BANTAM CLASSIC

A Country Doctor

Sarah Orne Jewett

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY PAULA BLANCHARD

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE late nineteenth century Sarah Orne Jewett was one of the best-loved authors in America. Her work appeared regularly in *The Atlantic Monthly, Harper's* and other leading literary journals, and almost every year her publisher, Houghton Mifflin, would collect an annual harvest of stories, wrap them up in book form and sell out a large edition. It was a good time to be a writer in America, when Mark Twain and Henry James were at the height of their popularity and Willa Cather and Edith Wharton were learning their craft. Readership of the journals cut across class and economic lines, and copies adorned parlor tables in country villages and isolated farms in New England, the South and Midwest, where they were passed from hand to hand among neighbors and read from cover to cover.

Jewett's fiction appealed to country people, especially country women, because in it they found themselves. "Thee knows," a Pennsylvania Quaker woman wrote to Jewett, "I am one of thy old women." Although Jewett wrote about men as well, and about both urban and rural settings, it was through her women characters that she found her most authentic voice. She was not the only author writing about country women. The novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe had preceded Jewett's and had been early models. Rose Terry Cooke and Mary Wilkins Freeman both wrote about women who lived in small New England towns. But Jewett's

women, particularly her older women, have a collective personality that is distinctly their own. The most memorable are Mrs. Todd and Mrs. Brackett in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Vigorous and independent, mostly widows and spinsters, they support themselves by nursing, farming, shopkeeping or whatever comes to hand. They are warm, humorous, practical and a bit prickly, and they are the mainstays of their families and neighbors, keeping alive the sympathetic ties that hold society together.

Nan Prince of *A Country Doctor* is one of these women in the making, having reached a point in life where she must jump to maturity and independence by means of conscious choice. In that respect she is different from Mrs. Todd and Jewett's other wise old women, whose native strength has been developed over the years as much by outward circumstance as by force of will. Nan must take hold of her future and shape it herself. Yet it is not hard to imagine that Nan at sixty will be in all essentials another of Jewett's strong elders, a counselor and peacemaker in her community. This was not a kind of strength that late-Victorian readers were used to seeing in women characters. More typically, even strong women like Charlotte Brontë's Shirley or George Eliot's Maggie had to die or compromise their freedom—usually by marriage—in the end.

Sarah Orne Jewett was born in 1849 in South Berwick, Maine, a coastal town on the Piscataqua River, which in that place forms the border between Maine and New Hampshire. The Piscataqua region had always prospered, and though in Jewett's time that prosperity was waning somewhat, real destitution was rare in South Berwick. The Jewetts were well off, income earned by Jewett's physician father being supplemented by inherited money made in the heyday of New England shipping. In recent years medi-

cine had replaced seagoing as a family tradition; not only Sarah's father but a grandfather, an uncle and a great-uncle were doctors.

Sarah grew up in a literate, urbane community. The older generation included a fair number of retired sea captains and their wives, world travelers all. She herself was descended from several generations of prominent politicians, and among the regular guests at the Jewett table were a member of the Maine legislature and a New Hampshire Supreme Court justice. Books in the Jewett house overflowed the library, filled one or two closets and were stacked on chairs. The town boasted a well-known private academy, which two generations of Jewetts attended, and for several weeks or months each year Sarah visited friends and relations in Boston, New York, Washington or Cincinnati.

In spite of being steeped in literature she was a solitary, outdoors child, preferring the woods and fields to human company. She spent many hours by herself, exploring old Indian paths through the woods or sitting in the corner of a field with a book, her back propped against a fencepost. She was not rebellious or prankish like Nan Prince, but like Nan she needed lots of space. She describes Nan as "wild as a young hawk," but Sarah herself—in her own words again—was "a bobolink over the fields."

Like that more domestic bird, after a short flight she liked to return to the nest. She was close to her parents and sisters, and together they formed a unit complete in itself. Although they were among the town's leading citizens and were active in various civic enterprises, the Jewetts probably would have been quite satisfied with only the company of one another and the various grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins with whom they often exchanged visits. Sarah's best friends were her father and her sister Mary.

