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FICTION

Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide,
In thy most need to go by thy side

AMERICAN SHORT STORIES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION BY
JOHN CURNOS



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INTRODUCTION

NOWHERE, with the possible exception of France and Russia, has the art of the short story flourished more abundantly than in the United States. Qualitatively and quantitatively, the shorter forms of fiction have, during the nineteenth century, shown such exuberant development that even if other literary forms were to be left out of the reckoning, this country would still have a place on the map scarcely to be ignored by students of literary geography. A glance at the crowded map presents an astonishing number of distinguished names: Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Fitz-James O'Brien, Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Bret Harte, Henry James, Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Sarah Orne Jewett, Frank Stockton, Ambrose Bierce, Mary E. Wilkins, Kate Chopin, Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Jack London, and last but not least, O. Henry. Still more numerous are the names inscribed in smaller letters, and by no means to be ignored. Many a "minor" artist pleads for remembrance in that he or she has written one or two stories worthy of the name of "masterpiece." Altogether, the cumulation and the variety offered are prodigious; moreover, the achievement has enjoyed a continuity and may, therefore, with justification, demand the attention of the historian. Many histories and handbooks have indeed been written; and the American short story has not been without its influence on the literature of other lands. Writers of such diverse gifts as Poe and O. Henry have countless admirers abroad; the author of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" has left his mark on French literature, the author of "The Four Million" is read almost as widely in Russia as he is in his native country.

Various theories have been advanced to explain this pre-eminence of the American short story; the most interesting of these by the writers themselves. It has been vaguely asserted that the American temperament, evolved out of a preoccupation with concrete, practical matters, and a tendency to rush and hurry, demands its literature terse and to the point.

An analysis of the main components should prove of some value in determining the most decisive factor in shaping the American short story.

There is, first of all, humour. Humour in itself is not a quality peculiar to any nation; and while American humour undoubtedly has a quality of its own and therefore a factor not to be ignored

it can scarcely be said to be the whole factor. The anecdotal factor may be even more cursorily dismissed, and on the same grounds. The use of dialect, i.e. the localisation of the American scene, must be considered, but no more than any component which does not affect the basic mood and structure of a tale told well. We get nearer to the secret when we examine the democratic element, which, incidentally, embraces the nature of humour, of the anecdote, and of the forms of speech. We get nearer to it still in the matter of precision, when we scrutinise the journalesque factor, of which the author of "The Luck of Roaring Camp" so glowingly speaks. The whole secret is here, and everything else is secondary. From the beginning a great democratic community, America has found her voice in the periodicals and the public press; and it is to these that, with the exceptions which prove the rule, the whole development of the American short story may be traced. Implications follow, interesting alike to the literary student and the student of social and political economy. Indeed, a whole book may be written on the subject of the American short story and economics, and fascinating reading it would make. Mr. Fred Lewis Pattee, Professor of American Literature in the Pennsylvania State College, has already, if vaguely, touched upon it in his "Development of the American Short Story"; but he is far too interested in the critical aspect of things to grasp more fully the significance of the dominant tendency. One thing, however, is made clear; in a democracy the people dictate the sort of literature they will have. In no other country has the law of supply and demand affected the literary art as it has in the United States. No stricture on the law is implied; it must be admitted that in the nineteenth century it has produced some admirable results, though latterly its effect has been to foster, in the widespread magazine press, an inferior product which has come to be known as the "formula story," a story written according to one and the same design, optimistic in character, with the ending inevitably happy at all costs.

