Recorders of the New England Decline

PREFACE

American literature in the larger sense of the term began with Irving, and, if we count *The Sketch Book* as the beginning, the centennial year of its birth is yet four years hence. It has been a custom, especially among the writers of text-books, to divide this century into periods, and all have agreed at one point: in the mid-thirties undoubtedly there began a new and distinct literary movement. The names given to this new age, which corresponded in a general way with the Victorian Era in England, have been various. It has been called the Age of Emerson, the Transcendental Period, the National Period, the Central Period. National it certainly was not, but among the other names there is little choice. Just as with the Victorian Era in England, not much has been said as to when the period ended. There has been no official closing, though it has been long evident that all the forces that brought it about have long since expended themselves and that a distinctively new period has not only begun but has already quite run its course.

It has been our object to determine this new period and to study its distinguishing characteristics. We have divided the literary history of the century into three periods, denoting them as the Knickerbocker Period, the New England Period, and the National Period, and we have made the last to begin shortly after the close of the Civil War with those new forces and new ideals and broadened views that grew out of that mighty struggle.

The field is a new one: no other book and no chapter of a book has ever attempted to handle it as a unit. It is an important one: it is our first really national period, all-American, autochthonic. It was not until after the war that our writers ceased to imitate and looked to their own land for material and inspiration. The amount of its literary product has been amazing. There have been single years in which have been turned out more volumes than were produced during all of the Knickerbocker Period. The quality of this output has been uniformly high. In 1902 a writer in *Harper's Weekly* while reviewing a book by Stockton dared even to say: "He belonged to that great period between 1870 and 1890 which is as yet the greatest in our literary history, whatever the greatness of any future time may be." The statement is strong, but it is true. Despite Lowell's statement, it was not until after the Civil War that America achieved in any degree her literary independence. One can say of the period what one may not say of earlier periods, that the great mass of its writings could have been produced nowhere else but in the United States. They are redolent of the new spirit of America: they are American literature.

In our study of this new national period we have considered only those authors who did their first distinctive work before 1892. Of that large group of writers born after the beginning of the period and borne into their work by forces that had little connection with the great primal impulses that came from the Civil War and the expansion period that followed, we have said nothing. We have given the names of a few of them at the close of chapter 17, but their work does not concern our study. We have limited ourselves also by centering our attention upon the three literary forms, poetry, fiction, and the essay. History we have neglected largely for the reasons given at the opening of chapter 18, and the drama for the reason that before 1892 there was produced no American drama of any literary value.

We would express here our thanks to the many librarians and assistants who have coöperated toward the making of the book possible, and especially would we tender our thanks to Professor R. W. Conover of the Kansas Agricultural College who helped to prepare the index.

F. L. P.

State College, Pennsylvania,
July 31, 1915.

Chapter XI

Recorders of the New England Decline

The New England school, which had so dominated the mid-nineteenth century, left, as we have seen, no heirs. As the great figures of the "Brahmins" disappeared one by one, vigorous young leaders from without the Boston circle came into their places, but the real succession — the native New England literary generation after Emerson — was feminine. During the decade from 1868 the following books, written by women born, the most of them, in those thirty which had witnessed the beginnings of the earlier group, came from the American press:

1870. *Verses*, Helen Hunt Jackson (1831-1885).
1875. *One Summer*, Blanche Willis Howard (1847-1898).
1875. *After the Ball and Other Poems*, Nora Perry (1841-1896).
Of the same generation, but earlier or else later in the literary field, were the poets Elizabeth Akers Allen (1832-1911), and Louise Chandler Moulton (1835-1908); the essayist Mary Abigail Dodge, “Gail Hamilton” (1838-1896); the novelists Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892), Jane G. Austin (1831-1894), and Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835—); and, latest of all to be known, the intense lyricist Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). In the eighties was to come the school of the younger realists, a part of the classical reaction — Alice Brown (1857—), Kate Douglas Wiggin (1859—) and Mary E. Wilkins (1862—), who were to record the later phases of the New England decline.

Outside of the New England environment there was also a notable outburst of feminine literature. In the thirteen years from 1875 appeared the following significant first volumes:

1875. Castle Nowhere, Constance Fenimore Woolson (1848-1894).
1875. A Woman in Armor, Mary Hartwell Catherwood (1847-1902).
1877. That Lass o’ Lowrie’s, Frances Hodgson Burnett (1849—).
1883. The Led Horse Claim, Mary Hallock Foote (1847—).
1884. In the Tennessee Mountains, Mary Noailles Murfree (1850—).
1884. A New Year’s Masque, Edith M. Thomas (1854—).
1886. The Old Garden and Other Verses, Margareta Wade Deland (1857—).
1886. Monsieur Motte, Grace King (1852—).
1887. Knitters in the Sun, Alice French (1850—).

The wide recognition of the Victorian women, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Mrs. Browning, and their American contemporaries, Margaret Fuller and Mrs. Stowe, had given the impetus, and the enormous popularity of prose fiction, a literary form peculiarly adapted to feminine treatment, the opportunity. During all the period the work of women dominated to a large degree the literary output.

The earliest group to appear was made up of daughters of the Brahmins — Louisa M. Alcott, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, Helen Hunt Jackson, and others — transition figures who clung to the old New England tradition, yet were touched by the new forces. The representative figure is Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. Daughter and granddaughter of theologians and divinity professors, reared in the atmosphere of the Andover theological seminary of the earlier period, she was a daughter of her generation, a perfect sample of the culminating feminine product of two centuries of New England Puritanism — sensitive to the brink of physical collapse, intellectual, disquieted of soul, ridden of conscience, introspective. We know the type perfectly. Miss Jewett, Mrs. Freeman, Miss Brown, have drawn us scores of these women — the final legatees of Puritanism, daughters of Transcendentalists and abolitionists and religious wranglers.