Although the sisters joined their schoolmates in various social events, both she and Mary were indifferent to the attractions of the local boys. Only Caroline, the youngest sister, married.

If Sarah did not fall in love with boys, however, she did experience a succession of brief, intense crushes on other girls. None of these friends, as far as we know, lived in South Berwick; typically she was drawn to urban girls whom she met during her extended city visits. One of her crushes was centered on an older woman, the writer Harriet Preston, who was one of her early mentors. After an inevitable parting these friendships would be kept up by lively correspondence, until they dwindled away or were abruptly cut short by the friend's marriage. Marriage became, in Sarah's eyes, something that robbed her of people she loved. It was not a state she ever remotely contemplated for herself.

She began writing very early. Some verses and a story were published locally when she was fourteen. Her first adult story was published before her nineteenth birthday, and from then on her work regularly appeared in print. For several years she was primarily a children's author, but in the early 1870s *The Atlantic Monthly* ran a series of sketches that became her first novel, *Deephaven.* An immediate popular success, it was followed by three collections of short stories and, in 1884, by *A Country Doctor.*

One would suppose that seeing her work in print would have ushered in a period of deep satisfaction. Instead, the years just before *Deephaven,* when she was in her early twenties, seem to have been the most troubled of her life. Diary entries from this time show her castigating herself for laziness and selfishness, lamenting that she is "not like other people in anything and never will amount to anything." Although her family practiced a liberal, tolerant

form of Christianity, she became morbidly religious, one of a circle of young women who monitored one another's strenuous efforts toward moral self-improvement. She seems to have needed a justification for her writing, and doubtless her sexuality as well: a reassurance that being "different" was not some violation of a universal order. In the end, she decided that to be a writer was to be a force for good, an "instrument" of God, and that a dedicated woman writer must remain unmarried. After *Deephaven* was published and she had the approval of her public, this need for supernatural vindication gradually diminished, and the moral imperative in her writing took on the form of helping people understand one another. Ultimately comfortable with spinsterhood and her vocation, she had come to believe that each person has a duty to use and develop his or her unique, God-given talents.

When Sarah Orne Jewett was a child she liked nothing better than to drive around with her father as he called on his patients. Theodore Jewett was not the only doctor in South Berwick, but he was certainly the best. His practice took him to the houses of judges and fishermen, schoolteachers and paupers. Often it took him far out into the countryside, to farms where a fall from a haymow had caused a broken leg, or where a widow had suddenly been paralyzed by a stroke. His daughter sometimes stayed outside, waving flies off the horse, but often enough she would be asked into the kitchen and offered an apple or a doughnut. There, half-forgotten, she would listen to the exchanges between doctor and family and take note of which remedy was dispensed for which ailment. Later, driving home, her father would point out certain dusty plants growing beside the road and tell her the medicinal properties of mullein and

coltsfoot and chickory. He would tell her why Mrs. Huckins on the south road needed no medicine at all, no matter how loudly she complained, and why the best treatment for one elderly sea captain was a bottle of wine and a cigar.

What she learned from her father applied as much to the writer she became as to the doctor she may have hoped to be. By all accounts Dr. Jewett was an uncommonly gifted physician who could have succeeded, perhaps brilliantly, in a city practice and taught at one of the large hospitals in New York or Boston. Instead he had chosen to stay in South Berwick, maintaining a horse-and-buggy practice and delivering a yearly course of lectures at Bowdoin Medical School in Brunswick. His city colleagues called it a waste, but he never lost their respect, and the life he had chosen was well suited to the person he was. Modest and understated to a fault as a young man, he never acquired the knack of making himself conspicuous in a crowd. Nor did he have much respect for textbook medicine. He was, one physician friend recalled, "above all an *understander* of men," a doctor who knew each of his patients probably better than the patient knew himself, and whose healing talent extended far beyond the bounds of formal medical knowledge.

