June 1964

Jewett on Writing Short Stories

Richard Cary

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.10, June 1964, p.425-440

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.
TWO acknowledged masterpieces of New England local color literature are Celia Thaxter’s *Among the Isles of Shoals* and Sarah Orne Jewett’s *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. These ladies, brought together through mutual acquaintance with Annie Fields, shared a friendship not exceptionally long—a dozen years—but demonstrably tender. Miss Jewett often drove the seventeen miles from her home in South Berwick to call on Mrs. Thaxter at Kittery Point, which visits she ardently reciprocated. In a day of florid appellatives “The Princess of Berwick” addressed “The Goddess of Appledore” as “Sandpiper” and was herself designated “Owlet.” They exchanged letters of advice and encouragement on matters ordinary and on particular problems of authorship. In the waning days of her life, during preparation of her last book, *An Island Garden* (1894), Celia avowed: “Dear, you have given me a real helpful lift, because I have been doing this work without a particle of enthusiasm, in a most perfunctory manner...”

After Celia died, Sarah edited and wrote a foreword to her *Stories and Poems for Children* (Boston, 1895); edited and wrote a preface to *The Poems of Celia Thaxter* (Boston, 1896). On the wall of the breakfast room in the Jewett Memorial House hangs a manuscript of Celia’s poem “Vesper” in a frame with her photograph.

The effluence of this affection swelled out and enveloped John Thaxter, second son of Celia and but five years younger than Sarah. Born in 1854 at the Mill House on the bank of the Artichoke River in Newburyport, Mass., he narrowly missed being christened Rupert. In her journal and in her letters to Elizabeth Hoxie, Celia reports him an impenitent mischief maker, round as an apple, red as a poppy, “dirtier than a whole

---

1 In a letter to Bradford Torrey, December 27, 1889, Mrs. Thaxter said: “I heard the hermit thrushes in South Berwick woods. Sarah Jewett drove me down into the woods just after sunset, and we sat in the carriage and listened. I had never heard them before.” Annie Fields & Rose Lamb, editors, *Letters of Celia Thaxter* (Boston, 1897), 171.

One of his most vivid experiences came to him at 13. His father, a scholarly man who consorted with Lowell and the artist William Morris Hunt, was advised by his physician to spend a season in warmer temperatures. Levi Thaxter chose Florida and set forth thereupon with tent, three guns, and a set of school books, for John and another son accompanied him. Contemptuous of the education to be had in local schools, Levi read to his boys with great charm in the sheltered corners of steamers taking them down St. John’s River. Settled at their destination, John would sometimes undertake shooting expeditions on his own. To his everlasting happiness, he bagged a small unknown bird, possibly a titlark.

Because he revered his father’s erudition and from boyhood displayed a predilection for writing verse and stories, it is curious that John never went farther than high school. His first job of note was apprentice farmer at Deerfoot Farms in Southborough, Mass., moving upward to overseer of a large estate in West Virginia. By the time he reached his twenty-fourth birthday, farming had established itself in his heart as his lifetime work. He spent one last rapturous summer on Appledore Island, then prevailed upon his father to secure a farm near the Isles of Shoals. After some discreet questing and haggling, they acquired the old Cutts Farm at Brave Boat Harbor in Kittery Point, Maine, a 150-acre tract with woods, cleared fields, pastures and, best of all, an extensive crescent of sandy shoreline facing the Isles. In 1880 John took residence in the ample new house, now known as Champernowne Farm. Shortly he put into effect the perpetual round of activities intrinsic to a farm: seeding, pruning, harvesting, haying, cutting ice, raising a herd of cows, making butter.

When Celia—who had described the scene estatically to Annie Fields—returned from Europe in 1881, she was appalled at “the dirt and disorder.” She pitched in grimly, restored the place to a semblance of cleanliness, then departed.

Thereafter she wrote less about robins, scarlet berries, and ash trees; instead she repeatedly admonished John to be less open-handed, to get a much-needed horse. Cheerfully, she accepted a calf on his behalf.

