

The Best American Humorous Short Stories



Alexander Jessup

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INTRODUCTION

This volume does not aim to contain all "the best American humorous short stories"; there are many other stories equally as good, I suppose, in much the same vein, scattered through the range of American literature. I have tried to keep a certain unity of aim and impression in selecting these stories. In the first place I determined that the pieces of brief fiction which I included must first of all be not merely good stories, but good short stories. I put myself in the position of one who was about to select the best short stories in the whole range of American literature,¹ but who, just before he started to do this, was notified that he must refrain from selecting any of the best American short stories that did not contain the element of humor to a marked degree. But I have kept in mind the wide boundaries of the term humor, and also the fact that the humorous standard should be kept second—although a close second—to the short story standard.

In view of the necessary limitations as to the volume's size, I could not hope to represent all periods of American literature adequately, nor was this necessary in order to give examples of the best that has been done in the short story in a humorous vein in American literature. Probably all types of the short story of humor are included here, at any rate. Not only copyright restrictions but in a measure my own opinion have combined to exclude anything by Joel Chandler Harris—*Uncle Remus*—from the collection. Harris is primarily—in his best work—a humorist, and only secondarily a short story writer. As a humorist he is of the first rank; as a writer of short stories his place is hardly so high. His humor is not mere funniness and diversion; he is a humorist in the fundamental and large sense, as are Cervantes, Rabelais, and Mark Twain.

No book is duller than a book of jokes, for what is refreshing in small doses becomes nauseating when perused in large assignments. Humor in literature is at its best not when served merely by itself but when presented along with other ingredients of literary force in order to give a wide representation of life. Therefore "professional literary

humorists," as they may be called, have not been much considered in making up this collection. In the history of American humor there are three names which stand out more prominently than all others before Mark Twain, who, however, also belongs to a wider classification: "Josh Billings" (Henry Wheeler Shaw, 1815-1885), "Petroleum V. Nasby" (David Ross Locke, 1833-1888), and "Artemus Ward" (Charles Farrar Browne, 1834-1867). In the history of American humor these names rank high; in the field of American literature and the American short story they do not rank so high. I have found nothing of theirs that was first-class both as humor and as short story. Perhaps just below these three should be mentioned George Horatio Derby (1823-1861), author of *Phoenixiana* (1855) and the *Squibob Papers* (1859), who wrote under the name "John Phoenix." As has been justly said, "Derby, Shaw, Locke and Browne carried to an extreme numerous tricks already invented by earlier American humorists, particularly the tricks of gigantic exaggeration and calm-faced mendacity, but they are plainly in the main channel of American humor, which had its origin in the first comments of settlers upon the conditions of the frontier, long drew its principal inspiration from the differences between that frontier and the more settled and compact regions of the country, and reached its highest development in Mark Twain, in his youth a child of the American frontier, admirer and imitator of Derby and Browne, and eventually a man of the world and one of its greatest humorists."² Nor have such later writers who were essentially humorists as "Bill Nye" (Edgar Wilson Nye, 1850-1896) been considered, because their work does not attain the literary standard and the short story standard as creditably as it does the humorous one. When we come to the close of the nineteenth century the work of such men as "Mr. Dooley" (Finley Peter Dunne, 1867-) and George Ade (1866-) stands out. But while these two writers successfully conform to the

exacting critical requirements of good humor and—especially the former—of good literature, neither—though Ade more so—attains to the greatest excellence of the short story. Mr. Dooley of the Archey Road is essentially a wholesome and wide-poised humorous philosopher, and the author of *Fables in Slang* is chiefly a satirist, whether in fable, play or what not.

This volume might well have started with something by Washington Irving, I suppose many critics would say. It does not seem to me, however, that Irving's best short stories, such as *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, are essentially humorous stories, although they are o'erspread with the genial light of reminiscence. It is the armchair geniality of the eighteenth century essayists, a constituent of the author rather than of his material and product. Irving's best humorous creations, indeed, are scarcely short stories at all, but rather essaylike sketches, or sketchlike essays. James Lawson (1799-1880) in his *Tales and Sketches: by a Cosmopolite* (1830), notably in *The Dapper Gentleman's Story*, is also plainly a follower of Irving. We come to a different vein in the work of such writers as William Tappan Thompson (1812-1882), author of the amusing stories in letter form, *Major Jones's Courtship* (1840); Johnson Jones Hooper (1815-1862), author of *Widow Rugby's Husband, and Other Tales of Alabama* (1851); Joseph G. Baldwin (1815-1864), who wrote *The Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853); and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870), whose *Georgia Scenes* (1835) are as important in "local color" as they are racy in humor. Yet none of these writers yield the excellent short story which is also a good piece of humorous literature. But they opened the way for the work of later writers who did attain these combined excellences.

The sentimental vein of the midcentury is seen in the work of Seba Smith (1792-1868), Eliza Leslie (1787-1858), Frances Miriam Whitcher ("Widow Bedott," 1811-1852), Mary W. Janvrin (1830-1870), and Alice Bradley Haven Neal (1828-1863). The well-known work of Joseph Clay Neal (1807-1847) is so all pervaded with caricature and humor that it belongs with the work of the professional humorist school rather than with the short story writers. To mention his *Charcoal Sketches, or Scenes in a Metropolis* (1837-1849) must suffice. The work of Seba Smith is sufficiently expressed in his title, *Way Down East, or Portraits of Yankee Life* (1854), although his *Letters of Major Jack Downing* (1833) is better known. Of his single stories may be mentioned *The General Court and Jane Andrews' Firkin of Butter* (October, 1847, *Graham's Magazine*). The work of Frances Miriam Whitcher ("Widow Bedott") is of somewhat finer grain, both as humor and in other literary qualities. Her stories or sketches, such as *Aunt Magwire's Account of Parson Scrantum's Donation Party* (March,

