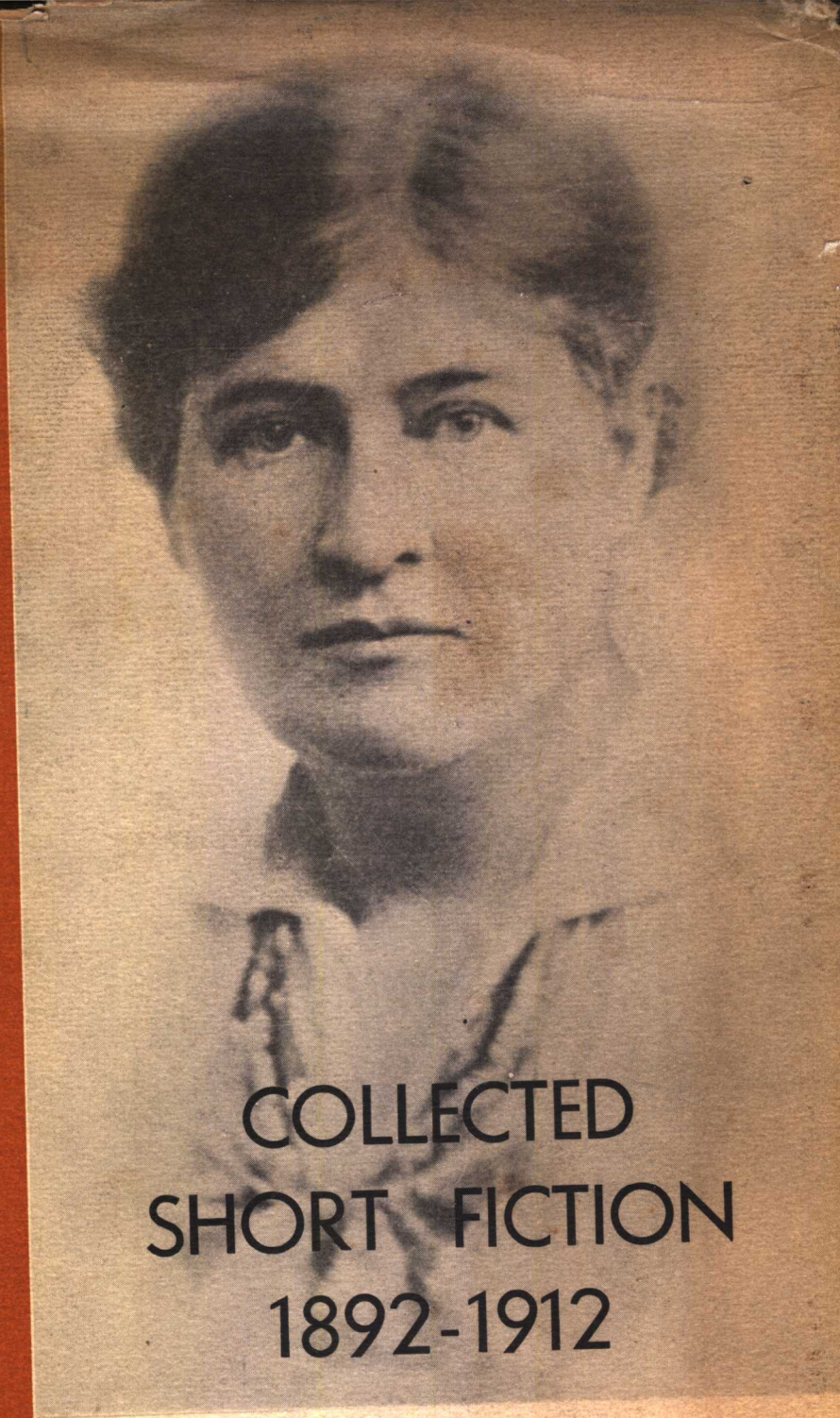


WILLA CAATHER



COLLECTED  
SHORT FICTION  
1892-1912

*Revised Edition*



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1892-1912

# Short Fiction

Volume I · THE BOHEMIAN GIRL

Volume II · THE TROLL GARDEN

Volume III · ON THE DIVIDE

*Edited by*

VIRGINIA FAULKNER

*Introduction by*

MILDRED R. BENNETT

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# Publisher's Preface



"Success is never so interesting as struggle—not even to the successful," Willa Cather declared in the preface to the 1932 edition of *The Song of the Lark*; and in "Old Mrs. Harris," another work with strong autobiographical overtones, she chose Michelet's aphorism, "The end is nothing; the road is all," as a motto for Vickie Templeton, the character who is her young self.

