Stockton's Stories: His Whimsical Art

by

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Approved by:

[Signatures]

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The aim of this study is to discuss the whimsical art of Frank R. Stockton. Since his short stories offer an abundance of material, and since the principles that are illustrated by them are common to all classes of his works, this study will be limited to his short stories for grown-ups. Only one story that is classified with children's stories has been used, *The Griffin and the Minor Canon*, and that for the reason that it is probably more often read by grown people than by children. In most cases the edition of Stockton's works used for this study was *Novels and Stories* (1900) published by Charles Scribner's Sons; in other cases, where the volume of the set was not available, the stories as they were published in the magazines were used.

In investigating this topic the writer has had in mind the purpose of determining Stockton's place in the history of the short story and of discovering, if possible, the cause of his present obscurity. But most of all the attempt here has been to see his particular contributions to the development of the short story and to point out the traits of his whimsical art.

There has been no attempt to observe the chronological order of publication, nor to make any extreme analysis which might result in astounding conclusions. The writer's only wish has been "from the writings to construe the writer" in all his whimsical moods.
The writer makes grateful acknowledgment of indebtedness to Professor J. H. Nelson, who as advisor gave much helpful criticism of the work in its early stages, and to Professor W. S. Johnson, who kindly aided in the final revision of the work.
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Introductory</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Representative Stories</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III The Stockton-exc Type of Story</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV The Point of View and the Style of Stockton</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V His Limitations</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI Conclusions</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

During the last half of the nineteenth century no American writer was more popular than Francis Richard Stockton, better known as Frank R. Stockton. He understood the American public and gave it what it wanted. Month after month his stories dropped like ready manna in a wilderness of realism—manna that was ever fresh and good. His name was in everybody's mouth, and his works were among the best sellers of his day.

He is known principally as a writer and the facts of his life apart from his career as an author and entertainer are neither striking nor out of the ordinary. He was born in Philadelphia in 1834, but he spent the greater part of his life in New York City as editor of the Hearth and Home, or in some connection with Scribner's Monthly or the St. Nicholas. Six years before his entrance into the field of journalism in 1872 he invented a double graver while employed at the wood graver's trade—a fact significant in that it shows his scientific turn of mind. In 1884 with his An Unhistoric Page he won the five hundred dollar prize offered by The Youth's Companion. From 1884 until his death in 1902 he was known everywhere as the author of The Lady or the Tiger? For thirty years he wrote novels and stories, starting before he was twenty years old.
By 1879 he had jumped into popularity with the publication of *Rudder Grange*. From this time on until his death he was popular, and in 1884 with the publication of *The Lady or the Tiger*? he was among the most talked of authors in America.

Of his tremendous contemporary reputation the criticism of the day bears eloquent testimony. Howells asks in the summary of an article on *Stockton's Novels and Stories*: "Where indeed in our literature shall we find such a body of honest humor, with its exaggeration deep in the nature of things and not in the distortion of the surface?" Again, an editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* says that Stockton did more than any other writer to define the peculiar virtues of the short story, and that he has shown the possibility of surprise as an effective element and of turn of a story rather than crisis of a plot to account for everything.

H. L. Mencken tells us that for thirty years Frank R. Stockton was the delight of all right thinking reviewers, and the few estimates given above will suffice to show that he was a favorite in his day.

Stockton has declined in popularity; today one seldom hears his name. But he is still read in some quarters, and college students and literary clubs still study his works.

Professor Pattee's estimate is doubtless too gloomy.

He says, "Save for a very few of his tales like *The Transferred Ghost*, *The Lady or the Tiger?*, *The Remarkable Break of Thomas Hyke*, he has already receded far into the shadow, the gloom of which bids fair to become total." But Stockton will doubtless live as a minor figure in American literature. Had he written nothing but those/that Professor Pattee mentions, he would be entitled to this consideration. One who was "an Edison among patient students and groopers after the dramatic truth of human life", will certainly live in such characters as Mrs. Lecks, Mrs. Ale-shine, and Pomona. His memory will live as long as there are those who can laugh.

CHAPTER II

REPRESENTATIVE STORIES

In choosing stories which are typical of Stockton, the writer has purposely selected various kinds, hoping by so doing to give the reader an idea of Stockton's versatility. The classification of stories used here, in so far as it can be made to fit Stockton's stories, is the same as that used in Heydrick's *Types of the Short Story*.

The types of story most common with his were these: the story of ingenuity which is best represented by *The Remarkable Wreck of Thomas Hyke* and *The Lady or the Tiger?*; the humorous story of which *Rudder Grange*, a rather long story, is an example; the story of dramatic incident best represented by *The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Alsheine*; the story of fantasy of which *Negative Gravity* and *The Griffin and the Minor Canon* are examples; the ghost story which is best represented by *The Transferred Ghost*; the character story of which *An Unhistoric Page* is an example; the love story of which *Love before Breakfast* is an example; the story of romantic adventure represented by *Come In, New Year*; the rather long story of local color represented by *The Late Mrs. Null*.

It seems advisable here to review briefly the stories and novels so that the reader will have them fresh in mind before he turns to the discussion of the whimsical art of Stockton.
The Remarkable Wreck of Thomas Hyke, one of his many stories dealing with the sea, tells how several men, imprisoned in a water-tight compartment vessel, find very suddenly, much to their dismay, that their vessel is sinking bow foremost. For several days the vessel stays in this perpendicular position, and the men act most ludicrously in their attempts to get food and air under such circumstances. Finally, the vessel rights itself when a shock of some kind readjusts the pig iron cargo, and the passengers find themselves right side up again.