1848, *Godey's Lady's Book*) and *Aunt Magwire's Account of the Mission to Muffletegawmy* (July, 1859, *Godey's*), were afterwards collected in *The Widow Bedott Papers* (1855-56-80). The scope of the work of Mary B. Haven is sufficiently suggested by her story, *Mrs. Bowen's Parlor and Spare Bedroom* (February, 1860, *Godey's*), while the best stories of Mary W. Janvrin include *The Foreign Count; or, High Art in Tattletown* (October, 1860, *Godey's*) and *City Relations; or, the Newmans' Summer at Clovernook* (November, 1861, *Godey's*). The work of Alice Bradley Haven Neal is of somewhat similar texture. Her book, *The Gossips of Rivertown, with Sketches in Prose and Verse* (1850) indicates her field, as does the single title, *The Third-Class Hotel* (December, 1861, *Godey's*). Perhaps the most representative figure of this school is Eliza Leslie (1787-1858), who as "Miss Leslie" was one of the most frequent contributors to the magazines of the 1830's, 1840's and 1850's. One of her best stories is *The Watkinson Evening* (December, 1846, *Godey's Lady's Book*), included in the present volume; others are *The Batson Cottage* (November, 1846, *Godey's Lady's Book*) and *Juliet Irwin; or, the Carriage People* (June, 1847, *Godey's Lady's Book*). One of her chief collections of stories is *Pencil Sketches* (1833-1837). "Miss Leslie," wrote Edgar Allan Poe, "is celebrated for the homely naturalness of her stories and for the broad satire of her comic style." She was the editor of *The Gift* one of the best annuals of the time, and in that position perhaps exerted her chief influence on American literature. When one has read three or four representative stories by these seven authors one can grasp them all. Their titles as a rule strike the keynote. These writers, except "the Widow Bedott," are perhaps sentimentalists rather than humorists in intention, but read in the light of later days their apparent serious delineations of the frolics and foibles of their time take on a highly humorous aspect.

George Pope Morris (1802-1864) was one of the founders of *The New York Mirror*, and for a time its editor. He is best known as the author of the poem, *Woodman, Spare That Tree*, and other poems and songs. *The Little Frenchman and His Water Lots* (1839), the first story in the present volume, is selected not because Morris was especially prominent in the field of the short story or humorous prose but because of this single story's representative character. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) follows with *The Angel of the Odd* (October, 1844, *Columbian Magazine*), perhaps the best of his humorous stories. *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* (November, 1845, *Graham's Magazine*) may be rated higher, but it is not essentially a humorous story. Rather it is incisive satire, with too biting an undercurrent to pass muster in the company of the genial in literature. Poe's humorous stories as a whole have tended to belittle rather than increase his fame, many of them verging on the inane. There are some, however, which are at least excellent fooling; few more than that.

Probably this is hardly the place for an extended discussion of Poe, since the present volume covers neither American literature as a whole nor the American short story in general, and Poe is not a humorist in his more notable productions. Let it be said that Poe invented or perfected—more exactly, perfected his own invention of—the modern short story; that is his general and supreme achievement. He also stands superlative for the quality of three varieties of short stories, those of terror, beauty and ratiocination. In the first class belong *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (1841), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842), *The Black Cat* (1843), and *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846). In the realm of beauty his notable productions are *The Assigination* (1834), *Shadow: a Parable* (1835), *Ligeia* (1838), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), *Eleonora* (1841), and *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842). The tales of ratiocination—what are now generally termed detective stories—include *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841) and its sequel, *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* (1842-1843), *The Gold-Bug* (1843), *The Oblong Box* (1844), "*Thou Art the Man*" (1844), and *The Purloined Letter* (1844).

Then, too, Poe was a master of style, one of the greatest in English prose, possibly the greatest since De Quincey, and quite the most remarkable among American authors. Poe's influence on the short story form has been tremendous. Although the *effects* of structure may be astounding in their power or unexpectedness, yet the *means* by which these effects are brought about are purely mechanical. Any student of fiction can comprehend them, almost any practitioner of fiction with a bent toward form can fairly master them. The merit of any short story production depends on many other elements as well—the value of the structural element to the production as a whole depends first on the selection of the particular sort of structural scheme best suited to the story in hand, and secondly, on the way in which this is *combined* with the piece of writing to form a well-balanced whole. Style is more difficult to imitate than structure, but on the other hand *the origin of structural influence* is more difficult to trace than that of style. So while, in a general way, we feel that Poe's influence on structure in the short story has been great, it is difficult rather than obvious to trace particular instances. It is felt in the advance of the general level of short story art. There is nothing personal about structure—there is everything personal about style. Poe's style is both too much his own and too superlatively good to be successfully imitated—whom have we had who, even if he were a master of structural effects, could be a second Poe? Looking at the matter in another way, Poe's style is not his own at all. There is nothing "personal" about it in the petty sense of that term. Rather we feel that, in the case of this author, universality has been attained. It was Poe's good fortune to be himself in style, as often in content, on a plane of universal appeal. But in some general characteristics of his style his work can be, not perhaps imitated, but

emulated. Greater vividness, deft impressionism, brevity that strikes instantly to a telling effect—all these an author may have without imitating any one's style but rather imitating excellence. Poe's "imitators" who have amounted to anything have not tried to imitate him but to vie with him. They are striving after perfectionism. Of course the sort of good style in which Poe indulged is not the kind of style—or the varieties of style—suited for all purposes, but for the purposes to which it is adapted it may well be called supreme.

Then as a poet his work is almost or quite as excellent in a somewhat more restricted range. In verse he is probably the best artist in American letters. Here his sole pursuit was beauty, both of form and thought; he is vivid and apt, intensely lyrical but without much range of thought. He has deep intuitions but no comprehensive grasp of life.

His criticism is, on the whole, the least important part of his work. He had a few good and brilliant ideas which came at just the right time to make a stir in the world, and these his logical mind and telling style enabled him to present to the best advantage. As a critic he is neither broad-minded, learned, nor comprehensive. Nor is he, except in the few ideas referred to, deep. He is, however, limitedly original—perhaps intensely original within his narrow scope. But the excellences and limitations of Poe in any one part of his work were his limitations and excellences in all.

