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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Charles V. Flowers entitled "The Fiction of Sarah Barnwell Elliott." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Robert Daniel, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Percy G. Adams, Nathalia Wright

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Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

August 14, 1950

To the Committee on Graduate Study:

I am submitting to you a thesis written by Charles V. Flowers entitled "The Fiction of Sarah Barnwell Elliott." I recommend that it be accepted for nine quarter hours of credit in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Robert Daniel
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Percy L. Adams
Nathalia Wright

Accepted for the Committee

C. H. Watson
Dean of the Graduate School

THE FICTION OF SARAH BARNWELL ELLIOTT

A THESIS

Submitted to
The Committee on Graduate Study
of
The University of Tennessee
in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts

by

Charles Vernon Flowers

August 1950

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CHAPTER I

LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENT

No record of the birth of Sarah Barnwell Elliott exists, but it is believed that she was born in 1848 in Georgia.¹ Her father, the Right Reverend Stephen Elliott, the first Protestant Episcopal Bishop of Georgia, helped to establish the University of the South, at Sewanee, Tennessee. With another bishop in the family, her brother, the Right Reverend Robert W. B. Elliott, first Bishop of Western Texas, Miss Elliott had the "Book of Common Prayer bred in her bones."² After the death of her father in 1870, when she was twenty-two, the family moved from Georgia to Sewanee. Except for some time spent in Baltimore, a year abroad, and seven years in New York, Miss Elliott lived the rest of her life in Sewanee, and died there in 1928.

She was educated mostly at home, studying occasionally under the professors at Sewanee. In 1886, she went to Baltimore to study under Dr. Bright of Johns Hopkins. She began writing at a very early age for the reason that she enjoyed it. Interviewed by an un-named reporter in the Nashville Tennessean of September 28, 1907, Miss

¹Unless otherwise noted, biographical material is taken from two sources: B. Lawton Wiggins, "Sarah Barnwell Elliott," Library of Southern Literature, ed. by E. A. Alderman and Joel C. Harris (Atlanta: 1909), IV, 1553-1557; and Eva Ann Madden, "Sarah Barnwell Elliott," Dictionary of American Biography (1931), VI, 98-99. These two sources incorporate the information in Who's Who in America, 1914-1915; obituaries in New York Times, August 31, 1928, and Sewanee Purple, October 21, 1928.

²Eva A. Madden, Dictionary of American Biography, VI, 98.

Elliott recalled:

I began writing as a child, before I was 12 years old. I wrote because I loved to write. It was a pleasure to me to write. What I wrote was of course most simple. Though I was writing continually, I did not publish anything until I published "The Felmeres," which came out in 1880.³

The Felmeres, a novel, introduced Miss Elliott's theology, which she returned to in her third novel, John Paget, thirteen years later. Her religion figured in her stories throughout her life.

In 1887, she went abroad, and spent a year traveling in England, on the Continent, and in the East. While traveling, she wrote several short stories; one of them, "Miss Eliza," she wrote while in Paris. Returning to Sewanee from Europe, Miss Elliott published Jerry, her second novel, in 1891. Written in Sewanee before she went abroad, Jerry is easily Miss Elliott's best novel. It protests against the increasingly mercenary values of the late nineteenth century. Eva Ann Madden writes of Jerry in Dictionary of American Biography:

Published in England and Australia, translated into German, not only did it make the fame of its author, but, with the novels of Charles Egbert Craddock, it turned the eyes of America toward the Southern mountains. . . . It led the Southern novel away from ante-bellum sentimentality.⁴

The last sentence overstates Jerry's influence, since the book did not lead even Miss Elliott away from sentimentality.

While Jerry was running in serial form in Scribner's Magazine

³Interview, Nashville Tennessean, Sept. 28, 1907.

⁴Dictionary of American Biography, VI, 98.

during 1891, Miss Elliott was writing a third book, John Paget. It was not published until two years later. In it she returns, and more successfully, to the theological problems raised earlier in The Felmeres. All of her Episcopal background makes itself evident in this book—even the diocese of West Texas, where her brother was bishop, figures in the settings of the novel. In fact, no major character in any of Miss Elliott's writing has any religious affiliations other than Episcopal. (Beatrice, in John Paget, grows up in a Catholic convent, but she remains Protestant.)

Leaving Sewanee in 1895 because, she says, "my home was broken up. . . .,"⁵ Miss Elliott lived for seven productive years in New York. Aside from Jerry, she reached the peak of her achievement during these years, publishing, besides many short stories, two novels, and a biography of Sam Houston. She wrote most of the stories included in the collection An Incident and Other Happenings while in New York. Published in 1898, The Durket Sperret, her fourth novel, has the advantage of originality, but the disadvantage of excessive emotion. Though living in the mountains and knowing the mountain people, Sarah Barnwell Elliott most frequently chose to construct her plots around the educated aristocratic class. Hannah Warren, heroine of The Durket Sperret, stands as Miss Elliott's only consistent representative of undiluted regional flavor. Mr. Montrose Moses, a critic of the time, regrets that Miss Elliott did not contribute more

⁵Interview, Nashville Tennessean, Sept. 28, 1907.

extensively to American belles-lettres, as did John Fox, Jr. and Mary N. Murfree, ". . . instances of the folk beliefs and customs of the mountain people . . . since they are the very heart and blood of a peculiar type. . . ." ⁶ In 1901 she published her last novel, The Making of Jane. Though artificially conceived, the story is well-written, and contains only a modicum of sentimentality.

