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A FORGOTTEN VIEW FROM BEACON HILL:
ALICE BROWN’S NEW ENGLAND SHORT STORIES

By SUSAN ALLEN TOTH

Alice Brown wrote wistfully to a friend in 1938, “Yes, dear, our world is gone, given over to the troglodytes. I do so much want to interview God, not impertinently but merely interrogative.”¹ She probably wanted to inquire in that interview about her disappearing reputation as a popular novelist, short-story writer, essayist, dramatist and poet. Her New England tales of the 1890s had delighted readers of Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett; her novels, published almost biennially from 1900 to 1935, had been often favorably reviewed by influential newspapers and periodicals; her play, Children of Earth, had won a $10,000 prize in 1914. Moving with ease in Boston literary society, she was both the epitome and one of the last survivors of an age of genteel letters. Yet by the time of her death in 1948, Alice Brown was almost wholly forgotten, and no significant mention of her has appeared in print at all for over fifteen years.²

Even if some of Miss Brown’s copious work deserves this neglect, her New England stories and sketches alone should have justified the survival of her reputation. Gathered in Meadow-Grass (1896), Tiverton Tales (1899), The County Road (1906), and Country Neighbors (1910), these stories are psychologically acute, thoughtful, and quietly humorous, as well as detailed studies of local characters and customs. In fact, Alice Brown’s tales provide a visible transition between

¹ Alice Brown to Esther Bates, Boston, 1938, no further date. This letter and others below are quoted by permission of Yale University Library.
² Dorothea Walker of Nassau Community College is now preparing a study of Brown for the Twayne Series on United States authors. The last critic to deal at length with Brown was Perry Westbrook in his Acres of Flint: Writers of Rural New England 1870-1900 (Washington, D. C., 1961).
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the earlier realism of New England local-color fiction, like Mary Wilkins Freeman's or Rose Terry Cooke's painstaking and often grim sketches of New England life, and the more introverted and psychologically complicated musings of later writers like Santayana or John P. Marquand.

Alice Brown's fiction spans a crucial period. Her New England tales first appeared in the 1890s, when the vogue of local color was at its height, and she continued to publish such stories well into the 1920s. This range makes her fiction an unusual repository of changing cultural and literary attitudes. Since Miss Brown balances precariously between veneration of the past and a desire for freedom from it, she embodies a developing conflict that was to shake so many later writers into frustration and exile. She rejects earlier New England writers' obsessions with the dying tremors of Puritanism. She offers instead her own blend of mysticism and pantheism, a kind of faith in the American land and its Creator that inspired the later populist literary movements of the 1930s and 1940s. Even her New England women characters, who descend from a long line of matriarchal preservers of tradition, often seem to speak of their radical dissatisfactions with traditional roles. A strange mixture of nostalgia, rebellious fervor, humor, and homely realism, Alice Brown's New England fiction has both historic and intrinsic interest for the student of American literature.

Alice Brown herself lived in a place and time peculiarly suited for looking both backwards and forwards. Born in New Hampshire in 1857, she grew up in the country and taught school briefly before moving to Boston. There she joined the staff of Youth's Companion, published her first novel, My Love and I (1885), and rapidly rose to quiet eminence in Boston literary society, then blooming in what Van Wyck Brooks has characterized as New England's "Indian Summer." During these autumnal days of Boston's Brahmin culture, Alice Brown was an intimate friend of Louise Imogen Guiney, who introduced her to all its tamed Bohemianisms, partisan enthusiasms, and insistent idealism.

In her later years, Miss Brown herself ruled as an arbiter of Boston taste from her quiet study at 11 Pinckney Street, former home of E. W. Whipple. After her death, one member
submitted a brief memorial poem to the Boston Authors Club Bulletin that succinctly described Alice Brown’s position:

To many of us you were cornerstone
In Boston’s most Bostonian life and lore;
And Beacon Hill, your most appropriate throne,
Will scarcely be the Hill, you there no more.  