Sarah resembled him in her tolerance of minor human frailties, her sense of humor, her intellectual curiosity (combined with a strong distaste for formal booklearning) and a disarmingly modest manner that invited confidences. Like him she was the kind of harmless-looking person people tell their troubles to. At some point in adolescence she seems to have toyed with the idea of following him into medicine. If she did, she must have realized that her health was a drawback: she suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, which crippled her for weeks at a time. In any case, she

would have hated the rote learning and intense study that medical school demanded. She became a writer instead, finding a parallel channel for a gift of sympathy that mirrored her father's. But she always prided herself on her medical knowledge, dispensing nostrums and advice to friends all her life and congratulating herself when one of her "cases" happened to improve, often in spite of the mildly poisonous remedies of the day.

As she reached adulthood the practice of medicine had only recently become possible for women. In 1849, the year Sarah Orne Jewett was born, Elizabeth Blackwell received her medical degree from Geneva College in upstate New York. The college administrators, believing Blackwell's admission application was a prank perpetrated by another school, had accepted it in a spirit of brotherly good fun. When Blackwell showed up at the beginning of the term she was ostracized by her classmates and barred from attending some classes. She only gradually won the respect of the faculty and students through persistence and obvious competence. Later, after further study in England and France, she was refused the right to practice in New York hospitals and vilified in anonymous letters. Landlords refused to rent rooms to her, certain that a female physician must be a disreputable woman. In 1853 she opened her own dispensary, which became the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. There she was joined by her sister Emily, who had followed her into medicine. Elizabeth Blackwell went on to enjoy a distinguished career in America and England, founding a medical school for women in New York and lending strong support to the new movement for women's medical education in England. By the time she retired in 1875, women physicians had earned a grudging acceptance in both countries.

The course of her career would have been well known

in the Jewett household, and the progress of the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston, which she founded, followed with interest. Prominent male physicians, whom Theodore Jewett knew at least by reputation and probably personally, served as consultants at the hospital; Horace Greeley, the liberal white knight of the *New York Tribune* and Margaret Fuller's sometime employer, was one of its trustees. Northeastern male liberals had taken up the cause, and a career in medicine was open to their daughters. But in the up-country towns of New England, the village matrons tightened their lips and declared their allegiance to the ways God had always ordered society and the family, while on the farms the notion of a lady doctor would have given rise to some fairly raw barnyard jokes.

By the time Sarah Orne Jewett reached her mid-twenties the whole question, in personal terms, had become moot. She was already an established author, having published many stories (mostly for children) and her novel, *Deephaven,* which had been approvingly received by both critics and the public. Her life in South Berwick with her parents and sisters was almost idyllically comfortable, and any thought of marriage had been rejected early and with some relief. The future seemed a seamless prolongation of girlhood, with all the awkward conflicts resolved. But in 1878, adulthood arrived with a jolt when her father suddenly died from a heart attack, leaving her without the one person she had thought indispensable. She had hoped to become a kind of amanuensis to him in his old age, writing down the thoughts he had never had time to express. She had thought of the two of them as a literary team—he the wise elder, she the dutiful child. Now she had to speak for both of them.

A few years later she found Annie Fields, the widow of

Boston publisher James T. Fields, and began the life-long pattern of dividing her time between South Berwick and Annie's home in Boston. Their relationship was close and loving. When they met, both were grieving—Sarah for her father and Annie for her husband, who died in 1881. In 1884 Sarah published *A Country Doctor,* which was at once a portrait of her father and the expression of the strong belief in independence he had taught her in life and, finally, through his death.

In *A Country Doctor* Nan Prince faces open opposition and private ridicule from the villagers, but it is tempered by their universal respect for Dr. Leslie. And it is his example and encouragement that is crucial in her decision to defy local opinion and become a doctor. Except for a few minor points of difference, the character of John Leslie is a portrait of Theodore Jewett. He has the same benign manner that invites trust in people who hardly know him, like Nan's mother; and along with it the same tact and "uncommon reserve." He practices medicine in the same way: "You have the true gift of doctoring," Dr. Ferris tells him. "You need no medical dictator, and whatever you study and whatever comes to you in the way of instruction simply ministers to your intuition." He is Nan's friend and mentor, but like Dr. Jewett he is also rather abstracted, leaving a slight emotional distance between them.