In June of 1887 he married Mary Gertrude Stoddard and installed her as mistress of the house. His mother continued to visit regularly. She would stay the winter in Boston and the summer on Appledore Island (which is visible on a clear day from the farmhouse); en route between the two points, she rested a goodly part of spring and autumn at John’s farm. It was during these interludes that Miss Jewett came to Kittery. Following Celia’s death John maintained his ties with Miss Jewett, riding to South Berwick on the trolley line then extant. In June 1899 she wrote him the first of eleven letters, eight incompletely dated, which could not have extended beyond 1902, for she does not mention the mishap which permanently disabled her that year.

Thaxter wrote, if not prolifically, habitually. In manuscript or typescript, one finds hundreds of rhymed charades, for which he cautiously supplied a key; stanza upon stanza of after-dinner remarks to the Federal Fire Society of Kittery, including versified minutes of their meetings and debates; topical and comical doggerel; patriotic odes to be intoned anti-Britishly on the 4th of July; Byronic petitions to idealized, imperious maidens; lyrics to the moonlit Mediterranean or to his daughter at Christmas; and a spate of steaming letters to the editor of the Portsmouth Herald extolling Woodrow Wilson and the League of Nations. His daughter attests that he never had anything published.

It appears that he put greatest store in his short stories, some of which have survived in as many as four versions. There is no telling how many he turned out. Still in condition to be perused are an untitled 52-page tale of a young man who willy-nilly acquires a skeletal benefactor. It transpires that he is an extinct relative, who obligingly makes available a hoard of money and an eligible damsel. There is also a baker’s half dozen of others entitled, “The Shadow of Gage’s Pool,” “Capricornus,” “Jedidiah’s Last Stand,” “The Case of Clara Bell,”

---

4 These holographs and all the typescripts of John Thaxter’s short stories cited in this essay are now in the Colby College Library through the good graces of Miss Rosamond Thaxter.
"Anemones," "Jeremiah," and "A Forgotten Honor." Of more immediate interest to this paper, however, are those specifically named or alluded to in Miss Jewett's letters below.

Late in the spring of 1899 Thaxter solicited her opinion as to the quality of his writings and her advice on how and where to place them. Ever prompt to abet neophytes despite her own excessive burdens, she sent him this cordial warranty from South Berwick on June 5:

I shall take great pleasure in reading your story and in helping you in any way that I can about it. I don't hesitate to say, however, that from long experience I have only got a more complete assurance that "pulls" do not count: a good story is its own best pull!

Please let me have the manuscript as soon as you can—it will come in just the right time for I am in the last week or two of idleness after a long illness, and presently I must turn to my own writing again.

He complied with alacrity. In less than a week he received the following assessment:

11 June
Manchester, Massachusetts

Dear Mr. Thaxter,

Your note and the story reached me here, and I have been eager to write you sooner but I was prevented yesterday. I wish that we could have a long talk for there are many things that I should find it much easier to say than to write. I think that the story has many fine qualities but it seems to me to fail in construction. You introduce your characters in an interesting way always, but there are too many of them for the length of the story and, if I may speak plainly, too many starts which do not come to sufficient importance. There is the really delightful, spirited beginning in which you make one deeply interested in the old house, the Doctor and his family, and the Scotch dependents, (your landscape and especially your descriptions are beautifully done) but afterward you keep making new claims upon the reader's attention and interest: there is the castaway and his mysterious history, then his relation to the little girl; then one must follow her career; then his as an inventor, then there are divergences into his past history etc, from all of which one expects more satisfaction, or some final results, and at the last you do not completely relate his shadowed fame, and his record as Deserter, to the story, that is, you bring it in too lightly and casually—I do not like the letter being lost!! And the whole sketch is confused and bewildering and even improbable, as if one saw a beautiful, quiet

---

5 See her letters to Willa Cather in Annie Fields, editor, Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett (Boston, 1911), and to Andress Floyd in Richard Cary, editor, Sarah Orne Jewett Letters (Waterville, Me., 1966).
piece of landscape painting with its figures hastily done, and crowded and even puzzling to the eye. I cannot praise enough the pictures of nature, the keen observation of sea and shore. I think that you have tried to do a very difficult thing in your plot, and that it would be a great wonder if you had quite succeeded. I wish that you would try something that does not aim so much at incidents. Take a simpler history of life: that very doctor who goes to help some lonely neighbour, and finds himself close to one of the tragedies or comedies of rustic life: try to give his own life with its disappointments — his growth of sympathy etc in that lonely place. You could make a series of short sketches of him and his casual patients, his walks or rides to the lonely farms and homes along shore in winter nights and summer dawns, and find yourself following out his character in most interesting ways. Just write things that you know and have done.