To picture Alice Brown in regal isolation, however, is to miss her passionate concern for ideas, books, and people, a concern shared in her unpublished correspondence with such members of the Boston circle as Guiney, Jewett, Annie Fields, Gamaliel Bradford, Robert Grant, Bliss Perry, William Dean Howells, John Livingston Lowes, Esther Bates, and others. She and her correspondents wrote vehemently about the latest literary movements, from Harriet Monroe and Amy Lowell to Stephen Vincent Benet and Thornton Wilder, and reinforced their mutual faith in the importance of their shared opinions. As a young woman, Alice exchanged views with Thomas Wentworth Higginson; fifty years later, she hoped to get Walt Disney to film her version of Pilgrim’s Progress. Her letters offer a fascinating panorama of these passing years.

As time went on, Miss Brown confronted without flinching what Martin Green has called “the problem of Boston,” the city’s gradual decline as America’s literary and cultural center. Several interesting stories deal with writers who find themselves ignored or denigrated by younger poets and novelists. In “The Mid-Victorian,” her hero, Abergenny, is a gentle, out-of-date writer in Boston. Challenged by a vigorous group of young writers, he realizes he is being categorized and depreciated not only as a writer but as a member of a vanishing social and cultural class. His beloved young nephew tells him patronizingly:

“It isn’t you alone, uncle, it’s the whole bloomin’ town. Your class refuses to see that there’s been anything new since the shipbuilding days. Meantime the population’s shifted. There’s a big percentage of Italians, Syrians, Lithuanians, Poles... But uncle... only knows he

4 The bulk of this correspondence is in the collection of Alice Brown material at Yale University Library.
meets shiny-eyed foreigners in the street when he’s pottering down to the post-office to get an English review, and they make him think of Italy, and he goes off into a pipe-dream about his sabbatical spree, don’t you, dad?”

Abergenny submits to such treatment with docility and even decides to invest all the money he has painstakingly saved for his Italian sabbatical into a new radical magazine. Miss Brown was no Abergenny, however; towards the end of her life, she wrote with wry humility why she, and others of her generation, should not be entirely forgotten:

I think the time is coming, and, indeed, now is when we ought to be keeping the older writers alive, even those who never thought of trying to be Shakespeares but industriously wrote out what was in their honest minds. Even a little Longfellow. I could do with him at a pinch. We need to tell the straddling bare legs of today how it seemed in those older days to say every hour of a certain day: “Dickens is dead.”

If Alice Brown indeed deserves to be remembered, it is as a writer of short fiction. Although she longed for recognition as a poet, after her first volume of verse, The Road to Castaly (1896), it was clear that her sentimental and mystical bent did not lead her to fresh poetic insights. In more than twenty novels, successful in various degrees, she explored many subjects, from religious fanaticism to historical fiction, but her wandering imagination seemed to need the disciplined limits of a shorter form. Her best work appeared as graceful travel sketches, collected in By Oak and Thorn (1896), as occasional essays on aspects of New England life, such as “The End of All Living,” an account of an old burial ground in Tiverton Tales, and, above all, as short stories.

As a short-story writer, Alice Brown’s sheer output is startling. Although her best collections, Meadow-Grass and Tiverton Tales, appeared before 1900, she continued to publish prodigiously for more than twenty-five years afterwards. Her stories fall into three different groups: mystical and moralistic love stories, brief parables, and New England tales. Few of her love stories are worth reading, but her parables, usually about unnamed characters placed in symbolically abstract situations, are often powerful and weirdly disturbing. Since none
of these parables was ever later collected, such fine brief achievements like “The Grass-Green Maid,” “The Man Who Wanted To Be Safe,” and “The Man Who Was Obstinate” remain even less known than her other work.8

Most memorable of all Alice Brown’s stories, however, are her New England tales. Often grouped with Jewett, Freeman, and Rose Terry Cooke, Brown has her own special charm which was recognized, though seldom defined, by contemporary reviewers. One critic declared in 1910: “We have had three great New England story-tellers. Mary Wilkins Freeman has untutored genius, but never acquired craftsmanship; Sarah Orne Jewett had exquisite craftsmanship and lacked the forces of genius; Alice Brown has genius and the craftsman’s skill combined.”9 Most critics agreed with the Spectator’s judgment that “her work has a peculiar and engaging note of its own.”10

