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JEWETT AND THE GILMAN WOMEN

By RICHARD CARY

THE background of the Gilman family that departed Hingham, England, and settled in Hingham, America, was recounted in "Jewett's Cousins Charles and Charlie" in the September 1959 COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY. More specifically, the relationships of Sarah Orne Jewett with Charles Jervis Gilman—who alone of that expansive clan migrated to Brunswick, Maine—and with his son Charles Ashburton, were examined through the medium of five letters¹ which Miss Jewett wrote them. The present essay, which should be read as sequel to the above, turns to Miss Jewett's association with the petticoat portion of that family, her cousin Mrs. Alice Dunlap Gilman and daughters Elizabeth and Mary. (See genealogical chart in September 1959 *CLQ*, 50.)

Charles Jervis married Alice McKeen Dunlap in October 1850 and soon after abandoned his successful law practice in Exeter, New Hampshire, to establish himself as a country squire on the spacious estate of his wife in Brunswick. Alice (Aug. 1, 1827-Sept. 15, 1905) sprang from distinguished lines on both sides. She was granddaughter to the Reverend Joseph McKeen, first president of Bowdoin College, and on the paternal branch could count a general who served on George Washington's staff during the Revolutionary War and a Governor of Maine.

Her grandfather Captain John Dunlap, a poor but purposeful lad, found the occupation of soldiering too restrictive and unremunerative. So he instituted a traffic in furs and pelts which he later supplemented with shipbuilding, overseas trade and lumber interests to become reputedly the richest man in Maine. From the proceeds of some of these investments Captain Dunlap built a huge and handsome colonial mansion in 1779 at the head of what was later named Gilman Avenue, as a mark of respect by the town for Charles Jervis. Surrounded by an old-fashioned fence, copious gardens, august elms and a stoic sundial, the house commanded a long view

¹ These and the letters quoted in this article were made available through the courtesy of Mr. Kenneth J. Boyer, Librarian of Bowdoin College.

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of the Androscoggin River. The ornamental staircase curved from the first floor to the garret in a continuous artistic spiral, opening on twenty-four rooms finished with gold embossed wallpaper, hung with crystal chandeliers and furnished with rare antiques. Expensive portraits, historic relics and tasteful collections of pewter and bric-a-brac rounded out the appointments. This showplace was inherited by Alice Gilman and to it Sarah Orne Jewett came often and with express pleasure.

Seven surviving letters from Miss Jewett to Cousin Alice reveal a good deal about both ladies and about current social usages, particularly that of the maidenly reciprocal visit. One need only peep into Miss Jewett's "The Guests of Mrs. Timms" to appreciate the ritualistic complexity of morning, afternoon, evening, overnight and indefinite visits which comprised the world of Victorian New England females free of communicable diseases. Miss Jewett did not shrink from collaboration in this revolving schedule of conviviality. In fact, she appeared to revel in it, being as much on call as at home during her adult years, if one can judge from the origins of her correspondence. One is left to wonder how she managed so sturdy a bulk of publications while so fitfully on the wing. For example, one letter of uncertain vintage (dated merely July 12th) which came to Cousin Alice from Beverly, Massachusetts, divulges in three brief paragraphs news of four separate visits: Miss Jewett and her sister Mary with the Gilmans; Elizabeth Gilman with the Jewetts; Miss Jewett with Susan Burley Cabot; Cousin Alice and daughter Mary with the Jewetts. Even energetic Aunt Helen Gilman of Portland could not repress a sally at Miss Jewett's gadabout propensities. To Mary Jewett she wrote: "Take or give my warmest love to Sarah, as her whereabouts may be." Only one of Miss Jewett's seven letters to Cousin Alice says nothing of visits impending or fulfilled, and that when Alice was severely stricken.

Much of Miss Jewett's published correspondence is from the period after she had achieved a modicum of fame as an author, and most of it is written to people outside her family. Thus, a screen of caution and formality, however thin, tends to obscure the natural exuberance she displayed only in her totally relaxed notes within the lineal circle. The following comes

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relatively early in her career, the year *Deephaven*, her first book, was published. Completely unfettered, completely characteristic, this letter throws light on her basic range of activity, her capacity for homely detail, her deep domestic attachment, her adoration of horses, her growing literary involvement, and her skittish ejaculation from topic to topic.