These dicta from her own writings might be invoked if one were called upon to defend the propriety of a publishing project which runs counter to the author's express wishes. For Willa Cather's attitude toward the stories that preceded her 1913 novel, *O Pioneers!*, is well known: she had put them behind her and she hoped that they would be forgotten—not merely her undergraduate efforts and the potboilers of her newspaper days, but even the stories written when, as managing editor of *McClure's* and the author of two books, she already was something of a mogul in the literary world. E. K. Brown, in *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography*, tells us that Miss Cather "disliked to be reminded of [these] stories . . . ; she was glad that she had the copyright and could prevent the republication of any among them. She compared her attitude to that of an apple-grower careful of his reputation: the fruit that was below standard must be left forgotten on the ground; only the sound apples should be collected." Of the forty-five stories collected here, only three—and those in revised form—were found worthy of inclusion in the "Library Edition," which represents Willa Cather's final judgment on her work. Thus, by Miss Cather's absolute standards there are no "sound apples" in this book.

While we know of no critic who agrees with Miss Cather's wholesale condemnation of her early writings, certainly none would dispute her right to supervise the body of her work during her lifetime, her right to suppress those stories which she considered substandard and whose publication not only would be personally embarrassing but would strike her as dishonest merchandising—trading on her reputation to vend an



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inferior product. Further, none would dispute her right—in fact, her obligation—to indicate which of her writings are those by which she wished to be measured. Such value judgments are of the first importance in studying an author's work.

Willa Cather's judgment has been recorded, and it will not be overlooked or slighted. But it can hardly be fully understood without reference to those productions which she considered inferior. The study of an author—any author—cannot be limited to the work of his artistic maturity or to such works as he or any other individual shall prescribe. If we are to arrive at a just estimate of Willa Cather's achievement, we must know the beginning as well as the middle and the end of the road she traveled.

Since her death in 1947, the passing years have served only to burnish Willa Cather's reputation; viewed in the lengthening perspective of time her artistic stature has consistently increased. We are convinced that this collection of the stories written from 1892 through 1912, crude and flawed though some of them undeniably are, far from detracting from Miss Cather's later work, will add another dimension to our appreciation of it. As Bernice Slote has pointed out in her discussion of the relationship between Willa Cather's poetry and the whole of her writing: "Perhaps more than most artists she worked a single, intricate design in which elements changed names and language and form but always remained a part of the body. Nothing in Cather's work is unrelated to the whole. In the poems (as in the first stories, some of which she also rejected), we find the early sketches, the first motifs, the suggested design of her major work."\* The present volume confirms this insight into the organic character of the Cather canon: Here are the first glimpses of a whole galaxy of Cather heroines—Alexandra Bergson and Marie Shabata, "My Antonia" and Lena Lingard, Cressida Garnett, Thea Kronborg, Lucy Gayheart; here the first expression of characteristic themes and attitudes, the first outlines of landscapes, incidents, and episodes which will reappear again and again in the later writings.

If it is true that not more than ten or twelve of the stories collected here will finally be classed as "sound apples," even by critics less emotionally involved than their author, nonetheless throughout this volume the world evoked is the magical Catherian world of the pioneer and the artist, and the voice that speaks in it is the authentic voice of Willa Cather,

\* Willa Cather, *April Twilights* (1903), edited with an introduction by Bernice Slote (rev. ed.; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. ix.



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inimitable even in the morning of her genius. Moreover, the stories are rich in the special virtues of youth, and in them we find a full-bloodedness, an abounding vitality and *joie de vivre*, that is not present in the later, more perfect narratives. Viewed collectively, the stories afford a graphic picture of the process by which an ardent, headstrong, immensely gifted young creature, eager, ambitious, profligate of her energy and talents, constitutionally unable to do things by halves, ready to tackle anything and take on the world in the bargain, is transformed into the dedicated artist whose work, more than that of any other modern master, is touched with the serene radiance we associate with the poets of classical antiquity. We have long known the dedicated artist; here we come to know the aspiring young woman.

We are profoundly grateful to Willa Cather's literary trustees, Miss Edith Lewis and Mr. Alfred A. Knopf, for sanctioning the publication of this volume.