During the seven years that she lived in New York, Miss Elliott was in the habit of coming to Sewanee for the summer, but in 1902 she returned to the Mountain permanently. She gradually wrote less and less, and she never again attained the level of achievement she had reached during her years in New York. The chief reason for her decreased productivity was that she used most of her time in caring for the children of her sister, who had died. Miss Elliott undertook to have her two nephews educated, and she sent them through the University of the South. In many of her short stories, significantly enough, she advances the idea that the most worthwhile satisfaction in life comes from the feeling of being useful to someone. "Miss Ann's Victory," "An Idle Man," and "Old Mrs. Dally's Lesson," to name a few, illustrate Miss Elliott's preoccupation with this theme.

In 1904 she made her only successful venture into the drama. ⁷ Collaborating with Maude Horsford, she wrote a romantic play, "His Majesty's Servant," which ran for a hundred performances in London's Imperial Theatre. Despite the abuse of the critics, the play obviously

⁶Montrose J. Moses, The Literature of the South (New York: 1910), p. 467.

⁷An earlier and unsuccessful venture was with the play, "The Master

satisfied frequenters of the theatre. The play was not published, and no manuscript exists.

Miss Elliott had, since returning from New York in 1902, taken an active part in woman's suffragist movements, serving as vice-president of the Southern States Woman Suffrage Conference and president of the Tennessee State Equal Suffrage Association. Many years earlier, in a letter to her brother Habersham, she had jestingly said that she would never turn to "womans rights."⁹ Besides working for extension of

of the King's Company," which if produced, had a very short run. The Sewanee Purple, Sept. 28, 1904, p. 7, reports: "It will be of great interest to the Sewanee public to know that Miss Sarah Barnwell Elliot's play, 'The Master of the King's Company', was recently presented for the first time at the Empire Theatre, London." The Purple uses the word "recently" very loosely, for Reginald Clarence, in his Stage Cyclopaedia (London: 1909), p. 285, lists a play titled "Master of the King's Company," a romantic comedy of four acts, and dates it Oct. 9, 1902. Clarence does not list the theatre where it was performed, if it was, and he does not give the author. There are no reviews of it in the London Times.

⁸After summarizing the crowded, confused plot, a reviewer writes: "Such a naive piece of work as this hardly calls for comment. At any rate, if comment is required, we confess ourselves unable to furnish it. We can only marvel—marvel that the excellent performers whose names figure at the head of this notice [Lewis Waller and S. B. Brereton] should be (to use the phrase of an actor contemporary with Mohun) "in that galley" . . . Let it be added that, when the curtain fell upon this singular entertainment, there was hearty, if not entirely unanimous applause." Review of "His Majesty's Servant," London Times, Friday, Oct. 7, 1904, p. 4.

⁹In a letter (now owned by Mr. Charles Puckette of Chattanooga, a nephew of Miss Elliott's), she writes her brother Habersham on April 28, 1871: "Do you not know, can it be true than you have not heard that I am going to . . . make tracks for the sisterhood? I leave 'the world and worldly things beloved' and retire to the seclusion of a Church Home for old maids. Do you not realize that I, having reached the age of 22 have 'quit struggling' and quite sneer matrimony down; squalling brats and curtain lectures being too much for my nerves. When a woman gives up all ideas of matrimony, she either turns saint or womans rights, and as the name of Elliott has never yet been disgraced, I do not propose to find my vocation in the Forum. The only thing left me then is saint, 'picture it, think of it, Saint Sarah'! It goes against the grain very much. I never was made for a saint."

franchise, Miss Elliott participated in the activities of the Colonial Dames, Daughters of the Confederacy, and the South Carolina Historical Association. Already nationally known for her writing and suffrage work, she acquired local fame of a different sort as a hostess. She became noted in Sewanee for her "Mondays," when she held open house for residents and students. Possessing both eminence and a sharp wit, she naturally attracted followers while stimulating an active opposition. Eva A. Madden exaggerates when she writes that everyone who knew her loved Sarah Barnwell Elliott.¹⁰ Miss Elliott had the same power of wit in writing dialogue, and in The Felmeres, John Paget, and The Making of Jane her conversations between the women make some of the most amusing sections of the books. Her writing shows a mastery of acutely feline repartee and innuendo in dialogue. After 1915, when she wrote "The Last Flash," a short story with the war as its theme, she published nothing more.

It will be well to discuss the achievement of Sarah Barnwell Elliott, and in examining the ideas closest to her, attempt to evaluate her literary achievement in the following chapters. Miss Elliott shows no growth as a writer, and for that reason her work cannot be divided into periods. This discussion of her work criticizes her novels in one chapter and her short stories in another simply for convenience. A chapter containing criticism of all the writing would be extraordinarily long; and to discuss Miss Elliott's works from 1880 to 1895, and 1895 to

¹⁰Dictionary of American Biography, VI, 98.