South Berwick

10 Oct. 1877

Dear Cousin Alice

Isn't it a good day for the fair? and don't I wish I were there!

I reached home all right but in the midst of a pouring rain. Mary was to have been here at three, but she did not show herself, so we are looking for her this morning. Father and mother are very well but I think they have been rather lonely and we sat up late last night talking for I had so much to tell about my visit. You dont know how much I enjoyed it, or how much I thank you and all the rest for your very great kindness to me. I shall have so many pleasant things to remember, and I hope you will all come here before very long, and that I can do something for you.

As for the horse—in which I take it for granted you have some interest: I am sorry to say he is not here yet so I have to wait another day. It is not much matter because it is so muddy today, but I want to see how he looks.

Father is away today and I think I shall give the horses a little exercise after I unpack my trunk. I wish Charlie was here for I owe him some splendid drives and I shouldn't mind paying up at all. Tell Liddy that I have lost some valuable time this morning because I had to sit right down and read the Mother's magazine. I had a lot of letters to read last night and one was from the editor of a new magazine asking me to write for it, so I dont believe I am likely to want business this winter with all the rest I have to do!

Tell Aunty that she shall have that poem in a few days.

I keep thinking of the fair and wishing I could go. I am so glad it doesn't rain, and I shall look anxiously for the Telegraph. Mother says the receipt for the "pepper-tomato" is to take the tomatos and put them in hot water a little while so they will peel very easily and then put them in a kettle without any water and the proportion is three pounds of sugar to four pounds of fruit. Boil them until they get dark and thick—(almost all day I guess) and put in cayenne pepper as strong as you like it. Mother is in the midst of grape jelly and there

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are some things for me to do for her, so I must say goodbye with ever and ever so much love to you and all the family.²

from your sincere
and aff - Sarah.

With Cousin Alice, once commended for "the beauty of her sweet spirit," Miss Jewett could run on unbridled in this free-associative vein. There might be tolerant smiles at the helter-skelter velocity of it all but never a reproof. In this protected cove of kinship, Sarah could be herself fearlessly.

In March-May of 1900 Miss Jewett enjoyed her fourth sojourn in Europe with her confidante Mrs. Annie Fields, about a month of which was spent in Greece. When Mrs. Fields edited *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1911), she saw fit to include only two from the classic peninsula, written to Sarah Wyman Whitman from Athens and Megalopolis (pages 171, 173). The following excerpt addressed to "Dearest Cousin Alice" presents an interesting contrast—less conventional, less "literary," more quintessentially Jewett. The familiar heading of SOUTH BERWICK, MAINE, is nullified by an undulant scrawl and superseded by the dateline "Athens, 31 March 1900."

The two names of places at the head of this paper seem strangely put together, but here I am, strange as it seems to me, and I have so often thought of you in the ten days since I came and wished to answer your most kind letter which reached me in Naples in my first mail from home. You were so kind to ask me to come to Brunswick and I should have been delighted to do so had I been at home. I was very much interested about my works being dramatized! and it gave me more pleasure than I can say to think that Brunswick was going to do them so much honour. I am sure that dear little Mary would do great honor

² Several of the matters in this letters are elucidated in the September 1959 *CLQ*: the Sagadahoc County Fair on page 52, footnote 5, and on page 56, footnote 15; the horse on page 55, footnote 10; Charlie Ashburton, Alice's son, on pages 54-58.

Mary is Miss Jewett's elder sister, also a considerable traveler-by-engagement.

Liddy is of course Alice's daughter Elizabeth.

Mother's Magazine, published in New York from 1833 to 1888, was at this time edited by a minister and bore heavily upon the Sabbath and scripture. Although it printed periodical reports of the Maternal Association, the magazine was "not for mothers any more than for women in general." It was widely read for its stories, poems and special features.

The "new magazine" was *Sunday Afternoon*, published in Springfield, Mass., and edited in its first year by Washington Gladden. Miss Jewett contributed four stories and two poems to its pages between January 1878 and July 1879. Two more of her stories appeared after its name was changed to *Good Company*.