Three great writers of the short story stand out, unaffected by economics. They are Hawthorne, Melville, and Henry James. Hawthorne's recognition came late, Melville's posthumously, and James during most of his life remained a writers' writer. It was the more sensational element in "The Scarlet Letter" which first gave Hawthorne his public; Melville's dæmonism and metaphysics could not appeal to a democratic public at any time; as for James, he had his private income, and he had no need to make a plea for public support; he went on writing about sophisticated people for sophisticated people, and to this day his public is limited. These three men alone, among the great American fiction writers, wrote what they wanted and how they wanted. To these might be added some lesser figures like Mary E. Wilkins, Sarah Orne Jewett, etc. The form of the others was more or less dictated by public conditions and private circumstances in which

the authors found themselves placed. And, oddly enough, in many instances the results have been extremely felicitous. It would be ungrateful of us to cavil at what these authors might have done in circumstances unaffected by the law of supply and demand. For we come upon what appears like a contradiction here: the law would seem to have made good writers as well as poor ones, who would have been poor in any case. It has done more than that: it has created the shorter form by forcing writers to adopt it in preference to the longer.

What Poe might have done had he received the anticipated fortune from his foster-father, Mr. Allan, is altogether problematical. He was, indeed, destined for quite another career than that of literature. But when the blow fell, only one outlet for his talents remained, and he became a writer. His difficulties arose in that for him literature was poetry, and poetry "not a pursuit, but a passion." His poetry could scarcely provide a living, and there was a market for prose; which meant that one must write for the annuals and the ladies' books so popular in his day. Short pieces were in demand, and so Poe wrote short pieces. To that extent, the influence was good, since it made a short story writer of Poe and left us some superb tales to read and treasure. But Poe's own misfortune was that he did not, or could not, comply with the particular demands made by his country and his time. A great publishing firm of his day refused to publish his tales unless he would "lower himself a little to the ordinary comprehension of the generality." It has been plausibly asserted that Poe's satires came out of his bitterness, due to his failure to market his work. Hard is the lot of the man who refused to bow to Demos where Demos rules.

A luckier fate awaited Fitz-James O'Brien, "soldier of fortune and literary adventurer," whose name has been often coupled with Poe's in that in his short stories he had shown the ability to make "copy" of new discoveries and scientific theories. "The two men," says Mr. Pattee, "undoubtedly were alike in one thing: both wrote tales with journalistic intent." But a lighter touch, the touch so vociferously demanded by editors of American periodicals had won the day for the author of "The Diamond Lens." With a product less perfect, he had more "efficiently" than Poe responded to the wants of the periodicals and the public who read them; but he had not even then all the necessary ingredients. If his manner had a measure of rightness, his materials were not all what they should be. Bret Harte was among the first to supply the lack and to answer the demand of the American public in a way it had not been answered before. The publication of "The Luck of Roaring Camp" in the new California magazine, *The Overland Monthly*, in 1868, provided a real national sensation. The fact to be noted is that the author of the story was the editor of the magazine; in short, a journalist; moreover, a journalist who had worked up through all the departments to the editor's chair. Demos was pleased and heaped

rewards on his head. Not that his good fortune was not justified. Within limitations, Bret Harte enriched the art of the short story, and in many examples of his craft attained admirable levels.

An even greater success was achieved by Thomas Bailey Aldrich when his wellnigh flawless short story, "Marjorie Daw," appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1873; but the effect of his success (economical as well as artistic) was to awaken an ambition to write a long novel. His longer pieces never quite reached the perfection of his short stories. This only shows that successful economics may work both ways: a man who has made money may do what he pleases, and what he pleases to do may not be as good as circumstances dictated him to do. One need only add that Aldrich, like Bret Harte, was an editor.

But even practised journalists may not deviate from the formula, flexible up to a point, of a short story required by the law of supply and demand; as Ambrose Bierce—"Bitter Bierce" he was called in his native San Francisco—found to his sorrow. He was what is commonly known in the United States as a "columnist," and edited a column called "Prattle" in the *Examiner*, of which a contemporary said that it was "the most wickedly clever, the most audaciously personal, and the most eagerly devoured column of causerie that probably ever was printed in this country." Attracted to the short story form, he achieved his first success in England with some satiric fables collected under the title of "Cobwebs From an Empty Skull," but when later in San Francisco he wrote some magnificent, if gruesome tales, magazines and publishers alike would have none of them.