The other story of this type, The Lady or the Tiger?, is Stockton's masterpiece. The princess's lover has been accused of a crime, and in order to prove his innocence or guilt he must enter the arena, on one side of which are two doors—if he is innocent out of one will come a beautiful lady; if he is guilty out of the other, a tiger. Here the author raises, in a humorous way, the question, "Will it be the lady or the tiger that will come out to meet the man in the arena?" The crowd in the arena and the reader expect the princess to show her lover by a look or an action which door to choose. But when the story closes the reader is none the wiser, for Stockton closes it with no attempt to decide what a woman would do if her lover were in such a predicament.

Rudder Grange contains in the first part a delightful burlesque of a house-boat outing. Euphemia and her husband take a house-boat when they are discouraged in their hunt for a house to suit their means and tastes. Of course they must have a maid
of all work; so Stockton brings in Pomona, a most delightfully entertaining young girl who dearly loves to read the most lurid dime novels. Stockton keeps the reader in an uproar of laughter when he lets this uneducated girl read sections of her books aloud. The story is crowded with humorous incidents: the family leave the boat and take a house; Pomona marries Jonas, and goes on a wedding trip to a dry falls and a lunatic asylum; Euphemia's husband rents a baby. The story is full of droll sayings and droller doings, but in all there is no unified or connected narrative.

The Casting Away of Mrs. Leeks and Aleshine, a story of dramatic incident, is delightful in its conception of a ridiculous situation and its life-like narration. Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine are shipwrecked on their way to Japan and are forced to take to the ocean on life preservers. The wildly absurd Crusoe experiences of these two prosaic New England matrons follow one another so rapidly that one feels that the cinematograph has quickened the action. The doings of the tall, slim Mrs. Leeks and the short, portly Mrs. Aleshine hold the reader spellbound. Mrs. Leeks is never disconcerted; even when it comes to getting a meal out in the middle of the Pacific, she is most efficient, and serves a fine meal to Mrs. Aleshine and Mr. Craig, a man who escapes from the leaky life-boat with them. And always, whether on land or sea, Mrs. Leeks can manage herself and everyone around her. When
the three escape to a cottage on shore, she runs the house, collects
the board money, engineers a love affair and the subsequent marriage,
and the preparations for the return trip to the United States. The
last part of the story is greatly enlivened by the humorous use of
a ginger jar as a holder for the money the boarders pay.

And what a story of fantasy is Negative Gravity! But
before Stockton can begin the story he must first explain fully
about the little box, eight inches by four, with its adjustable
screw which generates negative gravity. Why? Because on the
working of this box depends the whole story. The narrator, in
whose favor the author has abdicated, tells how this instrument
neutralizes gravity. All that one has to do is to fasten the
instrument on his back, and adjust the screw. Immediately he is
able to skip lightly over the ground. But woe to him if he adjusts
the screw too tightly, for he is sure to ascend like a balloon.
And that is what happens to the narrator and his wife. The man
turns the screw a little more tightly than usual so that the box
will carry himself and wife. They stop in their skimming walk
to chat with a friend, and the wife lets go of her husband. Immedi-
ately he is born up to the tree tops. He is absolutely helpless,
for he cannot reach the screw to loosen it. The rest of the story
pictures the man's attempts to get down and his wife's numerous
trials to get him down to the ground. When they are in their home
again, they destroy the plans of the little machine.
Another story of fantasy is the Griffin or the Minor Canon. A griffin visits a town to see his likeness in a stone image that adorns the door of an old church. All the village is terrified by the monster. Only the minor canon has courage enough to address the griffin to find out why he has come. The griffin stays and stays, and admires his image. The people, believing the minor canon to be the cause of the prolonged stay of the griffin, ask him to leave. When the griffin learns why the canon is no longer in the city, he leaves, taking his image with him and promises to send the canon back.

The Transferred Ghost, one of his best stories dealing with ghosts, will delight any reader whether he likes ghost stories or not because Stockton's ghosts are different. They are not really ghosts, because the spirits are always too solid and earthly in conversation and too ambitious to be associated with any world but this. Here the ghost is discontented because he holds a ghostship to a man who is not likely to die soon. This ghost talks often to the young man, the narrator. But Stockton takes care that the ghost shall have one natural quality— it is never visible except to the one with whom it converses. This Stocktonian ghost almost spoils the young man's chances with his sweetheart by appearing just at the time he is proposing to her. The ghost has come to tell the man of his good fortune; he has been transferred to a man who is soon to die. "You need not wait here," says the young man, as he is kneeling and holding the girl's hand. "I have
nothing to say to you." Of course he is addressing the ghost, but the girl sees no ghost. She is insulted. She flees. He pursues, explains, and does what all of Stockton's heroes but one do--wins the girl.

From Stockton's character stories the writer has chosen one of those dealing with the negro. One can never forget the inimitable Uncle Enoch in An Unhistoric Page. When Uncle Enoch learns from his son Dick that the Congress wants pages--white or colored, young or old--he immediately decides that he, and not Dick, should go to Washington, D. C., to get that seventeen hundred dollars. But he does not go before--negro-fashion--he teaches his boy a lesson by the parable of the city mouse and the country mouse. When he returns from an unsuccessful trip to Washington, he tells his son another parable. "Now, boy," says he, "dere's lots ob stories about one eberlastin' fool, but dat's de only story I knows about two uv 'em." And the story ends there, leaving Enoch's character indelibly stamped on the reader's mind.

