

O. Henry Prize Stories

PRIZE STORIES OF 1926. (The O. Henry Memorial Award). With an Introduction by BLANCHE COLTON WILLIAMS. New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. 1927.

Reviewed by LOUIS KRONENBERGER

AS long as the American short-story looks back, if only with half an eye, to O. Henry for guidance, it is doomed to accept the false coin of O. Henry's facility, ingenuity, and technical resourcefulness as its standards. O. Henry had enough individuality and gave people enough enjoyment to deserve the recognition (though not the praise) which he received; but his example has directed the short-story in America up a blind alley from which, thus far, it has not escaped. The greatest tribute these prize stories pay O. Henry is not the use of his name, but the imitation of his method. For almost a generation our magazines have virtually thrived on the O. Henry formulæ with their many variations, and during that period short-story technique in America has grown constantly more expert—and more stereotyped. Validity and vitality of subject-matter have counted for less than proficiency of technique, and most of the authors who get into a collection like this have mastered some one else's craftsmanship rather than developed their own. This 1926 exhibit is similar to earlier ones. There are the same kinds of stories, the same technique, the same magazines, the same kinds of authors. First prize, this year, goes to "Bubbles," by Wilbur Daniel Steele.

"Bubbles" is a masterpiece of complication, if not of art. It is seen through the eyes of a little girl who does not comprehend what is happening, that the reader may indirectly understand the situation—the insanity of the child's mother and the resultant life of her father—and eventually respond to the hidden horror it invokes. To me the story is not convincing enough to be really successful. And I think that the more sophisticated the reader is, the more his mind will be diverted from the emotional and human interests of the story to its technical convolutions. Despite deft craftsmanship, the story fails to become important, and even its pattern is beautiful artifice rather than art.

Second prize this year goes to Sherwood Anderson for "A Death in the Woods"—a chapter in Anderson's "Tar." In this story of a woman whose function in life was simply to feed animals and men, there is something more authentic, something simple and moving and real, which, though wastefully told, is told impressively.

Not a great deal need be said of the other stories. They are depressingly "various"—Chinese stories, Negro stories, New England coast stories, Ninth Avenue stories—stories which remind you how many sides life has, but which do not bring you greatly into contact with life itself. Toward the end of the book is a rather powerful tale called "Cane River." Elsewhere Booth Tarkington deals exaggeratedly with character; Ben Ames Williams is a little too unrestrained to be good; Mary Heaton Vorse, with a striking theme, is dull—but it would be pointless to catalogue all these stories. None of them is outstanding, and what is less pardonable, not many of them are truly interesting. For American short stories suffer from a second ailment, quite as bad as their rubber-stamp technique. Much carrying-on about "significance" and "true art" and "life-values" and other deep-sea qualities of literature, has reduced the short story to a state where pretentiousness has overthrown humor and warmth, charm and grace. The Bunner and Stockton tradition is dead. Except for "Claustrophobia" none of these stories can be said to add to the gaiety of nations. Instead, Miss Williams in her introduction considers each story with critical seriousness, and analyzes, and praises, and compares, till one can't help wondering what she would say of a Chekhov or a Maupassant. When people make an elaborate analysis of a story containing such dialogue as "If you had been willing to follow me, to have walked out there in that spacious tranquillity, hand in hand with me, under the quiet stars"—then short story criticism furnishes a handsome counterpart to short story writing which is neither artistic nor real, nor promising.

The BOWLING GREEN

Granules from an Hour-Glass

THE word in my mind, for reasons of my own, as I came down Sixth Avenue in the rain, was *humility*. At the entrance of the Hippodrome was a crowd, watching some advertising stunt in the doorway. It struck me, guiltily, that a real writer—a Shakespeare, a Kipling—would have halted to see what it was all about; digested it, taken it in. But I was so absorbed in my notions I didn't want to stop. Pacing along in the wet, with head lowered, at the 42nd Street corner I collided sharply with an old man whose pipe fell out of his mouth at the impact (he had less than a full quantum of teeth, poor ancient). He burst into screams of abuse: "You—, you—!" he kept raving at me, using lively words beginning with b's. I don't think it was more my fault than his, but I was so sorry for him I was quite speechless. He was wild with rage, and continued to screech oaths until I was almost angry—or perhaps, as people gathered to stare, I felt, for my own countenance, I ought to pretend I was angry. Yet he wasn't damaged and his pipe not broken. I wondered what grievances he may have borne to make him so wild, poor devil. He positively drooled with rage.