Literature to this group of women was not only a heritage from the past, from great shadowy masters who were mere names and books, it was a home product in actual process of manufacture about their cradles. The mother of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps — Elizabeth Stuart — had published in 1851 Sunny-Side, a simple story of life in a country parsonage, that had sold one hundred thousand copies in one year. She had followed it with A Peep at Number Five, a book that places her with Mrs. Stowe as a pioneer depicter of New England life, and then, at the very opening of her career, she had died in 1852. “It was impossible to be her daughter and not to write. Rather, I should say, impossible to be their daughter and not to have something to say, and a pen to say it.” The daughter was publishing at thirteen; at nineteen she was the author of twelve Sunday-school books; at twenty-four she had issued The Gates Ajar, which was to go through twenty editions the first year and to be translated into the principal European languages.

Gates Ajar is a significant book, significant beyond its real literary merit. It is a small book, an excited, over-intense book, yet as a document in the history of a period and a confession laying bare for an instant a woman's soul it commands attention. It is not a novel; it is a journal intime, an impassioned theological argument, a personal experience written with tears and read with tears by hundreds of thousands. It was the writer herself who had received the telegram telling that a loved one — not a brother as the book infers — had been shot in battle; it was her own life that had almost flickered out as the result of it; and it was she who had tried to square the teachings ingrained into her Puritan intellect with the desolation of her woman's heart.

It was peculiarly a New England book: only a New Englander of the old tradition can understand the full meaning of it, and yet it came at a moment when the whole nation was eager and ready for its message. The war had brought to tens of thousands what it had brought to this New England woman. In every house there was mourning, and the Puritan vision of the after life, unreasonable and lifeless, was inadequate for a nation that had been nourished upon sentimentalism. The heart of the people demanded something warm and sensible and convincing in place of the cold scriptural metaphors and abstractions. The new spirit that had been awakened by the war called for reality and concrete statement everywhere, and it found in the book, which made of heaven another earth — a glorified New England perhaps — with occupation and joys and friendships unchanged, a revelation with which it was in full accord. It brought comfort, for in every line of it was the intensity of conviction, of actual experience. It quivered with sympathy, it breathed reality from every page, and it seemed to break down the barriers until the two worlds were so near together that one might hold his breath to listen. The book, while it undoubtedly helped to prolong the sentimental era in America, nevertheless must be counted among the forces that brought to the new national period its fuller measure of toleration, its demand for reality, its wider sympathy.

All the author's later books bear the same marks of intensity, of subjectivity, of purpose: all of them are outpourings of herself. She is a special pleader shrilling against abuses, as in Loveliness, which excoriates vivisection, arguing for causes as in A Singular Life, a vision of the ideal pastor and his
church. The accumulated Puritanism within her gave to all her work dramatic tension. It is impossible to read her with calmness: one is shocked and grieved and harrowed; one is urged on every page to think, to feel, to rush forth and right some wrong, to condemn some evil or champion some cause.

Her world was largely a subjective one; to write she must be touched strongly on the side of her sympathy, she must have brought vividly into her vision some concrete case. Before she could write "The Tenth of January" — Atlantic, 1868 — she must spend a month in the atmosphere of the tragedy, not to collect realistic details, but to feel for herself the horror that she would impart. Her aim was sentimental: the whole story centers about the fact that while the ruins of the fallen mill were burning there floated out of the flames the voices of imprisoned girls singing "Shall We Gather at the River?" In its fundamentals her work, all of it, is autobiographic. Womanlike, she denied the fact — "If there be one thing among the possibilities to which a truly civilized career is liable, more than another objectionable to the writer of these words, the creation of autobiography has long been that one," and yet her books, all of them, have been chapters out of her own spiritual life. She has felt rather than seen, she has pleaded rather than created. Rather than present a rounded picture of the life objectively about her, she has given analyses of her own New England soul.

She yielded, at last, in some degree, to the later tendencies of American literature, and drew with realistic faithfulness characters and characteristics in the little New England world that was hers — A Madonna of the Tubs, The Supply at St. Agatha's, Jack, the Fisherman, and a few others, yet even these are something more than stories, something more than pictures and interpretations. In Jack, the Fisherman, for instance, the temperance lesson stands out as sharply as if she had taken a text. The artist within her was dominated ever by the preacher; the novelist by the Puritan.

Another transition figure, typical of a group of writers and at the same time illustrative of the change that came over the tone of American literature after the war period, is Harriet Prescott Spofford. A country girl, born in a Maine village, educated in the academy of a country town in New Hampshire, compelled early to be the chief support of an invalided father and mother, she turned from the usual employments open to the women of her time — work in the cotton mills and school teaching — to the precarious field of literature. That could mean only story-writing for the family weeklies of the day, for a bourgeois public that demanded sentimental love stories and romance. Success made her ambitious. She applied herself to the study of fiction — American, English, French. How wide was her reading one may learn from her essays later published in the Atlantic, "The Author of 'Charles Auchester'" and "Charles Reade." The new realism which was beginning to be felt as a force in fiction, she flouted with indignation: — "he never with Chinese accuracy, gives us gossiping drivel that reduces life to the dregs of the commonplace." Rather would she emulate the popular novelist Elizabeth Sheppard: "At his, Disraeli's, torch she lit her fires, over his stories she dreamed, his 'Contarini Fleming' she declared to be the touchstone of all romantic truth." The essay reveals the author like a flash-light. She too dreamed over Disraeli and the early Bulwer-Lytton, over Charlotte Brontë and Poe, over George Sand and French romance until at last when she submitted her first story to the Atlantic, "In a Cellar," Lowell for a time feared that it was a translation.

