

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

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THE COUNTRY OF THE
POINTED FIRS

WITH A PREFACE BY
WILLA CATHER

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
PREFACE BY WILLA CATHER	7
THE RETURN	17
MRS. TODD	19
THE SCHOOLHOUSE	25
AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE WINDOW	28
CAPTAIN LITTLEPAGE	32
THE WAITING PLACE	40
THE OUTER ISLAND	48
GREEN ISLAND	53
WILLIAM	67
WHERE PENNYROYAL GREW	71
THE OLD SINGERS	77
A STRANGE SAIL	82
POOR JOANNA	91
THE HERMITAGE	105
ON SHELL-HEAP ISLAND	114
THE GREAT EXPEDITION	119
A COUNTRY ROAD	127
THE BOWDEN REUNION	136
THE FEAST'S END	151
ALONG SHORE	158
A DUNNET SHEPHERDESS	176
THE QUEEN'S TWIN	203
WILLIAM'S WEDDING	231
THE BACKWARD VIEW	248

PREFACE

*But give to thine own story
Simplicity, with glory.*

LOUISE IMOGEN GUINEY

IN reading over a package of letters from Sarah Orne Jewett, I find this observation: '*The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature.*' Miss Jewett was very conscious of the fact that when a writer makes anything that belongs to Literature (limiting the term here to imaginative literature, which she of course meant), his material goes through a process very different from that by which he makes merely a good story or a good novel. No one can exactly define this process; but certainly persistence, survival, recurrence in the writer's mind, are highly characteristic of it. The shapes and scenes that have 'teased' the mind for years, when they do at last get themselves rightly put down, make a very much higher order of writing, and a much more costly, than the most vivid and vigorous transfer of immediate impressions.

In some of Miss Jewett's earlier books, *Deephaven*, *Country Byways*, *Old Friends and New*, one can find first sketches, first impressions, which later crystallised into the almost flawless examples of literary art that make up this volume. One can, as it were, watch

PREFACE

in process the two kinds of making: the first, which is full of perception and feeling but rather fluid and formless, the second, which is so tightly built and significant in design. The design is, indeed, so happy, so right, that it seems inevitable; the design is the story and the story is the design. These sketches are living things caught in the open, with light and freedom and air-spaces about them. They melt into the land and the life of the land until they are not stories at all, but life itself.

A great many good stories were being written upon New England themes at the same time that Miss Jewett was writing; stories that to many contemporary readers may have seemed more interesting than hers, because they dealt with more startling 'situations,' were more heavily accented, more elaborately costumed and posed in the studio. But most of them are not very interesting to read and re-read to-day; they have not the one thing that survives all arresting situations, all good writing and clever story making – inherent individual beauty; the kind of beauty we feel when a beautiful song is sung by a beautiful voice that is exactly suited to the song.

Pater said that every truly great drama must, in the end, linger in the reader's mind as a sort of ballad. Probably the same thing might be said of every great story. It must leave in the mind of the sensitive reader an intangible residuum of pleasure; a cadence, a quality of voice that is exclusively the writer's own, individual,

PREFACE

unique. A quality that one can remember without the volume at hand, can experience over and over again in the mind but can never absolutely define, as one can experience in memory a melody, or the summer perfume of a garden. The magnitude of the subject-matter is not of primary importance, seemingly. An idyl of Theocritus, concerned with sheep and goats and shade and pastures, is to-day as much alive as the most dramatic passages of the Iliad – stirs the reader's feeling quite as much, perhaps, if the reader is a poet.

It is a common fallacy that a writer, if he is talented enough, can achieve this poignant quality by improving upon his subject-matter, by using his 'imagination' upon it and twisting it to suit his purpose. The truth is that by such a process (which is not imaginative at all!) he can at best produce only a brilliant sham, which, like a badly built and pretentious house, looks poor and shabby in a few years. If he achieves anything noble, anything enduring, it must be by giving himself absolutely to his material. And this gift of sympathy is his great gift; is the fine thing in him that alone can make his work fine. He fades away into the land and people of his heart, he dies of love only to be born again. The artist spends a life-time in loving the things that haunt him, in having his mind 'teased' by them, in trying to get these conceptions down on paper exactly as they are to him and not in conventional poses supposed to reveal their character; trying this method and that, as a painter tries different lightings and different attitudes with his

PREFACE

subject to catch the one that presents it more suggestively than any other. And at the end of a lifetime he emerges with much that is more or less happy experimenting, and comparatively little that is the very flower of himself and his genius. I have tried to gather into this volume the very best of Miss Jewett's beautiful work; the stories which, read by an eager student fifty years from now, will give him the characteristic flavour, the spirit, the cadence, of an American writer of the first order – and of a New England which will then be a thing of the past.

