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KATE CHOPIN

A VOCATION AND A VOICE

STORIES

A VOCATION AND A VOICE

STORIES BY

Kate Chopin

Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by Emily Toth

PENGUIN BOOKS

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INTRODUCTION

"What do I write? Well, not everything that comes into my head," Kate Chopin declared in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in November 1899. Seven months earlier, she had published *The Awakening*, a novel that scandalized readers with its heroine's adulterous desires—but it was hardly Kate Chopin's only unconventional work. Many of her most avant-garde and thought-provoking stories were to appear in *A Vocation and a Voice*, the short story collection that was slated for publication, and then canceled, in 1900. It is now being published, here, for the first time.

To her contemporaries, Kate Chopin was a beloved writer, acclaimed for her Louisiana local color stories in *Bayou Folk* (1894) and *A Night in Acadie* (1897). Her first novel, *At Fault* (1890), also has its happiest scenes in Louisiana. Throughout her literary career, Kate Chopin lived in St. Louis, but until

she wrote the stories in *A Vocation and a Voice*, it was Louisiana that engaged her imagination and enticed her readers.

Born on February 8, 1850, Kate O'Flaherty was a St. Louisan by birth. Her mother, Eliza Faris, was of French descent and always spoke English with a French accent; her father, Thomas O'Flaherty, was an Irish immigrant and self-made man, twenty-three years older than his wife. Eliza, sixteen a few days before her wedding, brought social standing to the marriage, but she was penniless. Thomas's wealth provided for her family and cemented his own social position.

Five-year-old Katherine O'Flaherty, Eliza and Thomas's second child, entered boarding school at the Sacred Heart Academy in St. Louis in September 1855. But just two months later, on November 1, her father was one of the civic leaders on the gala inaugural train over the new Gasconade Bridge, linking St. Louis and Jefferson City. When the bridge suddenly collapsed, Thomas was killed—and Kate came home.

Nearly forty years later, Kate Chopin wrote about such a sudden death in "The Dream of an Hour" (now called "The Story of an Hour"), one of the tales in *A Vocation and a Voice.* In her story of a wife who hears that her husband has been killed in a railroad accident, Chopin recounted the cataclysmic event of her childhood (although in real life, there was no surprise ending). In her story, Chopin echoed the names from her childhood: her fictional wife is Louise, resembling the French pronunciation of Eliza, as it would have been overheard by a frightened little girl. Louise's sister is named Josephine, the name of Eliza O'Flaherty's youngest sister. Two men falsely reported killed at the Gasconade were named Bryan and Moore, and one of the dead was named Bullard: combining names and initials, Kate Chopin called the husband in her story Brently Mallard.

Chopin often used similar names as memory devices, spurs

to creativity, but "The Story of an Hour," like many of the *Vocation and a Voice* tales, is also a clever piece of social criticism, showing without preaching. Chopin's Louise has been a good wife, but she sees that death has freed her from sacrificing herself to someone else's will. Now she can make her own life.

As for Kate O'Flaherty, her father's death opened the door for the woman who shaped her early years (just as a woman inspires Alberta, the Nun in "Two Portraits"). At home Kate's great-grandmother, Victoria Verdon Charleville, taught her music (piano), French, and reading and writing, interspersed with gossip about local scandals and intrepid women. Madame Charleville's mother, for one, had obtained the first legal separation ever granted in Catholic St. Louis, and then went on to operate a very profitable shipping business. Madame Charleville, herself a widow, never remarried, nor did her daughter or her granddaughter, Eliza—so that Kate grew up in a household of lively, independent widows. There were also young aunts and uncles, two brothers and a sister, a boarder or two, and half a dozen slaves.

With her closest schoolgirl chum, Kitty Garesché, Kate shared candy and climbed trees (a mischievous pastime described in the story "Lilacs"). Passionate lovers of music and reading, Kate and Kitty read poetry together, enjoyed sentimental adventure stories, and devoured Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Grace Aguilar's *Days of Bruce*, and other romantic historical novels. St. Louis, with its fossil museums, circuses, and libraries, was a fascinating place for curious young girls and a mecca for scientific dabblers. The real-life Dr. George Engelmann, founder of a botanical society, and Dr. Friedrich Wizlizenus (known as "whistling Jesus") resemble the scientists Kate Chopin depicted much later in "A Mental Suggestion" and "An Easter Day Conversion (A Morning Walk)."