Other American women have had imaginations as lawless and as gorgeously rich as Harriet Prescott Spofford's; Augusta J. Evans Wilson, for instance, whose St. Elmo (1866) sold enormously even to the end of the new period, but no other American woman of the century was able to combine with her imaginings and her riotous colorings a real distinction of style. When in the fifth volume of the Atlantic appeared "The Amber Gods," judicious readers everywhere cried out in astonishment. Robert Browning and others in England praised it extravagantly. A new star had arisen, a novelist with a style that was French in its brilliancy and condensation, and oriental in its richness and color.

The Amber Gods fails of being a masterpiece by a margin so small that it exasperates, and it fails at precisely the point where most of the mid-century fiction failed. In atmosphere and style it is brilliant, so brilliant indeed that it has been appraised more highly than it deserves. Moreover, the motif, as one gathers it from the earlier pages, is worthy of a Hawthorne. The amber beads have upon them an ancestral curse, and the heroine with her supernatural beauty, a satanic thing without a soul, is a part of the mystery and the curse. Love seems at length to promise Undine-like a soul to this soulless creature:

He read it through — all that perfect, perfect scene. From the moment when he said,

"I overlean,
This length of hair and lustrous front — they turn
Like an entire flower upward" —
his voice low, sustained, clear — till he reached the line,
"Look at the woman here with the new soul" —
till he turned the leaf and murmured,
"Shall to produce form out of unshaped stuff
Be art — and, further, to evoke a soul
From form be nothing? This new soul is mine!" —
till then he never glanced up.

But there is lack of constructive skill, lack of definiteness, lack of reality. The story sprawls at the end where it should culminate with compelling power. The last sentence is startling, but it is not connected with the motif and is a mere sensational addition. Everywhere there is the unusual, the overwrought, incoherent vagueness. It is not experience, it is a revel of color and of sensuousness; it is a Keats-like banquet, sweets and spicery.

The parallelism with Keats may be pressed far. She was first of all a poet, a lyrist, a dweller in Arcady rather than in a New England village. She, like so many others of her generation, had fallen under the spell of the young Tennyson, and her world is a world of cloying sentimental: the whole story centers about the fact that while the ruins of the fallen mill were burning there floated out of the flames the voices of imprisoned girls singing "Shall We Gather at the River?" In its fundamentals her work, all of it, is autobiographic. Womanlike, she denied the fact — "If there be one thing among the possibilities to which a truly civilized career is liable, more than another objectionable to the writer of these words, the creation of autobiography has long been that one," and yet her books, all of them, have been chapters out of her own spiritual life. She has felt rather than seen, she has pleaded rather than created. Rather than present a rounded picture of the life objectively about her, she has given analyses of her own New England soul.

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sweetness, of oriental sensuousness, of merely physical beauty. Poems like "Pomegranate-Flowers" and "In Titian's Garden" show her tropical temperament:

And some girl sea-bronzed and sparkling,
On her cheek the stain ensanguined,
Bears aloft the bossy salver:
As the innocent Lavinia
Brought them in old days of revel
Fruits and flowers amesh with sunbeams —
No red burnish of pomegranates,
No cleft peach in velvet vermeil,
No bright grapes their blue bloom bursting,
Dews between the cool globes slipping,
Dews like drops of clouded sapphire,
But the brighter self and spirit,
Glowed illusive in her beauty.

The same poetic glamour she threw over all the work that now poured in swift profusion from her pen: *Sir Rohan's Ghost, Azarian*, and a score of short stories in the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* and other periodicals. It had been felt that the faults so manifest in "In a Cellar" and "The Amber Gods" would disappear as the young author gained in maturity and knowledge of her art, but they not only persisted, they increased. Like Charlotte Brontë, whom in so many ways she resembled, she knew life only as she dreamed of it in her country seclusion or read of it in romance. At length toleration ceased. In 1865 *The North American Review* condemned *Azarian* as "devoid of human nature and false to actual society," and then added the significant words: "We would earnestly exhort Miss Prescott to be real, to be true to something." It marks not alone the end of the first period in Miss Prescott's career; it marks the closing of an era in American fiction.

Wonder has often been expressed that one who could write "The Amber Gods" and *Sir Rohan's Ghost* should suddenly lapse into silence and refuse to work the rich vein she had opened. The change, however, was not with the author; it was with the times. Within a year Howells was assistant editor of the *Atlantic*. The artificiality of style and the high literary tone demanded in the earlier period disappeared with the war, and in their place came simplicity and naturalness and reality. The author of *Azarian* continued to write her passionate and melodious romance, but the columns of the *Atlantic* and *Harper's* at length were closed to her tales. A volume of her work of this periods still awaits a publisher.

She now turned to poetry — there was no ban upon that; the old régime died first in its prose — and poured out lyrics that are to be compared even with those of Taylor and Aldrich, lyrics full of passion and color and sensuous beauty. Among the female poets of America she must be accorded a place near the highest. Only "H. H." could have poured out a lyric like this:

In the dew and the dark and the coolness
I bend to the beaker and sip,
For the earth is the Lord's, and its fullness
Is held like the cup to my lip.

For his are the vast opulences
Of color, of line, and of flight,
And his was the joy of the senses
Before I was born to delight.

Forever the loveliness lingers,
Or in flesh, or in spirit, or dream,
For it swept from the touch of his fingers
While his garments trailed by in the gleam.