The title, Love before Breakfast, suggests this love story itself. A young Southerner rents his home to a man and his daughter, intending after so doing to go to Europe. But there is no trip to Europe after he meets the heroine. Instead he comes secretly every morning before the family is out of bed to tend the gardens so that all will be beautiful for the lady. On one of these early calls he proposes to the girl, shocking both the girl and the reader.
Come In, New Year is an entertaining and delightful story of romantic adventure. One finds other examples of this type in My Terminal Moraine, As One Woman to Another, A Story of Assisted Fate, and many others. But Come In, New Year is the best, the writer thinks. Margey, a young girl, goes to the home of her aunt to spend the Christmas holidays. She is very lonesome on New Year's Eve because at home her brothers and sisters are all gathered together observing a family custom—they are awaiting the coming of midnight so that they may open the door to the New Year. Margey decides to sit up and open the door so that the New Year may enter. Accordingly, even if she is all alone, she opens the door and says, "Come in, New Year." In walks not only the New Year but a young man who makes himself very much at home. He is the estranged brother of the girl's uncle. A reconciliation follows, and the young people are married.

The Late Mrs. Full, with its Southerners and its Virginian background, is an excellent story of local color. On the disguise of Annie, Mrs. Keswick's niece, hangs the whole story. Annie goes to live with her aunt, who is unfriendly to the Brandons. Lawrence Croft, who is trying to locate Robert Keswick, meets Annie, who is supposed to be his detective aiding him in finding Robert. The eccentric old Mrs. Keswick and Annie hold the most of the reader's attention. Scenes in which Aunt Patsy, Plez, Peggy, and Uncle Isham figure give excellent pictures of the
negroes and their various characteristics. The death of Patsy comes near to the pathetic—as near as Stockton ever came.

When Mrs. Keswick finds her dead baby’s shoes the scene is almost pathetic too. But the parts dealing with the negro life are most spontaneous in their humor, and Aunt Patsy and the Jerusalem Jumping are inimitable. There is much marrying in the end, and Mrs. Keswick takes a shrewd revenge on her enemy, Mr. Brandon, by jilting him at the altar.

In conclusion, it is necessary to say that these are only a few of the good stories of this American author; but it is hoped that this sampling will be sufficient to show the versatility of the man. It must be remembered that this classification takes no note of his stories for children.
CHAPTER III

THE STOCKTONESQUE TYPE OF STORY

Stockton contributed to our literature as distinct a type of story as did Poe, or Harte, or Irving. This story is as distinctly typical of Stockton in its particular combination of devices as the informal essay is of Lamb or as the allegory is of Bunyan. Like the story of Poe, Harte, or Irving, it entertains, but it is decidedly different in its construction, its material, and its method of development.

The Stockton story has an almost irreverent disregard for unity of plot, the idol of Poe's heart. Whereas every incident in a Poe story has to have a certain place in a preconceived plot which will produce a single effect, the incidents in a Stockton story follow one another aimlessly. No reader has to go far into a story of Stockton's before he notices this striking feature. The result of such a method is a story as whimsical, as free from intensity of effect, as absurd and unreal as the most fantastic mind could ever imagine. And what holds the story together? Only the author's humor and whimsicality, which are like a strong, unbreakable thread to hold the beads he wishes to string on it.

His narrative utilizes very skilfully material usually found in the essay, and in this particular, Stockton reminds one
of Irving, who likewise uses the autobiographical style to set forth material that is purely expository, broken only occasionally by conversation. Or Stockton will use page after page to describe one of his scientific inventions—like negative gravity—upon the successful working of which forms the central theme.

The main interest in this Stocktonesque story comes largely from the exploitation of a peculiar character or situation. From the peculiarities of Asaph, a Blackgam, a Pomona or some other person who has his own peculiarity, some situation will evolve—a situation so amusing and entertaining that the reader never forgets these heroes and heroines. Or the story may be based on some comical, improbable situation; the outcome of which no reader, no matter how alert he is, can divine ahead of time. The reader only knows it will end—sometimes!

Stockton's narrative meanders and seldom goes straight to the goal. It rarely shows climax or a thorough working out of a situation, nor does it approach to anything like as detailed an analysis as Poe give in The Gold Bug, for Stockton would much rather explain a trip to the north pole, or what would take place in 1947, or tell a story like The Vizier of the Two-Horned Alexander. But his pleasing, gentle style carries the reader along so smoothly that he never misses the climax; he just laughs with Stockton at the odd doings and events—blissfully unconscious all the
while that the events that he is reading have no goal.

But though it lacks plot, and seems often too long
drawn-out, the Stocktonesque narrative makes use of a great
"bundle of tricks". In addition to those devices already noted,
it depends largely upon such favorite ones as surprise endings,
odd turns of action, paradoxes, the first person narrator to
verify and vivify, and homely incidents set forth in the most
matter-of-fact way.

In an article in the Biograph Library of Universal
Literature is an excellent commentary. "In following......
the sinuous stream of his easily flowing fiction, we seldom
come to a downright cascade of irresistible and resounding
laughter. But with a gentle, ceaseless murmur of amusement and
a flickering twinkle of smiles the story moves steadily on in a
calm triumph of its assured and unassailable absurdity, its log-
ical and indisputable impossibility. There is nothing in the
world more sweetly reasonable than the narrator's tone. By the
absence of merely superficial eccentricities in the deeply
eccentric persons he chooses to depict, and the lucid sincerity
of the style with which he reports their doings, he produces a
perfect illusion."

The stories which best represent Stockton's genius are

*The Lady or the Tiger?*, Her-native Gravity, Hud-der Grance, The Cast-
ing Away of Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Fleaching, Asaph, A Piece of Red

1, Vol. 21.
Calico, The Christmas Wreck, and Come In, New Year. These are as suggestive of Stockton as The Fall of the House of Usher is of Poe, or The Legend of Sleepy Hollow is of Irving, or The Birthmark of Hawthorne, or The Outcast of Poker Flat is of Harte.