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to the heroine of Mr. Teaby! She seems small for the part except in the size of her heart, and I may say young, but I don't doubt that she could make up in costume.

I am only away for a short time, (I shall be at home the last of May.) I am glad to say for though I enjoy travelling quite as much if not more than most people I hate the feeling of being so far away from home, and I often have to *pinch hard* to keep myself from giving way to homesickness in spite of every possible satisfaction and pleasure.

It is delightful to find how much more beautiful Greece is than anybody ever gave me the idea. One must see the old marbles and the hill of the Parthenon for oneself, and nobody can write anything like the charm and the astonishing beauty of these old sights.

Day before yesterday we drove to Marathon (twenty-five miles) and saw the famous plain with its great mound of earth that has stood so many centuries over the Athenian soldiers, and the bright sea in front of it and the dark mountains behind. You would have loved the gay wild-flowers almost best of all—they really made a brilliant carpet for the ground. There were little marigolds and big scarlet and purple anemones much larger than our pale ones, and two kinds of poppies and big blue forget-me-nots and tall stalks of asphodel and all sorts of things, and pale purple gillyflowers all along the beach with our familiar beach peas. And the old olive trees are most beautiful: they seem as old as the mountains and plains themselves. I must put in some leaves for you so you can imagine how silvery the trees look when the wind blows them.

Miss Jewett's allusion to the dramatization of her works refers to the "entertainment" at Pythian Hall on Saturday evening, March 24, when two of her "delightful stories [were] acted by local talent." The Saturday Club, an organization addicted to periodic "dramatic presentations," chose to put on "The Guests of Mrs. Timms," an exposé of stratified snobbery, and "The Quest of Mr. Teaby," a twinkling lyric of superannuated courtship. Miss Jewett's irresolution about Mary Gilman's suitability for the role of Hannah Jane Pinkham seems excessive: Sister Pinkham, though "elderly," was uncommonly spirited and "dear little Mary" was within touch of 35. Miss Jewett suffered the excusable pangs of an artist viewing with alarm the distortion of one of her inimitable creatures. But she need not have quavered; the amateur thespians must have possessed ample cosmetic and some aplomb. The *Brunswick Telegraph* (March 28) reported the whole affair "a happy conception," and the performance of the latter story "a triumph of costuming and character-acting."

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As evidenced in the last paragraph of the excerpt, deeply ensconced in the hearts of writer and recipient was an overwhelming love of flowers, wild or cultivated. In his memorable critique in the *Atlantic Monthly* for October 1904, Charles Miner Thompson identified Miss Jewett with the fragrant, exquisite arbutus, "which I think she would say is the symbol of New England virtue, [and] is the symbol also of her own modest and delightful art." It was far from the only flower in her life. The family garden in South Berwick, a source of great pride to her, was overrun with lilacs and larkspur, hollyhocks and honeysuckle. She sprinkled the bypaths of her stories with aromatic herbs and blossoms, a foaming wealth of pink lotus and snowberries, phlox, syringa, rosemary and cinnamon roses. In her own right, Cousin Alice developed the peerless formal gardens of Gilman mansion, often carrying off county-fair prizes for the excellence of her plants and arrangements. She too coalesced with her flowers. Wrote a friend of long standing: "Flowers were a passion with her; and wherever was sickness, or sorrow or death, or unusual happiness, or some crowning joy in the life of any friend; and especially in adorning her much loved church, Mrs. Gilman's flowers were always there; and all felt in these lovely gifts that Mrs. Gilman was giving a part of herself." (In another note, Miss Jewett extolled the "delight we are taking in your beautiful pinks, for they seem to grow bigger and brighter every hour.") Devotees of Flora, neither ever tired of planting, conning, discussing, exchanging and writing about the myriad varieties at their fingertips.

The last two letters to Cousin Alice are of value primarily for what they uncover of Miss Jewett's feeling for Charles Jervis, patriarch of the Brunswick Gilmans (see September 1959 *CLQ*, 51-54, 58). After almost precisely half a century of residence in his adopted state, he died in February 1901. Miss Jewett immediately sent her commiserations to the widow, albeit she herself was in the throes of grippe. The note was written in pencil, with apparent difficulty, as by a person canted clumsily in bed. The handwriting lacks her usual firmness.