The revised edition of WILLA CATHER'S COLLECTED SHORT FICTION, 1892-1912, includes a recently proved, unsigned story dating from 1893, "The Elopement of Allen Poole." It is a story of particular interest and importance both because it is the first known published work in which Miss Cather drew on her childhood memories of Virginia and because of its connections with her last published novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940). The Chronology, the Bibliography of Short Fiction, 1892-1912, the Checklist of Short Fiction, 1915-1948, and the Bibliography of Selected Biographical and Critical Writings have been corrected and expanded in the light of recent research. We also have corrected factual and formal errors in the notes and Introduction and emended misprints in the text.



# The Arrangement of the Text



*The stories in this collection, with the exceptions noted below, are presented in reverse chronology according to date of first publication. Thus, the first story in the book is the most recent—"The Bohemian Girl," which appeared in August, 1912—and the last is "Peter," first published in May, 1892. This plan has been adopted in an attempt to reconcile the claims of the general reader, interested in the stories for their own sake, and the scholar who may wish, for example, to study the development of Willa Cather's style. For the scholar's purposes a chronological arrangement is the most convenient; however, to begin the book with the earliest work would mean that the reader is immediately confronted with the stories of least intrinsic merit. If, on the other hand, we follow a reverse chronology, the book opens with rich, accomplished stories, enjoyable in their own right, and closes with the apprentice work, which gains appreciably in interest when approached with an eye for its connections with the later stories.*

*The three volumes of the collection correspond to different phases of the author's professional career. The Volume I stories belong to the years (1906–1912) Willa Cather was on the editorial staff of McClure's, in New York; those in Volume II to the 1901–1906 period when she was a Pittsburgh high school teacher. Her years as a journalist in the east (1896–1901) and, before that, in Nebraska are covered by the two groups of stories in Volume III. Reverse chronology is strictly maintained in Volumes I and III, but not in Volume II, which is comprised of the seven stories collected by the author in The Troll Garden. Since a chronological arrangement would have destroyed the interweaving pattern Willa Cather intended, these stories are presented here in the same sequence as in her 1905 collection.*

*A note at the end of each story gives the place and date of first publication; additional bibliographical data and biographical information appear opposite the first text page of each volume and on page 481, between the two groups of stories in Volume III.*



# Introduction

Mildred R. Bennett



In speaking of her early fiction Willa Cather more than once made the point that like other young writers she had thought books and stories should be made out of "interesting material" and like them had found the new more exciting than the familiar. She believed that "usually the young writer must have his affair with the external material he covets; must imitate and strive to follow the masters he most admires, until he finds he is starving for reality . . ."; only then would he begin to work with his own material, write from his deepest experience.<sup>1</sup>

True enough, a number of the stories in this collection (and also Willa Cather's first novel, *Alexander's Bridge*, written in 1911) are the sort of "literary excursions" to which she was referring, but in her own case she began with her own material—her first published story, "Peter," reappears as an episode in *My Ántonia*—and returned to it at intervals during the twenty years that passed before she came back to it for good. Moreover, myriad connections, sometimes overt and obvious, sometimes subtle and shadowy, interweave between the 1892–1912 stories and the body of writing that follows them. Like the later works, these early stories often incorporate directly or indirectly Willa Cather's day-to-day experiences and her memories of the past, her current enthusiasms and aversions and notions about things, and they illuminate best if seen in a biographical context as well as in relation to the entire Cather canon. It may be useful, therefore, to begin with a brief scrutiny of Willa Cather's life from her birth up through her thirty-ninth year—when, with the writing of *O Pioneers!*, the time came that she could say: "In this one I hit the home pasture . . ."<sup>2</sup>

1. "My First Novels [There Were Two]," in *Willa Cather on Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), pp. 91–97; Preface to the 1922 edition of *Alexander's Bridge* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1922), pp. v–ix.

