

SHORT STORIES OLD AND NEW

SELECTED AND EDITED

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GINN AND COMPANY

BOSTON • NEW YORK • CHICAGO • LONDON

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219.12

The Athenæum Press
GINN AND COMPANY • PRO-
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INTRODUCTION

Every short story has three parts, which may be called Setting or Background, Plot or Plan, and Characters or Character.. If you are going to write a short story, as I hope you are, you will find it necessary to think through these three parts so as to relate them interestingly and naturally one to the other; and if you want to assimilate the best that is in the following stories, you will do well to approach them by the same three routes.

The Setting or Background gives us the time and the place of the story with such details of custom, scenery, and dialect as time and place imply. It answers the questions *When?* *Where?* The Plot tells us what happened. It gives us the incidents and events, the haps or mishaps, that are interwoven to make up the warp and woof of the story. Sometimes there is hardly any interweaving; just a plain plan or simple outline is followed, as in "The Christmas Carol" or "The Great Stone Face." We may still call the core of these two stories the Plot, if we want to, but Plan would be the more accurate. This part of the story answers the question *What?* Under the heading Characters or Character we study the personalities of the men and women who move through the story and give it unity and coherence. Sometimes, as in "The Christmas Carol" or "Markheim," one character so dominates the others that they are mere spokes in his hub or incidents in his career. But in "The Gift of the Magi," though more space is given to Della, she and Jim act from the same motive and contribute equally to the development of the story. In one of our stories the

main character is a dog, but he is so human that we may still say that the chief question to be answered under this heading is *Who?*

Many books have been written about these three parts of a short story, but the great lesson to be learned is that the excellence of a story, long or short, consists not in the separate excellence of the Setting or of the Plot or of the Characters but in the perfect blending of the three to produce a single effect or to impress a single truth. If the Setting does not fit the Plot, if the Plot does not rise gracefully from the Setting, if the Characters do not move naturally and self-revealingly through both, the story is a failure. Emerson might well have had our three parts of the short story in mind when he wrote,

All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone.

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SHORT STORIES

I. ESTHER¹

AUTHOR UNKNOWN

[*Setting.* The events take place in Susa, the capital of Persia, in the reign of Ahasuerus, or Xerxes (485-465 B.C.). This foreign locale intensifies the splendid Jewish patriotism that breathes through the story from beginning to end. If the setting had been in Jerusalem, Esther could not have preached the noble doctrine, "When in Rome, don't do as Rome does, but be true to the old ideals of home and race."

Plot. "Esther" seems to me the best-told story in the Bible. Observe how the note of empty Persian bigness versus simple Jewish faith is struck at the very beginning and is echoed to the end. Thus, Ahasuerus ruled over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, the opening banquet lasted one hundred and eighty-seven days, the king's bulletins were as unalterable as the tides, the gallows erected was eighty-three feet high, the beds were of gold and silver upon a pavement of red and blue and white and black marble, the money wrested from the Jews was to be eighteen million dollars, etc. The word "banquet" occurs twenty times in this short story and only twenty times in all the remaining thirty-eight books of the Old Testament. In other words, Ahasuerus and his trencher-mates ate and drank as much in five days as had been eaten and drunk by all the other Old Testament characters from "Genesis" to "Malachi."

Note also the contrast between the two queens, the two prime ministers, the two edicts, and the two later banquets.

¹ From the Old Testament, Authorized Version.

The most masterly part of the plot is the handling of events between these banquets. Read again from chapter v, beginning at verse 9, through chapter vi, and note how skillfully the pen is held. In motivation as well as in symmetry and naturalness the story is without a peer. There is humor, too, in the solemn deliberations over Vashti's "No" (chapter i, verses 12-22) and in the strange procession led by pedestrian Haman (chapter vi, verses 6-11).

The purpose of the story was to encourage the feast of Purim (chapter ix, verses 20-32) and to promote national solidarity. It may be compared to "A Christmas Carol," which was written to restore the waning celebration of Christmas, and to our Declaration of Independence, which is re-read on every Fourth of July to quicken our sense of national fellowship. But "Esther" is more than an institution. It is the old story of two conflicting civilizations, one representing bigness, the other greatness; one standing for materialism, the other for idealism; one enthroning the body, the other the spirit.

Characters. These are finely individualized, though each seems to me a type. Ahasuerus is a tank that runs blood or wine according to the hand that turns the spigot. He was used for good but deserves and receives no credit for it. No man ever missed a greater opportunity. He was brought face to face with the two greatest world-civilizations of history; but, understanding neither, he remains only a muddy place in the road along which Greek and Hebrew passed to world-conquest. Haman, a blend of vanity and cruelty and cowardice but not without some power of initiative, was a fit minister for his king. He lives in history as one who, better than in Hamlet's illustration, was "hoist with his own petard," the petard in his case being a gallows. He typifies also the just fate of the man who, spurred by the hate of one, includes in his scheme of extermination a whole people. Collective vengeance never received a better illustration nor a more exemplary punishment. Mordecai is altogether admirable in refusing to kowtow to Haman and in

his unselfish devotion to his fair cousin, Esther. The noblest sentiment in the book — "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" — comes from Mordecai.