1915, for instance, would be to divide it in an arbitrary and meaningless way. However, Miss Elliott's seven years in New York did have an invigorating effect on her writing—her short stories, especially. Particular attention will be paid to those years in the chapter on short stories, but otherwise, her novels and then her short stories will be criticized in the order of publication.

Sarah Barnwell Elliott's fiction forms a link between the sentimental plantation novel of such novelists as John Esten Cooke and Thomas Nelson Page, and the sterner realism of the late nineteenth century practised by William Dean Howells and Sarah Orne Jewett, for instance. Of the latter, Carlos Baker writes in the Literary History of the United States: "She has learned the great trick of true realism: to combine depth of sympathetic involvement with artistic detachment, reaching unity through the establishment of a point of view."¹¹ True, Miss Elliott must be regarded as a weak link, for she only rarely manages to remain unbiased, being instead, profusely sympathetic toward her protagonist. Of course, this over-sympathetic attitude results in sickeningly saccharin characters. When she writes realistically, as in Jerry, "Without the Courts," and "An Incident," Miss Elliott approaches the achievement of the more renowned figures of the period. Preventing her higher rank, however, is the inferior work that makes up the large part of her writing.

¹¹Carlos Baker, "Delineation of Life and Character," Literary History of the United States, ed. by R. E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, et al., (New York: 1948), II, 846.

Miss Elliott is not a regional writer, as are John Fox, Jr. of Kentucky, and Mary N. Murfree of Tennessee, both of whom accurately describe the manners of mountain folk. Though living in the mountains, Miss Elliott ordinarily writes of the educated rather than the illiterate. In The Durket Sperret, however, her one novel with an uneducated protagonist, she idealizes her heroine beyond plausibility.

The difficulty, of making the characters truly life-like often mars Miss Elliott's work and, consequently, she achieves her realism in developing her themes rather than in depicting her characters. The themes that she handles most successfully are the increasing emphasis on mercenary values in the nineteenth century, and the futility of attempting to change the South's mores by legislation, however well-intended. Another prevalent theme, but one that usually provokes her most emotional writing, is that usefulness and happiness are directly proportional.

CHAPTER II

THE NOVELS OF SARAH BARNWELL ELLIOTT

Miss Elliott wrote five novels. The Felmeres was published in 1880, and was the first writing of Miss Elliott's to be published. Between publication of the novels, Miss Elliott wrote many short stories. After The Felmeres, Jerry was published (1891), followed two years later by John Paget, which was similar in theme to the first book. Then, while in New York, Miss Elliott wrote and published her final two novels, The Duket Sperret in 1898, and The Making of Jane in 1901. In this chapter the books will be discussed in the order in which they appeared.

The Felmeres

The Felmeres, published in 1880, Sarah Barnwell Elliott's first novel, is an argument for Christianity against atheism.¹ Christianity triumphs, an admissable outcome, but Miss Elliott's unscrupulousness in her method of accomplishing the victory is not so acceptable. John Paget, a later novel, has as its theme the same conflict—that of faith and unbelief—and Miss Elliott is much more convincing in her conclusion than she is in The Felmeres. Her chief difficulty in the earlier novel is that she believes either Christianity

¹The Felmeres (New York: 1880), 357 pp.

or atheism must win the conflict. In John Paget she realizes that the two factions can exist side by side.

Helen Felmere and her father live together on a desolate marshland plantation in the South. Mr. Felmere's wife, a Roman Catholic, has left him years ago because of his unbelief, taking with her their only son, but leaving the daughter, Helen. Mr. Felmere has educated his daughter to believe that Christianity is a farce and that there is no God or eternity. Living such an isolated life, where her atheism does not conflict with the faith and professed faith of her class, Helen does not feel her non-conformity so strongly as she does after she moves away to the city.

A cousin of Helen's, Philip Felmere, visits her. Seeing her beauty and knowing from his mother of her fortune, he desires to marry her. Mr. Felmere favors the union because he wishes his branch of the family name continued. Helen does not love Philip, and tells him and her father so, but such an obstacle to the marriage is of no consequence to either of the men. In blind obedience to her father's wishes, Helen marries Philip, but with one clause in the contract: She will not live with him until her father dies. The arrangement distresses Philip, really in love with Helen, but who is dominated by his mother's determination that he shall secure the Felmere fortune, even if by means of an unconsummated marriage.

With the marriage appears the first flaw in the motivation of her action. Mr. Felmere's only interest in life is his daughter, but he insists that she marry Philip, a man she doesn't love. No

matter how strongly he might desire the continuation of the family name, he would not sacrifice the happiness of his daughter for a whim.

For six years Helen remains with her father, who, just before dying, asks her to promise that in loyalty to him she will never become a Christian. Helen promises. After her father's death, she moves to the city in fulfillment of her marriage contract with Phillip. From the beginning the marriage is doomed, since Philip's mother establishes herself as an antagonist, chiefly because of Helen's atheism. Helen's undiplomatic honesty, such as her expressed disgust at the way in which Philip and his mother pander to a wealthy and dominating aunt whose will is not yet made, destroys any chance for a truce. The lack of affection, which is expressed through dialogue, that Mrs. Felmere and the aunt feel for Helen (and the converse) gives the book its outstanding quality. Miss Elliott is at her best when she is presenting conversations between hostile women. An example is the sparring of Helen and the aunt:

"Yes," Helen answered slowly, as though considering and concluding on her deliberations—"yes, I do paint well."