As Poe's best short stories may be mentioned: *Metzengerstein* (Jan. 14, 1832, *Philadelphia Saturday Courier*), *Ms. Found in a Bottle* (October 19, 1833, *Baltimore Saturday Visitor*), *The Assigination* (January, 1834, *Godey's Lady's Book*), *Berenice* (March, 1835, *Southern Literary Messenger*), *Morella* (April, 1835, *Southern Literary Messenger*), *The Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaall* (June, 1835, *Southern Literary Messenger*), *King Pest: a Tale Containing an Allegory* (September, 1835, *Southern Literary Messenger*), *Shadow: a Parable* (September, 1835, *Southern Literary Messenger*), *Ligeia* (September, 1838, *American Museum*), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (September, 1839, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*), *William Wilson* (1839: *Gift for 1840*), *The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion* (December, 1839, *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*), *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (April, 1841, *Graham's Magazine*), *A Descent into the Maelstrom* (May, 1841, *Graham's Magazine*), *Eleonora* (1841: *Gift for 1842*), *The Masque of the Red Death* (May, 1842, *Graham's Magazine*), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1842: *Gift for 1843*), *The Tell-Tale Heart* (January, 1843, *Pioneer*), *The Gold-Bug* (June 21 and 28, 1843, *Dollar Newspaper*), *The Black Cat* (August 19, 1843, *United States Saturday Post*), *The Oblong Box* (September, 1844, *Godey's Lady's Book*), *The Angel of the Odd* (October, 1844, *Columbian Magazine*), *"Thou Art the Man"* (November, 1844, *Godey's Lady's Book*), *The Purloined Letter* (1844: *Gift for 1845*), *The Imp of the Perverse* (July, 1845, *Graham's Magazine*), *The System of Dr. Tarr and Prof. Fether* (November, 1845, *Graham's Magazine*), *The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar* (December, 1845, *American Whig Review*), *The Cask*

of *Amontillado* (November, 1846, *Godey's Lady's Book*), and *Lander's Cottage* (June 9, 1849, *Flag of Our Union*). Poe's chief collections are: *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840), *Tales* (1845), and *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe* (1850-56). These titles have been dropped from recent editions of his works, however, and the stories brought together under the title *Tales*, or under subdivisions furnished by his editors, such as *Tales of Ratiocination*, etc.

Caroline Matilda Stansbury Kirkland (1801-1864) wrote of the frontier life of the Middle West in the mid-nineteenth century. Her principal collection of short stories is *Western Clearings* (1845), from which *The Schoolmaster's Progress*, first published in *The Gift* for 1845 (out in 1844), is taken. Other stories republished in that collection are *The Ball at Thram's Huddle* (April, 1840, *Knickerbocker Magazine*), *Recollections of the Land-Fever* (September, 1840, *Knickerbocker Magazine*), and *The Bee-Tree* (*The Gift* for 1842; out in 1841). Her description of the country schoolmaster, "a puppet cut out of shingle and jerked by a string," and the local color in general of this and other stories give her a leading place among the writers of her period who combined fidelity in delineating frontier life with sufficient fictional interest to make a pleasing whole of permanent value.

George William Curtis (1824-1892) gained his chief fame as an essayist, and probably became best known from the department which he conducted, from 1853, as *The Editor's Easy Chair* for *Harper's Magazine* for many years. His volume, *Prue and I* (1856), contains many fictional elements, and a story from it, *Titbottom's Spectacles*, which first appeared in *Putnam's Monthly* for December, 1854, is given in this volume because it is a good humorous short story rather than because of its author's general eminence in this field. Other stories of his worth noting are *The Shrouded Portrait* (in *The Knickerbocker Gallery*, 1855) and *The Millennial Club* (November, 1858, *Knickerbocker Magazine*).

Edward Everett Hale (1822-1909) is chiefly known as the author of the short story, *The Man Without a Country* (December, 1863, *Atlantic Monthly*), but his venture in the comic vein, *My Double; and How He Undid Me* (September, 1859, *Atlantic Monthly*), is equally worthy of appreciation. It was his first published story of importance. Other noteworthy stories of his are: *The Brick Moon* (October, November and December, 1869, *Atlantic Monthly*), *Life in the Brick Moon* (February, 1870, *Atlantic Monthly*), and *Susan's Escort* (May, 1890, *Harper's Magazine*). His chief volumes of short stories are: *The Man Without a Country, and Other Tales* (1868); *The Brick Moon, and Other Stories* (1873); *Crusoe in New York, and Other Tales* (1880); and *Susan's Escort, and Others* (1897). The stories by Hale which have made his fame all show ability of no mean order; but they are characterized by invention and ingenuity rather than by suffusing imagination. There is not much homogeneity about Hale's work. Almost any two stories of his read as if they might have been written by

different authors. For the time being perhaps this is an advantage—his stories charm by their novelty and individuality. In the long run, however, this proves rather a handicap. True individuality, in literature as in the other arts, consists not in "being different" on different occasions—in different works—so much as in being *simply* different from other writers; in being *consistently* one's self, rather than diffusedly various selves. This does not lessen the value of particular stories, of course. It merely injures Hale's fame as a whole. Perhaps some will chiefly feel not so much that his stories are different among themselves, but that they are not strongly anything—anybody's—in particular, that they lack strong personality. The pathway to fame is strewn with stray exhibitions of talent. Apart from his purely literary productions, Hale was one of the large moral forces of his time, through "uplift" both in speech and the written word.

Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809-1894), one of the leading wits of American literature, is not at all well known as a short story writer, nor did he write many brief pieces of fiction. His fame rests chiefly on his poems and on the *Breakfast-Table* books (1858-1860-1872-1890). *Old Ironsides*, *The Last Leaf*, *The Chambered Nautilus* and *Homesick in Heaven* are secure of places in the anthologies of the future, while his lighter verse has made him one of the leading American writers of "familiar verse." Frederick Locker-Lampson in the preface to the first edition of his *Lyra Elegantiarum* (1867) declared that Holmes was "perhaps the best living writer of this species of verse." His trenchant attack on *Homeopathy and Its Kindred Delusions* (1842) makes us wonder what would have been his attitude toward some of the beliefs of our own day; Christian Science, for example. He might have "exposed" it under some such title as *The Religio-Medical Masquerade*, or brought the batteries of his humor to bear on it in the manner of Robert Louis Stevenson's fable, *Something In It*: "Perhaps there is not much in it, as I supposed; but there is something in it after all. Let me be thankful for that." In Holmes' long works of fiction, *Elsie Venner* (1861), *The Guardian Angel* (1867) and *A Mortal Antipathy* (1885), the method is still somewhat that of the essayist. I have found a short piece of fiction by him in the March, 1832, number of *The New England Magazine*, called *The Début*, signed O.W.H. *The Story of Iris* in *The Professor at the Breakfast Table*, which ran in *The Atlantic* throughout 1859, and *A Visit to the Asylum for Aged and Decayed Punsters* (January, 1861, *Atlantic*) are his only other brief fictions of which I am aware. The last named has been given place in the present selection because it is characteristic of a certain type and period of American humor, although its short story qualities are not particularly strong.

Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835-1910), who achieved fame as "Mark Twain," is only incidentally a short story writer, although he wrote many short pieces of fiction. His humorous quality, I mean, is so preponderant, that one hardly thinks of the form. Indeed, he is never

very strong in fictional construction, and of the modern short story art he evidently knew or cared little. He is a humorist in the large sense, as are Rabelais and Cervantes, although he is also a humorist in various restricted applications of the word that are wholly American. *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County* was his first publication of importance, and it saw the light in the Nov. 18, 1865, number of *The Saturday Press*. It was republished in the collection, *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches*, in 1867. Others of his best pieces of short fiction are: *The Canvasser's Tale* (December, 1876, *Atlantic Monthly*), *The £1,000,000 Bank Note* (January, 1893, *Century Magazine*), *The Esquimau Maiden's Romance* (November, 1893, *Cosmopolitan*), *Traveling with a Reformer* (December, 1893, *Cosmopolitan*), *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* (December, 1899, *Harper's*), *A Double-Barrelled Detective Story* (January and February, 1902, *Harper's*) *A Dog's Tale* (December, 1903, *Harper's*), and *Eve's Diary* (December, 1905, *Harper's*). Among Twain's chief collections of short stories are: *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, and Other Sketches* (1867); *The Stolen White Elephant* (1882), *The £1,000,000 Bank Note* (1893), and *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg, and Other Stories and Sketches* (1900).

Harry Stillwell Edwards (1855-), a native of Georgia, together with Sarah Barnwell Elliott (? -) and Will N. Harben (1858-1919) have continued in the vein of that earlier writer, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet (1790-1870), author of *Georgia Scenes* (1835). Edwards' best work is to be found in his short stories of black and white life after the manner of Richard Malcolm Johnston. He has written several novels, but he is essentially a writer of human-nature sketches. "He is humorous and picturesque," says Fred Lewis Pattee, "and often he is for a moment the master of pathos, but he has added nothing new and nothing commandingly distinctive."³ An exception to this might be made in favor of *Elder Brown's Backslide* (August, 1885, *Harper's*), a story in which all the elements are so nicely balanced that the result may well be called a masterpiece of objective humor and pathos. Others of his short stories especially worthy of mention are: *Two Runaways* (July, 1886, *Century*), *Sister Todhunter's Heart* (July, 1887, *Century*), "De Valley an' de Shadder" (January, 1888, *Century*), *An Idyl of "Sinkin' Mount'in"* (October, 1888, *Century*), *The Rival Souls* (March, 1889, *Century*), *The Woodhaven Goat*

(March, 1899, *Century*), and *The Shadow* (December, 1906, *Century*). His chief collections are *Two Runaways, and Other Stories* (1889) and *His Defense, and Other Stories* (1898).

The most notable, however, of the group of short story writers of Georgia life is perhaps Richard Malcolm Johnston (1822-1898). He stands between Longstreet and the younger writers of Georgia life. His first book was *Georgia Sketches, by an Old Man* (1864). The Goose Pond School, a short story, had been written in 1857; it was not published, however, till it appeared in the November and December, 1869, numbers of a Southern magazine, *The New Eclectic*, over the pseudonym "Philemon Perch." His famous *Dukesborough Tales* (1871-1874) was largely a republication of the earlier book. Other noteworthy collections of his are: *Mr. Absalom Billingslea and Other Georgia Folk* (1888), *Mr. Fortner's Marital Claims, and Other Stories* (1892), and *Old Times in Middle Georgia* (1897). Among individual stories stand out: *The Organ-Grinder* (July, 1870, *New Eclectic*), *Mr. Neelus Peeler's Conditions* (June, 1879, *Scribner's Monthly*), *The Brief Embarrassment of Mr. Iverson Blount* (September, 1884, *Century*); *The Hotel Experience of Mr. Pink Fluker* (June, 1886, *Century*), republished in the present collection; *The Wimpy Adoptions* (February, 1887, *Century*), *The Experiments of Miss Sally Cash* (September, 1888, *Century*), and *Our Witch* (March, 1897, *Century*). Johnston must be ranked almost with Bret Harte as a pioneer in "local color" work, although his work had little recognition until his *Dukesborough Tales* were republished by Harper & Brothers in 1883.

Bret Harte (1839-1902) is mentioned here owing to the late date of his story included in this volume, *Colonel Starbottle for the Plaintiff* (March, 1901, Harper's), although his work as a whole of course belongs to an earlier period of our literature. It is now well-thumbed literary history that *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (August, 1868, *Overland*) and *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (January, 1869, *Overland*) brought him a popularity that, in its suddenness and extent, had no precedent in American literature save in the case of Mrs. Stowe and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. According to Harte's own statement, made in the retrospect of later years, he set out deliberately to add a new province to American literature. Although his work has been belittled because he has chosen exceptional and theatric happenings, yet his real strength came from his contact with Western life.