Presumably he also resembles Dr. Jewett, as well as Sarah herself, in his theory of child-raising. A true son of Emerson and Rousseau, Leslie believes that God endows each person with particular talents that, left alone, will develop without being forced. The image of the child as growing plant is evoked repeatedly in the novel: Leslie is pleased that Nan "has grown up as naturally as a plant grows, not having been clipped back or forced in any unnatural direction. If ever a human being were untrammeled

and left alone to see what will come of it, it is this child." He confesses to a certain scientific curiosity to see what will happen.

So despite his love and example, Nan must depend on her own native strength. Like a "prince" in an old-fashioned tale, she must survive a succession of ordeals in order to achieve her goal. The first is the disapproval of the village. We are not told much about this, only that people either smile or frown at the idea of a girl studying medicine and that (at the end of the book) Mrs. Martin Dyer prides herself on being the only one in town who doesn't have "something to take back." Nan, strong in determination in her early teens, doesn't pay much attention to village opinion.

The second is later and much more serious. Faced with the need to actually begin medical studies after leaving school, Nan falls into a paralysis of depression and self-doubt that resembles Jewett's own early emotional crisis. She looks at other girls her age and sees none who want to be anything but wife and mother, and like her creator she wonders why she is different and whether it has all been a mistake. She thinks maybe she should settle for being no more than Dr. Leslie's hostess and companion. The doctor, who once encouraged her choice and shared his medical knowledge with her, is determined not to push her in any direction. He remains silent, leaving her to find her way alone.

Surviving this ordeal as well, she encounters the third when she falls in love with George Gerry. The choice between Gerry and her career will be absolute: in the 1880s, given the lack of birth control and the demands of conventional domestic life, there was no chance of combining the two. Nan's renewed dedication to medicine is couched in religious terms, almost as if she were a nun. This is based

on Jewett's own convictions, but it is also an appeal to the religious sensibilities of her readers. For a woman to willfully turn her back on the sacred duties of hearth and motherhood required such justification in the minds of the general public. For Nan, as for Jewett, personal ambition was not enough; one needed divine sanction as well.

The challenges Nan must overcome—social disapproval, the sense of isolation and paralyzing self-doubt, sexual renunciation and the loss of possible children—are all representative of the challenges faced by women of the last century and well into the twentieth. Nan is placed at a particularly awkward moment in women's history. Early pioneers like Elizabeth Blackwell had succeeded at great personal cost, but the lack of emotional support, the yearning for a normal family life and the fear of strong community criticism remained powerful barriers. Each woman who chose an unconventional vocation was essentially alone, having few precedents, if any, to follow. Through Dr. Leslie, Jewett voices the hope that Nan will be an exemplar for young women, "the teller of new truth, a revealer of laws."

After Jewett published *A Country Doctor* she wrote no more overtly feminist works except for a few short stories. But the beliefs expressed in this early novel are implicit in her later characterizations of women. Widows and spinsters mostly and well beyond marrying age, they earn their own living, are sturdy, wise and generous, they make their own decisions and are beholden to no man. There is a bit of Nan Prince in all of them.

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CHAPTER I

THE LAST MILE

IT HAD been one of the warm and almost sultry days which sometimes come in November; a maligned month, which is really an epitome of the other eleven, or a sort of index to the whole year's changes of storm and sunshine. The afternoon was like spring, the air was soft and damp, and the buds of the willows had been beguiled into swelling a little, so that there was a bloom over them, and the grass looked as if it had been growing green of late instead of fading steadily. It seemed like a reprieve from the doom of winter, or from even November itself.

The dense and early darkness which usually follows such unseasonable mildness had already begun to cut short the pleasures of this springlike day, when a young woman, who carried a child in her arms, turned from a main road of Oldfields into a foot-path which led southward across the fields and pastures. She seemed sure of her way, and kept the path without difficulty, though a stranger might easily have lost it here and there, where it led among the patches of sweet-fern or bayberry bushes, or through shadowy tracts of small white-pines. She stopped sometimes to rest, and walked more and more wearily, with increasing effort; but she kept on her way desperately, as if it would not do to arrive much later at the place which she was seeking. The child seemed to