality and ignorance. Charles Divine introduces a character equally urban, less memorable though more familiar. It is the waitress in "Breakfast Ankles" (Collier's, June 7) with the strange air of refinement, who conquers the heart of a gifted young sculptor because, in comparison with his socially irreproachable fiancée, the little waitress proved herself the real thoroughbred.

Steuart M. Emery might have told us what a moving picture actress thinks about when he wrote of Merrilee in "Merrilee Tells the World" (Red Book, June). But he didn't. He kept faith with his public, and furnished instead the romantic story of how Merrilee brought her lover to heel by appealing to him through the pictures, with a homemade plot fitting their own affair. Sophie Kerr might tell us much about human nature as it peers out from beneath its humdrum shell of business. But she is ambitious only to amuse. One must grant gracefully that she can do that to perfection. Her "Flying High" (Ladies' Home Journal, April) is a representative production.

The great popular magazines, one concludes, are not hospitable to fiction with any notable sincerity and forthrightness in its treatment of womenkind, whether in domestic, emotional, or business relationships. The short story writers never endanger their professional gallantry. As knights of the pen they are prepared to defend their gallery of fair women until the last drop of ink is shed.