When the dusk and the dawn in slow union
Bring beauty to bead at the brim,
I take, 't is the cup of communion,
I drink, and I drink it with Him!

A chapter of analysis could not so completely reveal the soul of Harriet Prescott Spofford.

For a time she busied herself making books on art decoration applied to furniture, and then at last she yielded to the forces of the age and wrote stories that again commanded the magazines. With work like "A Rural Telephone," "An Old Fiddler," and "A Village Dressmaker," she entered with real distinction the field that had been preëmpted by Miss Cooke and Miss Jewett, the depiction of New England life in its actuality. Then at the close of her literary life she wrote deeper tales, like "Ordronnaux," a story with the same
The school of fiction that during the later period stands for the depicting of New England life and character in their actuality had as its pioneers Mrs. Stowe and Rose Terry Cooke. Both did their earlier work in the spirit and manner of the mid century; both were poets and dreamers; both until late in their lives worked with feeling rather than observation and gave to their fiction vagueness of outline and romantic unreality. **Uncle Tom's Cabin** was written by one who had never visited the South, who drew her materials largely from her feelings and her imagination, and made instead of a transcript of actual life, a book of religious emotion, a swift, unnatural succession of picturesque scene and incident, an improvisation of lyrical passion — a melodrama. It is the typical novel of the period before 1870, the period that bought enormous editions of *The Lamplighter, The Wide, Wide World,* and *St. Elmo. The Minister's Wooing,* 1859, a historical romance written in the Andover that a little later was to produce *Gates Ajar,* was also fundamentally religious and controversial: it contained the keynote of what was afterwards known as the Andover movement. It dealt with a people and an environment that the author knew as she knew her own childhood, and it had therefore, as **Uncle Tom's Cabin** has not, sympathy of comprehension and truth to local scene and character. And yet despite her knowledge and her sympathy, the shadow of the mid century lies over it from end to end. It lacked what **Elsie Venner** lacked, what the great bulk of the pre-Civil War literature lacked, organization, sharpness of line, reality. Lowell, a generation ahead of his time, saw the weakness as well as the strength of the book, and in pointing it out he criticized not alone the author but her period as well. "My advice," he wrote her with fine courage, "is to follow your own instincts — to stick to nature, and avoid what people commonly call the 'ideal'; for that, and beauty, and pathos, and success, all lie in the simply natural. ... There are ten thousand people who can write 'ideal' things for one who can see, and feel, and reproduce nature and character." Again the voice of the new period in American literature. But Mrs. Stowe was not one to heed literary advice; her work must come by inspiration, by impulse connected with purpose, and it must work itself out without thought of laws or models. *The Pearl of Orr's Island* came by impulse, as later, in 1869, came *Oldtown Folks.* "It was more to me than a story," she wrote of it; "it is my résumé of the whole spirit and body of New England, a country that is now exerting such an influence on the civilized world that to know it truly becomes an object." That these books, and the *Oldtown Fireside Stories* that followed, do furnish such a résumé is by no means true, but that they are faithful transcripts of New England life, and are pioneer books in a field that later was to be intensively cultivated, cannot be doubted.

Mrs. Stowe's influence upon later writers was greater than is warranted by her actual accomplishment. The fierce light that beat upon *Uncle Tom's Cabin* gave to all of her work extraordinary publicity and made of her a model when otherwise she would have been unknown. The real pioneer was Rose Terry Cooke, daughter of a humble family in a small Connecticut village. Educated in a seminary near her home, at sixteen she was teaching school and at eighteen she was writing for *Graham's Magazine* a novel called *The Mormon's Wife.* That she had never been in Utah and had never even seen a Mormon, mattered not at all; the tale to win its audience need be true only to its author's riotous fancy. But the author had humor as well as fancy, and her sense of humor was to save her. In her school work in rural districts she was in contact constantly with the quaint and the ludicrous, with all those strongly individualized characters that Puritanism and isolated country living had rendered abundant. They were a part of her every-day life; they appealed not only to her sense of humor, but to her sympathy. She found herself thinking of them as she sought for subjects for her fiction. Her passion and her ambition were centered upon poetry. The idealism and the loftiness that Harriet Prescott Spofford threw into her early romance, she threw into her lyrics. Fiction was a thing of less seriousness; it could be trifled with; it could even record the humor and the quaintness of the common folk amid whom she toiled. She turned to it as to a diversion and she was surprised to find that Lowell, the editor of the new and exclusive *Atlantic,* preferred it to her poetry. For the first volume of the magazine he accepted no fewer than five of her homely little sketches, and praised them for their fidelity and truth.

That the author considered this prose work an innovation and something below the high tone of real literature, cannot be doubted. In *Miss Lucinda* (*Atlantic,* 1861), as perfect a story of its kind as was ever written, she feels called upon to explain, and her explanation is a declaration of independence:

But if I apologize for a story that is nowise tragic, nor fitted to "the fashion of these times," possibly somebody will say at its end that I should also have apologized for its subject, since it is as easy for an author to treat his readers to high themes as vulgar ones, and velvet can be thrown into a portrait as cheaply as calico; but of this apology I wash my hands. I believe nothing in place or circumstance makes romance. I have the same quick sympathy for Biddy's sorrows with Patrick that I have for the Empress of France and her august, but rather grim, lord and master. I think words are often no harder to bear than "a blue batting," and I have a reverence for poor old maids as great as for the nine Muses. Commonplace people are only commonplace from character, and no position affects that. So forgive me once more, patient reader, if I offer you no tragedy in high life, no sentimental history of fashion and wealth, but only a little story about a woman who could not be a heroine.