These are Stockton’s stories; and bear his stamp.
CHAPTER IV

THE POINT OF VIEW AND THE STYLE OF STOCKTON

The name of Frank R. Stockton is synonymous with whimsicality. Therefore in beginning the study of his art as a short story writer one must consider this whimsicality that "played on the surface of men and things". And by whimsicality the writer means what E. V. Lucas means. "By whimsicality," he says in an article on The Evolution of Whimsicality, "I mean broadly modern humor as distinguished from that we find before the end of the eighteenth century." Mr. Lucas goes on to suggest that this humor is like the onion in the bowl of salad. And it is the opinion of the present writer that Stockton's humor is the onion that animates the whole.

This mild whimsicality is omnipresent and manifests itself in two striking ways; namely, in the point of view and the skilful craftsmanship. Always he combines these two as he does in The Captain's Toll Gate, "in a pleasant domestic vein, mildly humorous, suggesting the atmosphere of summer holidays in the country."

His point of view is always that of a droll, fun-

3. Athenaeum, 2:577.
loving, daring humorist. Professor Pattee thinks that Stockton is the first after Aldrich to be humorous without being grotesque, to have restraint and refinement yet to be truly funny, to be incongruous in an artistic way. It is certainly true that this author views life through the merriest eyes, and it is this view that distinguishes his stories from those of Hawthorne, Poe, and others. When he takes Pomona to England and lets her ride on a bus in the rain, his only aim is to use her as a foil for the Englishman with his disregard for the rain. Pomona is much concerned inwardly about the rain spoiling her hat, though she tries very hard to appear as unconcerned as the Englishwomen about her. But the humor of an American servant girl in such a predicament is great, and only a humorist like Stockton could give so cleverly the American and English viewpoints. Again he makes the most of the situation when he imagines how such a girl as Pomona would act when she calls on an English lord. Are not these the coinage of a brain that enjoys the comedies of life?

With such a viewpoint he naturally creates backgrounds to suit his fancy instead of doing as E. S. Phelps who gathered first hand material to add a realistic touch. Stockton's only concern is that his background may seem real. Consequently he creates whatever background he needs, and by a mock serious air makes it appear real to his readers. And it is this very lack

of anything that would localize the most of his stories, this lack of the exploitation of any background that shows his humor and makes him the very antithesis of the local colorists who ruled the eighties in America.

How different he is from James and Howells in their defense of the truth. James stood for accuracy in characterization, in dialogue, in picturization, and in the determination of motives and mental reactions, while Howells stood for the sane truth but in a more sympathetic, humorous, and democratic way, thinks Pattee. Stockton's stories are more like those of W. S. Gilbert in that they have no thought of actual landscapes and people. Is it not the mark of a daring humorist to do such a thing in such an age as his was?

In his anti-realist fashion he gets his characters into the most ridiculous situations and stands off, as it were, and watches them act. In a manner as blasé as that of the modern youth doing the most unheard feats, Stockton takes Mrs. Leeks and Mrs. Aleshine out into the Pacific, shipwrecks them, and leaves them to float to goodness knows where to safety. It is enough for him that he has them where he wants them and can await the outcome of their dilemma.

His method, too, of making a most improbable yarn seem

1. The Atlantic Monthly, 58:133.
plausible is very striking and individual. Novella says of The late Mrs. Hull, "We follow the ins and outs of the characters with scarcely any incredulity or sense of the absurdity of their relations to each other, chiefly because Mr. Stockton, with his innocent air, never seems to be aware of any incongruity in their conduct." And if it is not this innocent air he uses, it is that of laughing with the gullible reader at the characters he draws. He seems to say, "Haven't you seen people just like them?" And the reader is completely disarmed. Or, again, he may introduce a skeptically inclined character, as in The Water Devil, whose business it is to interrupt the narrator and make him or some member of the group about him corroborate his story. This is very effective in fooling the reader into believing the most unlikely tales. And it is this very addition of the humanizing element to the improbable that makes Stockton's stories fascinating to the adult mind. Occasionally he does as in John Gayther's Garden, links several improbable yarns together in the manner of the Decameron or The Canterbury Tales and lets each member of the party tell a story that he himself has experienced and knows to be truth and nothing but the truth. Only a skilful author like as Stockton would use these devices to establish the plausibility of ridiculously untrue tales.

Stockton is especially skilful, also, in choosing por-

sons to tell his nonsensical tales. They are usually sailors, or negroes; now and then he uses a woman as the story-teller. Of women he makes more use as listeners than as narrators, possibly because he feels that they are weak, flighty beings incapable of spinning such wildly improbable stories. He admits in My Balloon Hunt that woman "lacks that prudent hesitancy which so often gives man his power over circumstances". But whether he uses a negro, a sailor, a woman, or a mere man romantically inclined, he does it in his own humorous way. His use of the negro’s love of story-telling and of parable telling is much better than his use of the sailor’s addiction to yarns. In That Some Old Coon and Ducky Philosophy Stockton uses the negro as narrator; in The Water Devil he uses the sailor; and in The Vice-Consort and The Widow’s Cruise he uses a woman. In the last one, the woman out-Herods Herod in her attempt to amuse some old sea captains.

Stockton’s point of view and his capacity for comical situations, which may come, as his wife suggests in a Memorial Sketch, from the English and French strains in him, are strongly enhanced by a distinctive craftsmanship that makes use of a "bundle of tricks", such as the convincing use of the autobiographic method of story telling, startling endings, improbable dialogues,
peculiar turns of phrases and epigrams, and odd, eccentric characters. And his most striking trick is his total avoidance of plot.