Irving and Dickens and other models served only to teach him his art. "Finally," says Prof. Pattee, "Harte was the parent of the modern form of the short story. It was he who started Kipling and Cable and Thomas Nelson Page. Few indeed have surpassed him in the mechanics of this most difficult of arts. According to his own belief, the form is an

American product ... Harte has described the genesis of his own art. It sprang from the Western humor and was developed by the circumstances that surrounded him. Many of his short stories are models. They contain not a superfluous word, they handle a single incident with graphic power, they close without moral or comment. The form came as a natural evolution from his limitations and powers. With him the story must of necessity be brief.... Bret Harte was the artist of impulse, the painter of single burning moments, the flashlight photographer who caught in lurid detail one dramatic episode in the life of a man or a community and left the rest in darkness."⁴

Harte's humor is mostly "Western humor" There is not always uproarious merriment, but there is a constant background of humor. I know of no more amusing scene in American literature than that in the courtroom when the Colonel gives his version of the deacon's method of signaling to the widow in Harte's story included in the present volume, *Colonel Starbottle for the Plaintiff*. *Here is part of it:*

"True to the instructions she had received from him, her lips part in the musical utterance (the Colonel lowered his voice in a faint falsetto, presumably in fond imitation of his fair client) Kerree!' Instantly the night becomes resonant with the impassioned reply (the Colonel here lifted his voice in stentorian tones), Kerrow!' Again, as he passes, rises the soft Kerree!'; again, as his form is lost in the distance, comes back the deep Kerrow!'"

While Harte's stories all have in them a certain element or background of humor, yet perhaps the majority of them are chiefly romantic or dramatic even more than they are humorous.

Among the best of his short stories may be mentioned: *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (August, 1868, Overland), *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (January, 1869, Overland), *Tennessee's Partner* (October, 1869, Overland), *Brown of Calaveras* (March, 1870, Overland), *Flip: a California Romance* (in *Flip, and Other Stories*, 1882), *Left Out on Lone Star Mountain* (January, 1884, Longman's), *An Ingenue of the Sierras* (July, 1894, McClure's), *The Bell-Ringer of Angel's* (in *The Bell-Ringer of Angel's, and Other Stories*, 1894), *Chu Chu* (in *The Bell-Ringer of Angel's, and Other Stories*, 1894), *The Man and the Mountain* (in *The Ancestors of Peter Atherly, and Other*

Tales, 1897), Salomy Jane's Kiss (*in* Stories in Light and Shadow, 1898), The Youngest Miss Piper (*February*, 1900, Leslie's Monthly), Colonel Starbottle for the Plaintiff (*March*, 1901, Harper's), A Mercury of the Foothills (*July*, 1901, Cosmopolitan), Lanty Foster's Mistake (*December*, 1901, New England), An Ali Baba of the Sierras (*January 4*, 1902, Saturday Evening Post), and Dick Boyle's Business Card (*in* Trent's Trust, and Other Stories, 1903). Among his notable collections of stories are: The Luck of Roaring Camp, and Other Sketches (1870), Flip, and Other Stories (1882), On the Frontier (1884), Colonel Starbottle's Client, and Some Other People (1892), A Protégé of Jack Hamlin's, and Other Stories (1894), The Bell-Ringer of Angel's, and Other Stories (1894), The Ancestors of Peter Atherly, and Other Tales (1897), Openings in the Old Trail (1902), and Trent's Trust, and Other Stories (1903). The titles and makeup of several of his collections were changed when they came to be arranged in the complete edition of his works.⁵

Henry Cuyler Bunner (1855-1896) is one of the humorous geniuses of American literature. He is equally at home in clever verse or the brief short story. Prof. Fred Lewis Pattee has summed up his achievement as follows: "Another [than Stockton] who did much to advance the short story toward the mechanical perfection it had attained to at the close of the century was Henry Cuyler Bunner, editor of Puck and creator of some of the most exquisite *vers de société* of the period. The title of one of his collections, Made in France: French Tales Retold with a U.S. Twist (1893), forms an introduction to his fiction. Not that he was an imitator; few have been more original or have put more of their own personality into their work. His genius was Gallic. Like Aldrich, he approached the short story from the fastidious standpoint of the lyric poet. With him, as with Aldrich, art was a matter of exquisite touches, of infinite compression, of almost imperceptible shadings. The lurid splashes and the heavy emphasis of the local colorists offended his sensitive taste: he would work with suggestion, with microscopic

focussings, and always with dignity and elegance. He was more American than Henry James, more even than Aldrich. He chose always distinctively American subjects—New York City was his favorite theme—and his work had more depth of soul than Stockton's or Aldrich's. The story may be trivial, a mere expanded anecdote, yet it is sure to be so vitally treated that, like Maupassant's work, it grips and remains, and, what is more, it lifts and chastens or explains. It may be said with assurance that *Short Sixes* marks one of the high places which have been attained by the American short story."⁶

Among Bunner's best stories are: *Love in Old Cloathes* (September, 1883, *Century*), *A Successful Failure* (July, 1887, *Puck*), *The Love-Letters of Smith* (July 23, 1890, *Puck*) *The Nice People* (July 30, 1890, *Puck*), *The Nine Cent-Girls* (August 13, 1890, *Puck*), *The Two Churches of 'Quawket* (August 27, 1890, *Puck*), *A Round-Up* (September 10, 1890, *Puck*), *A Sisterly Scheme* (September 24, 1890, *Puck*), *Our Aromatic Uncle* (August, 1895, Scribner's), *The Time-Table Test* (in *The Suburban Sage*, 1896). He collaborated with Prof. Brander Matthews in several stories, notably in *The Documents in the Case* (Sept., 1879, Scribner's Monthly). His best collections are: *Short Sixes: Stories to be Read While the Candle Burns* (1891), *More Short Sixes* (1894), and *Love in Old Cloathes, and Other Stories* (1896).