This is the key to her later work. She wrote simple little stories of commonplace people in a commonplace environment, and she treated them with the sympathy of one who shares, rather than as one who looks down upon a spectacle and takes sides. There is no bookish flavor about the stories: they are as artless as the narrative told by a winter hearth. In the great mass of fiction dealing with New England life and character her work excels in humor — that subdued humor which permeates every part like an atmosphere — in the picturing of the odd and the whimsical, in tenderness and sympathy, and in the perfect artlessness that is the last triumph of art. Hers is not a realism of the severe and scientific type: it is a poetic realism like that of the earlier and more delightful Howells, a realism that sees life through a window with the afternoon light upon it. In the whole output of the school there are few sketches more charming and more true than her "Miss Lucinda," "Freedom Wheeler's Controversy with Providence," "Old Miss Dodd," "The Deacon's Week," and "A Town and a Country Mouse." Others, like Mrs. Slosson and Rowland E. Robinson, for instance, have caught with exquisite skill the grotesque and
Of the later group, the generation born in the fifties and the early sixties, Sarah Orne Jewett is the earliest figure. With her there was no preliminary dallying with mid-century sentiment and sensationalism; she belongs to the era of Oldtown Folks rather than of Uncle Tom's Cabin. "It was happily in the writer's childhood," she records in her later introduction to Deephaven, "that Mrs. Stowe had written of those who dwelt along the wooded sea-coast and by the decaying, shipless harbors of Maine. The first chapters of The Pearl of Orr's Island gave the young author of Deephaven to see with new eyes and to follow eagerly the old shore paths from one gray, weather-beaten house to another, where Genius pointed her the way." And again in a letter written in 1889: "I have been reading the beginning of The Pearl of Orr's Island and finding it just as clear and perfectly original and strong as it seemed to me in my thirteenth or fourteenth year, when I read it first. I shall never forget the exquisite flavor and reality of delight it gave me. It is classical — historical."8

She herself had been born by one of those same "decaying, shipless harbors of Maine," at South Berwick, a village not far from the native Portsmouth of Thomas Bailey Aldrich. It was no ordinary town, this deserted little port. "A stupid, common country town, some one dared to call Deephaven in a letter once, and how bitterly we resented it."9 It had seen better days. There was an atmosphere about it from a romantic past. In Miss Jewett's work it figures as Deephaven. "The place prided itself most upon having been long ago the residence of one Governor Chantry, who was a rich ship-owner and East India merchant, and whose fame and magnificence were almost fabulous. ... There were formerly five families who kept their coaches in Deephaven; there were balls at the Governor's and regal entertainments at other of the grand mansions; there is not a really distinguished person in the country who will not prove to have been directly or indirectly connected with Deephaven." And again, "Deephaven seemed more like one of the cozy little English seaside towns than any other. It was not in the least American."

The social régime of this early Berwick had been cavalier rather than Puritan. It had survived in a few old families like the Jewetts, a bit of the eighteenth century come down into the late nineteenth. Miss Jewett all her life seemed like her own Miss Chauncey, an exotic from an earlier day, a survival — "thoroughly at her ease, she had the manner of a lady of the olden time." Her father, a courtly man and cultivated, a graduate of Bowdoin and for a time a lecturer there, gave ever the impression that he could have filled with brilliancy a larger domain than that he had destined to occupy. He had settled down in Berwick as physician for a wide area, much trusted and much revered, a physician who ministered to far more than the physical needs of his people. His daughter, with a daughter's loving hand, has depicted him in A Country Doctor, perhaps the most tender and intimate of all her studies. She owed much to him; from him had come, indeed, the greater part of all that was vital in her education. Day after day she had ridden with him along the country roads, and had called with him at the farmhouses and cottages, and had talked with him of people and flowers and birds, of olden times, of art and literature.

A story from her pen, "Mr. Bruce," signed "A. E. Eliot," had appeared in the Atlantic as early as 1869, but it was not until 1873 that "The Shore House," changed later to "Kate Lancaster's Plan," the first of the Deephaven papers, appeared in the same magazine. She had begun to write with a definite purpose. "When I was perhaps fifteen," she records in an autobiographical fragment, "the first city boarders began to make their appearance near Berwick, and the way they misconstrued the country people and made game of their peculiarities fired me with indignation. I determined to teach the world that country people were not the awkward, ignorant set those people seemed to think. I wanted the world to know their grand simple lives; and, so far as I had a mission, when I first began to write, I think that was it."

Mrs. Stowe and Mrs. Cooke were the depicters of the older New England, the New England at flood tide; Miss Jewett was the first to paint the ebb. With them New England was a social unit as stable as the England of Jane Austen; with her it was a society in transition, the passing of an old régime. The westward exodus had begun, with its new elements of old people left behind by their migrating children, the deserted farm, the decaying seaside town, the pathetic return of the native for a brief day, as in "A Native of Winby," and, to crown it all, the summer boarder who had come in numbers to laugh at the old and wonder at it. She would preserve all that was finest in the New England that was passing, and put it into clear light that all might see how glorious the past had been, and how beautiful and true were the pathetic fragments that still remained.

She approached her work with the serenity and the seriousness of one who goes to devotions. She was never watchful for the eccentric and the picturesque; there are no grotesque deacons and shrill old maids in her stories. She would depict only the finer and gentler side of New England life: men quiet and kindly; women sweet-tempered and serene. We may smile over her pictures of ancient mariners "sunning themselves like turtles on the wharves," her weather-beaten farmers gentle as women, and her spinsters and matrons, like Miss Debby, belonging to "a class of elderly New England women which is fast dying out," but we leave them always with the feeling that they are noblemen and ladies in disguise. Her little stretch of Maine coast with its pointed firs, its bleak farms, and its little villages redolent of the sea she has made peculiarly her own domain, just as Hardy has made Wessex his, and she has made of her native Deephaven an American counterpart of Cranford.