From E. D. Hale he borrowed the peculiar short story form which is known as Stocktoneseque. "Hale's whimsical tales suggest Stockton's in that they have the same impossibilities of character, incident made plausible by a serious treatment and a multiplicity of details, the same preposterous humor, the same coquetry, ingratiating style that at length captures the reader and holds him to the end, however completely he is on his guard." But Stockton "botters the instruction", and "when you do find him . . . you will find him like Brutus, like himself! Never is Stockton anybody but Stockton in style.

But of his particular characteristics of style, the most common and insistent is his use of an easy autobiographical style of narration. Nearly all of his stories are told in this fashion which Professor Leon Kellner thinks is peculiar to that type of American humorist who attempts to lull us into a dreamy state in consigning the laws of gravity to oblivion so that he can easily take us into the realm of fancy. Stockton does this very successfully. By using simple, straightforward, flowing English—an art that conceals art—he lulls the reader into ob-

livion or deliberately asks him to set aside his dictates of sense. With him, "a conceit, a whim, a mood is carried to its utmost conclusion regardless of reality and probability—this produces capriccios of the most airy, the merriest, most innocent nature". He absolutely refuses to be real.

In Stockton's lack of localization, analysis, and characterization Pattee thinks he fails to be a realist; and in his lack of moral, sentiment, and plot and movement that he fails to be a romanticist even though he deals with ideal regions and people. But it is these very deficiencies that make Stockton the story teller all love. It is this very mixture of realistic and romantic that distinguishes him from all other short story writers of America. He seems more like Sterne in his utter disregard of moral and plot, and in his determination to write to amuse himself.

But he chose a kind of writing that left him free to do about as he pleased. The realists of his day were obliged to conform to the reality others thought they saw, and they had to be careful not to blunder in their realistic presentations, the editor of The Atlantic Monthly thinks, but Stockton had an advantage over the realist because his people are real and commonplace like those of the realists; his characters talk just as

slouchy English, are just as free from romantic nonsense, but they live in a world of Stockton's invention, which is provided with a few slight improvements, and they avail themselves of these with an unconcern which must fill with anguish the realists who permit their characters to break all ten commandments in turn but use their strenuous endeavors to keep them from breaking the one imperious commandment—Then shalt not transgress the law of average experience.

But Stockton, in contrast to the realists, uses the autobiographie or first person to tell a most improbable story with never a sign of conscious departure from rectitude. The narrator of Negative Gravity, by his ingenius invention, demonstrates the law of negative gravity, and makes it seem perfectly plausible.

Hawells says that whereas Defoe brings witnesses to court to give authenticity to his stories, Stockton uses a better art—he makes the narrator's manner corroborate his invention. The highly improbable is thus substantiated by the narrator's being a part of the action described. Stockton is always abdicating his own place as an invisible story teller in favor of the narrator, and it is noticeable that he more often abdicates in favor of a male narrator who is either a sailor, a negro, or a romantic husband or lover. Surely one cannot doubt a story like The Remarkable Tneck of Thomas Link or The Christmas Tneck when

the narrator tells incident after incident in which he was a participant.

Negative gravity, or anything else unexpected, is ever the thing to expect in Stockton. In Asaph the reader is led to believe that Asaph, an old bachelor, is not interested in any woman but his widowed sister whom he is trying to marry to his old friend. The reader believes all the time that Asaph is a man who uses his head, but he hardly expects Asaph to use it as in the end of the story—to spite his old friend and win for himself a home and a wife. Stockton seems ever to delight in keeping the reader occupied so that he can spring a surprise on him when he is least expecting it. One finds this same—the unexpected—in A Piece of Red Calico. Just when the reader is feeling sorry for the poor husband who has failed to catch the piece of red calico his wife sent with him, the reader learns that the wife is very much pleased with the turkey red calico the husband has bought in a five yard piece. Again, the reader of Blackgun Ain't Thunder is much surprised at the outcome of the struggle between Blackgun and his wife, Thunder. The reader learns suddenly that the wife has won in the struggle, for Blackgun says, "Blackgun was split as fine as matches." The Magic Egg, too, offers an example of this unexpected ending. The reader expects that the magician will win the lady when she sees his wonderful performance. But on the proverbial changeableness
of the feminine mind he bases the turn of the story, and makes the girl refuse her lover very unexpectedly.

One could give numerous examples from Stockton's stories of his suddenly offering a much needed explanation of everything. In fact, in the use of this device he may be accounted the forerunner of O. Henry, who never fails to slap his reader in the face, as it were, to let him know the story is finished.

In the effective use of improbable dialogue, Stockton also shows himself to be a genius. He creates a ghost and lets it talk as if it were the most thoroughly alive being in the story. Conscious Amanda, in the story of that name, is merely a spirit who comes back to earth and views events in a perfectly human way, and with a perfectly human interest. Her speeches are the most natural part of her. In The Pie Ghost the spirit is no ghost at all but a real live baker who assumes the part of a ghost, and acts and talks as any live person might do. In The Transferred Ghost the spirit has the very earthly ambition of wanting a different ghostship—a term that is peculiarly Stocktonesque. He talks about the ghostship to the narrator of the story as any human being would do. There is nothing in their conversations that makes Stockton's ghost unreal or ghostly. These examples, though, will suffice to show Stockton's effective use of the dialogue of improbable characters.

Stockton's art consists also in part of the use of turns of phrases peculiar to him. These are but added evidences of his humorous mind. "During one of these intervals of mental disfixments, we took a house," says Euphemia's husband in Rudder Grange. In this
same book a crazy quilt is called "a manic coverlet." The wife in
*The Spectral Mortgage* is "Pegramized" because she has no other thought
in life but for her infant son Pegram. The husband says, "All
Pegramized as she was, she flew into my arms," meaning that the wife,
with the baby in her arms, flew into his arms. In *The Squirrel Inn*
in speaking of Calthea's eyes Stockton says, "There is a momentary
flash in the Calthean eyes." In the last named book disturbed
arrangements are "disarranged arrangements." Or instead of saying
some one blew a horn, Stockton will say, "the horner horned." It
is this turn of phrases that flavors every page he writes and makes
it most palatable.