In spite of all exceptions, such as Hawthorne, James, Melville, Mary E. Wilkins, who wrote "masterpieces" without regard to the immediate demands of the public; or such wayward authors as Poe and Bierce, rejected because they were too individual to please the many; merit, and often high merit, was not to be denied to the successful men, the entertainers of the vast public. Nevertheless, time has worked its revenges; and the American short story, which has arisen from journalism and economics threatens to end in journalism and economics. That is to say, the writing of short stories has become such a profitable affair that the market is being glutted with an article so palpably journalesque that the question of artistic merit does not even enter into it. Signs of this were not wanting even a generation ago. A novelist of merit like Frank Norris could assert in 1902 that the writer of fiction must be like the writer of news for the daily paper, in closest touch with the great democratic mass called "the American people." He should, with closest precision, study what the people want, for "in the last analysis the people are always right." Jack London, who in 1900 and 1901 had come to the fore with such strong tales as "The Son of the Wolf" and "The God of His Fathers," could at the beginning of his career give voice to the demands of his time in these words:

Make it concrete, to the point, with snap and go and life, crisp and crackling and interesting. . . . Be terse in style, vigorous of phrase, apt, concretely apt, in similitude. Avoid platitudes and common-places. Get the atmosphere, the colour, strong colour, lots of it. . . . Seize upon things salient, eliminate the rest and you have the pictures. Paint those pictures in words. Then put a snapper at the end, so if they are crowded for space they can cut off your contents anywhere, re-attach the snapper, and the story will still retain form.

The last sentence, in particular, deserves to be read carefully. What would Maupassant have thought of it? Or Chekhov? Did not the latter, too, write for a great democratic people, democratic in spite of the Tsar? Yet Jack London came near being a great writer, honoured abroad as well as at home; but evidence appears to exist of a confession made by him to the effect that if he had had his freedom—freedom, we suppose, from the mob, the press, economics—he would have written quite differently. The reader may draw his own conclusion.

American journalists who, in their different ways, were also fine short story writers include such names as Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis, and O. Henry. The last-named contributed his short stories to the Sunday edition of a New York newspaper; these stories are as good as anything which is journalistic can be, yet retain a good measure of authentic narrative art. The ingredients will not always bear looking into; but the stories are nearly always amusing, which, after all, was the chief intent of the author.

This volume is not only a collection of American short stories. It is also, by its deliberate sequence, a history of the development of the short story in the United States. I wish to express especial indebtedness to Mr. Edward J. O'Brien and Mr. R. N. Linscott, to whose co-operation this volume owes not a little of its representative quality.

JOHN CURNOS.

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PETER RUGG, THE MISSING MAN¹

By WILLIAM AUSTIN (1778-1841)

*From Jonathan Dunwell of New York to
Mr. Herman Krauff*

SIR,—Agreeably to my promise, I now relate to you all the particulars of the lost man and child which I have been able to collect. It is entirely owing to the humane interest you seemed to take in the report, that I have pursued the inquiry to the following result.

You may remember that business called me to Boston in the summer of 1820. I sailed in the packet to Providence, and when I arrived there I learned that every seat in the stage was engaged. I was thus obliged either to wait a few hours or accept a seat with the driver, who civilly offered me that accommodation. Accordingly, I took my seat by his side, and soon found him intelligent and communicative. When we had travelled about ten miles, the horses suddenly threw their ears on their necks, as flat as a hare's. Said the driver, "Have you a surtout with you?"

"No," said I; "why do you ask?"

"You will want one soon," said he. "Do you observe the ears of all the horses?"

"Yes; and was just about to ask the reason."