This piece of work interests me a good deal. I find such an interesting inheritance in it here and there of some of your mother's gifts of saying things, and I also find things that are wholly your own and which make me urge you to go on.

I think that you could easily get this story printed, but not in just the places where I should like to have you start! and besides there is too much really good material to make light of! I somehow wish to simplify it, to have you think about it again and see if you agree with what I have said. And don't go to work at it for some time, but try what you can do with the doctor — defeated, invalided, isolated in the strange old house. Write some real thing about his being knocked for some summer night and going to see a patient, and coming home again. Don't write a "story" but just tell the thing! I am afraid that I am disappointing you, but I know you will like it best if I write frankly.

Believe me ever

Yours most sincerely,

S.O. Jewett

I must beg again that you will put this manuscript aside for a while. Do not destroy it, or, above all, feel really discouraged by what I have said.

It is regrettable that no copy of this first story he submitted to her has been recovered. Miss Jewett's uncollatable remarks are nevertheless significant as a declaration of her principles for the short story and a remarkably close reflection of her own writing practices. Her chief objections center on the diffusion wrought by an overplus of characters pursuing irrelevant threads of intrigue, and the sense of improbability generated by too many digressions for the mere sake of plot. One recalls the unilateral clarity of her "A White Heron" or "The Hiltons"
Holiday" and is wont to agree. Typically, she admires most his descriptions of landscape ("of sea and shore," her favored salients for perspective) when human figures give the impression of blending into nature, as so subtly accomplished by the hay-makers in *A Marsh Island* and by Almira Todd and Esther Hight in *The Country of the Pointed Firs*.

Her counsel is likewise consistent with her philosophy of composition. In a ladylike echo of Thoreau’s "Simplify, simplify, simplify," she twice cautions Thaxter against the trapdoors of plural plotting, leading him toward simpler histories of life, so abundant in her own work. She further exhorts him to strive for verisimilitude by writing from observation and experience. Although she never wrote precisely such a series about an irradiating doctor, she did incorporate her memories into the novel *A Country Doctor*, whose Dr. Leslie is a portrait of her father. She had accompanied him on his professional rounds for several years during her childhood, had listened to his disquisitions on local flora, and had observed the customs and quirks of his patients. She could conceive no more solid base for creativity than the "things that you know and have done." Almost verbatim, she repeated her father’s prescription in her own novitiate: "Don’t try to write about people and things, tell them just as they are!" 6

Four keywords may be plucked out of context and placed in ascending juxtaposition to indicate Miss Jewett’s deep-rooted comprehension of existence in this region and her attitude toward it: *isolated, lonely, defeated; sympathy.* But she also knew the “comedies of rustic life,” and the totality of her art twinkles with little lyrics of victory over the dominant dispiriting predicament — "The Flight of Betsev Lane," "Decoration Day," "By the Morning Boat," "Miss Esther’s Guest."

On July 29 she wrote from Pride’s Crossing, Mass., the home of her elderly friend, Susan Burley Cabot:

Dear Mr. Thaxter

I am sorry to have kept your story so long, but I could not somehow get the right moment for a last reading, and to write to you. I have been moving about, and I have had to think much of other things.

Yet I have thought much of this piece of work which on the whole I like much better than the other. It is better worked out and more sincerely felt. I find myself always thinking of it as The Heart of Abijah! — and you have certainly given a most touching picture of a true and dependent affection. It is most genuine and real. The one thing that I question is the episode of the new teeth: one cannot have a chance to smile in just that way at poor Abijah or to let him be even the least bit shocking to one’s sense of good taste. You have written all the rest in such a different key, and keep your reader in a different atmosphere, and so I think the very truth of it strikes a wrong note of “realism.”

I think that one of the weekly magazines like the Independent of New York or the Outlook might like to print it. I have a great liking also for our good story-paper in Portland, the Portland Transcript. You may think that I am not choosing the best places, but I think that a sketch like this with all its good qualities does not exactly belong to the magazines as it is. I want you to print it, for I think nothing helps a writer like seeing his work in print. And I sincerely hope that you will go on and write more.