Many times Miss Jewett has been compared with Hawthorne, and undoubtedly there is basis for comparison. Her style, indeed, in its simplicity and effortless strength may be likened to his, and her pictures of decaying wharves and of quaint personalities in an old town by the sea have the same atmosphere and the same patrician air of distinction, but further one may not go. Of his power to trace the blighting and transforming effects of a sin and his wizard knowledge of the human heart, she had nothing. She is a writer of little books and short stories, the painter of a few subjects in a provincial little area, but within her narrow province she has no rival nearer her own times than Mrs. Gaskell.

Her kinship is with Howells rather than with Hawthorne, the Howells of the earlier manner, with his pictures of the Boston of the East India days, his half-poetic studies in background and character, his portraits etched with exquisite art, his lambent humor that plays over
all like an evening glow. In her stories, too, the plot is slight, and background and characterization and atmosphere dominate; and as with him in the days before the poet had been put to death, realism is touched everywhere with romance. She paints the present ever upon the background of an old, forgotten, far-off past, with that dim light upon it that now lies over the South of the old plantation days. Over all of her work lies this gentle glamour, this softness of atmosphere, this evanescent shade of regret for something vanished forever. Hers is a transfigured New England, a New England with all its roughness and coarseness and sordidness refined away, the New England undoubtedly that her gentle eyes actually saw. Once, indeed, she wrote pure romance. Her *The Tory Lover* is her dream of New England's day of chivalry, the high tide mark from which to measure the depth of its ebb.

Her power lies in her purity of style, her humorous little touches, and her power of characterization. Work like her "A White Heron," "Miss Tempy's Watchers," and "The Dulham Ladies," has a certain lightness of touch, a pathos and a humor, a skill in delineation which wastes not a word or an effect, that places it among the most delicate and finished of American short stories. Yet brilliant as they are in technique, in characterization and background and atmosphere, they lack nevertheless the final touch of art. They are too literary; they are too much works of art, too much from the intellect and not enough from the heart. They are Sir Roger de Coverley sketches, marvelously well done, but always from the Sir Roger standpoint. There is a certain "quality" in all that Miss Jewett wrote, a certain unconscious *noblesse oblige* that kept her ever in the realm of the gentle, the genteel, the Berwick old régime. One feels it in her avoidance of everything common and squalid, in her freedom from passion and dramatic climax, in her objective attitude toward her characters. She is always sympathetic, she is moved at times to real pathos, but she stands apart from her picture; she observes and describes; she never, like Rose Terry Cooke, mingles and shares. She cannot. Hers is the pride that the lady of the estate takes in her beloved peasantry; of the patrician who steps down of an afternoon into the cottage and comes back to tell with amusement and perhaps with tears of what she finds there.

All her life she lived apart from that which she described. Her winters she spent in Boston, much of the time in the home of Mrs. James T. Fields, surrounded by memorials of the great period of American literature. Like Howells, she wrote ever in the presence of the Brahmins — a task not difficult, for she herself was a Brahmin. It was impossible for her to be common or to be narrowly realistic. She wrote with deliberation and she revised and rerevised and finished her work, conscious ever of her art — a classicist, sending forth nothing that came as a cry from her heart, nothing that came winged with a message, nothing that voiced a vision and a new seeing, nothing that was not literary in the highest classical sense. In the history of the new period she stands midway between Mrs. Spofford and Mrs. Freeman; a new realist whose heart was with the old school; a romanticist, but equipped with a camera and a fountain pen.

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman is the typical representative of the group born a generation after the women of the thirties, the group that knew nothing of the emotional fifties and sixties, and that began its work when the new literature of actuality, the realism of Flaubert and Hardy and Howells, was in full domination. Of hesitancy, of transition from the old to the new, her fiction shows no trace. From her first story she was a realist, as enamoured of actuality and as restrained as Maupassant. She seems to have followed no one: realism was a thing native to her, as indeed it is native to all women. "Women are delicate and patient observers," Henry James has said in his essay on Trollope. "They hold their noses close, as it were, to the texture of life. They feel and perceive the real." But to her realism Miss Wilkins added a power usually denied her sex, the power of detachment, the epic power that excludes the subjective and hides the artist behind the picture. In all the writings of the creator of *Gates Ajar* we see but the intense and emotional soul of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps; in that of the writer of *A Humble Romance* we see only the grim lineaments of New England, a picture as remorseless and as startling as if a searchlight had been turned into the dim and cobwebbed recesses of an ancient vault. She stands not aloof like Miss Jewett; she is simply unseen. She is working in the materials of her own heart and drawing the outlines of her own home, yet she possesses the epic power to keep her creations impersonal to the point of anonymity.

For her work, everything in her life was a preparation. She was born in Randolph not far from Boston, of an ancestry which extended back into the darkest shadows of Puritanism, to old Salem and a judge in the witchcraft trials. Her more immediate progenitors were of humble station: her father was first a builder in her native Randolph, then a store-keeper in Brattleboro, Vermont. Thus her formative years were passed in the narrow environment of New England villages. The death of her father and mother during her early girlhood must also be recorded, as should the fact that her schooling was austere and limited.