¹ "The tale was first printed in Buckingham's *New England Galaxy*, 10 Sept., 1824. . . . The original story purports to belong to the year 1820, and the scene of a later continuation is laid in the year 1825, both these being reprinted in *The Boston Book* for 1841."—Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "A Precursor of Hawthorne," in *The Independent*, 29 March, 1888. Republished in *The Literary Papers of William Austin* (Little, Brown & Co., 1890), edited by James Walker Austin; and as a separate volume (John W. Luce & Co., 1910), with an introduction by Thomas Wentworth Higginson.

"They see the storm-breeder, and we shall see him soon."

At this moment there was not a cloud visible in the firmament. Soon after, a small speck appeared in the road.

"There," said my companion, "comes the storm-breeder. He always leaves a Scotch mist behind him. By many a wet jacket do I remember him. I suppose the poor fellow suffers much himself—much more than is known to the world."

Presently a man with a child beside him, with a large black horse, and a weather-beaten chair, once built for a chaise-body, passed in great haste, apparently at the rate of twelve miles an hour. He seemed to grasp the reins of his horse with firmness, and appeared to anticipate his speed. He seemed dejected, and looked anxiously at the passengers, particularly at the stage-driver and myself. In a moment after he passed us, the horses' ears were up, and bent themselves forward so that they nearly met.

"Who is that man?" said I; "he seems in great trouble."

"Nobody knows who he is, but his person and the child are familiar to me. I have met him more than a hundred times, and have been so often asked the way to Boston by that man, even when he was travelling directly from that town, that of late I have refused any communication with him; and that is the reason he gave me such a fixed look."

"But does he never stop anywhere?"

"I have never known him to stop anywhere longer than to inquire the way to Boston; and let him be where he may, he will tell you he cannot stay a moment, for he must reach Boston that night."

We were now ascending a high hill in Walpole; and as we had a fair view of the heavens, I was rather disposed to jeer the driver for thinking of his surtout, as not a cloud as big as a marble could be discerned.

"Do you look," said he, "in the direction whence the man came; that is the place to look. The storm never meets him; it follows him."

We presently approached another hill; and when at the height, the driver pointed out in an eastern direction a little black speck about as big as a hat. "There," said he, "is the seed-storm. We may possibly reach Polley's before it reaches us, but the wanderer and his child will go to Providence through rain, thunder, and lightning."

And now the horses, as though taught by instinct, hastened with increased speed. The little black cloud came on rolling over the turnpike, and doubled and trebled itself in all directions. The appearance of this cloud attracted the notice of all the passengers, for after it had spread itself to a great bulk it suddenly became more limited in circumference, grew more compact, dark, and consolidated. And now the successive flashes of chain lightning caused the whole cloud to appear like a sort of irregular network, and displayed a thousand fantastic images. The driver bespoke my attention to a remarkable configuration in the cloud. He said every flash of lightning near its centre discovered to him, distinctly, the form of a man sitting in an open carriage drawn by a black horse. But in truth I saw no such thing; the man's fancy was doubtless at fault. It is a very common thing for the imagination to paint for the senses, both in the visible and invisible world.

In the meantime the distant thunder gave notice of a shower at hand; and just as we reached Polley's tavern the rain poured down in torrents. It was soon over, the cloud passing in the direction of the turnpike toward Providence. In a few moments after, a respectable-looking man in a chaise stopped at the door. The man and child in the chair having excited some little sympathy among the passengers, the gentleman was asked if he had observed them. He said he had met them; that the man seemed bewildered, and inquired the way to Boston; that he was driving at great speed, as though he expected to outstrip the tempest; that the moment he had passed him, a thunderclap broke directly over the man's head, and seemed to envelop

both man and child, horse and carriage. "I stopped," said the gentleman, "supposing the lightning had struck him; but the horse only seemed to loom up and increase his speed; and as well as I could judge, he travelled just as fast as the thunder-cloud."