There's a big sign above the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, which says *Have you seen ABIE'S IRISH ROSE? If not you should. Millions and Millions have—Why not You?*

I was sitting peaceably on the railing at the edge of the Boardwalk, meditating this. I was wondering whether it might be considered an unconscious revelation of a fundamental American doctrine, that what is good for a great many people is good for me. (It's the word *should* on that sign that is important.) I had got as far as the thought that this notion is a lively example of what Sir Thomas Browne called *pseudodoxia epidemica*; but I came to no conclusion, for at that moment a cop came up to me and spoke quite savagely. "Here," he shouted, "you're not allowed to sit on that rail."

The paregoric influence of a familiar phrase. (The etymology of the word *paregoric* is interesting, if you should look it up.) The brakeman in the Shoreliner, going up to Providence, was telling a friend of his troubles with passengers who insist on playing cards on Sunday. "It's against the Law of the Land," he kept saying, again and again. Of what land, I wondered. Connecticut? Rhode Island? And how eminently New England, that a hard-boiled New Haven brakeman should worry about such matters. For I cannot rid myself of the doubt that there is any law (of the Land as a Whole) that denies cards on Sunday. But above the noise of the smoker I could hear him say, over and over, comforting himself with syllables, "It's against the Law of the Land."

The American Matriarchy: I was studying a rather appalling bronze medal awarded ("For Quality of Macaroons") by the Sesquicentennial Exposition in Philadelphia. The design of the medal was thus officially explained:

The Spirit of America . . . symbolized by the alert and decorative form of a young bald eagle. To stress the fecundity of America and its promise for the future the sculptor has purposely chosen the mother eagle and has placed within the nest the eggs which are the symbol of continuing productivity. The nest itself, fashioned of oak, bespeaks the strength of the American home . . . in the background whence sprang the eagle of freedom, Independence Hall is outlined against the rising sun of American prosperity.

"And have they, in England also" (I asked our delightful visitrix), "been all steamed up about Marcel Proust?"

I knew that they had, but I knew this was the kind of question an Intellectual Woman would enjoy answering.

"Yes, indeed," she replied flagrantly, "but the Marcel Wave is subsiding."

"I love malicious people," she said. "Henry James, Pearsall Smith, how delightfully bitter."

"But naturally. They were Americans living in England."

I caught a flash from her fine Boadicea eyes: a sound of Arthurian trumpets blown on the towers of Camelot: a flag hoisted: clink of sabres as the guard changed in Whitehall.

"Ah, America," she said . . . "the last stand of the Ten Commandments—"

"In England, I hear, they've been decimated—"

The simple bysitter would have thought they were quarreling. But it was all part of that exquisite *code duello* by which people explore each other's minds. The experienced hoodwinker, how well he recognizes (and rejoices in) the arts of manoeuvre in any other brisk practitioner. How much more ground than the bysitter would suspect is traversed under the stratagem of repartee. Business, as the merchant might say but never does, Going On During Altercations.

David Lipschutz brightened the morning for me. When I started up Sixth Avenue in his taxicab, he made the usual automatic gesture of flipping over the little flag to start the meter. But something stuck, the meter wouldn't go. He pulled up alongside the curb and tinkered anxiously, but still the apparatus abstained. Meanwhile I was in a hurry. A small private orison to Demeter (goddess of taxicabs) did not seem to avail; I was about to quest another vehicle when David, after some work with a wrench, got her in gear.

Secretly I wondered whether this hasty treatment might have agitated the meter, it might now run double quick. But concealing this morbid fixation I merely remarked, through the open window, that demurrage on the part of the meter was sufficiently rare. (What I actually said, of course, was "Well, buddy, I guess that don't happen often, does it?")

David grinned infectiously. "I been riding around so long without pickin' anybody up, I guess she got sore."