With very kind regards to Mrs. Thaxter

Yours ever most truly

S.O. Jewett

I think when the writer speaks of the hero, he should usually write his name in full — leaving ‘Bije’ to be spoken by the characters.

On p. 12: I think that ‘Bije’ would not have been kept from going to the grave by the doctor’s order; unless you had explained before that he was ill when he died, ‘or something.’ It would be the one thing that he insisted upon, it seems to me.

Two typed versions of this story are at hand. The first — evidently the copy Miss Jewett saw — was originally untitled. Across the top of the front page Thaxter indited in ink the title suggested. He also methodically substituted “Abijah” for “Bije” where applicable (not however catching every case), and supplied the doctor’s motivation by afflicting Abijah “with a severe cold” and “danger of pneumonia.” But he did not modify the scene in which the kindly smile of a doomed matron is transformed into a ghastly rictus by a set of new false teeth. By modern standards this macabre note in a hymn to con­nubiality would be accepted as an incongruity symbolic of the change to come rather than rejected as an affront to refinement. Thaxter obviously did not share Miss Jewett’s antipathy for the new breed of realists who were running roughshod across formal Victorian gardens in the wake of Twain, Garland, and Norris.
And he had remembered Poe's "Berenice" even if he ignored Miss Jewett's Poesque dictum on the singleness of effect.

Nine days later our nimble itinerant, momentarily at the family manor in South Berwick, scaled the perpendicular of enthusiasm, to the point of proposing that Thaxter offer his story to — sanctum sanctorum — the Atlantic Monthly.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

I think that this story is far and away better than the others! You have made it stronger in construction — more direct and interesting in every way. I hope that you will not mind my spoiling the two end pages, but somehow they did not quite follow the others well enough and I have shortened them as you will see, and using your own words almost always, I have tried to put them into the 'key' of the first chapter. I think the end — being such an end — ought to be as clear and simple as possible, and I even want that reference to the second greatest moment of Jonas's experience to come up (when he broke away from his mother), as if in those last moments his life was moved to its very depths. And I want you to write three or four lines of description for the very end — that "The doctor, as he went out into the clear light of the early morning, along the little sea-pasture, saw a sea pigeon raising itself from the water and diving, then floating; flapping its white-barred wings as if to try its strength."

I think that this will link the end of the story to its beautiful beginning. There is no need to say anything about the bird, but just say it was there & let people feel what they like about it. Somehow its presence that first morning and the poor fellow, sense of the bird's freedom and yet its fixed habit of life to that spot, were very striking — and you can't but like the bird and the man, or do better than repeat yourself. I think that this will make the sketch still more definite and complete. I wonder what name you have in mind — perhaps The Life of Jonas? I think that I should try the Atlantic with this, and if that fails, McClure's Magazine or Harper's. In great haste

Most sincerely
S.O. Jewett

Thaxter followed Miss Jewett's promptings to the letter. In all three extant copies of the conclusion to Jonas's tale, the sea pigeon "flapped its white-barred wings as if to try its strength." The final version comes nearest Miss Jewett's intent: to equate man and nature transcendentally by way of a structural reprise. To no avail. Notwithstanding her rhetorical and promotional zeal, "The Sea Pigeon" (as this story became known) failed to find asylum in the Atlantic, or McClure's, or Harper's.
When she wrote the next letter, August 27, Miss Jewett was back at Gambrel Cottage, Mrs. Fields’s summer home on Thunderbolt Hill in Manchester-By-The-Sea. She held out rue in one hand, a rose in the other.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

Mr. Bliss Perry (the new editor of the Atlantic) wrote me a day or two [ago] in the course of a letter about other things: “Mr. John Thaxter’s story happened to fall into my hands, and I liked his management of the descriptive passages very much. There were other elements too that seemed to me of distinct promise, and I disliked to return the story, though upon the whole I thought it not strongly enough put together to justify publication in the Atlantic.”

I was sorry to find that you had met with a disappointment, but I do think so much frank praise a consolation.

I have been thinking that you had better send it now to Harper’s — with a personal note to Mr. Henry M. Alden in which I am willing that you should tell him of my advice, and I think that since he was such a warm friend of your mother that he would like to know the work was yours, and to see what you are doing; even if he cannot print it I think he would be glad to help you about it. It is not that I think these things affect the value of work, especially to the mag. in question, which is what the editors must decide by, but all editors like to watch for new writers.

