SOME RECENT WOMEN SHORT-STORY WRITERS

NO one who has watched the development of our magazine literature can help being impressed by the number of women concerned therein, and also by the high average of their work, their diversity of talent, and their general literary skill. And this is peculiar to America, for, although in France the short story has reached a degree of excellence unsurpassed elsewhere, yet it is the work of men; there are few women who have sought that method of literary expression. And while England has had a continuous line of notable women writers since the days of Jane Austen, yet it was as novelists that they gained their fame, there are hardly any short story writers among them.

Of course there have been, in both countries, exceptions to this rule, but the short stories of the French women are more like novelettes, while in England it seems to be only writers associated with a certain locality, such as Jane Barlow, M. E. Francis, and the clever authors of *The Irish R. M.* to whom the short story is a natural mode of expression. The Englishwomen need space in which to mature their ideas; it is impossible to imagine Mrs. Humphry Ward or Lucas Malet condensing into the limits of a short story anything they may have to say, for their theme is the development of character through a long series of events.

In this country, on the contrary, there has been, during the last fifty years, an array of women short story writers which, beginning with authors like Rose Terry Cooke, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, has continued through names of varied degrees of excellence, down to those of women like Mrs. Deland and Edith Wharton, whose only similarity is the sterling quality of their work.

Women ought to be among the best writers of short stories, especially of those modelled upon the French style, the story of character rather than that of incident, the successful seizure of an emotional moment, of a phase of thought; and there are writers who, like Mrs. Wharton and Miss Cather, are particularly good in that line. But it is more in character study that the American women excel, and for which material is offered them in the great diversity of type found in this country, material which has been so admirably dealt with in Alice Brown's studies of New England life, Myra Kelly's sketches of Jewish school children and Ruth McEnery Stuart's silhouettes of Southern life.

The great number of periodicals published here, with their incessant demand for short stories, is perhaps responsible for the number of women who are now writing them, but it does not account for the high quality of their work. Ever since the publication in 1863 of Mrs. Spofford's remarkably good volume of stories, *The Amber Gods,* there has been a long line of women writers, fully equal to the men of their calling, and those who are coming to the front now are keeping up the standard.

Among the best of these younger writers is Miss Willa Sibert Cather, a Western woman by birth, who not long ago gave up a position as a school-teacher in Pittsburg in order to accept one on the staff of *McClure's Magazine.*

In her book of short stories, infelicitously named *The Troll Garden,* Miss Cather shows a wonderful aptness in seizing a decisive moment and, with a few touches, deducing from it a whole character, sometimes an entire life. Such a story is "The Sculptor's Funeral," where the body of the great artist is brought back to his native place for burial, and where we learn from the talk of the watchers, uncomprehending men to whom the palm on the coffin means nothing, just what his early life was, what he had to struggle against, his weaknesses and his faults; and after Jim Laird, once

BEATRIX DEMAREST LLOYD

the sculptor's school friend, now the clever, unscrupulous, drunken lawyer, has risen to his defence, we know not only the character of the artist, but that of every man in the room. Such also is "A Death in the Desert," the story of the singer, dying at her brother's ranch in Wyoming, with the recollection of her brilliant career, her longing for New York and all that it represents to her, and her bitter memories of her fickle lover, all eating into her heart; and such is the story of "Paul," the young degenerate with a sort of inarticulate longing for beauty which he gratifies by means of a week of luxury at the Waldorf on stolen money; all of these show the author's keen perception of emotional value as well as her skill in character drawing.

Miss Edith Wyatt is another Western woman whose work is on a very high plane, as she adds a sense of humour to her great capacity for sympathetic analysis, and in her book of short sketches, *Every Man His Own Way*, she has shown us how much there is of real interest in the lives of the most prosaic people. Her *locale* is Chicago and its neighbourhood and her characters the kind of people of whom George Ade writes—typical Americans, in that no country but this could produce them, frankly uncultivated, mid-Western and not ashamed. There is Hoffman, the city alderman, a saloon-keeper by trade and a "square-dealing and innocent boodler" in his civic capacity; there is Fred Einstein, the big, exuberant, affectionate Jew; Sigurd Bhaer, the German flute-player; Ham Kinney, the professional bicycle-rider—these are the people of whom Miss Wyatt writes, and whom we are perhaps a little surprised to find so interesting. Besides her comprehension of these every-day mortals Miss Wyatt has an equally keen appreciation of that conscientiously cultivated class of whom

WILLA S. CATHER

Richard Elliott, whose "test of life is refinement," is a fair example, and she even has the audacity to stand up for the western R and to poke a little fun at that fetish of the half-cultivated, the board A.