This “peculiar and engaging” note depends for much of its distinctiveness on Alice Brown’s unusual blend of personal Christianity and romantic pantheism. Unlike Cooke and Freeman, as well as most other New England writers, Miss Brown found New England Puritanism not only uncongenial but also incomprehensible. She complained about the Puritan view of life after death:

I want us to feel immediately, “Why! I’ve got Home!” And then we could be taken aside by a benign spirit —I choose Sir Thomas More—and be talked to gently and reminded that we’d got into bad habits—known as Sins—and, not to pay the Piper in any extravagant way, but just to learn the decorum of the new walks of life (on Golden Streets!) ... And after all, it was His system you’d been living under on earth, and your brain was His “for he made it” —and it’s all “no fair.”11

A New Englander who can insist that sins are “bad habits,” who loathes the idea of confession, who rejects severe punishment for sin, and who simply feels that “it’s all no fair,” is far from the world of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Oldtown Folks or Freeman’s Pembroke or Cooke’s Somebody’s Neighbors.

Believing that man and God could find a possible union in

8 Many of these parables, together with a vast collection of other Brown manuscripts, both published and unpublished, are in the collection at Yale.
10 Anon., review of Country Neighbors, Spectator, CIV (June 25, 1910), 1078.
11 Brown to Bates, undated; Yale.
nature, Miss Brown asserted that her God was an architect, a great designer, an artist who was responsible for beauty. In another letter she wrote to Gamaliel Bradford, “I see cruelty in almost everything, but no slovenliness. And also I get some solace from the forms of things, larkspur and columbine and shells.”\footnote{Brown to Gamaliel Bradford, Boston, November 1, 1922; quoted by permission of Harvard College Library.}

In the same countryside that Freeman and Cooke describe as harsh, bleak, and barren, Miss Brown sees a New England of winter sunsets, glittering snow, massed purple violets, and freshly turned earth in spring.

While Freeman’s and Cooke’s men and women must battle their environment to survive, Brown’s favorite characters have an inborn affinity with the land. One such hero is Eli Pike of “Farmer Eli’s Vacation,” one of Brown’s finest stories, which focuses upon a contrast between ordinary New England farm life and the suggestive mystery of the nearby ocean. It also illustrate’s Miss Brown’s subtleties of narrative development and tone.

When “Farmer Eli’s Vacation” opens, Eli Pike and his wife are sitting together on a quiet summer evening. Timid Eli, we learn, has always longed to spend a week at the sea, which he has never seen, although it is but a few miles distant; and after many long years of hard work, he and his family are about to travel to the beach for a week’s camping excursion. Already Eli is hesitant about his plans, but his wife, an efficient, comfortable and unimaginative soul, encourages him; and next morning they set out. The Pike’s uneventful journey to the beach is an illuminating adventure to the land-bound farmer and his family. Eli and his son-in-law comment on the poverty of neighboring land, compared to their own, and on the brackishness of local water, compared to the clear ice-cold water at home. When Mrs. Pike alights to picnic informally by the side of the road, she nervously feels she must assert her pride when strangers pass who might think the Pikes are gypsies: “I guess I’ve got as good an extension-table to home as any on ‘em,” she remarks defiantly.

When the Pikes finally arrive at the ocean, Mrs. Pike gushes in rapture. But Eli refuses to look until later; then “he faced it as a soul might face Almighty Greatness, only to be stricken
blind thereafter; for his eyes filled painfully with slow, hot tears.” He sits alone for a long while, staring at the sea but saying nothing. During the night, while his wife snores peacefully beside him, Eli remains awake; “He looked, though he could see nothing, through the opening in the tent, in the direction where lay the sea, solemnly clamorous, eternally responsive to some infinite whisper from without his world. The tension of the hour was almost more than he could bear.” In the morning he rises early, draws his daughter aside, and tells her that he must suddenly return home. Making no excuses, he leaves his family to enjoy their vacation and joyfully turns his back on the sea. Arriving home, he only remarks to his hired man, “I guess I’m too old for such jaunts.”