While this man was speaking, a pedlar with a cart of tin merchandise came up, all dripping; and on being questioned, he said he had met that man and carriage, within a fortnight, in four different states; that at each time he had inquired the way to Boston; and that a thunder-shower like the present had each time deluged his wagon and his wares, setting his tin pots, etc. afloat, so that he had determined to get a marine insurance for the future. But that which excited his surprise most was the strange conduct of his horse, for long before he could distinguish the man in the chair his own horse stood still in the road, and flung back his ears. "In short," said the pedlar, "I wish never to see that man and horse again; they do not look to me as though they belonged to this world."

This was all I could learn at that time; and the occurrence soon after would have become with me "like one of those things which had never happened," had I not, as I stood recently on the door-step of Bennett's hotel in Hartford, heard a man say, "There goes Peter Rugg and his child! He looks wet and weary, and farther from Boston than ever." I was satisfied it was the same man I had seen more than three years before; for whoever has once seen Peter Rugg can never after be deceived as to his identity.

"Peter Rugg!" said I; "and who is Peter Rugg?"

"That," said the stranger, "is more than anyone can tell exactly. He is a famous traveller, held in light esteem by all innholders, for he never stops to eat, drink, or sleep. I wonder why the government does not employ him to carry the mail."

"Ay," said a bystander, "that is a thought bright only on one side; how long would it take in that case to send a letter to Boston? for Peter has already, to my knowledge, been more than twenty years travelling to that place."

"But," said I, "does the man never stop anywhere; does he never converse with anyone? I saw the same man more than three years since, near Providence, and I heard a strange story about him. Pray, sir, give me some account of this man."

"Sir," said the stranger, "those who know the most respecting that man say the least. I have heard it asserted that Heaven sometimes sets a mark on a man, either for judgment or a trial. Under which Peter Rugg now labours, I cannot say; therefore I am rather inclined to pity than to judge."

"You speak like a humane man," said I; "and if you have known him so long, I pray you will give me some account of him. Has his appearance much altered in that time?"

"Why, yes. He looks as though he never ate, drank, or slept; and his child looks older than himself, and he looks like time broken off from eternity, and anxious to gain a resting-place."

"And how does his horse look?" said I.

"As for his horse, he looks fatter and gayer, and shows more animation and courage than he did twenty years ago. The last time Rugg spoke to me he inquired how far it was to Boston. I told him just one hundred miles.

"'Why,' said he, 'how can you deceive me so? It is cruel to mislead a traveller. I have lost my way; pray direct me the nearest way to Boston.'

"I repeated, it was one hundred miles.

"'How can you say so?' said he; 'I was told last evening it was but fifty, and I have travelled all night.'

"'But,' said I, 'you are now travelling from Boston. You must turn back.'

"'Alas,' said he, 'it is all turn back! Boston shifts with the wind, and plays all around the compass. One man tells me it is to the east, another to the west; and the guide-posts too, they all point the wrong way.'

"'But will you not stop and rest?' said I; 'you seem wet and weary.'

“‘Yes,’ said he, ‘it has been foul weather since I left home.’

“‘Stop, then, and refresh yourself.’

“‘I must not stop; I must reach home to-night, if possible: though I think you must be mistaken in the distance to Boston.’

“He then gave the reins to his horse, which he restrained with difficulty, and disappeared in a moment. A few days afterward I met the man a little this side of Claremont, winding around the hills in Unity, at the rate, I believe, of twelve miles an hour.”

“Is Peter Rugg his real name, or has he accidentally gained that name?”

“I know not, but presume he will not deny his name; you can ask him—for see, he has turned his horse, and is passing this way.”

In a moment a dark-coloured, high-spirited horse approached, and would have passed without stopping, but I had resolved to speak to Peter Rugg, or whoever the man might be. Accordingly I stepped into the street; and as the horse approached, I made a feint of stopping him. The man immediately reined in his horse. “Sir,” said I, “may I be so bold as to inquire if you are not Mr. Rugg? for I think I have seen you before.”