Mary Stewart Cutting has published at least three volumes of short stories, one of which, *Little Stories of Courtship,* is far above the average both in excellence and variety. In "Paying Guests" we have the well-born, cultivated woman, striving to make a living by taking boarders, and proving, by reason of her refinement, utterly unable to cope with the vulgar women who compose the larger part of her household, and we welcome her release, which comes by her marriage with the man who speaks the same language and thinks the same thoughts that she does. In "Henry" we have the shilly-shallying lover in a plainer class of life, and the story of his discomfiture by his more manly rival is told with delightful vigour and energy. "Cinderella's Shoes," with its unexpected climax, is the story of a woman who, born to leisure, finds herself obliged to earn her own living. She attends a reception given by an old school-friend, and is shocked to find many of her contemporaries grown old before their time, dull, and uninterested in anything outside of the limits of their own narrow lives. She is amazed to find that the life of leisure which has always seemed to her so desirable has proved in so many cases a stultifying influence, and she realises that it is her work and her

ZONA GALE

association with workers that has kept her young.

In her *Stories of Suburban Life* Mrs. Cutting has not succeeded so well, although she has given us the atmosphere of sympathy and family interest which makes the bright side of suburban life.

MARY STEWART CUTTING

It is well to have a friendly interest in one's neighbours, but difficulties with servants and troubles with dilatory plumbers are not in themselves interesting. In one story, however, the author has touched a note of pathos with great skill. "Not a Sad Story" is only an account of the void left in a small community by the death of a little boy, but it is told with a touching feeling and sympathy that suggest a personal experience.

Mary Shipman Andrews, a daughter of the late rector of Christ Church, New York, and sister of a recent West Point chaplain, shows the influence of both the Church and the army in her last book of short stories, *The Militants,* for most of her heroes are either clergymen or soldiers. With one exception these are

stories of incident, but in "Crowned With Glory" there is that introspective note so often found in the American short story. A mother is looking through the papers of her young son who was killed at San Juan and finds the letters of two women, one, a gay, shallow young girl to whom he was engaged, the other, an older woman of deeper feelings and maturer

MRS. WILSON WOODROW

mind, whom he evidently loved. There are also a few lines of farewell, unaddressed, written the night before the battle; for whom are they intended? This is left to the decision of the reader, but this is the only story of Mrs. Andrews with that note of uncertainty which was at one time so common in fiction.

Two of Mrs. Andrews's stories have been published in separate form, and they illustrate very well two different aspects of her skill. "The Good Samaritan" is an account of the adventures of a young theological student in trying to take home an intoxicated friend, and is a most amusing description of the latter's vagaries. He takes a refreshing nap on a baggage truck at the ferry, he offers his seat in the elevated train to a lady and remains politely standing in the half empty car until his destination is reached, and when he has got as far as his own door, turns back to telegraph his impending arrival to his family lest the shock of his arrival be too great. All these performances, executed with the ceremonious gravity of intoxication, are described by the author

with a sympathetic humour seldom elicited from women by a display of inebriety.

In "The Perfect Tribute" pathos, not humour, is the informing spirit, the central figure is that of Abraham Lincoln, and the scene, the death-bed of a young Confederate soldier in a hospital who, all unknowing who it is that sits at his bedside, speaks with enthusiasm of the Gettysburg speech, made the day before, predicts that it will become a classic in the language, and dies with his hand in that of the great opponent of the cause for which he had given his young life.

One of the many good writers who have come to us from the West is Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, who has been for ten years at least a contributor to magazines and at one time was the editor of *The Puritan*. Her stories are noticeable for their high level of interest; they all have that quality of readableness so hard to define, so easy to recognise, and have variety of theme and character as well. There is the innocent little pair of variety artists whose sketch is so poor that an astute manager of vaudeville hires them for "chasers"; there is the young wife

MARY HEATON VORSE

MARY S. WATTS

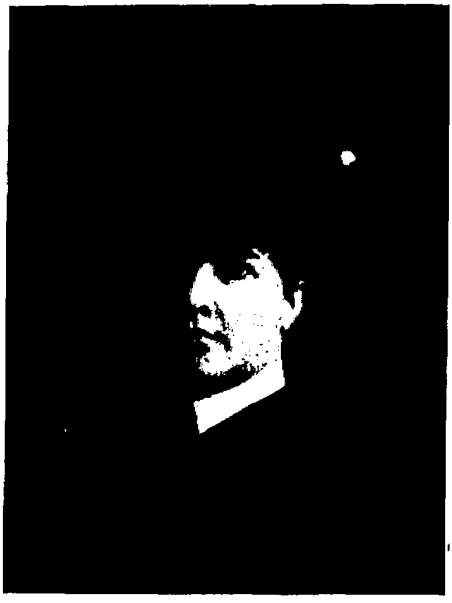
who suffers the pangs of disillusionment when she finds that her husband falls asleep over Pater, declines to read Plato aloud to her, and is more interested in automobiles than in the proper housing of the poor; and there is the insignificant husband of the poetess adored by young girls, who finally gives up $50,000 in order to cease from being known as the husband of Lucile Grant Parker and to assert himself a man among men. But best of all her recent stories is that masterpiece describing the young artist and his bride—the Lovelys, whose childlike innocence of business, entire disregard of other people's rights and willingness to take anything offered them, combined with their great charm of manner, make them the glorified type of the eternal sponge.