Alice Brown never destroys the delicate ambiguity of this unpretentious story. Did Eli Pike find that the reality of the sea paled before the infinite greatness he had imagined? Did he return disappointed to a matter-of-fact life that now seemed more valuable than dreams? Or was Eli Pike’s vision fulfilled, and did he find the imaginative strain of confronting it too much to bear? Miss Brown never answers these questions definitely, but she suggests both the silent farmer’s passionate attachment to his land and his yearning for farther horizons. Maintaining a reticent sensitivity, she enhances the tale with the power of suggestion.

Alice Brown’s appreciation for her New England countryside involves her fondness for its past. Like Sarah Orne Jewett, Miss Brown urges her readers to revere their traditions and monuments. “The House With the Tower,” for example, centers on a young woman’s arrogant plan to add a desecrating tower to a fine example of colonial architecture. In “The Flat-Iron Lot,” an old clock-repairer and self-appointed historian of his town manages to prevent the destruction of an ancient church-bell and its replacement by a donated one bearing a businessman’s flashy slogan. The villain of “A Righteous Bargain” is an unscrupulous antique collector and dealer, “an alert Yankee type, with waxed blond mustache and eye-glasses”

13 In Meadow-Grass: Tales of New England Life (Boston, 1895), 29.
14 For a discussion of Jewett and the past that applies to other New England local-colorists as well, see Ferman Bishop, “The Sense of the Past in Sarah Orne Jewett,” University of Wichita Bulletin (February 1959).
15 Barner’s, CXXVIII (May 1914), 919-926.
16 In Tiverton Tales (Boston, 1899), 263-319.
who pretends that the objects he covets have no value. This quick-witted confidence man is a warning to Miss Brown's readers that they must value their eight-day clocks and hand-woven coverlets. 17

Alice Brown is not merely concerned with tradition as embodied in houses, clocks and coverlets. Many of her stories are immersed in a sense of passing time, a sense that is usually elegiac, mildly regretful, and comforting. If the past can offer a secure haven, however, it can also be a dulling and finally deadening escape. Miss Brown's ambiguous attitude towards the past adds a disturbing resonance to tales that might otherwise be sentimental reveries like many of Rose Terry Cooke's or Sarah Orne Jewett's.

In "A Second Marriage," for example, Alice Brown emphasizes the hypnotic effect of time and memory. Amelia Porter, a young widow, comes to the end of her year-and-a-day mourning and defiantly hopes for a new life. As she looks around her snug, small home, she begins to plan how to modernize it, since John, her dead husband, had quietly insisted that all furnishing be kept precisely as his grandfather had left it to him. John, "a man who had wrapped her about with the quiet tenderness of a strong nature, but who was not of her own generation either in mind or in habit," hovers over the tale, an unassertive but powerful force allied with the past.

When Laurie Morse, Amelia's former lover, arrives, full of vigorous life, Amelia is glad to see him; she feels she is "taking up her youth just where the story ended." But this feeling proves to be deceptive. He is followed by another visitor, this time a rotund, puffing aunt, who suggests different ways to re-do the house and dispose of the inconvenient past. But when, on impulse, Amelia brings downstairs an old spinning wheel, the women are soon lulled by the "purring silence" of the past. "The low hum of her spinning filled the air, and she seemed to be wrapped about by an atmosphere of remoteness and memory."

When the aunt leaves, Amelia is glad to find herself alone again. "That worldly voice, strangely clothing her own longings with form and substance, had been stilled; only the clock, rich in the tranquillity of age, ticked on, and the cat stretched herself

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17 In *Meadow-Grass*, 139-165.
and curled up again.” Not surprisingly, Amelia finally rejects Laurie Morse’s proposal that evening, crying out:

“Why, what do you think I’m made of, after fifteen years? What did I think I was made of, even to guess I could? You don’t know what women are like, Laurie Morse,—you don’t know.”... Though the desert were arid on this side, it was her desert, and there in her tent she must abide. She began speaking again between sobbing breaths: “I did have a dull life. I used up all my young days doin’ the same things over and over, when I wanted somethin’ different. It was dull; but if I could have it all over again, I’d work my fingers to the bone.... I guess I gained somethin’ I’d sooner give up my life than even lose the memory of.”