We have just received Mary's letter with the unexpected news of dear Cousin Charles's death which I feel very much. I have always been very fond of him as you know, and so many memories of the past

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are associated with him and his kindness and affection to me and to all of us at home. I cannot but be thankful that he need suffer no more weakness and illness but I shall always miss him. I send you a great deal of sympathy and my love to you and your children. You must remember a great many lovely things—how ready he was to serve and help others, and to push forward things that he saw ought to be done, and the forgetfulness of his own interests which we have sometimes been sorry about, shows such a different side! He did so many good things and gave so many good ideas to other people!

Five months later, in haler circumstances, she recalled him to memory. She had recently received an honorary degree of Doctor of Letters from Bowdoin College, the first of her sex to be so honored. She reflected sentimentally on the pleasure it would have given her father, once a member of the medical faculty there, then

I thought of Cousin Charles too, and that it would have given him pleasure, and how he would have half teased me, and said some serious things that would have made me feel a deeper pleasure than before. I miss him very much, even though I have not yet gone to Brunswick without finding him. He was always so kind, and put so many new thoughts into my mind whenever we talked together.

This impulsive homage is succeeded by a pair of sentences at once petulant and prophetic. "I have almost finished the *Tory Lover* now, and I am very glad for I am almost too tired after more than a year's steady hard work," she wrote. "Lately I have 'kept at it' both morning and afternoon and it has been almost too much." Her tone of annoyance was matched by that of the literary critics, most of whom relegated this novel—her only extended attempt at dramatic plot—to the bottom of her barrel. She had labored unseasonably upon it, had contrived in a fashion unnatural to her. The smell of the lamp pervaded this book. It was indeed "too much."

Two of the four letters to Alice's daughters are addressed to Lizzie, the other two to Lizzie and Mary. (Mary either destroyed all her cousin's communications or existed, missively, only as adjunct to Lizzie.) The Gilman sisters, Elizabeth Jarvis and Mary Gardiner, were respectively seven and sixteen years junior to Miss Jewett, who treated them with the airy indulgence of a favorite grandaunt. Apparently, not until after their mother had died did she see them as sedate and autonomous grownups. During their youth and young womanhood,

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festivity at the opulent mansion gradually contracted. Following the death of their parents, the two spinsters found maintenance of so vast a house too great a drain on energy and exchequer. They shut off many parts, confining entertainment to two parlors near the formal entrance.

Elizabeth (July 6, 1856-Dec. 18, 1939) seems to have been somewhat closer to Miss Jewett, visiting at South Berwick frequently and, in later days, recollecting many happy times there. With the aid of one regular maid, Lizzie became more and more the recognized housekeeper, making a home for her sister and two brothers, and lending dignity to a fading household. Quiet, poised—the perfect gentlewoman—she was also formidably meticulous. One of her younger relatives, wishing to show appreciation for overnight hospitality, made up the elaborate four-poster (with tester and valances) in the morning. Unobtrusively and without comment, Lizzie undid the bedclothes and deftly rearranged them. After a decade of undisputed rule as hostess, she was abruptly faced with a disturbing new dispensation: her brother Charlie brought home his bride, a vivacious and sociable lady. A situation which for many women would have evolved into irreconcilable feud was, by the force of Lizzie's character, sustained in unruffled harmony. Without missing a step, or a stitch, she adapted to the revised regime.

Mary, the younger (July 11, 1865-Oct. 7, 1940), proved to be the last of the line. Like Lizzie, she was graduated from the local high school, but unlike Lizzie, she did not occupy herself exclusively thereafter with the possessive manor. She became Town Librarian and held the position forty-seven years; was secretary of the Pejepscot Historical Society and an acknowledged authority on the city of Brunswick and Cumberland County. As flexible as her sister (she had no quarrel with the incursions of modernity), Mary was presumably more animated (she mixed *sans cérémonie* in numerous community affairs). If she was separated by an additional nine years from her eminent cousin, this did not evidently affect their companionableness.