With kindest wishes believe me

Yours sincerely

S.O.Jewett

Both Perry and Miss Jewett have seen fit to commend Thaxter on his descriptive prowess, so it seems germane to review here a token passage from “The Heart of Abijah.”

Before him, placid and serene, lay the harbor with the little village of Wye nestling at its edge; its white church spire taking a rosy tint from the sunset, and the weather cock shining like burnished gold. The shadows in every little inlet were deepening into a more somber blue, while far away, on either hand, stretched the silver ocean touched here and there with yellow and rosy lights. How often had he looked down on that familiar scene. — on the long stretches of woodland, with the spruces showing almost black against the lighter greens of the deciduous trees. There were the giant pines, towering above all the rest in solemn majesty, and the dark hemlocks scattered among the light green beeches, making a strange contrast. Dotted among it all were the little farms, with their green fields, and irregular lines of stone walls, and the buildings peeping out from among the trees. Far away to his right the purple shadows were creeping up the distant hills, while the sun’s rays still brightened their summits, and all was beauty, happiness and peace.
As pictorial statement this is undoubtedly delicate and evocative. It lacks, however, the uniqueness of detail that gives a place soul, the gritty particularities that Miss Jewett, for instance, knew how to inject into just the right spot and bring it sharply alive. This defect of generality becomes more marked in later stories and was surely a factor in defeating Thaxter's bid for acceptance as a delineator of local color.

Grateful for her unsparing aid and possibly anticipating a tête-à-tête on techniques, Thaxter invited Miss Jewett to Champernowne Farm. She declined graciously and reluctantly.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

Thank you very much for your letter, and especially for the invitation to come to you for a day or two a little later. I keep the pleasantest remembrance of my visit to the farm and I wish that I could see so pleasant a place again but I am almost afraid to make any promise to come this year. I lost so much time through my long illness that I feel very much hurried now that I have had to put by many plans. Perhaps in October or November I may get a day for one of the long drives in which I delight, and so can see you then. I hope that Mrs. Thaxter is having a delightful journey in Canada. Thank you both for wishing that I could come and believe me

Yours sincerely
S.O. Jewett

I should like dearly to see our sea pigeon, and the little pasture!

Miss Jewett's disposition to intercede for Thaxter in the crucial procedure of marketing his stories, detectable in earlier letters, becomes the overwhelming motif in her next.

23rd October 1899
South Berwick, Maine

Dear Mr. Thaxter

Thank you for your very kind letter, but I am afraid that I must not promise to accept your invitation. I am very busy these weeks with writing and guests and hurrying off to Town for two or three days at a time. I am well again after so long a pull of illness, but not very strong, and I must put many pleasant things aside.

I am sorry that your story is not yet placed. I asked Mr. Arthur Stedman if he would not undertake the placing of your work and he probably will write to you. A great many writers do all that by means

1 The son of Edmund Clarence Stedman (1833-1908), distinguished poet, critic, editor, and Wall Street broker.
of such an agent now: you have to pay a commission, but they generally get very good prices. He is at the Dewey Building, 5 East 14th Street, New York.

With my best regards to Mrs. Thaxter

Yours most sincerely
S.O. Jewett

P.S.
I have felt disappointed that Mr. Alden should not have known about this last story. I think that he was on his vacation when it was sent. Why do not you write him a letter and ask if you may send it again and tell him that it was sent back to you, but that I thought he would like to see it, and would at any rate give you a word of advice. He was a very warm friend of your mother and certain things in the story would interest him doubly, as they did me.

Try some short sketches of 1500 or 2000 words with a view of the Youth's Companion. And if you get on with them send them to the Care of Johnson Morton Esq. Office of the Youth's Companion, Boston. I should think you could make easily some good sketches of fishing or woodcraft or of shooting if you shoot. They are always longing for such things!!

On the 1st of November she continued in the same vein from Mrs. Fields's house in Boston.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

I thank you for your kind and delightful letter. We are all three glad to know that you found some pleasure in your little visit because it gave us such real pleasure to see you!

Indeed I think that your idea of changing Jonas's 'plain name' to The Sea Pigeon is excellent!