2. Inscribed by Willa Cather in the copy of *O Pioneers!* belonging to her friend Carrie Miner Sherwood.



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### I

Born in Virginia on December 7, 1873, Willa Cather lived her first nine years in a post-Civil War community where her grandfather was sheriff, her father his reluctant deputy, and her mother a loyal Confederate. From this region rich in tradition and lush with moisture, Willa was brought to the empty prairie of Webster County, in south-central Nebraska, where only the dry, wind-swept land could claim a past. But history was being made there before her eyes, and the traditions of a world older than the Old Dominion lived on in the "colonies of European people, Slavonic, Germanic, Scandinavian, Latin spread across our bronze prairies like the daubs of color on a painter's palette."<sup>3</sup>

After a year on the Divide—the tableland between the Little Blue and Republican rivers—the family moved to the county seat, Red Cloud, a division point on the Burlington Railroad. On Willa's visits to the immigrant settlers in their soddies and dugouts, they had told her of their home countries; now in Red Cloud she heard tales of that breed of men who had dreamed a railroad across half a continent. She came to know founding fathers such as former Governor Silas Garber, Red Cloud's first citizen in a double sense; misfits and drifters like her music teacher, Professor Schindelmeisser, who came from nowhere and disappeared into nowhere; artists like Peoriana Sill, who once had painted the Bay of Naples from the boudoir window of the Queen of Italy.

Some Cather critics and biographers have insisted upon the cultural impoverishment of life in what they invariably describe as a raw (or crude) little frontier town, but Willa Cather's reiterated emphasis on the crucial importance to the artist of his first fifteen years does not refer only to the impression made upon her by "the wild land" and the Bohemian and Scandinavian settlers. The Cathers were cultivated people: the nineteenth-century English and American classics, the Bible, and Shakespeare, were staples in the family reading, and Willa was not yet in her teens when she began studying Latin and Greek with William Ducker, a retired British scholar with a passion for the classics. Next door to the Cathers lived the Charles Wieners, of cosmopolitan background, who spoke French and German and introduced Willa to French literature. Through another neighbor, Mrs. James Miner, an accomplished pianist, she became acquainted with operatic themes and arias; touring theatrical companies opened the door into still another world. Her tastes bore the

3. Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation*, CXVII (September 5, 1923), 236.



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indelible imprint of these early cultural experiences, and in 1890, when she left the "clean, well-planted little prairie town, with white fences and good green yards"<sup>4</sup> for Lincoln and the University of Nebraska preparatory school, Willa was by no means the untutored roughneck run in off the prairie that she later implied she had been.

During her university years (one year in prep, four in the university), as James R. Shively has recorded, Willa lived in an atmosphere of "intense intellectual competition and stimulation." The student body, which numbered less than a thousand when she matriculated in the fall of 1891,

included many who were later to achieve distinction—four as state governors, one as a United States Senator, two as members of Congress, and two as chancellors of state universities. Classmates of Miss Cather who would later distinguish themselves in scholarship included William L. Westermann, an authority on Greek and Egyptian history; Hartley B. Alexander, poet, philosopher, and literary scholar; and Louise Pound, famous for her research in folklore, balladry, linguistics, and literary history.<sup>5</sup>

To this list should be added the names of Louise Pound's brother, Roscoe, future Dean of the Harvard Law School, then studying for his Ph.D. in botany; Alvin S. Johnson, editor of the *New Republic* and one of the founders of the New School for Social Research; and Harvey E. Newbranch, editor of the *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, who received the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 1920.

Thrust into this new milieu the seventeen-year-old Willa not only felt quite at ease, but unhesitatingly went her unconventional way in everything from her style of dress (severely tailored) and hair-do (an early version of the Eton crop) to her opinions on how Shakespeare should be taught. (Recalling her days as a "shave-headed prep," Willa admitted to her friend Mariel Gere that her self-confidence must have

4. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Sentry Edition; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), p. 145.

5. James R. Shively, *Willa Cather's Campus Years* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950), pp. 19-20. Among faculty notables were the chancellor, James H. Canfield, subsequently president of Ohio State University and Librarian of Columbia University; Charles E. Bessey, famed botanist and one-time president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science; August Hjalmar Edgren, philologist and member of the first Nobel Prize Committee; and General John J. Pershing, then a lieutenant, the commandant of the cadet corps, and instructor in mathematics.



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been odious.<sup>6</sup>) In her sophomore year she let her hair grow to play Lady Macbeth in a student production and her style of dress became more conventional, but she remained as opinionated and argumentative as ever.