The stories chosen for this volume vary little in quality, though one may have one's favourites among them. The story *William's Wedding* was uncompleted at the time of Miss Jewett's death, and while all the essentials of the picture are there, the writing is in places a little vague, lacks the last co-ordinating touch of the writer's hand.

To note an artist's limitations is but to define his genius. A reporter can write equally well about everything that is presented to his view, but a creative writer can do his best only with what lies within the range and character of his talent. These stories of Miss Jewett's have much to do with fisher-folk and seaside villages; with juniper pastures and lonely farms, neat grey country houses and delightful, well-seasoned old men and women. That, when one thinks of it in a flash, is New England. I remember hearing an English actor say that until he made a motor trip through New

PREFACE

England he had supposed that the Americans killed their aged in some merciful fashion, for he saw none in the cities where he played.

There are many kinds of people in the State of Maine, and its neighbouring States, who are not in Miss Jewett's books. There may be Othellos and Iagos and Don Juans, but they are not highly characteristic of the country, they do not come up spontaneously in the juniper pastures as the everlasting does. Miss Jewett wrote of the people who grew out of the soil and the life of the country near her heart, not about exceptional individuals at war with their environment. This was not a creed with her, but an instinctive preference. She once laughingly told me that her head was full of dear old houses and dear old women, and that when an old house and an old woman came together in her brain with a click, she knew that a story was under way.

Born within the scent of the sea but not within sight of it, in a beautiful old house full of strange and lovely things brought home from all over the globe by seafaring ancestors, she spent much of her girlhood driving about the country with her doctor father on his professional rounds among the farms. She early learned to love her country for what it was. What is quite as important, she saw it as it was. She happened to have the right nature, the right temperament, to see it so—and to understand by intuition the deeper meaning of all she saw.

PREFACE

She had not only the eye, she had the ear. From childhood she must have treasured up those pithy bits of local speech, of native idiom, which enrich and enliven her pages. The language her people speak to each other is a native tongue. No writer can invent it. It is made in the hard school of experience, in communities where language has been undisturbed long enough to take on colour and character from the nature and experiences of the people. The 'sayings' of a community, its proverbs, are its characteristic comment upon life; they imply its history, suggest its attitude toward the world, and its way of accepting life. Such an idiom makes the finest language any writer can have; and he can never get it with a notebook. He himself must be able to think and feel in that speech — it is a gift from heart to heart.

Much of Miss Jewett's delightful humour comes from her delicate and tactful handling of this native language of the waterside and countryside, never overdone, never pushed a shade too far; from this, and from her own fine attitude toward her subject-matter. This attitude in itself, though unspoken, is everywhere felt, and constitutes one of the most potent elements of grace and charm in her stories. She had with her own stories and her own characters a very charming relation; spirited, gay, tactful, noble in its essence and a little arch in its expression. In this particular relationship many of our most gifted writers are unfortunate. If a writer's attitude toward his characters and his scene is

PREFACE

as vulgar as a showman's, as mercenary as an auctioneer's, vulgar and meretricious will his product remain forever.

Gilbert Murray has illustrated the two kinds of beauty in writing by a happy similitude. There is a kind of beauty, he says, which comes from rich ornamentation; like the splendour one might admire on a Chinese junk, gorgeously gilded and painted, hung with rich embroideries and tapestries. Then there is the beauty of a modern yacht, where there is no ornamentation at all; our whole sensation of pleasure in watching a yacht under sail comes from the fact that every line of the craft is designed for one purpose, that everything about it furthers that purpose, so that it has an organic, living simplicity and directness. This, he says, is the beauty for which the Greek writers strove; it is certainly that for which Miss Jewett strove.

If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely. The latter book seems to me fairly to shine with the reflection of its long, joyous future. It is so tightly yet so lightly built, so little encumbered with heavy materialism that deteriorates and grows old-fashioned. I like to think with what pleasure, with what a sense of rich discovery, the young student of American literature in far distant years to come will take up this book

PREFACE

and say, 'A masterpiece!' as proudly as if he himself had made it. It will be a message to the future, a message in a universal language, like the tuft of meadow flowers in Robert Frost's fine poem, which the mower abroad in the early morning left standing, just skirted by the scythe, for the mower of the afternoon to gaze upon and wonder at — the one message that even the scythe of Time spares.

WILLA CATHER

. . . I always think of her as of one who, hearing New England accused of being a bleak land without beauty, passes confidently over the snow, and by the grey rock, and past the dark fir tree, to a southern bank, and there, brushing away the decayed leaves, triumphantly shows to the fault-finder a spray of the trailing arbutus. And I should like, for my own part, to add this: that the fragrant, retiring, exquisite flower, which I think she would say is the symbol of New England virtue, is the symbol also of her own modest and delightful art.

From THE ART OF MISS JEWETT, by Charles Miner Thompson, in the *Atlantic* for October, 1904.