I happened to see Mr. Johnson Morton last evening, and I had a good chance to tell him how much interested I am in your work and he said that he should be glad to talk with you. You must keep in mind the fact that the Y. C. is primarily for "Youth" not children — but sketches of adventure are always in order. I do not see why he could not use "Blown Off"!

In haste

Yours most sincerely
S.O. Jewett

"The Sea Pigeon" title change may have been inspired as much by her impassioned postscript, above, as by his inventiveness. In his first version the clearly typed "Jonas" is scored through and superscribed anew by hand. "Blown Off," initially "The Sailor that Loved a Lass," is another manifestation of Thaxter's penchant for doctors and old houses.
1402 Charlestowne
Bost. 1 November

Dear Mr. Martin,

I thank you for your kind and delightful letter. We are all three glad to know that you found some pleasure in your letter and because it gave us such real pleasure to see you! Indeed I think that your idea of changing Jonah's name to The Sea Pigeon is excellent!
"Come, Jonas, be you a'goin ter sleep all day," called Mrs. Marden with severity in her tones.

"I'm up, ma," said Jonas, obediently, opening his bedroom door, "I'm all ready, but it aint four o'clock yet. Nev yer hen settin' up all night ter git ahead of me like that?"

"Yave a lot ter do this morn' and yer know it. There's them beans yer ought ter've finished last night after supper, but yer had ter go roamin' off with Becky Sewall insted. Now yer got ter finish 'em 'fore breakfast an' none'll yer git till they air finished," said his mother with emphasis. "Yer'd better step lively and git the cow milked and the chores done up."

Jonas knew his mother too well to have any desire to argue with her. He simply nodded and taking down his milk pail from the shelf in the kitchen, made his way to the little pasture that lay along the shore. The dawn was showing rosy red over the ocean, a gentle southerly breeze slightly ruffled its surface and a long ground swell heaved in, and broke lazily on the rocks almost at his feet. A short distance from shore a sea pigeon was swimming about feeding, making short dives occasionally, and sometimes raising itself high out of the water, flapping its wings as if to try its strength without rising to fly. Its black plumage with the broad white bars across the wings, and even its straight sharp beak showed distinctly against the blue waves on which it rose and fell with perfect buoyancy.

"Hello, old man," said Jonas. "You're out early this morn' 'p'ears to me."

The bird looked up at him, but went on with its feeding undisturbed.
Yet another is "The Sisters." With this story Miss Jewett comes full circle, expounding conspicuously the same line as in her letter of June 11. In shorter compass she renews her esthetic doctrines of muted simplicity and domestic realism, while virtually proposing that Thaxter rewrite the likes of her coon dog story or "The Courting of Sister Wisby."

Dear Mr. Thaxter

Your letter and the sketch have followed me here, or you should have heard sooner.

I don't care for this little story ["The Sisters"] as much as for some others — it reads as if you had rather pushed yourself to the writing of it, and with all its wonderful accuracy of detail, and perfect verity of the old man's speech, it has an artificial quality in its make up that your best things lack. I think that the melodramatic quality does not go with the material. The old man is so real: the shut up room for so many years does not seem to me to go with his plain living. There might be such a room with the untouched things, but —

I must not try to write just what I mean. The shipwreck, the drowning; it isn't simple enough, there is too much in it. And then the Doctor who is so familiar with this case of rheumatism — how is it that he sees the room and above all hears the story for the first time?

I wish you would try some country talk on a more everyday basis: a horse trade reported, a funny bargaining sort of talk; a good story told as some old farmers sit together — one might overtake the other plodding toward the village (have a bit of landscape) and take him in and hear that he has been cheated in a horse trade or a wagon bought at auction that comes to pieces — and his wife has jeered at him. Call the sketch "A Bad Morning," or something of that sort. All your sense of this talk ought to make something very good. But I must not write longer.