"That is honest at least," Miss Esther remarked, with a trifle of sarcasm in her tone. She had been panting for an opportunity to snub this new-comer into proper appreciation of her special merits.

Helen looked up surprised.

"And is not honesty a desirable quality?" she asked.

"Very desirable," Miss Esther answered, with a little toss of her head, "if there is a trifle of modesty mixed with it."

"There are such things as false modesty and affectation," Helen went on quietly, to the great amusement of the family, who never by any chance answered Miss Esther; "and I despise

both. If I think I paint well, why not say so?"

". . . In short, be conceited."

"No," Helen said gravely; "that is one step too far; that amounts to self-admiration, while what I mean is simply self-approval. The one is putting yourself above and beyond your fellow creatures; the other is only putting yourself on a level with them."

"And you consider yourself on a level with the highest?" queried Miss Esther. Helen laughed as she answered:

". . . With one or two exceptions known long ago, yes."²

Unfortunately, the repartee is sparsely scattered through the book. The bulk of the story is a sentimental account of Helen's nostalgia for her old home, and for Felix Gordon, who has taught her to paint, and is the only man she has ever loved. Even more sentimental is Helen's feeling for her child. She knows that she must give him up to allow him to be reared a Christian, if he is to have a happier life than she has had. Her sustained agony at the thought is extremely maudlin.

In creating Helen as an intelligent woman, and in having her fulfill the promise of atheism to her dying father, Miss Elliott motivates conflict, but it is useless, uncharacteristic conflict. Instead of being pathetic in her difficulty, Helen is ludicrous, because she refuses to adopt a sensible compromise between past and present. Her difficulty is that she wants the security and peace of life-after-death promised by Christianity, but she has sworn to remain an unbeliever. She feels that she must always be loyal to her father,

²The Felmeres, 151-153.

which is ironical, because as an atheist he believed that everything ended with death, and therefore there is nothing—not even his spirit—to hold her to the promise. She should have realized that if her father truly was anxious for nothing but her happiness, he would not hold her to a pledge that is wrecking her life.

Miss Elliott's conclusion to the book is even less satisfactory than the motivation. Helen accidentally finds her long-lost brother. The brother is an Episcopal minister in a poor parish,³ and he baptizes Helen's son. He advises her that she must, for the child's sake, permit it to be educated as a Christian. Helen decides to allow Philip the custody of the child, and to return alone to her old home. But after seeing the child baptized and carried away from her forever, she pursues the departing carriage, and is run over and killed.

The Felmeres, then, has a weakly motivated conflict, and is burdened with sentimentality. Helen's marriage, her promise of atheism to her father, and her finding her brother are implausible, while her suffering and all the business about the child are maudlin.⁴

In spite of its faults, the book contains some fine passages,

³The poor parish is important in understanding Miss Elliott's religious convictions in her writing. She satirizes the wealthy, complacent rectors and the equally wealthy, complacent parishioners in The Felmeres and John Paget. Service to the needy is her idea of Christian works.

⁴Even B. Lawton Wiggins, who usually writes only in eulogistic phrases, is cautious about The Felmeres. "The conclusion shows a little lack of art and some lack of truth to human nature." Library of Southern Literature, ed. by E. A. Alderman and Joel C. Harris (Atlanta: 1909), IV, 1553.

as the conversation between Helen and Felix before they part permanently. Helen knows that their love cannot develop into anything, for she is already committed to Philip, and Felix knows that he is about to hear bad news:

The sun was sinking in a flame of crimson and amber, and the evening light lay long and low across the flats. Against a pale green sky, and far away one great white bird flew up slowly from the sea. The bit of sedge was all shredded now, and Felix, seeing the bird, thought, "Before that bird reaches us, I shall know all."⁵

Felix watches the bird get closer while he listens to Helen tell him that their love must terminate. Helen finishes talking as the bird passes overhead. This symbolic use of the bird, an unusual technical device for Miss Elliott, adds to the mood of anticipation that she is creating.⁶

Jerry

Though not published until 1891, eleven years after The Felmers, Jerry⁷ was the second novel that Sarah Barnwell Elliott wrote.⁸ Of Jerry she says:

⁵The Felmeres, p. 106.

⁶On one other occasion, in John Paget, Miss Elliott uses the device of a character concentrating on a nearby object while he hears bad news. John Paget studies the contents of a wastebasket as he learns of Beatrice's engagement to Claud.

⁷Jerry (New York: 1891), 473 pp.

⁸Interview, Nashville Tennessean, Sept. 28, 1907.

Here the motif was the labor problem, the power of money, the land question, the single tax, and the rights of the people to the land, were the issues that interested me at that time [sic]. My problem was what would happen when everything was run by machinery, the individual becoming less and less and machinery more and more.⁹

Her conclusions in the book are not happy ones.

Jerry is doubtless Miss Elliott's best novel. The book is a serious discussion of prevailing wrongs of the mechanistic and mercenary post-Civil War decades. In it, Miss Elliott traces the disintegration of her main character, Jerry, from the moment that, realizing his ability to command a following, he first has visions of himself as a sort of savior, until, having completely misused his power, he is overcome by those whom he originally set out to help.