When she approached literature, therefore, it was as a daughter of the Puritans, as one who had been nurtured in repression. Love in its tropical intensity, the fierce play of the passions, color, profusion, outspoken toleration, freedom — romance in its broadest connotation — of these she knew nothing. She had lived her whole life in the warping atmosphere of inherited Puritanism, of a Puritanism that had lost its earlier vitality and had become a convention and a superstition, in a social group inbred for generations and narrowly restricted to neighborhood limits. "They were all narrow-lived country people," she writes. "Their customs had made deeper grooves in their roads; they were more fastidious and jealous of their social rights than many in higher positions." She recorded it very largely in her first four volumes: *A Humble Romance*, twenty-four short stories as grim and austere as Puritanism itself; *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, *A Humble Nun*, a prolonged short story; and *Pembroke*, a novel. This is the vital part of her work, the part that is to bear up and preserve her name if it is to endure.
The key to this earlier work is the word repression. The very style is puritanic; it is angular, unornamented, severe; it is rheumatic like the greater part of the characters it deals with; it gasps in short sentences and hobbles disconnectedly. It deals ever with repressed lives: with dwarfed and anemic old maids who have been exhorted all their lives to self-examination and to the repression of every emotion and instinct; with women unbalanced and neurotic, who subside at last into dumb endurance; with slaves of a parochial public opinion and of conventions ridiculously narrow hardened into iron laws; with lives in which the Puritan inflexibility and unquestioning obedience to duty has been inherited as stubbornness and bally setness, as in Deborah and Barnabas Thayer who in earlier ages would have figured as martyrs or pilgrims.

Her unit of measure is short. It is not hers to trace the slow development of a soul through a long period; it is hers to deal with climactic episodes, with the one moment in a repressed life when the repression gives way and the long pent-up forces sweep all before them, as in “The Revolt of Mother,” or “A Village Singer.” Her effects she accomplishes with the fewest strokes possible. Like the true New Englander that she is, she will waste not a word. In her story “Life-Everlasting,” Luella — the author’s miserliness with words withholds her other name — has gone to carry a pillow to the farmhouse of Oliver Weed. She wonders at the closed and deserted appearance of the premises.

Luella heard the cows low in the barn as she opened the kitchen door. “Where — did all that — blood come from?” said she.

She began to breathe in quick gasps; she stood clutching her pillow, and looking. Then she called: “Mr. Weed! Mr. Weed! Where be you? Mis’ Weed! Is anything the matter? Mis’ Weed!” The silence seemed to beat against her ears. She went across the kitchen to the bedroom. Here and there she held back her dress. She reached the bedroom door, and looked in.

Luella pressed back across the kitchen into the yard. She went out into the yard and turned towards the village. She still carried the life-everlasting pillow, but she carried it as if her arms and that were all stone. She met a woman whom she knew, and the woman spoke; but Luella did not notice her; she kept on. The woman stopped and looked after her.

Luella went to the house where the sheriff lived, and knocked. The sheriff himself opened the door. He was a large, pleasant man. He began saying something facetious about her being out calling early, but Luella stopped him.

“You’d — better go up to the — Weed house,” said she, in a dry voice. “There’s some — trouble.”

That is all we are told as to what Luella saw, though it comes out later that the man and his wife had been murdered by the hired man — how we know not. There is a primitiveness about the style, its gasping shortness of sentence, its repetitions like the story told by a child, its freedom from all straining for effect, its bareness and grimness, that stamps it as a genuine human document; not art but life itself.

For external nature she cares little. Her backgrounds are meager; the human element alone interests her. There is no Mary E. Wilkins country as there is a Sarah Orne Jewett country; there are only Mary E. Wilkins people. A somber group they are — exceptions, perhaps, grim survivals, distortions, yet absolutely true to one narrow phase of New England life. Her realism as she depicts these people is as inexorable as Balzac’s. “A Village Lear” would have satisfied even Maupassant. Not one jot is bated from the full horror of the picture; it is driven to its pitiless end without a moment of softening. No detail is omitted. It is Père Goriot reduced to a chapter. A picture like this from “Louisa” grips one by its very pitilessness:

There was nothing for supper but some bread and butter and weak tea, though the old man had his dish of Indian-meal porridge. He could not eat much solid food. The porridge was covered with milk and molasses. He bent low over it, and ate large spoonfuls with loud noises. His daughter had tied a towel around his neck as she would have tied a pinafore on a child. She had also spread a towel over the tablecloth in front of him, and she watched him sharply lest he should spill his food.

“I wish I could have somethin’ to eat that I could relish the way he does that porridge and molasses,” said she [the mother]. She had scarcely tasted anything. She sipped her weak tea laboriously.

Louisa looked across at her mother’s meagre little figure in its neat old dress, at her poor small head bending over the teacup, showing the wide parting in the thin hair.

“You don’t you toast your bread, mother?” said she. “I’ll toast it for you.”

“No, I don’t want it. I’d jest as soon have it this way as any. I don’t want no bread, nohow. I want somethin’ to relish — a herrin’, or a little mite of cold meat, or somethin’. I s’pose I could eat as well as anybody if I had as much as some folks have. Mis’ Mitchell was sayin’ the other day that she didn’t believe but what they had butcher’s meat up to Mis’ Nye’s every day in the week. She said Jonathan he went to Wolfsborough and brought home great pieces in a market-basket every week.”

She is strong only in short efforts. She has small power of construction: even Pembroke may be resolved into a series of short stories. The setness of Barnabas Thayer is prolonged until it ceases to be convincing: we lose sympathy; he becomes a mere Ben Jonson "humor" and not a human being. The story is strong only in its episodes — the cherry party of the tight-fisted Silas Berry, the midnight coasting of the boy Ephraim, the removal of Hannah to the poorhouse, the marriage of Rebecca — but these touch the very heart of New England. Because of their artlessness they are the perfection of art.