After he leaves, Amelia sits down once more to her spinning wheel by the soft firelight. Like her dead husband, she will devote herself to maintaining tradition, a way of life fast disappearing under the pressures of the present.

Yet Miss Brown knows that Amelia is giving up something too; her life will be spent among shadows, peaceful and gentle, but insubstantial. In her “desert” she will live without passion of any kind, without husband, children, family. The dullness of habit has become a soothing drug, to which Amelia is so addicted that she would rather “give up my life” than forget.

“A Second Marriage,” like Mrs. Freeman’s better-known “A New England Nun,” celebrates the appeal of living in the past only with deep underlying ambiguity.

Cultural historians trying to assess American views of the past could do worse than consult Alice Brown’s other tales on the same theme, such as “A Last Assembling” and “The Way of Peace.” In the former, a middle-aged woman refuses her fiancé at last because she cannot bear to leave her old family home and its heirlooms, of which she is the last custodian. Dilly Joyce’s two conflicting passions are depicted with sympathetic force, but the past is stronger. Visited during the night by a vision of her ancestors, their trials and modest successes, Dilly feels herself swept into the current of time:

She felt herself to be one drop in a mighty river, flowing into the water which is the sum of life; and she was content to be absorbed in that great stream. Dilly felt the safety of the universe; she smiled lovingly over the preciousness of all its homely ways. She thought of the twilights when she had sat on the doorstone, eating huckleberries and

18 In Tiverton Tales, 259-261.
milk, and seeing the sun drop down the west; she remembered one
night when her little cat came home, after it had been lost, and felt
the warm touch of its fur against her hand. ¹⁹

Living in such appealing, secure memories offers an irresistible
appeal. Having given herself to time and memory, Dilly regrets
losing her lover but feels she has gained something more im­
portant: "The room, the house, the race were hers forever; she
had learned the abidingness of what is real."

"The Way of Peace" carries such an obsession over the brink
of reality. When Lucy Ann's mother dies, the lonely young
spinster dresses herself in the dead woman's clothes, restyles
her hair, and literally transforms herself into her mother's
image. Miss Brown seems to approve this eerie change, for she
emphasizes how secure and loved Lucy feels in her new guise.
The last lines of the story reveal a final frightening kind of
happiness, as Lucy demands of her brothers and their families
that they accept her decision:

But no moment of that evening was half so sweet to her as the one
when little John, the youngest child of all, crept up to her and pulled
at her poplin skirt, until she bent down to hear.

"Grandma," said he, "when'd you get well?" ²⁰

Because Alice Brown sees time as a continuous stream, she
also preaches the preciousness of the present moment. Her
yearnings for the past and its tradition are partially balanced
by her insistence that men and women should snatch what
pleasures they can from the present. Her most beloved hero­
ines are those who manage to escape from daily drudgery in
order to enjoy fleeting moments of beauty. A carefree spirit
pervades and enlivens such tales as "Adventure," "A Stolen
Festival," "Heartsease," "Honey and Myrrh," "After All," and
many others. This is the quality that appealed to Horace
Scudder, when he described Brown's "mood which is the stirring
of gypsy blood in the veins ... a motion, a light, joyous tread,"
giving Brown's stories "a subtle attraction not to be found ... in
any other collection of New England tales." ²¹

Alice Brown believed that it is never too late to begin to

¹⁹ Ibid., 170-171.
²⁰ Ibid., 202.
²¹ Horace E. Scudder, "Half a Dozen Story-Books," Atlantic Monthly,
LXXVI (October 1895), 559.
enjoy life. Her emphasis on the possible pleasures of man’s middle years is a rarity in American literature. Some of her most delightful stories describe how middle-aged men and women finally decide to indulge long-repressed desires—finally, in fact, decide to live. “After All,” for example, tells of a gentle, rather timid old maid who has spent her life caring for and obeying a stern, ascetic father. After his death, Lucindy shocks her friends and neighbors by doing all the things she has been denied for years, such as riding horseback, wearing bright flowers on her bonnet, and entertaining children. Even though the community finds such mild pleasures undignified and unsuitable, Lucindy persists in her clear intention to enjoy her remaining allotment of time.  