But in the 1850s, St. Louis was also a slave city in a slave state, and two months after Kate O'Flaherty's eleventh birthday, war broke out. Although Missouri did not secede from the Union, Kate endured martial law, sudden and frightening school closings, and the threat of arrest when she tore down a Yankee flag from the family porch. After the Union victory at Vicksburg, Yankee soldiers invaded her household and forced Eliza O'Flaherty, at bayonet point, to hoist their flag. The year 1863 was full of losses for young Kate: her teacher and great-grandmother Madame Charleville died; her half-brother George, a Confederate soldier, died; and her best friend, Kitty, was banished from St. Louis because her father supported the Confederacy. It was five years before the two friends saw each other again.

Then, in the peace after the war, Kate O'Flaherty became an honor student at the Sacred Heart Academy, where she was acclaimed for her essays and story telling. In her schoolgirl notebook, she collected apt quotations about women's rights, art, religion, music, and human foibles. She also sometimes expressed barbed opinions: on a sentimental greeting card, Kate scrawled, "Very pretty, but where's the point?"

After her graduation in 1868, Kate O'Flaherty entered St. Louis society, where she was popular for her musical talents, beauty, "amiability of character," and "cleverness." Yet in her diary, she complained about dancing till dawn with men "whose only talent lies in their feet." She disliked "general spreeing," because it kept her from her "dear reading and writing that I love so well." (Other people, she noted, thought she was very strange.)

By 1870 Kate O'Flaherty and Kitty Garesché, twenty-year-olds, had to choose directions for their lives. As in Chopin's "Two Portraits," they had come to the age at which "the languor of love creeps into the veins and dreams begin." Like Alberta

the Nun, Kitty evidently felt "an overpowering impulse toward the purely spiritual": she joined the intellectually rigorous Sacred Heart nuns, embarking on a long career as a dedicated teacher. But Kate chose another path: "the right man," she called him in her diary.

Oscar Chopin, born in Louisiana in 1844, had lived in France during the war years. According to his own account, he spent much of his time ogling young women—and so failed his baccalaureate exam. But in postwar St. Louis, Oscar studied business in his great-uncle's firm and attended exquisite society parties at the Oakland estate, where he met Kate O'Flaherty. Theirs was a proper match: both were Catholic, spoke French, and had relatives in the Cane River country of Louisiana; they also shared an interest in music, literature, and word play.

After their wedding on June 9, 1870, in Holy Angels Church in St. Louis, the young Chopins set off on a three-month European honeymoon. Kate, reveling in their freedom, drank beer, walked about alone, and asked impertinent questions; she and Oscar skipped mass and resolved not to feel guilty. By the time the young Chopins settled in New Orleans in October, Kate was expecting her first child.

By 1878 the Chopins had five sons and a pretty home in the Garden District (now 1413–1415 Louisiana Avenue), but Oscar's business as a cotton factor was failing. To salvage what they could, the Chopins moved to his family lands in Cloutierville, (*Cloo-chy-ville*), a tiny village in Natchitoches (*Nack-i-tush*) Parish in northwest Louisiana. There Kate gave birth to Lélia, the last Chopin child and only daughter.

The Chopins lived in a large white house (now the Bayou Folk Museum/Kate Chopin home), and Kate amazed country people with her lavender riding habits and plumed hats from New Orleans. She lifted her skirts too high when she crossed

the village's one street, displaying her ankles; she smoked Cuban cigarettes—something no lady did. ("An Egyptian Cigarette," one of the *Vocation and a Voice* stories, suggests that she smoked something stronger and stranger than tobacco—but that was years later.)

In 1882, another sudden loss transformed Kate Chopin's life: Oscar died of malaria, on December 10. His widow and six children were left some twelve thousand dollars in debt. Taking charge of her own life, as the widows in her family had always done, Kate sold some of the property, ran the plantations and general store herself, and attracted the attentions of a charming and wealthy neighboring planter. Albert Sampite (*SAM-pi-TAY*), who insinuated himself into her business affairs and her personal life, shared a love of horses and the night and an attraction to the forbidden. Their relationship became a notorious romance, which inspired the character named Alcée in two of her short stories and *The Awakening*.

But Albert Sampite had his failings. He drank too much, he was married, and he beat his wife (who later separated from him and always said that Kate Chopin had broken up her marriage). Abruptly, in 1884, Chopin and her children returned to St. Louis, to live with her mother.