Jerry's strength is his most prominent characteristic, for he is a strong good man, and a strong bad man as well. The fact that there is no definite place in the novel where Jerry changes from good to bad indicates Miss Elliott's ability to create realistic characters. For Jerry's change is gradual and completely plausible, and his justifiable disgust with the greediness and ignorance of the people whom he dedicates himself to improve constitutes his chief reason for finally working against the best interests of the majority of his followers.

Jerry, as a small boy, runs away from his home in the Cumberland Mountains because his brutal father has caused the death of his mother, the only person in his small world who cares for him. Not under-

⁹Ibid.

standing death, Jerry goes west, hoping to find his mother, who at the last told him she was going to the "golding gates." After weeks of wandering Jerry collapses near the Western mining town of Durden's, where a kindly, lonesome miner, Joe, finds him and carries him to his cabin. Once there, Joe brings in the local doctor, who saves the exhausted and starving child. Jerry recovers, continues to live with Joe, and begins his education with the doctor as his tutor. Even though this background shows that Jerry rose to prominence despite his unfortunate childhood, it could just as well have been alluded to as described in detail, for its importance is only incidental. There is in fact entirely too much background exposition in the novel—exposition that in its attempt to establish Jerry as a sympathetic character, borders on sentimentality, and exposition that really is out of place, because it has no integral connection with the main story.

The doctor is a mysterious person, a cultured Easterner, living with no one but his ward, Paul, a boy of approximately Jerry's age.¹⁰ An antagonism between Jerry and Paul develops early, since Jerry is jealous that the doctor should tutor anyone but himself, and Paul, a delicate and bad-tempered Eastern boy, hates everything in the West, Jerry particularly.

Guided by the doctor, Jerry grows into a well-educated man. He

¹⁰Miss Elliott evidently likes "mysterious" persons, since many of her characters have obscure pasts. Carter Wilton in John Paget is another of the quiet, deep men who are incongruous in their surroundings. So is Hetty in "Fortunes Vassals."

becomes the schoolmaster in the nearby mining town of Eureka. When a rich vein of gold is discovered in Eureka, the doctor forms a syndicate, which buys up all the surrounding land. Indignant at what he thinks is the mercenary change in the doctor, Jerry leads a counter-movement of those in Eureka who stand to suffer by the doctor's scheme. He proposes that instead of buying land from the doctor at inflated prices, the people save their money and come to Durden's, where he proposes that a communal project be instituted. The land will be owned by all, and no one will gain or lose by speculation. Though he has no affection for the people, Jerry thinks the doctor has wronged them. Miss Elliott says of Jerry: "So he reasoned from the gospel of Justice--scarcely knowing the gospel of Love."¹¹ Jerry's dislike of the people as a whole is not passive, for he actively and consistently despises them for their greed, ignorance and filth. Walking into the town saloon one day, Jerry

pauses a moment in the doorway, thinking angrily how ugly these men and women were. Seeing them one at a time in the sweet sunshine of the plains, or in the shadow of the mountains, they were not so revolting; their surroundings were not fitted to them, and so in a manner mitigated their wretchedness. But here, where everything had been selected with a view to suiting their tastes--where everything was an outgrowth of their own natures, the picture was horrid in its degradation and filthiness.¹²

Jerry's plan is for the people, with the money they have made in Eureka by selling their land at the high prices, to purchase all the lots in the town of Durden cheaply, and with the balance purchase

¹¹Jerry, p. 182.

¹²Ibid., p. 185.

the old, abandoned Durden's gold mine, which has been found to have a rich vein. He convinces the people that the railroad will extend its line on to Durden's from Eureka if the communal project he has proposed is organized. Seeing an excellent chance to become wealthy, the people flock to Jerry.

Old Joe, with whom Jerry is still living, is disturbed by the news that the town is to buy Durden's mine, and Jerry learns that Joe has been panning gold from a stream in the mine for years. The two grow cool to one another, for Jerry thinks that Joe's mining gold on property not his own is the equivalent of stealing, but, on the other hand, Joe has cared for him for years, which makes Jerry's very life a growth from Joe's mining of gold not his own.

But Jerry has become too much involved in his plans for the town of Durden's future to have more than brief qualms of conscience. It having been definitely established that Durden's mine is inexhaustibly rich, Jerry goes East for negotiations to have the railroad extended to Durden's. The success of the town depends on the railroad's being built. Before entering the room where the board meeting is being held to hear his request, Jerry recognizes that he originated his plan to help the people, but that now he is "working only for the success of his venture."¹³ "Its success might mean the good of the people, but he knew that if it did not mean this, he would pursue the success just as eagerly. He had not been true."¹⁴ And the success

¹³Jerry, p. 260.

¹⁴Ibid.

of the venture becomes more and more important to him, while the good of the people becomes less, though the people's financial good depends on the success of the mine.

Jerry's interest in the people motivates his action even less after he returns to Durden's, for shortly after he comes home, old Joe dies, leaving Jerry a fantastic amount of gold that, unknown to anyone, he has hoarded away, through his years of panning secretly in the mine and existing in the most frugal manner. Jerry invests it all for himself in Durden's mine stock, an unwise, greedy act leading to his own undoing, for Paul, still Jerry's bitter enemy, learns that Jerry has made the investment without telling the commune of it. Naturally, Paul tells the people, who are indignant that their work will benefit Jerry so much more than themselves.