But it was to Lizzie that Miss Jewett turned when she had both of them to thank or when a matter of serious disposition

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arose. On a Friday evening following the death of Cousin Alice, Miss Jewett wrote in part to Lizzie from Poland Spring House—her haven of escape when she badly needed detachment and rest:

I am more and more thankful that we could have those few hours with you on Monday, and you will not need to have me say how many dear memories filled my heart of your mother's affection and kindness to us all. You know how much we all loved her, and how near Mary and I shall always feel to you four children. You will have a great many sad times in missing your dear mother, but I am sure that the happiness of knowing how she was loved, and how much you all did to make her happy especially in these last years, will be a great comfort.

The words are trite but the sentiment is of a piece with Miss Jewett's tremendous fund of human sympathy. She must have exulted over the profusion of flowers at the funeral; how appropriate that she who loved them so well in life should be so bountifully attended by them in death.

Three intertwined topics dominate Miss Jewett's letters to the Gilman girls: candy, butternuts and gardening. Once, gingerbread dispossessed the butternuts, but only once. The candy may have been Mary's specialty, but there is little question that the preparation of irresistible butternuts marked the apogee of Lizzie's domestic art. Twice Miss Jewett said, "The candy is better than ever," but she was more ingenious about the butternuts and the gardening. In an undated letter to Lizzie (circa 1895), she prattled infectiously:

You cant think how I am enjoying the butternuts! I have had a great feast, especially the day after they came—Wednesday morning—when I was busy in the garden and kept a *deposit* with a useful hammer on the stone carriage-block where I returned every little while to crack a few and enjoy a season of rest!! Gardening takes hold of a person in the early days of the season—and I wish that I could always have butternuts to *see me through!* You were so kind to remember my love for them, and I thank you very much.

We are so glad to have a card from dear cousin Alice now and then; the water³ is a blessing at any rate, but I bless it beside for bringing us a word from her. It makes me so happy to think that she feels a little stronger this spring, but don't let her do *too much* in the garden (unless you have saved out a few butternuts *to stay her*; I do find them *so efficacious!*) We are not doing any thing very new this year but you

³ Reference is to Paradise Spring Water from the Gilman estate. See September 1959 *CLQ*, 51, 53-54.

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know, Cousin Alice knows, that there are always gaps to fill, and transplantings to do after the long winter.

And from Mrs. Fields' summer home on Thunderbolt Hill in Manchester, Massachusetts, she gratefully indited to Lizzie and Mary this strong recapitulation of the flower motif:

Mrs. Fields was so pleased with the poppies and wondered as I did at their being in bloom so early. She only got her poppy seeds in this week!! The last of the flowers are in the window of her little sitting room upstairs—the buds all coming out this morning in the sun, though I gave some to Margit Bursley to her delight for fear they would fade and fall before they all got here! (I told Mrs. Fields!)

The horticultural theme of the last two letters is inseparable from Miss Jewett's rural orientation and proliferates in all her writings. She enunciated it most vibrantly in her pastorate of 1889, "The White Rose Road." There she declared, "Everything in a country garden has its history and personal association." And, "There is a constant exchange of such treasures [bushes, perennials] between the neighbors, and in the spring, slips and cuttings may be seen rooting on the window ledges, while the house plants give endless work all winter long . . . A flower-loving woman brings back from every one of her infrequent journeys some treasure of flower-seeds or a huge miscellaneous nosegay."

In the Preface to her collection of *The Best Stories of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1925), Willa Cather said: "Miss Jewett wrote of the people who grew out of the soil and the life of the country near her heart, not about exceptional individuals at war with their environment." The Gilman women qualify in every respect: they were not of the earth earthy but they preserved a communion of their own with it in the immemorial posture of hands and knees; there was nothing truly remarkable about them except as all dear and useful women are remarkable; they did not always rate their condition as ideal but they fought no self-destructive battles against it. These were gentle, pliant, dauntless women, the kind Miss Jewett best understood and portrayed on several levels. Besides, Alice, Elizabeth and Mary were her cousins. She could, and did, open her heart to them.⁴

⁴ I am indebted to Mrs. Frances D. Shepard for personal data on the Gilman family, and to Mr. Robert E. Dysinger, Assistant Librarian of Bowdoin College, for unstinted aid in other aspects of the research.