

THE SHORT STORY

By SISTER MAURA

SUPREME among all short stories are, of course, the Gospel parables. Throughout the Christian centuries, for ninety-six generations, they have shed their healing radiance around the world. They are in a class apart.

Every discourse is in a sense a story since it tells about something, so Mario Pei properly calls his learned and popular disquisition *The Story of Language*. Ordinarily, the word means an imagined narrative of greater or less length. The short story is a narrative, complete in itself, which does not run to more than seven thousand words.

Stories have been told from time immemorial to teach or to entertain. The early Egyptians enjoyed listening to short stories, and wrote some of them out on papyrus. The British Museum treasures one of these that dates to about 1450 B.C. Greece, Rome, India, Persia had their stories. *The Arabian Nights* collection was made in the middle of the fifteenth century, A.D., but the stories garnered were ancient then. Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are famous medieval collections. In those days, *contes dévots* had an extraordinary vogue, and one of them left a glorious mark on world literature in Goethe's *Faust* and Marlowe's *Faustus*. Another, re-emerging in the present century as *The Miracle*, furnished gorgeous fare to theatre-goers.

In England, the first suggestion of what is known as the modern short story, came in the narrative essays of the eighteenth century. Sir Roger de Coverley, Beau Tibbs, the Man in Black are full-drawn fictitious characters, but they come to life only to express an opinion on the manners and morals of the time. By the close of the century, a writer was rising to fame who has several excellent short stories to his credit. In *The Two Drovers*, Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) illustrates the twentieth century formula, though not so economically as moderns do; he interprets a human life through one crucial incident, the fatal quarrel between Robin Oig and Harry Wakefield. The modern short story gives totality of impression by suggesting the past and implying the future.

In *The Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, Dickens (1812-1870) shows himself a master of the form. *The Carol* is a story that exemplifies Aristotle's theory that 'the probable impossible is better plot material than the possible

improbable.' The ghostly visitants once taken for granted, everything else follows logically and consistently. The action of this plot develops with a rhythmical symmetry that has no trace of artificiality. Washington Irving's (1783-1859) masterpieces, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, are stories of character and situation rather than of plot. Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804-1864) short stories, like his long ones, bear the imprint of New England mysticism.

In France, Merimée (1803-1870), Daudet (1840-1897), and de Maupassant (1850-1893) cultivated the art of the short story through the nineteenth century. This form of fiction flowered in the nineteenth as detective fiction did in the twentieth century. De Maupassant had such extraordinary skill that his name became a seal of quality. When O. Henry's friends wished to compliment him, they called him "the de Maupassant of America." In the United States, Bret Harte (1839-1902) introduced the wild west to literature by his stories of humor and humanity. In Great Britain, Stevenson (1850-1894) was writing with an artistry and a spirituality not easily paralleled. *Markheim*, *Thrawn Janet*, and *A Lodging for a Night* are the peaks of his achievement. *Thrawn Janet*, a grim story of the enemy of mankind, creates a black atmosphere of mounting terror, and also demonstrates the vital and graphic quality of Scots. A recent story on the same theme, different but quite as sinister, is Graham Greene's *The Hint of an Explanation*.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) developed a special technique and wrote what is sometimes called the American short story. Poe is an artist and master craftsman. By focusing every detail on the final climax, he concentrates interest upon it with intense effect; but he is not an interpreter of American life. His stories are often macabre, like *The Fall of the House of Usher* or *Ligeia*, and sometimes even gory, like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*.

For several generations, American writers followed Poe's formula. O. Henry (1862-1910) is notable among them, but he added a device of his own, which he used very adroitly—the surprise ending. He paints the American scene with skilful fidelity and an occasional shade of artificiality. A truer interpretation of the life of the average American citizen is, for instance, *Mr. Bisbee's Princess* by Julian Street. Mr. Bisbee is earnest, honest, patriotic, enterprising; and the mysterious lady who comes into his life, is a fascinating personality. The British Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), a short story writer par

excellence, knows how the human mind works; he is master of vivid description and character-drawing, and has a gift for racy diction that is also literary. Kipling brought India into English literature.

Daniel Corkery, Frank O'Connor, Liam O'Flaherty, and Sean O'Faolain are interpreting Irish life today; but George Russell held that Seumas O'Kelly, who belonged to the first quarter of the century, wrote the best short story of the time. This is *The Weaver's Grave*. It is indeed no mean feat to make a beautiful flower of romance blossom by the graveside. This story has distinction, humor, realism, and beauty. Another of Mr. Kelley's stories introduces one of the most interesting small boys in fiction. As a barge comes to rest in a canal, Billy, a deck hand who has roamed the world, looks up to see a boy perched on the gate of the lock. "His eyes were upon Billy. A round soft hat was pulled down on his head. There was a smile on the face in the shadow of the hat as elusive as the smile on the Mona Lisa . . . A rather vivid complexion brightened a round, mild face. Billy noted the sheen in a wisp of fair hair that showed over one ear."

The two struck up a friendship, and after some conversation, Billy asked, "What do they call you at home?"

"They call me the Terror," replied the boy without any emotion, and the course of a lively narrative justifies his title.

To illustrate that the short story can succeed in the epistolary form, which is difficult because missives are likely to overlap, take *The Decorations*, by E. V. Lucas. Here is a situation that becomes more and more complicated with every letter that follows the Reverend Lawrence Lidbetter to London; but he finally resolves the whole entanglement with a stroke of his pen. The eleven letters are distinctly individualized; the jewel of the batch comes from Mrs. Hobbs the charwoman.