P. Y. M. and I were coming along 33rd Street toward the Long Island Station. Pasted on the side of a wagon, in large red letters, we saw the announcement, something like this:—JANE EYRE, by Charlotte Bronte—The Love Story of an Unhappy Young Girl—In the Evening Graphic. We gazed at each other, silent on a peak of the bookselling instinct. P. Y. M., excellent fellow (he works for the Oxford University Press), said just what I hoped he would. "I wonder if there isn't some way for us to ride on that? We've got a mighty nice little edition of Jane Eyre in the World's Classics Series."

We read in the papers about the landing gear of airplanes, and how daring aviators drop it before a long flight. It struck me that that is exactly what humanity has done as a whole—it finds itself in mid-air without landing gear and can't come down without a crash; or else on the unplumbed, salt, estranging sea. Henry Adams divined this pretty clearly; and others too before him—Walt Whitman, for instance.

I shan't forget you, Nancy. The ribby barrel of your torso, your spare flanks, your long quick legs, the tall arch of your quarters—not just haunches, but real thighs. The pure fawn-color of your coat, the strong white paddy feet, the crisp ridge of cowlick down your nose, your soft dark muzzle, your great uncropped ears. Your proud unspoiled head, held so high; your unchastized eyes, fierce and confiding; the lean bulge of your shoulder-blades when you crouched to blink by the fire.

In that orchard under the cool apple-trees you seemed to need a nymph, a white goddess to be mirrored, very tiny, in the clear topaz of your eyes. Virgin bitches such as you, perhaps, went with Diana to her pool. They mocked me, Nancy, when I said that it would be worth while to be torn in pieces by such a dog—worth while for the tearing as well as the cause of being torn. It was a silly saying, yet when did not beauty promote us to saying silly things?

I don't like people who palaver dogs in public; but you, since you will never guess your marvel, I am not loath to praise. Proudest of Great Danes, I think of you and your mistress on a green hillside of apple trees.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

Books of Special Interest

Narcotics

NARCOTIC EDUCATION. By H. S. MIDDLEMISS. Edited Report of Proceedings of the First World Conference on Narcotic Education; Philadelphia, July 5-9, 1926.

Reviewed by JOHN PALMER GAVIT
Author of "Opium"

"I SHOULD worry, let George do it," seems to be the attitude of the average American citizen—and the average citizen of every other country, for that matter—toward the peril and the problem of the abuse of narcotics. The world is a good distance yet from realization of either the sinister nature or the magnitude of the menace. Allowing some margin for sentimentalism and gush over poor, defective creatures, flotsam and jetsam of civilization, who would go to the dogs in some other way if there were not drugs, for hysterical exaggeration by persons congenitally addicted to extremes; nevertheless it is undoubtedly true that addiction to narcotic drugs, morphine, heroin and cocaine especially, is not only one of the great evils of our day, but is increasing alarmingly. And behind it is an extremely profitable international traffic, ruthless, sleepless, intricately and all but universally organized, feeding upon the insatiable appetite which drug addiction fastens almost incurably upon those caught in its web.

One need look but slightly under the surface of everyday social life to come upon the intermeshed threads of this web. Few persons of any considerable extent of acquaintance could not find, if they knew how to look, within their own circle the ghastly work of this most cunning of the devils. Drug addiction can go a long time undiscovered—it does not unsteady the gait or redden the nose; by the time it discloses itself it is usually far beyond cure.

Before any effective steps toward meeting the evil can be taken, or will be taken, with the indispensable backing of public opinion, the community must be awakened. Tom, Dick, and Harry; Jane Doe and Martha Robinson, each of whom may perhaps be concealing in the heart the tragedy of a victim among close friends, must come

to know with that kind of knowledge that leads to comparing notes and joining in common action, how widespread is the danger, and how desperate the need of determined and united effort.

This is what gives value to the "World Conference on Narcotic Education," held last July at Philadelphia, and to the verbatim report of its proceedings, just now published. It is full of just the kind of information one needs, even if it is rather a hodge-podge, of cool, scientific papers cheek-by-jowl with excited utterances of persons full of good intentions and half-digested "statistics" in some instances of dubious authenticity. But on the whole and all allowances made, this is a book to be treated with the respect owing to those who bravely pioneer. No person can read it even casually without gaining the impression that here is a social problem of major importance, calling for a great deal more attention than it has had.