After Poe and Hawthorne almost the first author in America to make a vertiginous impression by his short stories was Bret Harte. The wide and sudden popularity he attained by the publication of his two short stories, *The Luck of Roaring Camp* (1868) and *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (1869), has already been noted.⁷ But one story just before Harte that astonished the fiction audience with its power and art was Harriet Prescott Spofford's (1835-) *The Amber Gods* (January and February, 1860, *Atlantic*), with its startling ending, "I must have died at ten minutes past one." After Harte the next story to make a great sensation was Thomas Bailey Aldrich's *Marjorie Daw* (April, 1873, *Atlantic*), a story with a surprise at the end, as had been his *A Struggle for Life* (July, 1867, *Atlantic*), although it was only *Marjorie Daw* that attracted much attention at the time. Then came George Washington Cable's (1844-) "*Posson Jone*," (April 1, 1876, *Appleton's Journal*) and a little later Charles

Egbert Craddock's (1850-) *The Dancin' Party at Harrison's Cove* (May, 1878, *Atlantic*) and *The Star in the Valley* (November, 1878, *Atlantic*). But the work of Cable and Craddock, though of sterling worth, won its way gradually. Even Edward Everett Hale's (1822-1909) *My Double; and How He Undid Me* (September, 1859, *Atlantic*) and *The Man Without a Country* (December, 1863, *Atlantic*) had fallen comparatively still-born. The truly astounding short story successes, after Poe and Hawthorne, then, were Spofford, Bret Harte and Aldrich. Next came Frank Richard Stockton (1834-1902). "The interest created by the appearance of *Marjorie Daw*," says Prof. Pattee, "was mild compared with that accorded to Frank R. Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger?* (1884). Stockton had not the technique of Aldrich nor his naturalness and ease. Certainly he had not his atmosphere of the *beau monde* and his grace of style, but in whimsicality and unexpectedness and in that subtle art that makes the obviously impossible seem perfectly plausible and commonplace he surpassed not only him but Edward Everett Hale and all others. After Stockton and *The Lady or the Tiger?* it was realized even by the uncritical that short story writing had become a subtle art and that the master of its subtleties had his reader at his mercy."⁸ The publication of Stockton's short stories covers a period of over forty years, from *Mahala's Drive* (November, 1868, *Lippincott's*) to *The Trouble She Caused When She Kissed* (December, 1911, *Ladies' Home Journal*), published nine years after his death. Among the more notable of his stories may be mentioned: *The Transferred Ghost* (May, 1882, *Century*), *The Lady or the Tiger?* (November, 1882, *Century*), *The Reversible Landscape* (July, 1884, *Century*), *The Remarkable Wreck of the "Thomas Hyke"* (August, 1884, *Century*), "His Wife's Deceased Sister" (January, 1884, *Century*), *A Tale of Negative Gravity* (December, 1884, *Century*), *The Christmas Wreck* (in *The Christmas Wreck, and Other Stories*, 1886), *Amos Kilbright* (in *Amos Kilbright, His Adscititious Experiences, with*

Other Stories, 1888), *Asaph* (May, 1892, *Cosmopolitan*), *My Terminal Moraine* (April 26, 1892, *Collier's Once a Week Library*), *The Magic Egg* (June, 1894, *Century*), *The Buller-Podington Compact* (August, 1897, *Scribner's*), and *The Widow's Cruise* (in *A Story-Teller's Pack*, 1897). Most of his best work was gathered into the collections: *The Lady or the Tiger?*, and *Other Stories* (1884), *The Bee-Man of Orn, and Other Fanciful Tales* (1887), *Amos Kilbright, His Adscititious Experiences, with Other Stories* (1888), *The Clocks of Rondaine, and Other Stories* (1892), *A Chosen Few* (1895), *A Story-Teller's Pack* (1897), and *The Queen's Museum, and Other Fanciful Tales* (1906).

After Stockton and Bunner come O. Henry (1862-1910) and Jack London (1876-1916), apostles of the burly and vigorous in fiction. Beside or above them stand Henry James (1843-1916)—although he belongs to an earlier period as well—Edith Wharton (1862-), Alice Brown (1857-), Margaret Wade Deland (1857-), and Katharine Fullerton Gerould (1879-), practitioners in all that O. Henry and London are not, of the finer fields, the more subtle nuances of modern life. With O. Henry and London, though perhaps less noteworthy, are to be grouped George Randolph Chester (1869-) and Irvin Shrewsbury Cobb (1876-). Then, standing rather each by himself, are Melville Davisson Post (1871-), a master of psychological mystery stories, and Wilbur Daniel Steele (1886-), whose work it is hard to classify. These ten names represent much that is best in American short story production since the beginning of the twentieth century (1900). Not all are notable for humor; but inasmuch as any consideration of the American humorous short story cannot be wholly dissociated from a consideration of the American short story in general, it has seemed not amiss to mention these authors here. Although Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) lived on into the twentieth century and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman (1862-) is still with us, the best and most typical work of these two writers belongs in the last two decades of the previous century. To an earlier period also belong Charles Egbert Craddock (1850-), George Washington Cable (1844-), Thomas Nelson Page (1853-), Constance Fenimore Woolson (1848-1894), Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-), Hamlin Garland (1860-), Ambrose Bierce (1842-?), Rose Terry Cooke (1827-1892), and Kate Chopin (1851-1904).