Mariel's father, Charles H. Gere, founder and publisher of the leading Lincoln newspaper, the *Nebraska State Journal*, published on March 1, 1891, an essay by Willa on Thomas Carlyle; written for her English class, it had been sent to the paper by her instructor. In retrospect, according to E. K. Brown, its publication "seemed to Willa Cather to have been a decisive event. She had come to Lincoln intending to take a chiefly scientific course, and later to specialize in medicine. The sight of her work in print . . . had an effect upon her which she could only describe as 'hypnotic.' Henceforth it was clear that her aim must be to write."<sup>7</sup> She began to contribute stories, poems, and miscellaneous pieces to the student literary magazine, the *Hesperian*, and served on its staff in her sophomore and junior years.

If the sight of her work in print determined her to become an author, events of 1893—national, local, and personal—compelled her to begin writing for money. Eighteen ninety-three was a panic year: banks failed throughout the United States and depression settled over the land; locally, no rain fell, crops withered, and taxes went unpaid. In Willa's immediate circle, death took her maternal grandmother, Rachel Boak, her mentor, William Ducker, and her neighbor, Mrs. Wiener. Furthermore, Willa's father, Charles F. Cather, was among the many suffering financial damage. The Cathers owned tracts of land, but the parched fields brought in no tax money. Willa had six younger brothers and sisters, and though Roscoe, the eldest son, taught school to help out, Mr. Cather found it difficult to pay his bills. Confronted with these depressing realities, Willa accepted with enthusiasm an invitation to become a regular contributor to the *State Journal*.<sup>8</sup> She began writing a

6. Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, May 2, 1896. The letters cited in this introduction, including those to Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Gere, to Frances Gere, and to Will Owen Jones, editor of the *State Journal*, are in the Nebraska State Historical Society Collections. Because of restrictions in Willa Cather's will, her letters may not be quoted.

7. E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 51-52.

8. Later statements made by Willa Cather are responsible for the erroneous impression that while attending university she had to work to keep from starving. Unquestionably she found plenty of uses for the extra money she earned—including loaning it to her actress friends—but her father provided the necessary funds for her education, even though he went into debt to do so. See Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), p. 233, and pp. 216 and 257.



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Sunday column and play reviews in the fall of 1893; from that time on, while she continued to attend classes and participate in university activities, the focus of her interest gradually shifted from the campus to the downtown scene, with special emphasis on local theatrical offerings. Those were the great days of the Road, and most of the reigning stage stars and actor-managers brought their companies to Lincoln—where, like as not, they would be cut down to size by the razor-sharp and uninhibited comments of the *Journal's* young lady drama critic. In her Sunday columns, along with her own observations Willa relayed theatrical gossip gleaned from out-of-town papers; she also kept her readers informed of doings in the musical world—including the latest eccentricities and caprices of operatic prima donnas.

An impressive, even startling, feature of Willa Cather's journalistic writings is their quantity.<sup>9</sup> As an undergraduate she managed to turn out an astonishing number of Sunday columns, reviews, and articles; and during her five most active years as a newspaperwoman she must have averaged well over a quarter of a million words annually. In comparison with the economy of the later, canonical writings—such distillations as *A Lost Lady*, *My Mortal Enemy*, and *Sapphira*—this torrent of words points up a major difference between Willa Cather in the first decade of her career and Willa Cather in the years of her artistic maturity.

In at least one other respect the young Willa Cather seems to be almost the diametric opposite of the formidable, reclusive artist whom the world knew (or rather, was not permitted to know) during the last quarter century of her life. Far from being withdrawn and stand-offish, the young Willa was outgoing and gregarious: she wanted to be in the thick of things, to see for herself and have her say. Back in Red Cloud after her graduation she bewailed her “bitter exile,” referred to the town as “Siberia,” and urgently appealed to Lincoln friends to help her secure a teaching post at the university.<sup>10</sup> Even though one of her stories, “On the Divide,” had just appeared in the *Overland Monthly*, and she harbored a painful conviction that her friends expected great things of her as a writer, her first concern was not writing but escape from stagnation into life: the world of music, drama, art. In seeking a job away from home she had the excuse of economic necessity—the financial burden on her father had

9. Two collections—*The Kingdom of Art* and *The World and the Parish*—have been published by the University of Nebraska Press. See Selected Bibliography.

10. Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, January 2, March 12, 1896; Willa Cather to Charles H. Gere, March 14, 1896.



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not lessened—but if writing had really assumed the most important place in her life, she could have stayed in Red Cloud, with pen and paper, time, and a roof over her head.