Eliza O'Flaherty's death a year later plunged her daughter into a deep depression, until her friend and obstetrician, Frederick Kolbenheyer, suggested that Kate try writing professionally. Chopin's early stories set in St. Louis did not sell easily, but there was a ready market, she found, for stories of Louisiana life. And so Kate Chopin became the first writer to use the Cane River country of Louisiana, Natchitoches Parish, as her own fictional world. Within four years, Chopin was a published author, and by the mid-1890s, she was publishing in the most esteemed national magazines, including the *Century*, the *Atlantic*, and *Youth's Companion*.

Editors and readers applauded her stories of Louisiana country people, with their soft-sounding patois, fanciful French names, and quaint folkways. Chopin wrote about blacks and whites, Creoles and Acadians ("Cajuns"), and characters who were comical and passionate, honorable and sweet—and scarcely ever evil. Yet some of her earliest stories were chilling. In "Désirée's Baby," for instance, a plantation master casts off his devoted wife because he thinks she is black; in "La Belle Zoraïde," a slave woman deprived of her child goes mad with grief. But reviewers of Chopin's first collection, *Bayou Folk*, focused on local color and charm, ignoring her social criticism and the strong and independent female characters she was creating.

Chopin's second collection, *A Night in Acadie*, received much less attention. Although its stories were also set in Louisiana, they were vignettes, slices of life in which wives looked curiously at other men and sudden deaths meant cheerful new possibilities. Reviewers were puzzled by the stories, which did not end neatly: some trailed off, without really concluding at all. Kate Chopin was no longer telling stories in a traditional way, and some reviewers wished that she would return to the sunny charm of *Bayou Folk*.

But *Vogue*, a new magazine in the 1890s, was publishing Chopin's most advanced stories, the ones exploding romantic myths. Under its strong-minded, eccentric, and progressive editor, Josephine Redding, *Vogue* was never limited to stories suitable for "the Young Person," the mythical sheltered adolescent who, most editors said, had to be protected from unseemly magazine matter.

Kate Chopin, her St. Louis friend Charles Deyo once noted, did not write for "the young person" but for "seasoned souls," and her *Vogue* stories were about adult realities. Of the twenty-two stories planned for *A Vocation and a Voice*, ten first ap-

peared in *Vogue:* "An Egyptian Cigarette," "The White Eagle," "The Story of an Hour," "Two Summers and Two Souls," "The Unexpected," "Her Letters," "The Kiss," "Suzette," "The Recovery," and "The Blind Man." Many involve blindness or death; others hint broadly at "guilty love" (sex outside marriage), a subject untouchable in most American magazines.

With *A Vocation and a Voice*, stories she began writing as early as 1893, Kate Chopin abandoned Louisiana as a setting and local color as a mode of expression. Only four tales take place in Louisiana; only two ("Suzette" and "Ti Démon") rely on dialects and local lore. In "The Godmother," Chopin makes the Natchitoches Parish setting incidental to a deadly tale of murder and misguided loyalty, while in "A Vocation and a Voice," she implies a Louisiana setting for part of the story, by mentioning bayous, crawfish, and " 'Cadians" (Cajuns)—but the story is about a boy's consciousness, not about Louisiana ways. Most of the other stories in *A Vocation and a Voice* have no definable setting, except for two in rural Missouri ("Elizabeth Stock's One Story" and "Juanita") and one in Paris ("Lilacs").

Chopin had written all but two of the *Vocation and a Voice* stories (the second "Ti Démon" and "The White Eagle") before *The Awakening* appeared in April 1899, published by the innovative Herbert S. Stone & Company in Chicago. For several years, publishers and editors had urged Chopin to write a novel, claiming it would bring her more money and recognition than her short stories.

But *The Awakening* elicited hostile, even damning reviews. Although it was never banned or withdrawn from libraries (that myth grew up later), Kate Chopin's story of a discontented wife and mother who yearns for freedom, artistic fulfillment, and other men offended reviewers throughout the United States. In

St. Louis, it was called "too strong drink for moral babes—should be labeled 'poison' "; it was said to make readers "sick of human nature." In other cities, reviewers found *The Awakening* "repellent," promoting "unholy imaginations" and "unclean desires," with a plot "that can hardly be described in language fit for publication."

St. Louis women did rally to Kate Chopin, writing her fond letters of praise and honoring her at the city's most prestigious women's club, the Wednesday Club, where she read "Ti Démon," seven months after *The Awakening* appeared. The story was well received, and three Chopin poems were also set to music for the occasion.