"Honoured Sir," she writes, "I am writing you because Hobbs and me dispare of getting any justice from the so called ladies who have been turning the holy church of Saint Michael and All Angels into a Covent Garden market. To sweep up holly and green stuff I don't mind, because I have heard you say year after year that we should all do our best at Christmas to help each other. I always hold that charity and kindness are more than rubys, but when it comes to flour I say no. If you would believe it, Mrs. Millstone is first watering the holly and lorrel to make it wet and then sprinkling flour on it to look like hore frost, and the mess is something dreadful, all over the

cushions and carpet. To sweep up ordinary dust I don't mind, more particularly as it is my paid work and bounden duty; but unless it is made worth my while Hobbs says I must say no. We draw the line at sweeping up dough. Mr. Starling is very kind, but as Hobbs says you are the founting head.—Awaiting a reply, I am, your humble servant, Martha Hobbs.”

Technically, the short story of the present day owes much to Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923). She writes with a light hand, a casual air, and warm sympathy. Her theme is never farfetched. She can transmute commonplace crucial happenings to a luminous glory that gives them a claim on immortality. Witness *The Garden Party*, *The Singing Lesson*, *Mr. and Mrs. Dove*.

The short story in Canada is a recent growth. At first, Canadians sought recognition in England or in the United States, but now they can find an enterprising publisher and a large reading public at home. The best stories produced so far are, I think, Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches*. Though these have the touch of nature that makes the whole world kin, they are unmistakably Canadian, even Ontarian, in spirit. Mariposa on the shore of Lake Wissanotti is the setting in which Mr. Leacock's characters work out their destiny. It is a country town, described in familiar detail, such as, "Up and down the Main Street are telegraph poles of cedar of colossal thickness, standing at a variety of angles and carrying rather more wires than are commonly seen at a transatlantic cable station."

The characters are living people, portrayed with humorous affection but without illusion. Judge Pepperleigh, for instance, "had the aptitude for passing sentences so highly perfected that he spent his whole time at it inside of court and out. I've heard him hand out sentences for the Sultan of Turkey and Mrs. Pankhurst and the Emperor of Germany that made one's blood run cold. He would sit there on the piazza of a summer evening reading the paper, with dynamite sparks flying from his spectacles as he sentenced the Czar of Russia to ten years in the salt mines—and made it fifteen a few minutes afterwards." The stories have no more plot than real life has.

Leacock approves the reading of innocent and sentimental novels by innocent and sentimental girls, and justifies it in this way: "Each one of them (the girls) in due time marries an enchanted prince and goes to live in one of the little enchanted houses in the lower part of the town . . . As for the enchanted

princes, they find them in the strangest places, where you would never expect to see them, working—under a spell, you understand—in drug-stores and printing offices, and even selling things in shops. But to be able to find them you have first to read ever so many novels about Sir Galahad and the Errant Quest and that sort of thing.”

Several authors who received their accolade in other fields, have made noteworthy contributions to the Canadian story; Sir Charles Roberts, for instance, Marjorie Pickthall, Mazo de la Roche. In *Sir Watson Tyler*, Harvey O'Higgins has written what may prove to be a classic. This story—human, humorous, and skilfully written—is *From the Life* in every sense of the term from the life in Ontario.

Nova Scotia has had her writer of fiction in Mr. Will R. Bird for a quarter of a century. His short stories, though not so well known in Canada as his novels, have won international recognition. Twenty-three of them have been starred in O'Brien's *Best Short Stories* and *O. Henry Prize Stories*, one was published in *British Best Short Stories of 1935*. Mr. Bird has sold, in all, five hundred and forty-six short stories and novellettes in Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. The Ryerson Press has garnered the best of them in book form under the title *Sunrise for Peter*. Of the title piece, Sir Charles Roberts wrote, “This is what I call a really great story.”

In 1939, another Nova Scotian, Thomas Raddall, stepped into fame with a book of short stories named *The Pied Piper of Dipper Creek*. Mr. Raddall followed this with three successful historic novels and two more books of short stories, *Tambour* and *The Wedding Gift*. The most entertaining of his stories is *The Pied Piper*, which might well have been named *Where but in Nova Scotia?* Lord Tweedsmuir did this book the honor of writing a foreword for it, brief but full of matter; this points out the inspiration which both the past and present of the province offer a writer.

“Nova Scotia has in her day,” says Lord Tweedsmuir, “been a cockpit of war between France and Britain; she has had a long connection with the British Navy; she has had a medley of industries—mining, lumbering, farming, and above all, the sea. There was a time when her square-riggers were the finest craft, and her Bluenoses the best seamen, on the globe. She has her Micmac aborigines and her French remnant, and she has drawn her later settlers from every corner of Britain and New

England. In her landscape she has everything but high mountains; forests and wild meadows, clear windy lakes, short fierce rivers, and a rugged coast eternally chafed by the Atlantic . . .

"The new age, if it has destroyed much, has also opened windows. Nova Scotia is one of Canada's gates to the North. From her ports, the little ships sail out yearly, using the historic North-West Passage, and penetrating to within a few hundred miles of the Pole. Her sons were in the van of Western exploration, and now they are among the chief pioneers of the North. . . The village street is always within hail of the untravelled and the unknown."