“My name is Peter Rugg,” said he. “I have unfortunately lost my way; I am wet and weary, and will take it kindly of you to direct me to Boston.”

“You live in Boston, do you; and in what street?”

“In Middle Street.”

“When did you leave Boston?”

“I cannot tell precisely; it seems a considerable time.”

“But how did you and your child become so wet? It has not rained here to-day.”

“It has just rained a heavy shower up the river. But I shall not reach Boston to-night if I tarry. Would you advise me to take the old road or the turnpike?”

“Why, the old road is one hundred and seventeen miles, and the turnpike is ninety-seven.”

“How can you say so? You impose on me; it is

wrong to trifle with a traveller; you know it is but forty miles from Newburyport to Boston."

"But this is not Newburyport; this is Hartford."

"Do not deceive me, sir. Is not this town Newburyport, and the river that I have been following the Merrimack?"

"No, sir; this is Hartford, and the river, the Connecticut."

He wrung his hands and looked incredulous. "Have the rivers, too, changed their courses, as the cities have changed places? But see! the clouds are gathering in the south, and we shall have a rainy night. Ah, that fatal oath!"

He would tarry no longer; his impatient horse leaped off, his hind flanks rising like wings; he seemed to devour all before him, and to scorn all behind.

I had now, as I thought, discovered a clue to the history of Peter Rugg; and I determined, the next time my business called me to Boston, to make a further inquiry. Soon after, I was enabled to collect the following particulars from Mrs. Croft, an aged lady in Middle Street, who has resided in Boston during the last twenty years. Her narration is this:

Just at twilight last summer a person stopped at the door of the late Mrs. Rugg. Mrs. Croft on coming to the door perceived a stranger, with a child by his side, in an old weather-beaten carriage, with a black horse. The stranger asked for Mrs. Rugg, and was informed that Mrs. Rugg had died at a good old age, more than twenty years before that time.

The stranger replied, "How can you deceive me so? Do ask Mrs. Rugg to step to the door."

"Sir, I assure you Mrs. Rugg has not lived here these twenty years; no one lives here but myself, and my name is Betsy Croft."

The stranger paused, looked up and down the street, and said, "Though the paint is rather faded, this looks like my house."

"Yes," said the child, "that is the stone before the door that I used to sit on to eat my bread-and-milk."

"But," said the stranger, "it seems to be on the wrong side of the street. Indeed, everything here seems to be misplaced. The streets are all changed, the people are all changed, the town seems changed, and what is strangest of all, Catherine Rugg has deserted her husband and child. Pray," continued the stranger, "has John Foy come home from sea? He went a long voyage; he is my kinsman. If I could see him, he could give me some account of Mrs. Rugg."

"Sir," said Mrs. Croft, "I never heard of John Foy. Where did he live?"

"Just above here, in Orange-tree Lane."

"There is no such place in this neighbourhood."

"What do you tell me! Are the streets gone? Orange-tree Lane is at the head of Hanover Street, near Pemberton's Hill."

"There is no such lane now."

"Madam, you cannot be serious! But you doubtless know my brother, William Rugg. He lives in Royal Exchange Lane, near King Street."

"I know of no such lane; and I am sure there is no such street as King Street in this town."

"No such street as King Street! Why, woman, you mock me! You may as well tell me there is no King George. However, madam, you see I am wet and weary, I must find a resting-place. I will go to Hart's tavern, near the market."

"Which market, sir? for you seem perplexed; we have several markets."

"You know there is but one market near the town dock."

"Oh, the old market; but no such person has kept there these twenty years."

Here the stranger seemed disconcerted, and uttered to himself quite audibly: "Strange mistake; how much this looks like the town of Boston! It certainly has a great resemblance to it; but I perceive my mistake now. Some other Mrs. Rugg, some other Middle Street. Then," said he, "madam, can you direct me to Boston?"