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Three More Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett

Carl J. Weber
who have not seen a copy of the Bibliography, which is now out of print.

"This," said Abbott’s publishers a hundred years ago, "is undoubtedly the most popular series of juvenile books ever published in America."

THREE MORE LETTERS OF SARAH ORNE JEWETT
Edited by Carl J. Weber

In 1947 the Colby College Press published thirty-three Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett Now in the Colby College Library in a volume later chosen by the American Institute of Graphic Arts as one of the Fifty Books of the Year. Two years later, six more letters by Miss Jewett were printed in the pages of this Quarterly, and in February, 1950, we published three additional letters from her pen. This brought the total at Colby to forty-two.

The library has now acquired three new Jewett letters—very cordial and characteristic compositions—written during the last two or three years of Miss Jewett’s life. (She died
June 24, 1909.) These letters were addressed to Miss Violet Paget, an English lady on whom Mrs. Annie Fields and Miss Jewett had once called at Miss Paget's home in Florence, Italy. We are going to have much more to say about Violet Paget in future issues of this QUARTERLY. Here it will suffice to note that she was the author of many books published (through a fifty-year period, 1880-1930) under the pen name of Vernon Lee, and that copies of several of them had apparently been sent by Miss Paget to Sarah Orne Jewett with a request for her help in gaining for "Vernon Lee" an entrée to American magazines. Miss Paget was evidently trying to market some "English sketches" and hoped that Sarah Jewett's long experience—one of her youthful sketches had appeared in The Atlantic in 1869 when she was only twenty—would be of some use in the attempt. Miss Jewett had helped at least one of her European friends to obtain admission to the pages of The Century and other American periodicals, and Violet Paget had obviously asked for the same sort of assistance.

Miss Jewett wrote the first two of her replies from the Boston home of her friend Mrs. James T. ("Annie") Fields, with whom she had made several trips abroad.

Letter No. 43

148 Charles Street Boston
3d Jan'y [1907]

Dear Miss Paget

I have been waiting too long before sending any acknowledgment of your letter which brought me true pleasure—perhaps the best thing of all is that you are letting me try to do something for you! I cannot send word yet of any decision about the papers—The Atlantic is just now printing some French sketches (rather more like useful tanks than hillside springs!!) by Mrs. Wharton,¹ and I am

waiting to hear from one New York editor, and failing him
I shall wait until I can see another myself. ²

Mr. [Bliss] Perry, of the Atlantic, spoke with the most
true appreciation of your work—you have had few better
or more affectionate readers—but he has had some diffi-
culties in following his personal choice—how little young,
beginning writers are aware of this!—and I suppose too that
the late difficulty in financial affairs makes the magazines
careful about new ventures.

But I am full of hope about these English sketches, only
do not be impatient if it seems to take longer than is reason-
able.

I am just ready to thank you for The Sentimental Traveller
volume³—it is delightful. The Bead Threader and La Ferte
(rank) first in my heart. You do not know your group of
readers here as I do—they are at any rate the ones you
would choose and wish to have.

² Miss Jewett had had previous correspondence with Lyman Abbott
of The Outlook, William H. Ward of The Independent, [A. E.?] Keet
of The Forum, and F. M. Hopkins of The Review of Reviews. Mr.
Ward is the most likely one whom she hoped to “see.”

³ Vernon Lee’s The Sentimental Traveller was published in Lon-
don by John Lane in 1908. Miss Jewett’s copy of the book, now in the
Harvard College Library, shows no indication of its being a freak, and
I do not know how to explain Miss Paget’s ability to provide her
American friend with this copy of a 1908 book in January, 1907, at
the time when Mrs. Wharton’s articles were appearing in The At-
lantic. John Lane cannot have printed the book in 1906 and supplied
the author with copies a year in advance of publication, for Miss
Jewett refers to two chapters in the book, one of which fixes a date.
Chapter 11, entitled “The Bead-Threader’s Funeral,” deals with the
obsequies of a nineteen-year-old girl who had made bead-garlands
for cemeteries and who died of consumption in Venice. Chapter 26,
etitled “La Ferté-sous-Jouarre,” is sub-titled “In Memoriam Th.
Bentzon. ob. 4th Feb. 1907.” Miss Jewett again refers to this obituary
notice as “that most loveable chapter about our dear Madame Blanc”
in her (S. O. J.’s) letter of July, 1908; but if it be surmised that the
letter of January 3 is really a letter of 1908 and not of 1907, then
S. O. J.’s reference to Mrs. Wharton’s sketches as appearing “just
now” is quite out of chronological focus.
Mrs. Fields would send you a message of most friendly remembrance. We are looking for Miss Cochrane presently on her way back to Rome. This note must be but an eager forerunner of a later letter but I must say before I end it that I am following you in Greece with sheer joy: I bless the friend who won you to go just now,—only I hope next time that you will go in March, as I did, and see the Greek flowers!