Willa did not receive the teaching appointment, but through the instrumentality of Charles Gere, late in June, 1896, she went east to assume the managing editorship of a newly reorganized Pittsburgh magazine, the *Home Monthly*. Overjoyed at her deliverance, she described to Mariel Gere how intoxicating it was, after the train got east of Chicago, to see hills and streams and woods; in fact, her high spirits were so apparent that the conductor had asked if she was getting home. And, wrote Willa, this was just how she felt.<sup>11</sup> She did not then suspect that she had been forever branded by the prairie, and that her life was to be a tug of war between East and West.



In exuberant letters to Mariel and Mrs. Gere, Willa told of her first crowded days on the *Home Monthly*. Since it was an infant magazine, contributors were scarce and Willa herself wrote half the first issue under a variety of pseudonyms. In addition to doing all the manuscript reading, proofing, planning of future issues, and corresponding with authors, she had to help her inexperienced foreman in the composing room. But everyone cooperated, and she had a stenographer who knew how to spell (Willa's own spelling was distinctly substandard, though not without a certain addled charm). The magazine featured articles on care of the teeth and gardening, fashions, and homey advice: trash in Willa's view, but apparently trash that people wanted to read. In any case she was determined to stick at her job and prove herself to the people back in Nebraska; her serious writing would have to keep until she had time for it.<sup>12</sup> By December, she had organized her work to the point that she could start sending a weekly column, "The Passing Show," back to the *State Journal*.

We owe a delightful portrait of Willa at this period to George Seibel, one of the earliest of her Pittsburgh friends, then a freelance newspaperman, later director of the Carnegie Free Library at Allegheny, Pennsylvania. In a 1949 article he told of his first meeting with the editor of the *Home Monthly*—she "looked about eighteen; she was plump and

11. Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, n.d. Headed: "Pittsburgh, Friday."

12. Willa Cather to Mrs. Charles H. Gere, July 13, 1896; Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, August 4, 1896.



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dimpled, with dreamy eyes and an eager mind." Through this encounter "was established an understanding by which Willa Cather came to the Seibel home once or twice a week to read French. Our reading covered a vast territory."<sup>13</sup> In an earlier article he had gone into detail:

We started in on Alphonse Daudet's "Femme d' Artistes"; we finished with Edmond Rostand's "Cyrano de Bergerac." . . . It was the wildest rodeo of French literature ever put on between Paris, France, and Paris, Texas. We ranged from De Musset and Verlaine, with their tears and absinthe, to Victor Hugo and Theophile Gautier, in purple waistcoats and alexandrian armor . . . but our most arduous adventure was the siege of Carthage in Flaubert's "Salammbô."

Flaubert was our chief delight, and Willa's impeccable style was achieved by a sedulous study of this merciless master. . . . All these prodigies were achieved upon a simple home dietary of noodle soup and potato salad, with copious draughts of Balzacian coffee. But on Christmas Eves she would munch the needles of spruce or fir, which she accounted an epicurean delicacy. Sometimes she would voice regret that she was not a boa constrictor, who could feed full of Christmas evergreens and then curl up luxuriously under the tree to purr in rivalry with our cat . . . . To one of these Christmas Eves, Willa brought a young friend, wide eyed and sweet voiced. Her name was Dorothy Canfield, and she too has achieved an honored place in American Literature as Dorothy Canfield Fisher.<sup>14</sup>

In a letter to Seibel which appeared with his recollections, Mrs. Fisher said that of course she remembered perfectly well "that Christmas Eve when Willa Cather and I went to help trim your Christmas tree. . . ." The girls had known each other in Lincoln when Dorothy's father, James H. Canfield, had been chancellor of the university; in 1895 (the year Willa graduated) he had accepted the presidency of Ohio State University and the Canfields had moved to Columbus. In 1896 Dorothy spent Christmas in Pittsburgh with Willa.

By that time, Mrs. Fisher wrote in a subsequent article,

[Willa] had more prestige than ever for me, because she was earning her own living, was getting (as I remember it) the munificent salary of a hundred dollars a month (this really was munificent in the 1890's),

13. George Seibel, "Miss Willa Cather from Nebraska," *New Colophon*, II, Pt. 7 (1949), 195-208.

14. George Seibel, "The Quiet Observer," *Musical Forecast*, June, 1947, pp. 5, 11.



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was living on her own, in a boarding house, free to do whatever she wanted, out of her office hours.