Led by Paul, the people destroy the mine by flooding it, and kill Jerry. The tragic irony of their action is that they destroy themselves in destroying Jerry and the mine. The moral that Miss Elliott more than gently suggests is that the lust for money and power is a destructive force, and that the nineteenth century is on the way to destruction, at least morally.

Writing from the omniscient viewpoint, Miss Elliott frequently injects her own comments on society. The most notable of these is a pessimistic consideration of the trends of the times:

This proud, hard Nineteenth Century that vaunts itself that it neither fears nor loves--that glories in tearing the veil from the "Holy of Holies" that the mob might be as free to touch and see as the "Anointed of the Lord"! that analyzes every throb of brain and heart; that laughs faith and hope to

scorn, holding only certainty; that shuts charity into hospital wards. . . . Hailing "labor-saving" inventions with a shout of triumph, and trusting to disease and death to clear the overcrowded garrets and cellars!

Clamoring and battling for gold; legislating on the crowded prisons and lunatic asylums! This great "Iron Age" that has no heart save the thud of machinery—is this the music it dances to?

Do the . . . foolish heart and soul find their refuge here? Sobbing through all the songs and dances—crying out to the throb of beating feet!

Do we hear the heart of the Nineteenth Century pulsing in its music--the saddest music the world has ever heard?¹⁵

Miss Elliott admits the defeat in Jerry of the "foolish heart and soul," because the "thud of machinery" and the "battling for gold" are too powerful.

Jerry is a very successful book. Its main character, though strong, still is defeated by his infatuation for the prevailing evils of the age. The fineness of the book depends on Jerry's gradual but true disintegration.

John Paget

Though it has a theme similar to The Felmeres, the novel John Paget,¹⁶ published in 1893, goes deeper into the conflict between atheism and Christianity. Miss Elliott says of the book:

The same year that Jerry was published [1891] I wrote John

¹⁵Jerry, p. 274.

¹⁶John Paget (New York: 1893), 407 pp.

Paget. This story embodies my theology. The story is of two brothers, the one brought up a Christian, the other an atheist. The development of these two characters and the play of each upon the other makes the story.¹⁷

Claude and John are brothers. Claude is the atheist, and John the Christian. Shortly after the Civil War their older cousin and guardian, Carter Wilton, returning to his South Carolina plantation, is forced to agree to the separation of the brothers because of his inability to support both of them. Claudia Van Kuyster, who before the war was engaged to Carter, but who foolishly married Van Kuyster, a wealthy but middle-aged New Yorker, adopts Claude. Having lost the woman he loves and most of his wealth, Carter has no interest left in life but the rearing of John Paget. He takes John to Texas. In Texas Carter becomes an Episcopal minister, while John grows into a wild, but wel-read cow hand. Soon after arriving in the Southwest, Carter, out of pity, marries a poor Mexican woman. They have a daughter, Beatrice, but the mother dies in child-birth and Carter sends the child to a Catholic convent to be reared.

Though doing nothing particularly bad, John's lack of a worthwhile goal in life worries Carter. His one constructive act before Carter dies is his educating Elizabeth Marsden, the pretty but neglected daughter of a lawless and uncouth old squatter. Shortly before dying, Carter reprimands John for his almost completely wasteful existence. Stung by the truth of the accusation, John pledges himself to establish

¹⁷Interview, Nahsville Tennessean, Sept. 28, 1907.

higher aims in his life. Consequently, he begins study for the ministry and stops seeing Elizabeth altogether. She realizes that John no longer considers her good enough for himself.

Claudia, in New York, hearing of Carter's death, is glad to undertake the responsibility of adopting Beatrice and sending John to a seminary. Her husband, whom she had never really loved, has died several years before, leaving her his fortune. Claude has grown to be a dilettante and an atheist. Expecting no more than a plain, illiterate country girl, Claude is taken with Beatrice, now a young woman.

Almost as soon as John and Beatrice arrive in New York, the theological discussion, which is the book's theme, begins. Claude, a hedonist, believes that pleasure is the object in life. He says: ". . . why not have life bright and happy, why insist upon being tragic and solemn. . . ." ¹⁸ John, on the other hand, believes that happiness is achieved only through the fulfilling of duties. He sounds somewhat Wesleyan when he says: "Until I have made other duties for myself, I consider that all humanity is my duty." ¹⁹ And the humanity he makes it his duty to care for is the lowest level—those who actually need help immediately. In discussing the duties of the clergy to humanity, Miss Elliott makes it plain that she has nothing but contempt for the pastors of fashionable parishes whose functions primarily

¹⁸ John Paget, p. 194.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 339.

consist of organizing campaigns and keeping the factions in the congregation appeased, lest the contributions be endangered. She is too crude, however, in showing that Dr. Radcliffe, leader of a socially prominent flock in New York, has no sympathy for the poor. Dr. Radcliffe refuses to help a needy man, then rushes the wretch out of his office, impatient to keep an appointment.