But the leading character is Esther, not because she was "fair and beautiful" but because she was hospitable to the great thought suggested by Mordecai. None but a Jew could have asked, "Who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" and none but a Jew could have answered as Esther answered. The question implied a sense of personal responsibility and of divine guidance far beyond the reach of Persian or Mede or Greek of that time. It calls up many a quiet hour when Esther and Mordecai talked together of their strange lot in this heathen land and wondered if the time would ever come when they could interpret their trials in terms of national service rather than of meaningless fate. Imagine the blank and bovine expression that Ahasuerus or Haman would have turned upon you if you had put such a question to either of them. But in the case of Esther, Mordecai's appeal unlocked an unused reservoir of power that has made her one of the world's heroines. She had her faults, or rather her limitations, but since her time men have gone to the stake, have built up and torn down principalities and powers, on the dynamic conviction that they had been sent to the kingdom "for such a time as this."]

CHAPTER I

THE STORY OF VASHTI

1. Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over a hundred and seven and twenty provinces,)
2. That in those days, when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace,

3. In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him:

4. When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even a hundred and fourscore days.

5. And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace;

6. Where were white, green, and blue hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble.

7. And they gave them drink in vessels of gold, (the vessels being diverse one from another,) and royal wine in abundance, according to the state of the king.

8. And the drinking was according to the law; none did compel: for so the king had appointed to all the officers of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure.

9. Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.

10. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven chamberlains that served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king,

11. To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the crown royal, to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look on.

12. But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by his chamberlains: therefore was the king very wroth, and his anger burned in him.

13. Then the king said to the wise men, which knew the times, (for so was the king's manner toward all that knew law and judgment :

14. And the next unto him was Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, which saw the king's face, and which sat the first in the kingdom,)

15. What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she hath not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?

16. And Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.

17. For this deed of the queen shall come abroad unto all women, so that they shall despise their husbands in their eyes, when it shall be reported, The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not.

18. Likewise shall the ladies of Persia and Media say this day unto all the king's princes, which have heard of the deed of the queen. Thus shall there arise too much contempt and wrath.

19. If it please the king, let there go a royal commandment from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it be not altered, That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus ; and let the king give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.

20. And when the king's decree, which he shall make, shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honour, both to great and small.

21. And the saying pleased the king and the princes ; and the king did according to the word of Memucan :

22. For he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.

CHAPTER II

ESTHER MADE QUEEN

1. After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.

2. Then said the king's servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king :

3. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hegai the king's chamberlain, keeper of the women ; and let their things for purification be given them :

4. And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti. And the thing pleased the king ; and he did so.

5. Now in Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite ;

6. Who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.

7. And he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter : for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful ; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.

8. So it came to pass, when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.

9. And the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him; and he speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her, and seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king's house: and he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women.

10. Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it.

11. And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her.

12. Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women,)

13. Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house.

14. In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaash-gaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.

15. Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what

Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.

16. So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

17. And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.

18. Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

19. And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai sat in the king's gate.

20. Esther had not yet shewed her kindred, nor her people, as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.

MORDECAI SAVES THE KING'S LIFE

21. In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.

22. And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name.

23. And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

CHAPTER III

THE CONSPIRACY OF HAMAN

1. After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.

2. And all the king's servants, that were in the king's gate, bowed, and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence.

3. Then the king's servants, which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordecai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment?

4. Now it came to pass, when they spake daily unto him, and he hearkened not unto them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's matters would stand: for he had told them that he was a Jew.

5. And when Haman saw that Mordecai bowed not, nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath.

6. And he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had shewed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai.

7. In the first month, that is, the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is, the month Adar.

8. And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.

9. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.

10. And the king took his ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy.

11. And the king said unto Haman, The silver is given to thee, the people also, to do with them as it seemeth good to thee.

12. Then were the king's scribes called on the thirteenth day of the first month, and there was written according to all that Haman had commanded unto the king's lieutenants, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the rulers of every people of every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of king Ahasuerus was it written, and sealed with the king's ring.

13. And the letters were sent by posts into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

14. The copy of the writing for a commandment to be given in every province was published unto all people, that they should be ready against that day.

15. The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment, and the decree was given in Shushan the palace. And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city Shushan was perplexed.

CHAPTER IV

FASTING AMONG THE JEWS

1. When Mordecai perceived all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and a bitter cry;

2. And came even before the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

3. And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes.

4. So Esther's maids and her chamberlains came and told it her. Then was the queen exceedingly grieved; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordecai, and to take away his sackcloth from him: but he received it not.

5. Then called Esther for Hatach, one of the king's chamberlains, whom he had appointed to attend upon her, and gave him a commandment to Mordecai, to know what it was, and why it was.

6. So Hatach went forth to Mordecai unto the street of the city, which was before the king's gate.

7. And Mordecai told him of all that had happened unto him, and of the sum of the money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.

8. Also he gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given at Shushan to destroy them, to shew it unto Esther, and to declare it unto her, and to charge her that she should go in unto the king, to make supplication unto him, and to make request before him for her people.

9. And Hatach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai.

10. Again Esther spake unto Hatach, and gave him commandment unto Mordecai;

11. All the king's servants, and the people of the king's provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called, there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days.

12. And they told to Mordecai Esther's words.

THE GREAT APPEAL

13. Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.

14. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

15. Then Esther bade them return Mordecai this answer,

16. Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish.

17. So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.