Yours most truly
S.O.Jewett

On May 3rd, presumably 1900, she castigates herself for good intentions gone sour. In the upper right corner of the first page of Thaxter's "A Forgotten Honor" is pasted Arthur Stedman's business label, wherein he is identified as a "Literary Agent." The story Miss Jewett analyzes in this note exists in four versions, the title converted from "A Question of Duty" to "The Touch of a Vanished Hand." It is more copiously overhauled than any of his previous efforts but patently not

---

*Thaxter attempted a story almost entirely in rustic dialogue, "Jedidiah's Last Stand," replete with the misspellings dear to ebullient local colorists, but it falls short of the languid localisms which would have lent it unequivocal native resonance.*
enough to stave off unanimous rejection. Miss Jewett sounds prim and squeamish — she was at best a guarded realist — but she had unerring instinct about what editors and the contemporary reading public would embrace. Her own incompetents are at worst crotchety rather than obnoxious, and Christian contribution glimmers through the darkest deeds of her scoundrels or beldams.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

I must say first of all that I am very sorry indeed for your annoyance in regard to your affairs with Mr. Stedman. I well remember that you were guided in his direction by my advice, and that I spoke warmly to him about your work and the promise that it seemed to me to give. I fear that he must have gone to pieces — when I had to do with him before, he had been most business-like, and I knew that he was in contact with many publications of different sorts, but I have heard nothing of him now for a long time.

About this story: I find in it a new proof of your gifts of observation — it is wonderful how you get the talk of your characters. But I think that episode with the half-witted man is very unpleasant, too unpleasant, so that it may have been the reason why the story has failed of acceptance. It is as true and close a study of character as the rest, but quite too horrible, and carries a kind of disgust with it for the wretched creature. I don’t think the story needs such a proof of the lover’s helpfulness — I believe it would be better to leave it out. Your point in the assurance of the heroine’s heart that she was not doing wrong is original. I would add a remark on the part of William that he didn’t generally believe in doing evil that good might come, but he never had reproached himself about that foolin’ of Mirandy. He might watch them some evening as they stood together happily in the house-yard, for a little final paragraph, and say this!

I think that I should send the story to Mr. Alden again; but you may not like either my subtraction or my addition!

In haste with kindest regards

S.O. Jewett

Miss Jewett’s final letter to Thaxter is dated sparely “Tuesday,” from South Berwick. It relates to “The New Silk Dress,” an unsuccessful last ruse by a spinster to entrap an old-salt bachelor. Embodying elements reminiscent of Miss Jewett’s “All My Sad Captains,” “The Dulham Ladies,” and “Miss Peck’s Promotion,” it represents the pinnacle among Thaxter’s surviving manuscripts.

Dear Mr. Thaxter

I think the first half of this new story is the best work you have done, but I don’t feel sure that the story as a whole is as good as the
last—no, I like that and the one with the bird on the wave better! But there is such good humour in this. I wonder if you cannot think over the ending and make it a little freer. I am almost persuaded that I should have the dress prevail! And after all its visions and delays have Miss Sarah Burr reap a triumphant victory and when she goes to the parsonage she looks so splendid and puts on such an easy gaiety with her new garment that the Captain finds her approachable and all is settled! What do you think of this? The other sister would affectionately admire—you could dispose of her: but one’s heart is appealed to by Miss Sarah Burr. I couldn’t bear to see her cast down. I am sure Mrs. Thaxter will agree with me that she showed a splendid fight, and such funny determination.

Have you tried the Saturday Evening Post in Philadelphia? They use a good many stories—and Outing?

I am very much hurried this morning, so please forgive such a letter as this.

Yours most sincerely
S.O. Jewett

It is not necessary to accord with Miss Jewett’s preferential denouement to observe that Thaxter’s conclusion is flabby. The strength of the story lies in the characterization of spunky Sarah Burr and in the crackling dialogue.

John Thaxter’s ordeal of unrequited diligence upholds, perhaps, the axiom that a writer is born not made. He had every advantage of place, peace, leisure, inclination, and expert guidance—how many incipient artists are granted such minute tutelage by so qualified a mentor? He developed into a journeyman, earnest but insufficient. The celestial afflatus was missing. Once more Miss Jewett was to realize that genius is not transferable.

In September 1902 she suffered an accident which incapacitated her for the remaining seven years of her life. In that interval Thaxter boarded the trolley car many times on pilgrimage to the stricken “Princess.” After she died, her sister Mary wrote him in part: “We hoped for some weeks that she might regain at least a measure of strength, for she did improve for a time but the end to the long illness came very peacefully and much as we miss her it would be selfish to wish her longer life with the limitations which must have been hers.” He persevered in literary enterprise until his own demise at 69, without attaining publication. Consolation, if ever he felt the need of it, lay in the luminous communion he enjoyed for so long with the ranking literary artisan of his day and scene.