John, of course, is the antithesis of Dr. Radcliffe. He opposes the minister because of the conflict between his enthusiasm and the pastor's placating attitude of compromise. Because of his goodness, though, John is dull and priggish. His persistence in always taking the noble stand on every issue makes him bloodless. He is sure that Beatrice loves him, is fairly certain that he loves her; he sees Claude striving to win her favor, and he knows that, childishly simple and trusting, she will be fooled by Claude's persuasiveness; yet he refuses to give her any sign that he cares what she does. Claude, however, understanding that Beatrice, having been reared a Catholic, needs infallible judgement, sets out to be her Pope. After training her in the sophisticated ways of the big city, he proposes to her, but she is still hopeful that John will commit himself. John, being busy at welfare work in the slums, wishes Beatrice happiness, while assuming the attitude of beaten but noble suitor. The attitude does not please Beatrice in the least, who has hoped that news of Claude's proposal would stir John into jealous pursuit. When John makes no effort to win her, she decides to accept Claude.

John immerses himself even deeper in work after he loses Beatrice. His experiences in the New York slums convince him that organized, scientific charity is nearly worthless. It amounts to a dole, he thinks, and there exists little good feeling on the side either of the giver or the recipient. John believes that it would be better to get at the cause rather than the effect of poverty. But he finds the problem incurable. The landlords are responsible for the miserable living conditions, he thinks, because by charging prohibitive rent they promote the practice of sub-letting apartments, which causes over-crowded and unsanitary living conditions.

With the outbreak of a yellow-fever epidemic in Texas, John feels it his duty to help. Shortly after he returns to Texas, Beatrice follows him. He flatters himself by thinking that she has come to be with him, but actually Beatrice comes to re-enter the convent. Convinced by her maid of Claude's atheism, and worried about the condition of her soul if she marries him, she has written her former Mother Superior, who tells her to come home. Beatrice catches a fever and dies. John, of course, is hurt by her death, but not as hurt as he would have been had he heard her asking for Claude at the last.

Continuing the fight against the epidemic, John meets Elizabeth Marsden again. As atonement for his earlier desertion, he asks her to marry him, but she refuses, knowing that he makes the offer to ease his own feeling of guilt.

The concluding chapter in the book makes a comparison between

Claude and John. Each is living the life he thinks will give the most happiness, but neither is contented. Claude, on a vacation in Rome, hears music that reminds him of Beatrice, and he receives momentary pleasure from resurrecting the old love. John, recovering his health on the South Carolina plantation that Claudia has willed him, has lost both the women in his life and his health as well, and while knowing that he has been useful, he cannot relax, because he feels that he must continue his ministry. He has set his aim too high to permit pausing along the way to indulge in self-congratulations. John is so involved in the troubles of humanity that he cannot enjoy living. He takes duty too seriously, failing to see that in moderation he can sustain his efforts for a longer time. His Christian faith drives him too relentlessly, while Claude's atheism prevents his sincere conviction of anything. John is certainly the more beneficial to mankind.

Miss Elliott has come to a more satisfactory conclusion in John Paget than in The Felmeres by having both the atheist and Christian dissatisfied, rather than permitting the triumph of Christianity at the expense of plausibility. Though she works out her theme better in John Paget than in The Felmeres, she still allows sentimentality to corrupt her writing. Her most flagrant uses of excessive emotion are toward the beginning and conclusion of the novel. Early in the book John tutors Elizabeth Marsden and she falls in love with him. When he catches a fever and nearly dies, she tenderly nurses him, though he has already neglected her completely to begin study for

the ministry. She does it to repay his kindness, but he never knows of it, because he is delirious. Later, her keeping him from knowing of it is extremely silly. Then, toward the conclusion, Beatrice's death contains all the pathos Miss Elliott can muster; she includes, even, a dog's finding the body and whimpering piteously.

The Durket Sperret

The least ambitious of all of Sarah Barnwell Elliott's novels, The Durket Sperret, published in 1898,²⁰ is the story of an uneducated but proud mountain girl who humbles herself in the estimation of her neighbors by hiring herself out as a maid to a well-to-do family in order that she can care for her grandparents. Miss Elliott avoids a problem theme in The Durket Sperret, preferring to write simply a quite original narrative. Regrettably, she does not avoid sentimentality.

With the Cumberland Plateaus of her home at Sewanee as the setting for the book, Miss Elliott obviously writes with first-hand knowledge of the mountains and the mountain people. Some of the finest passages in the novel are excellent descriptions of the mountains. One of these, in an opening paragraph, describes the flat-topped Cumberlands.

²⁰The Durket Sperret (New York: 1898), 222 pp. First published in serial form in Scribner's, XXII (1897), 372-386, 492-512, 635-652.

On all sides the mountains rise . . . in soft, sweeping curves, until they stand out against the sky a level, unbroken line. There is little of rugged wildness in these old mountains, for no stormy outburst marked their birth. . . . Their gray of faces looked out across the slow silurian sea, whose wandering waves began the patient work of denudation.