Anne O'Hagan, whose name is always associated with good work, is one of the many successful writers whose first sketches appeared in a newspaper. Her stories have great diversity, ranging in scene from the Western plains to the Italian quarter in New York, and varying

in *personnel* from Joan Fletcher, the woman whose pride of race is her strongest feeling, down through the political boss to the enlisted man in the ranks. She deals with emotions, as well as character, and one of the best of her recent stories is called "And Angels Came—," in which a girl who has lost her lover by death is saved from a later unworthy marriage with a rich man by a chance encounter with a little old maid who belongs to "the shining company of those who keep unsullied the early vision."

Miss O'Hagan has humour as well as pathos; it is seen in her stories, but it pervades certain delightful little essays which are mostly given to considerations of the single versus the married life. This is a subject which offers every opportunity for sentimentalism, but Miss O'Hagan is saved from this pitfall by her clear vision and good judgment. No one but a woman can appreciate at its full value her description of the compassion with which the married woman, no matter how commonplace her existence, always regards even the most brilliant and successful of spinsters, and there is a touch little short of genius in the author's account of a lunch where, after listening spellbound to the adventures of a friend who, as a missionary in China, had participated in the Boxer troubles, and had become familiar with that wonderful crystallised civilisation, the married woman of the party regrets in perfect good faith that Estella should have had so little experience of life, by which she meant that she had never married.

JULIET WILBOR TOMPKINS



ELIZABETH JORDAN

Mrs. Wilson Woodrow is another Western woman whose work has been steadily growing in favour with the public since her first appearance as a writer. Perhaps the best of her short stories are those in which she has depicted the feminine side of life in a Colorado mining village, and in which the principal character is one new in fiction, the Missioner. She does not let us forget that in Colorado women have political power, and that their votes are as liable to stray from purely patriotic paths as those of men.

A year or more ago there appeared in one of the magazines a remarkably good story by Mary S. Watts, a name new to most readers. It was called "The Gate of the Seven Hundred Virgins" and was

JOSEPHINE DASKAM BACON

a story of smugglers in a little French seaport. It had the charm of originality, incident, and humour, and a finish quite remarkable for a first achievement. Since then two more stories from her pen have appeared: "The North Road," a tale of highwaymen on the road between London and Edinburgh, and "The Voodoo Woman," a story of West Indian magic. The three are entirely different in scene, character, and incident, but each is so good in its way as to assure us that one of the latest recruits to the band of women writers may be relied on to sustain the high quality of its work.

It is not the writer's purpose to com-

MYRA KELLY

ment fully upon the work of those women who, in spite of their comparatively recent entry into the field of short-story writing, have already secured for themselves a high position therein, nor is it possible to deal adequately, within the limits of this article, with the many clever writers with whose names the magazines have made us familiar. There is Herminie Templeton, with her sketches of Irish life and character; Eliza Calvert Hall, whose "Aunt Jane" is such a de-

lightful personality, and George Madden Martin, who has caused many of us to re-live our happy, foolish youth in the person of Emmy Lou. And there are writers like Mary Heaton Vorse, Zona Gale, Olivia Dunbar, Elizabeth Jordan, and Beatrix Lloyd, whose work is constantly to be met with in the pages of the periodicals.

The old accusation that women have no sense of humour is fully refuted by a glance at the writings of many of these women. Besides the atmosphere of gentle humour that pervades the work of Miss O'Hagan and Miss Tompkins, the latter has done some clever burlesques, one in particular which hit off the peculiarities of the epigrammatic school of fiction, having attracted much attention. Mrs. Wilson Woodrow is a frequent contributor to *Life*, and her humorous work is fully up to the standard of that periodical. Both Josephine Daskam Bacon and Christine Terhune Herrick have made merry at the expense of the advanced method of bringing up children, and the very foundation of Myra Kelly's success is her power of showing us the funny side of the foreign children who throng our public schools.

The short story has always been popular in this country, and from Edgar Poe's fantastic imagery down through Hawthorne's spiritual symbolism to Henry James's intellectual exercises our best writers have not disdained this form of literary expression. Of later years it has devolved largely upon women to keep up the national reputation, a task in which they are acquitting themselves with great credit.

Mary K. Ford.