This conference devoted itself more particularly to the question of personal addiction and its consequences to individuals and to the community through them. But there is another phase of it, quite as vital; it seems to me, much more so. Observing as I did personally throughout both, the two great international opium conferences at Geneva in 1924-5, and at the same time devoting considerable study to collateral phases not dealt with by either of those conferences, I became profoundly convinced that no extent of control, certainly no mere dealing with the individual casualties, within this or any other country; no domestic legislation, state or federal; no police activities at retail, will serve to check the flood of narcotic drugs now surging about the world. All that, however commendable and desirable in itself, is "fishing behind the net," so long as the great nations which call themselves civilized continue to produce these drugs in a quantity certainly at least tenfold the legitimate needs of medicine and science, and regard it as lawful, not to say decent, to compete in all waters for the "market"—consisting almost wholly of addicts. In the Hague Opium Convention of 1912 the nations pledged themselves to limit manufacture of narcotic drugs to the

amount needed for *bona fide* medicine and science. As yet no nation, including the United States, has done that, or taken adequate steps to that end. And these drugs, almost everywhere in the world, are supplanting the crude opium of old.

This question was hardly touched at the Philadelphia conference; yet it is fundamental.

The Second Conference is appointed to be held in London in 1931. Upon the foundation thus laid work can proceed, increasingly intelligent and effective, awakening the nations to an international obligation, which in fact they assumed twelve years ago.

In Ecuador

ON THE TRAIL OF THE UNKNOWN.
By GEORGE MILLER DYOTT. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons. 1926. \$6.50.

Reviewed by KERMIT ROOSEVELT

THOSE who are acquainted with Mr. Dyott through the medium of his book "Silent Highways of the Jungle" will welcome any opportunity to renew that acquaintance. Nor will they be disappointed in their anticipations when they delve into "On the Trail of the Unknown." Dyott is that unfortunately rarely to be found combination of the genuine explorer and natural writer. He does remarkable pieces of exploration and writes about them in a remarkably interesting manner.

The expedition of which he tells in this last volume was undertaken with the particular aim of exploring certain of the larger unknown mountain peaks of the hinterland of Ecuador. The resources at his disposal did not permit of an elaborately planned assault upon the peaks; and Dyott was obliged to make out the best he could depending largely upon what material he could find on the spot. He not only understands from intimate first-hand knowledge the manner in which to handle the South American Indians and mestizos, but he is blessed with a constitution peculiarly adapted to work in the tropics.

When your funds are limited you must of course cut your cloth to suit, and Dyott had taken with him only one companion. Their main objective was the securing of a photographic record of the wholly unknown and partially unknown regions which they traversed. In this they were signally successful as all who have had the opportunity to see their moving pictures will testify. The naturalist will of course regret that they were unable to take advantage of their opportunities for bringing back specimens of the birds and mammals with which they met. How unusual were these chances is illustrated by the fact that Dyott secured excellent photographs of a mountain tapir of which there exists no specimen in the museums of this country.

Dyott has the happy faculty of appreciating and liking the natives of the country. So often travellers go forth with an *idée fixe* that there is no country but their native land, whether they designate it as "God's Country" or the "Little Isle." They have a permanent chip on the shoulder; everyone they meet is either a liar or a thief, generally both, with complete and utter incompetence thrown in. Such an account makes tiresome reading, and you soon become exasperated and throw the book aside. It seems pointless to travel, and doubly pointless to write about it, if you have set out prepared to appraise everything and everyone you meet upon the wholly fictitious standard of what you imagine your own countrymen to be.

Dyott has his difficulties with the natives; they attempt to cheat him, and desert him when he most needs them, but he never hurls anathema at a community because of the shortcomings of some of its members. He gives delightful pictures of some of the more important residents of the outposts where he was so often detained waiting for means of transport to proceed on his way. He writes in such an unassuming and matter of fact manner in regards to the obstacles with which he is faced, that those who do not know the tropics at first hand will be apt to underestimate his achievement. Those who have experienced some of the same difficulties and faced the same problems will readily appreciate Dyott's accomplishment at its true worth.

Dyott has just returned from another South American expedition retracing the route of the Roosevelt-Rondon exploration of the River of Doubt. Once again he has met dangers and overcome difficulties and we may look forward to another graphic account of travel along the tributaries of the Amazon.



Content and format

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