"O. Henry" was the pen name adopted by William Sydney Porter. He began his short story career by contributing *Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking* to *McClure's Magazine* in 1899. He followed it with many stories dealing with Western and South- and Central-American life, and later came most of his stories of the life of New York City, in which field lies most of his best work. He contributed more stories to the *New York World*

than to any other one publication—as if the stories of the author who later came to be hailed as "the American Maupassant" were not good enough for the "leading" magazines but fit only for the sensation-loving public of the Sunday papers! His first published story that showed distinct strength was perhaps *A Blackjack Bargainer* (August, 1901, *Munsey's*). He followed this with such masterly stories as: *The Duplicity of Hargraves* (February, 1902, *Junior Munsey*), *The Marionettes* (April, 1902, *Black Cat*), *A Retrieved Reformation* (April, 1903, *Cosmopolitan*), *The Guardian of the Accolade* (May, 1903, *Cosmopolitan*), *The Enchanted Kiss* (February, 1904, *Metropolitan*), *The Furnished Room* (August 14, 1904, *New York World*), *An Unfinished Story* (August, 1905, *McClure's*), *The Count and the Wedding Guest* (October 8, 1905, *New York World*), *The Gift of the Magi* (December 10, 1905, *New York World*), *The Trimmed Lamp* (August, 1906, *McClure's*), *Phoebe* (November, 1907, *Everybody's*), *The Hiding of Black Bill* (October, 1908, *Everybody's*), *No Story* (June, 1909, *Metropolitan*), *A Municipal Report* (November, 1909, *Hampton's*), *A Service of Love* (in *The Four Million*, 1909), *The Pendulum* (in *The Trimmed Lamp*, 1910), *Brickdust Row* (in *The Trimmed Lamp*, 1910), and *The Assessor of Success* (in *The Trimmed Lamp*, 1910). Among O. Henry's best volumes of short stories are: *The Four Million* (1909), *Options* (1909), *Roads of Destiny* (1909), *The Trimmed Lamp* (1910), *Strictly Business: More Stories of the Four Million* (1910), *Whirligigs* (1910), and *Sixes and Sevens* (1911).

"Nowhere is there anything just like them. In his best work—and his tales of the great metropolis are his best—he is unique. The soul of his art is unexpectedness. Humor at every turn there is, and sentiment and philosophy and surprise. One never may be sure of himself. The end is always a sensation. No foresight may predict it, and the sensation always is genuine. Whatever else O. Henry was, he was an artist, a master of plot and diction, a genuine humorist, and a philosopher. His weakness lay in the very nature of his art. He was an entertainer bent only on amusing and surprising his reader. Everywhere brilliancy, but too often it is joined to cheapness; art, yet art merging swiftly into caricature. Like Harte, he cannot be trusted. Both writers on the whole may be said to have lowered the standards of American literature, since both worked in the surface of life with theatric intent and always without moral background, O. Henry moves, but he never lifts. All is fortissimo; he slaps the reader on the back and laughs loudly as if he were in a bar-

room. His characters, with few exceptions, are extremes, caricatures. Even his shop girls, in the limning of whom he did his best work, are not really individuals; rather are they types, symbols. His work was literary vaudeville, brilliant, highly amusing, and yet vaudeville." ⁹ *The Duplicity of Hargraves*, the story by O. Henry given in this volume, is free from most of his defects. It has a blend of humor and pathos that puts it on a plane of universal appeal.

George Randolph Chester (1869-) gained distinction by creating the genial modern business man of American literature who is not content to "get rich quick" through the ordinary channels. Need I say that I refer to that amazing compound of likeableness and sharp practices, Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford? The story of his included in this volume, *Bargain Day at Tutt House* (June, 1905, *McClure's*), was nearly his first story; only two others, which came out in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1903 and 1904, preceded it. Its breathless dramatic action is well balanced by humor. Other stories of his deserving of special mention are: *A Corner in Farmers* (February, 29, 1908, *Saturday Evening Post*), *A Fortune in Smoke* (March 14, 1908, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Easy Money* (November 14, 1908, *Saturday Evening Post*), *The Triple Cross* (December 5, 1908, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Spoiling the Egyptians* (December 26, 1908, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Whipsawed!* (January 16, 1909, *Saturday Evening Post*), *The Bubble Bank* (January 30 and February 6, 1909, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Straight Business* (February 27, 1909, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Sam Turner: a Business Man's Love Story* (March 26, April 2 and 9, 1910, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Fundamental Justice* (July 25, 1914, *Saturday Evening Post*), *A Scropper Patcher* (October, 1916, *Everybody's*), and *Jolly Bachelors* (February, 1918, *Cosmopolitan*). His best collections are: *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford* (1908), *Young Wallingford* (1910), *Wallingford in His Prime* (1913), and *Wallingford and Blackie Daw* (1913). It is often difficult to find in his books short stories that one may be looking for, for the reason that the titles of the individual stories have been removed in order to make the books look like novels subdivided into chapters.

Grace MacGowan Cooke (1863-) is a writer all of whose work has interest and perdurable stuff in it, but few are the authors whose achievements in the American short story stand out as a whole. In *A Call* (August, 1906, *Harper's*) she surpasses herself and is not perhaps herself surpassed by any of the humorous short stories that have come to the fore so far in America in the twentieth century. The story is no less delightful in its fidelity to fact and understanding of young human nature than in its relish of humor. Some of her stories deserving of special mention are: *The Capture of Andy Proudfoot* (June, 1904, *Harper's*),

In the Strength of the Hills (December, 1905, *Metropolitan*), *The Machinations of Ocoee Gallantine* (April, 1906, *Century*), *A Call* (August, 1906, *Harper's*), *Scott Bohannon's Bond* (May 4, 1907, *Collier's*), and *A Clean Shave* (November, 1912, *Century*). Her best short stories do not seem to have been collected in volumes as yet, although she has had several notable long works of fiction published, such as *The Power and the Glory* (1910), and several good juveniles.