This kind of success and independence for a young woman was not in the least taken for granted in the '90's. . . . It cast a glamor over Willa which enhanced the admiration we had felt for her during the college years, because of her gift for writing. I was immensely grateful for Willa's invitation to me . . . .<sup>15</sup>

In the same article Mrs. Fisher spoke of that evening as "a deep draught of the most concentrated essence of Christmas I've ever had." She recalled that there was "wonderful, cosmopolitan talk. . . . Willa had studied both French and German in her college classes, and of course there had been professors at the University who spoke these languages. But this was the first household where she had come and gone familiarly where cultivated Germans used their mother tongue freely, as naturally as English. With her passionate appreciation of every opportunity for enlarging the horizon of her culture, she drank in admiringly the atmosphere of this pleasant, friendly home . . . ."

In June, 1897, Willa visited the Canfields in Columbus en route to Nebraska. In July she wrote the Seibels from Red Cloud that the *Home Monthly* had been sold and that she had severed connections with it but would return to Pittsburgh before September. She was planning to go into regular newspaper work, and asked Mr. Seibel's advice.<sup>16</sup> In the interim she settled down to write. Her work was going well when a wire came offering her a job on the *Pittsburgh Daily Leader* at \$75.00 a month. Willa made immediate arrangements to leave, although with some regret, for she had been writing better stories. Probably she went out too much in Pittsburgh for the good of her work—but then, after all, one couldn't be a hermit. She would have next summer and many other summers for her writing, and in Pittsburgh there would be Calvé and Bernhardt and all the rest of her idols.<sup>17</sup>

Hardly a week after her return to Pittsburgh, however, Willa wrote Mariel Gere a long, homesick letter. Everyone seemed glad to see her—five men had met her at the train—but already she was tired of the gay

15. The late Dorothy Canfield Fisher kindly permitted the author to make use of the original manuscript of the article, published in part as a feature story, "Novelist Recalls Christmas in Blue-and-Gold Pittsburgh," *Chicago Tribune Magazine of Books*, December 21, 1947.

16. Willa Cather to George Seibel, July 23, 1897.

17. Willa Cather to Will Owen Jones, n.d. Headed: "Red Cloud, Tuesday."



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Bohemian life. A west wind was blowing and it made her ache to be home; she missed her brothers Roscoe and Douglas, she longed for the baby of the family, Jack. Whatever made her suppose she would be happy so far away from Nebraska? One shouldn't be an exile. (At this point, apparently, Pittsburgh, not Red Cloud, was "Siberia.") In her new job on the day telegraph desk she edited and wrote headlines for all the telegraph news that came in from eight A.M. to three P.M.; the rest of the day and all her evenings were free except Saturday when she worked until midnight. She was continuing to do drama criticism, for which she would be paid extra.<sup>18</sup> All in all, these duties would seem enough to keep anyone occupied, but Willa found time to write "The Passing Show," which she now sent to the *Lincoln Courier*, a weekly paper edited by her friend Sarah B. Harris, and to conduct a book column (under the pseudonym "Helen Delay") for the *Home Monthly*.

This rigorous and demanding life, whose compensations were chiefly music and the theater and the opportunities to meet celebrities of the day, continued until Willa's resignation from the *Leader* in the spring of 1900. In 1898 the routine grind was alleviated by a vacation in Red Cloud and a hunting trip in the Black Hills and Wyoming with her brothers. Earlier in the year there had been a week in New York (memorable for a lunch with one of Willa's favorite actresses, Mme Modjeska) and a fortnight in Washington, D.C. Here she visited her father's cousin, Howard Gore, a professor of geodesy at Columbian University, who was about to leave on the Wellman Polar Expedition. Dr. Gore's friends offered a change from the composers, singers, writers, and stage people whom Willa had been meeting in Pittsburgh; a letter to Frances Gere mentions such dinner companions as the Turkish chargé d'affaires, the Norwegian ambassador, and the secretary of the German legation, to say nothing of one Herr Otto Schenfeldt who, Willa confided, was so pro-Spanish that the government screened his mail (the United States had declared war on Spain just the week before). Most of her letter, however, was devoted to rhapsodic praise of her cousin's wife, Lillian Thekla Brandthall, daughter of a former Norwegian ambassador and kin of King Oscar II of Sweden; this glamorous creature could sing Grieg's songs and read Ibsen like no one else—exactly Willa's idea of "l'étoile du Nord."<sup>19</sup>

Nineteen hundred opened on an auspicious note with the appearance

18. Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, n.d. [September 19, 1897].