Yours most sincerely and affectionately,

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

Miss Jewett's second letter was written after she had read Violet Paget's *Hortus Vitae* (London, John Lane, 1904). Her interest in this book was doubtless increased by her discovery that one of the chapters bore the title "New Friends and Old"—a title strongly reminiscent of Miss Jewett's own book, *Old Friends and New*. This work was first published in 1879, long before Violet Paget had met the American writer, but it was re-issued in 1896 at about the time when Sarah Orne Jewett's writing was first appearing under a British imprint. Violet Paget was a close observer of the London reviews, and it may reasonably be surmised that she saw Edward Garnett's article on "Books Too Little Known: Miss Sarah Orne Jewett's Tales," which appeared in *The Academy*, London, July 11, 1903. In this article Garnett called Miss Jewett "a writer who can be ranked second only to Hawthorne in her interpretation of the spirit of New England soil." Miss Paget's *Hortus Vitae* was published shortly after the appearance of this article.

My dear Vernon Lee

I have just read again—again again!—your preface to *Hortus Vitae* and "New Friends and Old," and then I laid down the book and took up my pen feeling as if you were
new friend and old, together and at once! And now Madame Blanc has gone too, and every way I turn I find one of her letters—in a book, in a desk, as if she still put them into my hand and still tried to speak in that way, as if Summers of old spoke in their withered leaves and pressed flowers, hid in some safe corner. We were very near to each other. I remember the wonder of it filling my heart as we were walking along a favorite bit of road of mine in the country between two pastures and beside the scattered pines. "What is this?" she would ask, and I would say "juniper" or "bayberry."

"I have read of it," and she would smile soberly as if she met an old friend for the first time; and at last I got over the wall and picked a handful of scarlet columbines and on we went again—the horses now gone far ahead—but I stopped short and faced her and there we stood in the narrow road together. "How did we come to be walking here together?" I cried. "I am made of this spot, but you!—How came this afternoon to be ours?" She smiled at me just as if she knew, but we both understood that only those who are wiser than we give gifts like that: there we were, close enough, though Berwick and the Quartier and Saint Cloud [in Paris] might be far enough apart. You will know why I write all this, else I should not have sat here and let my pen write it.

Madame Thérèse Blanc-Bentzon was a French writer who, in 1885 and 1893, translated a dozen of Miss Jewett's sketches into French and introduced her to a French audience through the pages of the Revue des deux Mondes. (For the list of these French translations, see A Bibliography of the Published Writings of Sarah Orne Jewett by Clara C. Weber and her husband, Waterville, Colby College Press, 1949; page 57.) In 1893 and again in 1897, Madame Blanc visited America, and on the latter occasion she stayed for some time in Miss Jewett's home in South Berwick, Maine. The French writer died on February 5, 1907.

Violet Paget also knew Madame Blanc, had visited her in Paris, and had been introduced by her to the editor of the Revue des deux
and fifteen years since—are mine, with all she was and all the friendship gave me.

I have never forgotten the day that Mrs. Fields and I went to take luncheon [with] you at Murano that Spring day when the flowers were growing along the banks of your brook like the foreground of one of Botticelli’s pictures. I begged a little flowered Italian bowl of you, and I keep it on a shelf in my bedroom for an outward and visible sign!

And in Paris, again; and Mrs. Fields has seen you since in Rome, but not long enough or quietly, as she wished. I am with her now; we often talk of you and the more because after a long long illness after a bad accident to my head (and heels!) in driving, I have begun to read, and write a little too at my letters as I used, and I have gathered up your books, that came while I was in a wintry state, and now come along with you, shly hoping some day to really get hold of your hand. But as somebody said once about writers—we are never so confidential as when we address the whole world—and with the books I may get closer [to you] than some who are near enough to do the other thing. And I send you a truly thankful and affectionate message by this letter.

Shall you never come seafaring? Shall you never come to New England—not for myrtle and olive (oh the ashes of those branches that you brought from Corsica)—but for juniper and bayberry? I wish, and Mrs. Fields wishes, that you would;—come, summer or winter, as you like.

I am, meanwhile, your grateful and affectionate friend

SARAH ORNE JEWETT

[P.S.:] And all this I have written—and of Ariadne in Mantua not one word, but I have the most dear copy of it—the

Mondes. After Madame Blanc’s death, Violet Paget wrote a discerning article about her. Miss Jewett once told the editor of The Century Magazine: “I am afraid that I cannot write about Madame Blanc. Mrs. Fields does such things better than I ever could. . . .”