William James Lampton (?-1917), who was known to many of his admirers as Will Lampton or as W.J.L. merely, was one of the most unique and interesting characters of literary and Bohemian New York from about 1895 to his death in 1917. I remember walking up Fifth Avenue with him one Sunday afternoon just after he had shown me a letter from the man who was then Comptroller of the Currency. The letter was signed so illegibly that my companion was in doubts as to the sender, so he suggested that we stop at a well-known hotel at the corner of 59th Street, and ask the manager who the Comptroller of the Currency then was, so that he might know whom the letter was from. He said that the manager of a big hotel like that, where many prominent people stayed, would be sure to know. When this problem had been solved to our satisfaction, John Skelton Williams proving to be the man, Lampton said, "Now you've told me who he is, I'll show you who I am." So he asked for a copy of *The American Magazine* at a newsstand in the hotel corridor, opened it, and showed the manager a full-page picture of himself clad in a costume suggestive of the time of Christopher Columbus, with high ruffs around his neck, that happened to appear in the magazine the current month. I mention this incident to illustrate the lack of conventionality and whimsical originality of the man, that stood out no less forcibly in his writings than in his daily life. He had little use for "doing the usual thing in the usual sort of way." He first gained prominence by his book of verse, *Yawps* (1900). His poems were free from convention in technique as well as in spirit, although their chief innovation was simply that as a rule there was no regular number of syllables in a line; he let the lines be any length they wanted to be, to fit the sense or the length of what he had to say. He once said to me that if anything of his was remembered he thought it would be his poem, *Lo, the Summer Girl*. His muse often took the direction of satire, but it was always good-natured even when it hit the hardest. He had in his makeup much of the detached philosopher, like Cervantes and Mark Twain.

There was something cosmic about his attitude to life, and this showed in much that he did. He was the only American writer of humorous verse of his day whom I always cared to read, or whose lines I could remember more than a few weeks. This was perhaps because his work was never *merely* humorous, but always had a big sweep of background to it, like the ruggedness of the Kentucky mountains from which he came. It was Colonel George Harvey, then editor of *Harper's Weekly*, who

had started the boom to make Woodrow Wilson President. Wilson afterwards, at least seemingly, repudiated his sponsor, probably because of Harvey's identification with various moneyed interests. Lampton's poem on the subject, with its refrain, "Never again, said Colonel George," I remember as one of the most notable of his poems on current topics. But what always seemed to me the best of his poems dealing with matters of the hour was one that I suggested he write, which dealt with gift-giving to the public, at about the time that Andrew Carnegie was making a big stir with his gifts for libraries, beginning:

Dunno, perhaps

One of the yaps
Like me would make
A holy break
Doing his turn
With money to burn.
Anyhow, I
Wouldn't shy
Making a try!

and containing, among many effective touches, the pathetic lines,
... I'd help

The poor who try to help themselves,
Who have to work so hard for bread
They can't get very far ahead.

When James Lane Allen's novel, *The Reign of Law*, came out (1900), a little quatrain by Lampton that appeared in *The Bookman* (September, 1900) swept like wildfire across the country, and was read by a hundred times as many people as the book itself:

"The Reign of Law"?

Well, Allen, you're lucky;
It's the first time it ever
Rained law in Kentucky!

The reader need not be reminded that at that period Kentucky family feuds were well to the fore. As Lampton had started as a poet, the editors were bound to keep him pigeon-holed as far as they could, and his ambition to write short stories was not at first much encouraged by them. His predicament was something like that of the chief character of Frank R. Stockton's story, "*His Wife's Deceased Sister*" (January, 1884, *Century*), who had written a story so good that whenever he brought the editors another story they invariably answered in substance, "We're afraid it won't do. Can't you give us something like '*His Wife's Deceased Sister*'?" This was merely Stockton's turning to account his own somewhat similar experience with the editors after his story, *The Lady or the Tiger?* (November, 1882, *Century*) appeared. Likewise the editors didn't want Lampton's short stories for a while because they liked his poems so well.

Do I hear some critics exclaiming that there is nothing remarkable about *How the Widow Won the Deacon*, the story by Lampton included in this volume? It handles an amusing situation lightly and with grace. It is one of those things that read easily and are often difficult to achieve. Among his best stories are: *The People's Number of the Worthyville Watchman* (May 12, 1900, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Love's Strange Spell* (April 27, 1901, *Saturday Evening Post*), *Abimelech Higgins' Way* (August 24, 1901, *Saturday Evening Post*), *A Cup of Tea* (March, 1902, *Metropolitan*), *Winning His Spurs* (May, 1904, *Cosmopolitan*), *The Perfidy of Major Pulsifer*

(November, 1909, *Cosmopolitan*), *How the Widow Won the Deacon* (April, 1911, *Harper's Bazaar*), and *A Brown Study* (December, 1913, *Lippincott's*). There is no collection as yet of his short stories. Although familiarly known as "Colonel" Lampton, and although of Kentucky, he was not merely a "Kentucky Colonel," for he was actually appointed Colonel on the staff of the governor of Kentucky. At the time of his death he was about to be made a brigadier-general and was planning to raise a brigade of Kentucky mountaineers for service in the Great War. As he had just struck his stride in short story writing, the loss to literature was even greater than the patriotic loss.

Gideon (April, 1914, *Century*), by Wells Hastings (1878-), the story with which this volume closes, calls to mind the large number of notable short stories in American literature by writers who have made no large name for themselves as short story writers, or even otherwise in letters. American literature has always been strong in its "stray" short stories of note. In Mr. Hastings' case, however, I feel that the fame is sure to come. He graduated from Yale in 1902, collaborated with Brian Hooker (1880-) in a novel, *The Professor's Mystery* (1911) and alone wrote another novel, *The Man in the Brown Derby* (1911). His short stories include: *The New Little Boy* (July, 1911, *American*), *That Day* (September, 1911, *American*), *The Pick-Up* (December, 1911, *Everybody's*), and *Gideon* (April, 1914, *Century*). The last story stands out. It can be compared without disadvantage to the best work, or all but the very best work, of Thomas Nelson Page, it seems to me. And from the reader's standpoint it has the advantage—is this not also an author's advantage?—of a more modern setting and treatment. Mr. Hastings is, I have been told, a director in over a dozen large corporations. Let us hope that his business activities will not keep him too much away from the production of literature—for to rank as a piece of literature, something of permanent literary value, *Gideon* is surely entitled.

ALEXANDER JESSUP.