Another middle-aged rebel is William of “The Tree of a Thousand Leaves,” a man whose passion is arithmetic. He has spent a dutiful life caring for his wife and child, and now, a widower, he only wants to indulge his passion in harmless pursuits, such as numbering the leaves on his gilly-flower tree.

In “Dooryards,” Della, the “mother of two grave children, and the wife of a farmer who never learned to smile,” builds herself a homemade croquet set, with withers for hoops and sawed-off bedposts for balls. In her spare moments she plays by herself, fighting loneliness in her dream-world of joy.

Like many other New England chroniclers of the same period, Alice Brown insists that the human need to celebrate and enjoy life continues through old age, that period even more neglected than the middle years in American fiction. One of her most poignant tales is “Heartsease,” which tells about a bright-eyed and alert old woman of eighty, Old Lady Lamson, who longs to escape from a cosseted existence with her son and his wife. One night, when they are called away, she lives a full life again for a few hours, prowling throughout the house, baking biscuits, ironing shirts, wandering outdoors. Her hour in the moonlit pastures reminds her, like Dilly Joyce, of her participation in the flow of life and leads without fear to accepting one’s own individual death. Death thus becomes part of life, to be welcomed with a sense of wonder.

22 In Meadow-Grass, 30-58.  
23 In The County Road (Boston, 1906), 191-217.  
24 In Tiverton Tales, 1-14.  
25 In Meadow-Grass, 100-116.
While Alice Brown shares with Sarah Orne Jewett a positive acceptance of the process of life, she is not as relentlessly optimistic in her portrayals of daily life. One sharp difference that sets her apart from other sentimental and nostalgic New England local-colorists is her attitude towards New England women. One of the earliest and best of these local-colorists, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had created in *Oldtown Folks* (1869) the archetype of the New England maternal figure, Grandmother Badger, an efficient, loving, strong-willed, intelligent woman who reveled in her domestic tasks. Grandmother Badger ruled her household with a kind but firm hand, supported her church, educated her children, doled out welfare to the town at large. Her descendants in later New England fiction continued in the same strain, culminating in Jewett's remarkably capable widow, Almira Todd of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Alice Brown, however, no longer believed in the existence of such women, and she introduced in her stories a new strain, unhappy, neurotic, rebellious—prototypes for the suffering women of later local-color fiction like Willa Cather's or Hamlin Garland's.

Alice Brown knew that not all women are able to live as fully as they would like. Hampered by family responsibilities, demanding husbands, clinging children, a New England farm wife could finally rebel against her burdens and against her strained relationships. In a variety of stories, some comic and some pathetic, Brown recorded these moments of rebellion.

One of the best of these stories is "A Sea Change," a perceptive and gentle account of one woman's breakdown and recovery. Set on a lonely farm overshadowed by a towering hill, the story opens when Cynthia Miller is frantically doing her spring house-cleaning. Interrupted in her task by her husband's voice, she responds with the same frozen stillness as the lonely woman in Robert Frost's "The Hill Wife":

She stood as still as one of those little brown creatures on the trees, when they straighten themselves into twigs at the approach of other life. Her eyes narrowed. She looked not so much frightened as immovably perverse. . . . Then she called again, and she heard his step coming her way. It sounded blundering, as it always did in the house.\(^\text{26}\)

Cynthia cannot bear to look at Timothy, who is a quiet, stolid

\(^{26}\) In *The County Road*, 151.
man, "a son of the soil, made out of earth," with straws clinging to his clothes and loam caking his boots. When he leaves his boots for her to grease, she flings them out the door and glances at the mountain, symbol of her shut-off life, "with a flash of obstinate malice. She was bitterly angry with it, as she was with her husband . . . She was forty years old now, and the mountain seemed too near."