19. Willa Cather to Frances Gere, June 23, 1898.



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in the January *Cosmopolitan* of her story, "Eric Hermannson's Soul." Perhaps its acceptance contributed to her decision to leave the *Leader*; also, and more important, a new Pittsburgh magazine, *The Library*, opened its pages to her for the twenty-six numbers that it lasted. During the summer she visited her cousins in Washington, and secured a part-time job there editing translations. In November the *Ladies' Home Journal* published her article about the composer Ethelbert Nevin. Of the celebrities she had met in Pittsburgh, Nevin was perhaps the one Willa knew the best: she had praised him in the highest terms in letters to the Geres, saying she was prouder of his friendship than of anything that had happened to her.<sup>20</sup> In December she began contributing a Washington column to Pittsburgh and Lincoln papers. But supporting herself as a freelance was a precarious business at best, and in March, 1901, when the opportunity presented itself she was glad to accept a teaching post in Pittsburgh's Central High School.

Earlier—probably on a visit to Pittsburgh at Christmas—she had talked with George Seibel about obtaining a teaching position. She felt that her journalistic writing was leading nowhere; she needed time for her serious work, and teachers had their summer months free. Thanks to loyal friends, the job had been secured, but Willa did not find teaching easy. During the spring term she taught Latin, and by the end of the semester had lost twenty pounds.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, to her relief, she was transferred to the English department, and in 1903 went on to a better paying position in the American Literature department at Allegheny High School.

By then, however, her circumstances had been radically altered for the better. Sometime during 1899 she met Isabelle McClung, the daughter of a prominent Pittsburgh judge, and as a result of their meeting Willa's days of batching it in a boarding house were over. Large of mind and heart, Isabelle "became for Willa Cather what every writer needs most, the helping friend."<sup>22</sup> Willa was invited to make her home with the McClung family, and from this time on until she left Pittsburgh in 1906 lived in the McClung mansion on Murray Hill Avenue.

20. Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, January 10, 1898; Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, n.d. The opening and closing pages are missing, but it is apparent from the text that the letter was written in late November or early December, 1898.

21. Willa Cather to George and Helen Seibel, July 17, 1901.

22. Elizabeth Moorhead, *These Too Were Here: Louise Homer and Willa Cather* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1950), p. 50.



## INTRODUCTION

Living in the McClung house with its solidity and comfort, its well-trained servants and ordered routine, made a great change in Willa Cather's life. . . . Although she still had to get up at six in the morning and take a long, and, in winter, a very cold streetcar ride to and from her work; and although she taught, as she did anything she undertook, with a great expenditure of vital energy, she enjoyed a tranquillity and physical comfort in the McClung house she had probably never before experienced. Isabelle McClung fitted up a sewing-room at the top of the house as a study for her, and she wrote here on week-ends and holidays, and during school vacations; . . .<sup>23</sup>

Except for a few scattered articles and a series of travel letters written on her first trip abroad in 1902, Willa now devoted herself wholly to poetry and fiction. Her first book, a volume of verse titled *April Twilights*, appeared in 1903, and a collection of short stories, *The Troll Garden*, in 1905. Her work had attracted the attention of that dynamic publishing genius, S. S. McClure, and after meetings with him in Pittsburgh and New York, Willa was offered an associate editorship on the staff of *McClure's Magazine*. She had grave reservations;<sup>24</sup> McClure was known to be a man difficult to work for—in fact, virtually the entire staff resigned in a body in March, 1906—but in the end Willa accepted his offer. In June she moved to New York and took an apartment on Washington Square.



Despite her misgivings, Willa Cather and McClure understood each other from the start, and throughout her years on the magazine remained in perfect accord. Her first major assignment—to reorganize, verify, and rewrite a series of articles on the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy—kept Willa in Boston for most of 1907 and part of 1908. Early in the latter year she met Sarah Orne Jewett, whose friendship and counsel meant so much to her; indeed, Miss Jewett's letter of advice, written in December, 1908, was, in E. K. Brown's judgment "the most

23. Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), pp. 53-54.

24. Willa Cather's friend and biographer, the late Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant wrote that the move to New York "was a hard decision to make (she used to tell me) because of Willa's now established Pittsburgh roots and affections and, above all, because of her love of teaching the young" (*Willa Cather: A Memoir* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963], p. 28).