It would perhaps be appropriate just here to comment on
Stockton's figures of speech and epigrams. His figures of speech
are always expressed forcibly, and bear out the meaning. When
Stockton wants to give an idea of old Captain Cophas's grin, he
describes it as "a grin as if a great leak had been sprung in the
side of a vessel, stretching from stern to stern." And if a char-
acter philosophizes, he always does it in his own words and style;
for example, old Captain Eli says in *Captain Eli's Best Ear*, "If
the wind and the tide's ag'in' me, I can wait till one or the other
or both of them serve." Old Petter in *The Squirrel Inn* says: "It
strikes me, Susan, that our lives are very seldom built with a
hall through the middle and rooms alike on both sides. I don't think
we'd like it if they were. They would be stupid and humdrum. The
right sort of a life should have its ups and downs, its ins and outs, its
different levels, its outside stairs and its inside stairs, its balconies, windows and roofs of different periods and different styles. These things are the advantages that our lives got from the lives of others." This quotation is especially appropriate because the squirrel inn of which Mr. Potter was proprietor was built on this order, and naturally he used it as a symbol of life. But it must be remembered that philosophizing is not very common. However, the little bits that he nearly always puts into the mouth of some character, together with the fine figures of speech, make his style most charming.

Now as to the characterization in Stockton, the present writer feels that he exploits odd, eccentric persons more than almost any other writer she knows. Though Professor Pattee thinks there is something lacking in Stockton's characterization, it would be difficult to produce characters more delightfully real than Pomona, Mrs. Lecks, Uncle Enoch, Aunt Patsy, Mrs. Alershine, Asaph, Miss Penney, and Mrs. Keswick. Everyone is peculiar in his way, but each is human, nevertheless. And it is on this very peculiarity that Stockton builds the story. On the peculiarities of a negro or a sailor or an Irish maid, he can build a charming narrative, but it is noticeable that he seldom attempts to portray foreigners or persons with whom he is not absolutely familiar. If he does attempt to bring in a German or Italian, he does it in a very unobtrusive manner. But he knows his limitations as well as the reader does, and avoids them.

Perhaps of all the types of characters he attempts to portray, the negro is the best, because the negro gives him just that independ-
ence of logic and that irresponsibility which he so much relishes. These characters seem like real photographs of the negro as most people think of him, with his leaky conscience, his superstitions, his religious ardor, and his love of parables. Stockton "fairly revels in this sideshow of the world's circus and takes an almost childish delight in the exhibition of negro character and life," says the editor of The Atlantic Monthly. And it is true that the sideshow runs away with the main one sometimes, for Stockton draws his negro so well that he sometimes slight his white characters, as in The Late Mrs. Hall. But his negroes seem racially correct and atone for any minor deficiencies.

The last and most important characteristic of Stockton's stories is the almost total avoidance of plot. Instead of plot there is simply an enumeration of incidents that usually ends in a quip or quirk. A drollery that pervades every story that he writes, that is ever the most insistent feature of his stories, lessens the need of plot, and the delicious absurdities and matter-of-fact statement of the unexpected make the story so pleasing that the reader does not miss the plot. Nobody but Stockton could so utterly disregard such an essential of a story, and yet do it successfully. It certainly is true that no one could do it in the way he does, and still be as popular as he was in his realistic age.

In summary one might say that Stockton's humor is peculiar to himself; it is Stocktonesque rather than American. It is never like the rough-and-tumble humor of the English Fielding and Smollett,

nor like the grotesque humor Shakespeare. Again it is not like the humor of the American Twain or Word, for it does not lean heavily on exaggeration and never on irreverence. It is the subtler, kindlier, quieter sort that comes from a skilful observation and caricature.

To Stockton, says Vedder in American Writers of Today, belongs the credit for redeeming American humorists from the charge of coarseness and want of literary charm.

His most praiseworthy qualities as a short story writer are inventiveness, humorous point of view, and his capacity for comical situations. And whatever may be said of his manner, it is evident that his stories are peculiar in method and style, and his humor is quiet, droll and quaint. His method is like David's sling, and succeeds with him whereas in the hands of another it would probably be a failure.

"In all probability," says the editor of Current Literature, "this remarkable man stands alone in his method of work. Without making a note, without a scrap of synopsis, he carries novels in his head, oftentimes letting the story build itself up over a period of years. When ready to write, he calmly speaks to the young girl. This first draft made from his head alone, for he never touches pen to paper, becomes practically the final draft. Mr. Stockton seldom cares to touch, in way of correction, the typewritten sheets."  

1. P. 289.
3. L. 32: 495.
When one realizes that for thirty years Stockton produced regularly his yearly output of stories for the delight of all readers, he feels that Stockton in his own day must have seemed like the proverbial tree planted by the rivers of realism—bringing forth his fruit in its season and leaves that bid fair never to wither. He must have appeared, indeed, as Howells says in The Great Modern American Stories a master of "a far range of numberless caprices and inventions." One finds also that he was too delightfully unreal to indulge in preaching or moralizing when he could just as well let his characters behave like ordinary mortals in a world untroubled by the straining of conscious.

But in his conscious or unconscious attempts to sweeten the realistic pessimism of his day, Stockton often went to the other extreme. Consequently, when he did attempt, now and then, to be real, he produced "a realism with a screw loose." But deliberately and consistently he refuses to take a serious view of life, and it is from this, the present writer thinks, that his limitations spring.