We begin to realize that as soon as her compulsive cleaning is finished, Cynthia intends to leave. With nervous fear, she watches the mountain as though it were an accusing judge:

She had kept her back to it as much as possible of late, but somehow it filled her vision all the more; and now, when she went out to spread her dish towels on the brush, it grew and grew, as if it would engulf her. "Why don't you get into the winder, if you want to?" she inquired, scorning it at last. 28

Here too the sense of encroaching paranoia is strongly reminiscent of Frost in such poems as "Tree at My Window." Frost in fact knew and corresponded with Brown; this may have been one of the stories he read. 28

When Cynthia abruptly announces her departure, ostensibly to visit her sister Frances, whom she has not seen for years, poor dull Timothy is stunned—and accidentally seizes a china cup for a drinking mug and promptly breaks it. This small incident mirrors the breaking of their domestic world. With feminine intuition, Alice Brown knows just why Cynthia is leaving: she lets us share Cynthia's confused thoughts as she planned how she should meet her sister and tell why she had come. All winter long she had brooded upon that opening speech, but now the long catalogue had resolved itself into one last irritation, and she could go only thus far: "I can't live with him no longer. I'm goin' to support myself." Then Frances would ask why, and she would say, "He greases his boots so much. He leaves 'em by the oven door." That seemed to be all she could remember, and quite enough. Any woman would know. 29

Cynthia's nervous tension, her refusal to sink into a deadening

27 Ibid., 160-161.
29 In The County Road, 165.
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routine until death, her revulsion against her husband and home, perhaps even her rebellion against the demands of physical life, exerted by man or mountain, are all compressed into this glimpse of a tormented woman’s mind.

Arrived at her sister’s, Cynthia collapses. She is convinced that she is dying of heart disease, but her sister Frances knows better. When the doctor examines her, the resulting exchange is as sharp and poignant as any conversation in a Mary Wilkins Freeman story:

The doctor sat down beside the bed, and took her hand. He looked at it, the little red palm, seamed and wrinkled, and the crooked fingers beckoning for some obstinate good. Then he looked at her. “How long have you lived up there by the mountain?” he asked.

Cynthia choked. She could not remember. It seemed far away, yet the later terror of it was flaming still in sight. “Some years,” she said. “Years an’ years.”

“Been there all winter?”

“Yes.”

“Had any company? Been away anywhere?”

She shook her head.

“Busy all day?”

“Most all.”

“What at?”

“Doin’ up the work. Sewin’.” The doctor nodded.

Frances hears and understands, and slowly and tenderly she nurses her sister’s true “heart disease.” Cynthia is given a room overlooking the harbor, whose infinite view is a welcome change from the mountain’s restrictions. She is hugged and kissed, fed and pampered. She responds to all this love, and eventually she is restored both physically and mentally. It is a true “sea change,” and when Timothy comes to the village to seek her, she welcomes him. During their talk, Cynthia asks him what he ever did with the broken china cup. “Hove it under the

30 Ibid., 169-170.
bam,” he answers. “Had I ought to ha’ kep’ it?” Cynthia laughs and tells him no. Their relationship, once broken, has been transformed into a new shape.

Not all Alice Brown’s heroines escape their thralldom in such dramatic ways. Her version of “The Revolt of Mother” is probably “The Other Mrs. Dill,” a richly comic tale whose thematic likeness to the well-known Freeman story is so strong that it can hardly have been unintentional. Mrs. Dill has always been a dutiful wife to her stern husband, but when her son Herman comes to her with a tale of woe about how his father’s stinginess is preventing Herman’s marriage, she decides to act in her son’s behalf. Mrs. Dill seizes upon an article she has read on “double personality,” and she informs her husband that night that she is such a case. After all these years, she confronts him with “the other Mrs. Dill,” a woman with a mind of her own. He is terrified:

“Hermie’s much my son as he is your’n, and what you bought that place with is as much mine as it is your’n. I helped you earn it. Myron, it’s comin’ up in me. I can feel it.”

“What is?” In spite of all his old dull certainties he felt the shock of wonder. He looked at her, her scarlet cheeks and widening eyes...

“It’s that,” she said, with an added vehemence. “It’s my double personality.”