But in February 1900, Herbert S. Stone & Company canceled Kate Chopin's contract; they would not publish her third short story collection, *A Vocation and a Voice*. Herbert Stone did not actually say that *The Awakening*'s notoriety had caused him to cancel *A Vocation and a Voice*; apparently he gave Kate Chopin no reason at all and let her assume the worst. (In fact, Stone was cutting back on the firm's list and not necessarily making a judgment on Chopin's work.) Lucy Monroe, the editor who had championed *The Awakening*, seems not to have influenced Stone to keep *A Vocation and a Voice*.

Stone had known that Kate Chopin was no traditional American writer. Although she admired stories by the New Englanders Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary E. Wilkins, Chopin was most inspired by the work of a Frenchman, Guy de Maupassant, whose subtlety and indirection she studied and imitated. Between 1894 and 1898, she also translated eight of his stories but managed to sell only the most conventional three. The others, which include a woman's intimate love for her horse and a man's "strange sexual perversion" with flowers, were far too graphic for American magazines. The brooding Maupassant

tales, which Chopin called "Mad Stories," were about suicide, death, water, night dreams, infidelity—the subjects Chopin herself used in *A Vocation and a Voice.*

Kate Chopin's writing was also influenced by the friends who frequented her salon, held at her unpretentious home at 3317 Morgan Street (now Delmar, but the house no longer exists). Although one visitor called her "the most brilliant, distinguished, and interesting woman that has ever graced St. Louis," Chopin did not dominate at her "Thursdays": "One realizes only afterward how many good and witty things she has said in the course of the conversation," another friend recalled.

Her guests were outspoken and argumentative authors, artists, and editors. Dr. Kolbenheyer, an agnostic and an anarchist, would declaim about the filth and "bestiality" of Polish peasant life; William Vincent Byars, a poet and linguist, could groan "Ah me!" in half a dozen languages. Carrie Blackman, a beautiful, dark-eyed, pensive artist whose husband adored her, appeared to have a troubling and mysterious secret (or so Kate Chopin noted in her own diary). Blackman, best known for her portrait of a woman reading letters, seems to have inspired Chopin's story "Her Letters."

Chopin's women friends were not ordinary, nor were they society "philistines": she inveighed against those in her diary. In "The Kiss," she skewers the socialite Nathalie, who kisses for pleasure but marries for money. For her own friends, Chopin preferred such women as the flamboyant Rosa Sonneschein, who wore theatrical costumes, founded the Pioneers (the first literary society for Jewish women), and created a scandal by divorcing her rabbi husband—after which she started *The American Jewess,* the first magazine by and for Jewish women.

The only gentile contributor to her first issue was her fellow cigar-smoker, Kate Chopin.

Chopin also sneaked secret cigarettes with the globetrotting journalist Florence Hayward, a clever humor writer and a proud, self-proclaimed "independent spinster." Hayward resembled, physically, the haughty central character in "The Falling in Love of Fedora"—but her no-nonsense ideas and mental poise are more like those of Pauline in "A Mental Suggestion." Another Chopin friend, Sue V. Moore, edited *St. Louis Life* and used it to boost Kate Chopin—by announcing her literary breakthroughs, publishing her reviews and translations, and writing an admiring profile that was frequently reprinted.

At her salon, at musicales (where she played the piano), and at al fresco suppers, Kate Chopin enjoyed the company of "a pink-red group of intellectuals," her son Felix used to say. (He also claimed that they "expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing," but no photographs survive.) Her friends' telling ghost stories and debating new scientific theories no doubt influenced Kate Chopin to write her gently satirical story of hypnosis, "A Mental Suggestion." She also drew on life for her beliefs about extrasensory perception: one evening, sensing that something had happened to her daughter, Chopin raced home and found that there had indeed been a dangerous fire.

Other fires simmered. Among Chopin and her male admirers, most of whom were married, there were sometimes sexual tensions. Two editors at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, John Dillon and George Johns, were close Chopin friends and perhaps more. Also, according to Chopin's son Felix, "Kolby had eyes for Mom," although the fierce-eyed, dark-bearded doctor remained married to his childhood sweetheart. Whether Kate

Chopin had eyes for Frederick Kolbenheyer is unknown, but her doctor characters are often the ones with the greatest interest in human peculiarities and wicked ways.