His most obvious limitations are these: his inability to construct a story on an adequate situation, or to characterize people convincingly, or to write convincing love scenes, or to handle pathos and sentiment successfully. Along with these should be listed certain bad habits, such as, his overuse of the improbable, his fondness for

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1. P. XIII
building a story annex fashion, and his fondness for delay in un-
covering a disguise.

The first of these defects one finds in such stories as

The Christmas Creck. This story contains no amusing situations nor
any unexpected ones. Silas, an old seaman, and two of his comrades
are shipwrecked in the Pacific on the day before Christmas. The
whole story is of their attempts to blast the hold to get food for
their Christmas dinner, and Silas's discovery of a box of the longed
for canned peaches near by him. The story ends there, but the
reader feels that the incident is too trivial for the basis of a
story.

But whether or not the situation is adequate matters not
to Stockton, for he can build a story—annex fashion—on it just the
same. He delights in adding incident to incident with an utter dis-
regard for clixaxes. In The Late Mrs. Null and The visiter of the Two-

Horner Alexander he builds annex on to annex until the stories have no
symmetry or form. In The Casting Away of Mrs. Lecks and Mrs. Aleshine
Stockton hastily brings in a new hero near the end of the story for
no apparent reason other than that of having him fall in love with
the only unattached girl in the story. This lean-to only spoils
an otherwise symmetrical structure. Either of the last two stories
named would have been improved if some of the annexes had been left
off; so many of them are tiresome and do not compensate the reader
for the lack of plot.
From his lack of a serious view of life, as previously stated, grows also a characterization that is neither deep nor sympathetic. One is surprised at the small number of really fine characters there are in the stories of this author. His negro characters seem by far his best ones. Perhaps this is because there are fewer of them, and for that reason they are more easily remembered. But in his portrayal of them he is neither as sympathetic as Page nor as serious and deep as Harris, who makes us feel fully conscious of the stain on our civilization of "the vast shadow of a race in slavery, of a great social system destroyed." Stockton's white characters, too, though drawn from life, are never reproduced with enough original or unique qualities to make them individual. The lady in The Lady or the Tiger? is just a lady—nothing more. All of his heroes and heroines are just made up of the "qualities needful," heaped together Cooper-fashion into something "wooden and empty."

Stockton never attempts any psychological analysis of his characters; he is too much of a romanticist for that. In his anti-realist fashion he produces men and women who act like puppets and entertain like puppets.

It is no wonder, then, that Stockton fails in drawing realistic love scenes. The interesting fact about this deficiency is that Stockton realized it himself and told Edith N. Thomas once that he wished he might have had the chance to see a proposal and hear it accepted. He told her he envied a friend of his who had had

such an opportunity. Stockton felt that a writer needed a model as much as a painter. Surely his readers cannot help regretting that he never did have his wish. Perhaps then when he described a scene it would not have seemed, as Howells thinks, as though he had taken the words from a dictionary, or as though he was hastening over the scene with shamefaced alacrity, or as though his lovers were merely going through the motions with praiseworthy carefulness. If he had had his wish and had seen a proposal and heard it accepted, he might have remedied this defect. As it is, his sense of the ludicrous plays him false, and his love scenes are stale, flat, and unprofitable.

Again Stockton seems bent on surfeiting his reader with improbabilities, and one feels that Stockton's sense of proportion here is lacking. In The Visier of the Two-Horned Alexander he deliberately asks the reader to set aside his senses and listen to the longest, most drawn-out tale of events and people from Abraham's century down to the present one. Such a conglomeration of events:

"The Late Mrs. Hull, too, is too clever; it runs over with prodigality of inventions and surprises of situations," says C. C. Buel. The reader, though he likes Stockton's devices, sometimes tires of them.

Now and then, too, Stockton keeps a disguise from the reader so long that when he does tell him, the reader says, "I told you so. I just knew it would be that way." And that part of the story, which should have been stimulating and exciting, falls flat. The disguise

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of Mrs. Hull and the change of Miss Panney's attitude toward the hero of The Girl at Colbhorst are kept from the reader so long that he gets impatient and "edgy" at Stockton's delay.

But one could forgive him for some of these limitations if there was any real sentiment or pathos in his stories. Then he describes Mrs. Keswick's finding of the baby shoes, he hastens by the scene as if it were not for the reader to see her reactions. In the same way he treats the death of Aunt Fatsy. The writer recalls but one story, Stephen Skarridge's Christmas, where there is much pathos and sentiment. Here one finds both, but they are exaggerated in the manner of Dickens, and the writer is glad he did not try this kind of story often.

But one would welcome a chance to weep, if for no other reason than to afford him a respite from incessant grinning. He feels like saying, "Send us both the sunshine and the rain". A little rain would certainly improve and furnish a variety.

In concluding, the writer seems to see the evident cause for Stockton's receding into the gloom, as Pattee suggests. Stockton has produced a story devoid of pathos, sentiment, and deep analysis of character. He has substituted too much of the unreal for the real. His stories are so many nonsense syllables, and there is a limit to the mind's capacity for such syllables. Again, one cannot continually set aside the dictates of his senses and long remember or cherish for any great length of time what he reads in such moments.

1. The Late Mrs. Hull.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

"During the generation that has elapsed since 1870," says James Cooper Lawrence, "five men have stood out above others as masters of every form of the short story. These are Alphonse Dandet, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Louis Stevenson, Frank R. Stockton, and Sir Arthur quiller-Concho." All of these, Lawrence tells us, have not attempted to restrict their genius to one channel but have written fact stories and tales of fancy, telling their stories historically, dramatically, or didactically with impartial skill.