In her later period Miss Wilkins became sophisticated and self-conscious. The acclaim of praise that greeted her short stories tempted her to essay a larger canvas in wider fields of art. She had awakened to a realization of the bareness of her style and she sought to bring to her work ornament and the literary graces. She experimented with verse and drama and juveniles, with long novels and romances, and even with tales of New Jersey life. In vain. Her decline began with Madelon, which is improbable and melodramatic, and it continued...
through all her later work. She wrote problem novels like The Portion of Labor, long and sprawling and ineffective, and stories like By the Light of the Soul, as impossible and as untrue to life as a young country girl's dream of city society. As a novelist and as a depicter of life outside of her narrow domain, she has small equipment. She stands for but one thing: short stories of the grim and bare New England social system; sketches austere and artless which limn the very soul of a passing old régime; photographs which are more than photographs: which are threnodies.

VI

The last phase of the school may be studied in the work of Alice Brown, representative of the influences at the end of the century. The late recognition of her fiction — she was born in 1857 — which placed her a decade after Miss Wilkins who was born in 1862, compelled her to serve an apprenticeship like that of Howells, and subjected her work to the new shaping influences of the nineties. When she did gain recognition in 1895, she brought a finished art. She had mastered the newly worked-out science of the short story, she had studied the English masters — chiefest of all Stevenson, whose influence so dominated the closing century. She was not a realist as Miss Wilkins was a realist. The New England dialect stories of Meadow Grass were not put forth to indicate the final field that she had chosen for her art: they were experiments just as all the others of her earlier efforts were experiments. Of her first seven books, Fools of Nature, with its background of spiritualism, was a serious attempt at serious fiction with a thesis worthy of a George Eliot, Mercy Warren and Robert Louis Stevenson were biographical and critical studies, By Oak and Thorn was a collection of travel essays, The Road to Castelay was a collection of poems, and The Day of His Youth perhaps a romance.

That she won her recognition as a writer of dialect tales rather than as a novelist, a poet, an essayist, a romancer, was due, first, to the nature of the times, and, secondly, to the fact that the tales were a section of her own life written with fullness of knowledge and sympathy. She had been born and reared in a New Hampshire town, educated in a country school and a rural “female seminary,” and, like Rose Terry Cooke, she had taught school. Later she had broken from this early area of her life and had resided in Boston. The glamour of childhood grew more and more golden over the life she had left behind her; the memories of fragrant summer evenings in the green country and of the old homes she had known with all their varied inmates grew ever more tender on her pages as she wrote. It was impossible for her not to be true to this area that she knew so completely. Characters like Mrs. Blair and Miss Dyer in “Joint Owners in Spain,” or Farmer Eli in “Farmer Eli’s Vacation” stood living before her imagination as she told of them. She had known them in the flesh. If she were to paint the picture at all she must paint it as it was in her heart. To add to it or to subtract from it were to violate truth itself.

Her stories differ from Mrs. Cooke’s and Miss Jessett’s in a certain quality of atmosphere — it is difficult to explain more accurately. They have a quality of humor and of pathos, a sprightliness and freedom about them that are all their own. They never fall into carelessness like so much of the work of Mrs. Stowe and they are never poorly constructed. They are photographically true to the life they represent, and yet they possess, many of them, the beauties and the graces and the feeling of romance. They add richness to realism. In style she is the antithesis of Miss Wilkins. There is beauty in all of her prose, a half-felt tripping of feet often, a lilting rhythm as unpremeditated as a bird-song, swift turns of expression that are near to poetry. An inscription in the Tiverton churchyard halts her, and as she muses upon it she is wholly a poet:

“The purple flower of a maid!” All the blossomy sweetness, the fragrant lament of Lycidas, lies in that one line. Alas, poor love-lies-bleeding! And yet not poor according to the barren pity we accord the dead, but dowered with another youth set like a crown upon the unstowned front of this. Not going with sparse blossoms ripened or decayed, but heaped with buds and dripping over in perfume. She seems so sweet in her still loveliness, the empty province of her balmy spring, that, for a moment fain are you to snatch her back into life and of the soil of youth and joy and rapture as the immortal figures on the Grecian urn. While she was but a flying phantom on the frouze of time, Death fixed her there forever — a haunting spirit in perennial bliss.

Whenever she touches nature she touches it as a poet. She was of the mid nineties which saw the triumph of the nature school. Behind each of her stories lies a rich background of mountain or woodland or meadow, one that often, as in “A Sea Change,” dominates in Thomas Hardy fashion the whole picture.

Only a comparatively few of Miss Brown’s volumes deal with the field with which her name is chiefly associated. Meadow Grass, Tiverton Tales, and The Country Road contain the best of her dialect stories. Her heart in later years has been altogether in other work. She has written novels not provincial in their setting, and, unlike Miss Wilkins, she has succeeded in doing really distinctive work. She has the constructive power that is denied so many, especially women, who have succeeded with the short story. She has done dramatic work which has won high rewards and she has written poetry. Perhaps she is a poet first of all.

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England’s decline began in the interwar years between World War I and World War II. To all appearances, England was still a great world power. The sun never set on the British flag; indeed, it had less chance of doing so in the interwar years than before. The British navy no longer quite ruled the seas, but no other did either. In the gatherings of great powers, England must still be present or consulted. This new mercantilism differed significantly in the animus behind it from the mercantilism of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. It was spurred by the trend toward socialism and the welfare state. Countries found it expedient to erect “trade curtains” to protect themselves from the world market in order to control and regulate domestic economies.