After two days of this, Myron is beaten. His faithful wife has threatened him with disobedience, with drawing out all her savings to give to Herman, with other treasonous acts that leave him agog. He concedes, and Mrs. Dill’s “other self” sinks back into the quiet housewife once more—but her husband has been warned.

Alice Brown clearly enjoys Mrs. Dill’s stratagem and courage and her story reflects that enjoyment. A slighter tale, but also a humorous parable of woman’s revolt, is “A Day Off,” in which a browbeaten wife decides to lie extravagantly all day long in order to give her daughter a few hours of stolen happiness. The ease of lying and its delightful results appall her, for at the end of the day she confesses obliquely to her unsuspecting husband: “Jonathan, I’ve found out suthin’. It don’t
do to do the leastest thing that’s wrong. . . . It’s because’—She halted a moment, and her voice dropped a note—‘it’s because wrong-doin’s so pleasant.’”

Like Mrs. Dill, this meek wife will now be content to return to her ordinary life; but the fire, if banked, still burns.

It is typical of Alice Brown’s fiction that her humor softens the harsh impact of her subject. Always critical of those who lacked the power to laugh at themselves, she once wrote to Gamaliel Bradford, “Oh, dear! how can the human animal take himself so seriously?” Many other fine stories, such as “Joint Owners in Spain” and “Heman’s Ma,” are evidence of her warm and sympathetic view of the human condition. In a time when satire and black humor have replaced the kind of laughter Alice Brown enjoyed, her stories may seem strangely innocent. But if one acknowledges temporarily that men and women have the capacity for self-understanding, dignity, and even love, then such delightful tales as “Farmer Eli’s Vacation,” “A Second Marriage,” or “A Sea Change,” can make their quiet appeal felt.

Alice Brown’s New England stories can indeed be enjoyed on two levels. Using her New England to bring her close to a more universal reality, as did the best of all the local-colorists, Alice Brown was able to produce a series of short stories resonant with her love of nature, poignant with her sense of the past, joyous with her love of the present, moving and entertaining as stories should be. But her tales are also a valuable record of a vanished time and changed place, a record with both nostalgic and historic interest. Early in her career, Brown reviewed some English “folk-tales” with appreciative words that apply as well to her own local-color fiction:

Every bit of fiction setting forth the ‘form and pressure’ of unspoiled country life with fidelity and insight, becomes a valuable contribution not only to art, but to social science. To keep alive tradition and the habits of speech of an elder generation is to enrich the folk-lore of fiction; and it is generally to be desired that England and America should multiply these homely records of a time now becoming fugitive before a strenuous and complex civilization.

Today, when the “strenuous and complex” life of 1896 has

32 In The County Road, 21.
34 “English Folk-Tales,” Book Buyer, XIII (November 1896), 651.
multiplied in noise and fierceness, Brown's plea for preserving the "folk-lore of fiction" is even more relevant. Both for their sociological and their literary merit, Alice Brown's New England tales deserve renewed recognition, as does her place in a transitional period of fiction.

RIDDLING LEAVES:
ROBINSON'S "LUKE HAVERGAL"

By N. E. DUNN

"Luke Havergal," Edwin Arlington Robinson's early poem in the Symbolist mode, has offered considerable challenge in regard to interpretation. Readers tend to emerge from the poem with a few scattered suppositions concerning the situation but without a clear conviction about the meaning of the situation. Presumably, Luke's lover is dead and he is faced with a temptation of some sort, possibly to join her in death by suicide. The problem is to determine the significance of the specifics and the concretes in the poem.

It is salutary to begin one's exploration of meaning in the poem with the proviso in mind that the concretes may not "mean" anything. As Wallace Anderson has observed in his discussion of "Luke Havergal," the purpose of a Symbolist poem is essentially to create mood, music, and mystic feeling, as though by means of a disembodied voice. It may well be that specific details such as crimson leaves and a western gate have no "meaning" other than whatever personal emotive associations the reader himself brings to them. It is also possible, on the other hand, since these very images are not only used but used recurrently, and with a certain consistence of pattern and association, that the poet has endowed them with more specific significance. If so, the images cease to be merely emotive images and become symbols, conveying idea.

Western gate and crimson leaves are central to the imagery—