Chopin welcomed at least one notorious character to her circle: William Marion Reedy, the rotund and raffish editor of the weekly *St. Louis Mirror.* Reedy published groundbreaking authors few others would touch, among them Oscar Wilde and Theodore Dreiser. Kate Chopin once gave Billy Reedy a box of his favorite cigars for Christmas, and she was one of few St. Louisans who did not condemn him. A former altar boy from Kerry Patch (the Irish ghetto), and known for his sweet voice and angelic face, Reedy had succumbed to alcoholic and sexual temptations: during one binge he married a famous St. Louis madam. After divorce and remarriage, he was excommunicated, and he shared Kate Chopin's fierce insistence on the right to divorce.

Reedy published Chopin's stories, said she belonged in an American academy of letters, and called her one of St. Louis's "Minervas," women most esteemed for intellectual achievements. Reedy also inspired Chopin's longest short story, "A Vocation and a Voice," in which a poor, nameless altar boy from Kerry Patch runs off with vagabonds, and a whole new world of music and sensuality opens to him. Perhaps to amuse or humor the adult Reedy, who loved sonorous Latinate words, Chopin uses a much more pompous vocabulary than was her wont: her boy wears, for instance, "habiliments" and "canonicals" instead of "clothes" and "robes." Evidently, the boy's seduction by the gypsyish Suzima, a few days after he has come upon her naked in a stream, was too racy for almost all magazine editors—but not for Reedy, who published it in his *Mirror.*

Like Reedy, Kate Chopin read the newest, most modern European writers, among them Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Swinburne.

When her eyes ailed her, a friend read to her from the Norwegian Alexander Kielland's *Tales of Two Countries*—and Kielland's description of a trapped bird with wise, all-knowing eyes anticipates "The White Eagle." (The story also resembles Flaubert's "A Simple Heart.") But unlike her European models, Kate Chopin loved the scents, the sights, the sounds of nature, and her stories are full of caressing breezes, delicious aromas, and the colors of light and life. *A Vocation and a Voice* is a celebration of the senses over the intellect, and eros over reason.

Chopin also evidently experimented with altered states of consciousness and was intrigued by Eastern religions and Oriental luxury. In "An Egyptian Cigarette," the story of a drug trip, the narrator has visions of lilies and garlands, pagan gods, waters, birds, and death—images also found in *The Awakening* but highly uncommon in the Midwest or in American literature in the late nineteenth century.

Kate Chopin was an imaginer and a questioner who had stopped going to church not long after her mother's death, and her salon was peopled by nonconformists who ignored or derided organized religion. But there were parts of the religious life that she still found appealing. In "Lilacs," Chopin describes the Sacred Heart rituals she knew as a child: the protagonist, now a very worldly Parisian actress, still remembers how to fold her clothes with dainty correctness, and at certain times of the year, she yearns for the nuns' serene, untroubled life. But four days after writing "Lilacs," Kate Chopin visited a school friend, Liza, who had become a Sacred Heart nun. The peace of convent life was attractive, Chopin wrote in her diary, and Liza had "her lover in the dark" (Jesus)—but to Chopin that convent world was "a phantasmagoria," not real life.

A year later, when she wrote "Two Portraits," Chopin had

come to a far more radical thought: that nuns had not truly surrendered their earthly desires and human passions. Alberta the Nun, after all, is known for her "visions" and her "ecstasies." Then, a year after that, Chopin wrote "A Vocation and a Voice," in which the pure spiritual singing of the boy earns him and his vagabond companions, a fortune teller and a fraudulent herbal healer, the most tangible reward of all: money.

Like most nineteenth-century women writers, Kate Chopin claimed to have no serious ideas or ambitions, but in fact she was a dedicated professional who studied the markets and sought good pay as well as literary distinction (although she never earned a living from her writings). She seems to have enjoyed motherhood: her children, in their twenties by the time *A Vocation and a Voice* was to appear, adored her and never wanted to leave home, and she worried about them. During the months after her son Fred joined the troops fighting the Spanish-American War, Chopin could write only sad tales, including "Ti Démon (A Horse Story)" and "Elizabeth Stock's One Story." No magazine would publish either one: evidently they lacked the optimism American editors favored.

After *A Vocation and a Voice* was canceled, Kate Chopin wrote very little. The title story, printed in Reedy's *Mirror* in 1902, proved to be the last adult story that Chopin would publish. Her health was deteriorating; her friends and relatives were ailing and dying; and her son Jean's wife died in childbirth, plunging him into a depression from which he never recovered. Chopin moved to a smaller home (still extant, at 4232 McPherson), and she apparently gave up her salon.

After a strenuous day at the St. Louis World's Fair, she died of a brain hemorrhage on August 22, 1904, and was buried in Calvary Cemetery with a lilac bush, her favorite flower,