The writer is glad to find such a tribute paid to Stockton; and it is certain that among American short story writers he holds a high place. No one else in American Literature is like him; he deserves a place and recognition for his individuality and originality.

One authority in commenting on him says, "Certainly he had not his Aldrich's atmosphere of the beau monde and his grace of style, but in whimsicality and unexpectedness, and in the subtle art that makes the obviously impossible seem perfectly plausible and commonplace, he surpasses not only him, but Edward Everett Hale and all others."

Everywhere in his stories are anticlimaxes, paradoxes, and the grotesquely unexpected; everywhere there is a topsy turvy


arrangement of details and events. In all that he wrote there is little substance, but in spite of this his stories are amusing and delightful. This very lightness and irresponsibility of his short stories endeared Stockton to the hearts of the readers of his own day. But these very qualities and his lack of a serious view of life are perhaps the cause of the temporary eclipse that now over-shadows him. Nevertheless, to be known as the author of The Lady or the Tiger? and others of his stories is no mean reputation.

Though he breaks most of the conventional requirements of the short story, he should not be too severely criticized. He constructed rules of his own which he followed religiously, because he believed, as did Aldrich, that form was more important than matter. Pattee tells us that "at a single moment in the history of the short story form, while all around were modeling in the coarse, colored clay of strange unliterary regions," Stockton stood for manner rather than material. Indeed in this very making of his own rules he shows himself a genius.

"His special talent is for writing a tale which in a few pages and with the lightest of touches, exploits an odd plot or delineates an odd character, dealing so gravely and logically with an absurd or impossible set of circumstances that they seem reality itself." Does not such a graphic quality as this excuse him for any charge of breaking the conventional rules of the short story? Does he not deserve much credit as an American short story writer?

Some critics would class him more as a humorist than as a short story writer. But whether he is classed as a short story writer or not, it is certain some of his stories are quite significant. There is no denying that most of them are "unclassifiable studies in incongruity," that they are unlocalized, that they do nothing but amuse. However, "Stockton as much as anyone prepared the way for O. Henry and the later school of short story makers, with their careful technique, their unconventional endings, their liveliness of humor, their quaint and unexpected conceits of situation, and their insistence that the reader be kept constantly alert and constantly surprised."1

It is true that other short story writers added elements for which they are better known. For instance, Howells made the short story realistic with his portrayal of the details, manners and unidealized truth of the life of the average American citizen; Harte immortalized California and by so doing added local color to the American story; Harris added the folklore of the negroes and left his stamp on it; Hawthorne added the moral to the short story; Irving legendized the short story by adding the legends of New York; Poe added the atmosphere of the gruesome to it; James added the psychological element as no other American writer has done. But Stockton added whimsicality, an element that is perhaps as important though too elusive to receive as much distinction and credit as is due him; he added humor that was peculiarly individual, and he gained

for America the credit for refining American humor.

As one would naturally expect, he has none of that "suave compactness that carries forward the narratives of Howells, smoothly and lightly, with all their freight of delicate psychology"; none of that "brisk competence of Mrs. Wharton, hard and bright as a diamond, flashing irony in the turn of phrase." There is never any of that neatly packed freight of thought or fact. His stories carry only a freight of allusions, purposely and consistently.

Yet in spite of this, as was said in the beginning, he has defined the virtues of the short story and has shown the possibilities of the surprise ending. He has used a chief structural device, the dexterous turn of story rather than crisis of a plot, and he has done it successfully. He has written a story that needs no label, for it is distinctly Stocktonesque, from the first word to the last—a story that is whimsical, untrue, fantastic, but never heavy, psychological, realistic, didactic or gruesome. His is genuinely humorous, and will please while there are those who enjoy subtle humor.

Whether or not this whimsical story will ever be extremely popular, or as popular as it was in the eighties, is a guess. Yet, American Literature is much richer for it. Perhaps the reason it is not more popular today is that it was written in an age of great production, for from 1865 to 1875 there were more short stories produced than in any two decades before the war. Secondly, the ephemeral quality perhaps results from the journalistic style or

tendency of Stockton. Thirdly, one who wrote so much would perhaps not do it all equally well. But *The Lady or the Tiger?* and others with their delicious mockery of realistic literature will certainly live long.

Concerning the place of such an author, this writer feels uncertain. It seems probable that an author who persistently avoided the reflecting of the deeper emotions and sentiments of life will not continue as a major figure long after his day. A prodigious imagination is an excellent thing, but it cannot take the place of intensity of thought and emotion. Humor, too, is an excellent quality, but it needs a ballast of pathos to keep it in its proper place. The writer wonders whether such a hollow, whimsical story with its continual disregard for truth can long endure. If only Stockton had taken care to add the deeper sentiments, he would have been popular not only in the eighties but in all times to come. Stockton should have known more than to write such a hollow story.

Though he did not take the trouble to delve into the inner thoughts and emotions of his characters as Howells or James, he produced a story that is noted for its form, its humor, and its originality. It has the beauty of seeming most natural—just as an unsophisticated story-teller would tell it. It has the easy beginning, the abundant explanation to let the reader know what the story-teller is driving at, the sense of leisure and unworried narrative. All of these features remind one of the way a member of a group of people passing a bit of idle time would tell a story. This plan
or form where each person in a group adds his story has been used by some of the world's greatest story-tellers—Boccaccio, Chaucer, Defoe. Stockton showed his skill by choosing a form that has always lived and always will live. In the use of this form he is the forerunner of some of the modern writers—Anderson, Conrad, and W. McFee. Professor Pattee thinks that his influence was greater than his works.

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