6 A romance in five acts, by Vernon Lee; Oxford, 1903.
My dear Miss Paget

I have been so ready to thank you all these weeks that I can hardly feel ashamed of seeming ungrateful. You cannot know how much I loved your letter and that most lovable chapter about our dear Madame Blanc written with such sympathy and discernment, from the perfectly right point of view; it seems wonderful to me that any one so much younger could have taken it who had not lived with her for long stretches of time. There were so many Thérèses if one had her for a day or two at a time! The great French lady of—one [would] almost say—some centuries earlier, returned to earth and gracefully adapting herself to modern conditions, was what everyone could not see. Oddly enough one of my dearest friends on this side of the sea was great granddaughter of a young French officer who came over at the time of the Revolution, and one never understood her until (and many New Englanders never could!) one returned to the 1760’s and matched her traits to that day and date and to the habits of people who had to do with Courts and camps. But to say how I miss Madame Blanc and see new reasons for having loved her so much is quite impossible. Your memories of her bring her back as nothing else has done.

I am not forgetting to thank you, either, for Sister Benvenuta. I brought that dear little volume with me in my

7 This copy was possibly a piracy published in Portland, Maine, by Thomas B. Mosher in 1906. Miss Jewett owned other American editions of the writings of Violet Paget, for example, Varitas, New York, 1892.

8 By Vernon Lee; London, E. G. Richards, 1906.
kit. I doubt if we are separated for a good while to come; it is a true bit of life—it explains many quite un-related things!—with the charm that a new flower had the other day (perhaps it was only a forgotten flower) that I found on a green island on the Maine coast here where I have been cruising on a comfortable old sailing yacht with a friend. You would have loved the small harbours with their villages where we spent the nights and often an evening and clear, still morning. The birds sang all along the wooded shores and the lambs bleated, the waves plashed against the rocks after a boat went by, and one heard no other noises. I had been ill for a month with a second quite un-called for attack of influenza, and I certainly liked those noises better than any. I send you a bit of “pointed fir”—their new tips look almost as if they had flowered in pretty fringes. The salt air, the fragrance of these woods make one a little light-headed sometimes.

The other day I gave a card to two acquaintances, lovers of Italy who go to see her for the first time. Miss McCracken, a magazine writer of talent, and true, shy, little lover of best things, a Southerner by birth, and Miss Julia Marlowe the [Shakespearean] player who has just been having a good season in London—Viola and Juliet not beyond her—she has had great popularity in lesser parts, but I think she has great gifts, unequal as artists are; but I look to see her gain much from this Italian summer. They both loved the Ariadne in Mantua. I doubt if they are lucky enough to find you for half an hour, but they can have the drive to your door [in Florence], and that is giving them much [?pleasure in anticipation?].

I confess to having lived with you a good deal since your letter came and really brought you not only to my door but inside to stay. This letter thanks you for many things. I hoped you would say that this was the summer when you could come—to sail over from England in June is not long, and you should have a tin Bank when you got here and go
home clinking it heavy with savings. You should be withheld from long journeys and only shown a very few places. Autumn is better than midsummer: come in Autumn!

If I were writing a week later I should send you messages from Mrs. Fields whom I shall see then. She is not very strong nowadays, but always such a giver of help and pleasure. You would like her summer house [at Manchester, Massachusetts] close by the sea, as much as I do, and I hope you would like my own old house in a country village with a proper New England garden.

I must stop writing, but please find all that I write without ink and please, my dear friend, write one day again. I can take your books, old and new, all for letters now, but that very fact makes me wish to hear [from you] again.

Yours affectionately

S. O. J.

When, shortly before her death, Mrs. Laura E. Richards, of Gardiner, Maine, presented a Sarah Orne Jewett item to the Colby College Library, she inscribed it "in the hope that this reminder of a gracious and scholarly Past may be an inspiration for the students of the Future." As one reads these newly acquired letters of Miss Jewett's one is again reminded of that "gracious and scholarly Past" and of the quiet influence that went out from a cultured home in South Berwick, Maine, to spread throughout the literary world.

9 On July 15, 1908, Sarah Orne Jewett wrote to a friend: "I have been (with [sister] Mary) 'down east' on a friend's boat, and came into Portland and right on here [to Manchester-by-the-Sea] this morning, because I had not heard from Annie for several days. . . . Luckily she is all right. . . ." I am indebted to Mr. John Frost of New York City for knowledge of this letter, which helps to fix the date of the Colby letter as July 7 or thereabouts.