No rugged wildness, but a silent grandeur of repose smoothes every curve of every spur that stretches out across the plain, and a great unspoken dignity lives in the straight line that marks the summit.²¹

Miss Elliott's descriptions compare favorably with those of Mary N. Murfree, better known as Charles Egbert Craddock, who captures the atmosphere of the mountains in her The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains, generally acknowledged as her best.²²

Hannah Warren, heroine of The Durket Sperret, lives in Lost Cove, which is surrounded on all sides by mountains. Hannah is the granddaughter of old Mr. and Mrs. Warren. The old man, afflicted with rheumatism, can no longer tend the "craps" and do the plowing. Since his son, Hannah's father, has recently died, the responsibility of keeping the farm running falls on Hannah. Mrs. Warren, who before her marriage had been a Durket, a family prominent among the people of the coves, retains her dominating Durket "sperret" (spirit), and her sharp tongue makes an already hard life more difficult for Hannah. Mrs. Warren has set her mind on having Hannah marry a cousin, Si Durket, who has a house and land of his own, but whose evil nature and boorishness repel Hannah.

For a year, since Hannah's father died, the Warrens have been

²¹The Durket Sperret, Scribner's, XXII (1897), 372.

²²Montrose J. Moses, The Literature of the South (New York: 1910), p. 468.

hard pressed for money, and soon they are unable even to buy coffee and sugar, much less pay for the plowing that needs to be done. Mrs. Warren argues that if Hannah marries Si, all financial difficulties will be healed, but Hannah will not hear to it. She enrages her grandmother and starts the neighbors whispering when she sells eggs and butter to the university people in Sewanee. With money from her produce she buys supplies and hires Dock Wilson, a good, steady neighbor of about her own age, to do the plowing. The grandmother, however, will not let matters rest, and when Hannah refuses to accept an invitation to visit Si, the old lady, in a fit of pique, curses her. Refusing to stay in the house any longer, Hannah goes to Sewanee, where she becomes the maid of Agnes Welling, the daughter of a professor to whom she has been selling butter and eggs. Old Mrs. Warren is even more torn with bitterness when she learns that Hannah is to be a servant, and when her granddaughter comes home to collect her belongings, the old lady remarks: "'Hev theyuns got ary dorg?" "Kase if thar ain't none, sposen you gits down an' be a dorg?"²³

Agnes has two young gentleman friends, Max Dudley and Cartright. Noticing Hannah's unschooled intelligence, the three discuss the question of whether or not education makes for a better, happier life. These discussions constitute the only controversial topic that Miss Elliott touches upon in the story. For the purposes of this book, she sympathizes with that Romantic ideal, the sweet, innocent child of

²³Ibid., p. 497.

nature. Hannah, the unsophisticated, irreproachable mountain girl, personifies that ideal. In comparison, Agnes Welling, the polished product of the more advanced culture, appears slightly insincere and jaded. (But lower still is Maggie, a relative of Hannah's who has attended an inadequate state normal school, and makes a ludicrous attempt to adopt the higher culture.) Agnes and Cartright, more class-conscious than Dudley, say that people are divided into two intellectual groups, those who, like moles, live in the dark, not knowing what is happening in the world; and those who, like squirrels, live in the "tree-tops of culture." Dudley attempts to turn the simile against the two by saying:

"The mole makes a living; what more does the squirrel?
And what difference does it make to the mole so long as he
does not know what it is to be a squirrel; still, if I were
a mole, I hope that I should be in this same state of mind,
and burrow diligently into the best potato-patch I could find."²⁴

Miss Elliott's three characters create controversy where none should exist, for their fallacious argument does not admit that any number of circumstances determine whether or not an intellect can be cultivated. Therefore, the educated and uneducated, in many cases (particularly in Hannah's), are not comparable. The educated can be compared with one another, as can the uneducated; but intellects must be given equal opportunities before their relative merits can be determined. Miss Elliott contends, through character development, that education and the good, upright life have no relation, for she creates the uneducated

²⁴Ibid., p. 497.

Hannah as the most admirable character.

All goes well with Hannah until Si, her cousin and suitor, begins spreading a malicious and untruthful story that Dudley and she are having illicit relations. Si has two motives: he is humiliated by her rejection of him, and he hopes that the story will result in her coming home, so that he may have another chance to win her. Afraid of scandal, Agnes dismisses Hannah, who returns home disgraced. Mrs. Warren believes that since Hannah has been humbled she will accept Si, but Hannah, accusing her of collaborating with Si in spreading the story, says she will die first.

Dock Wilson is the only "covite" undaunted by the scandal. He offers to marry Hannah, not for pity but for love. At the same time, Max Dudley comes down to the cove from Sewanee and asks Hannah to marry him to clear her name. Though grateful to Max for his gallantry, Hannah refuses his offer, and Max is grateful for the rejection. She then accepts Dock's proposal. When Max returns to Sewanee he learns that Agnes and Cartright have just become engaged. Mrs. Warren, frustrated by her disobedient granddaughter, proves that she still has her share of the Durket "sperret" by dying of apoplexy. To the last she will not accept the fact of Hannah's individuality.

The Durket Sperret marks a distinct retrogression in the writing of Sarah Barnwell Elliott from the high point she attained with Jerry. As bare narrative the novel frequently slips into sentimentality. Hannah is just too noble. She never does wrong, and the other characters are flatly either good or bad. But the originality of the story

and the contrast between the educated and uneducated gives the novel a stimulating freshness, found elsewhere only in Jerry.

The Making of Jane

Her fifth and last novel, The Making of Jane,²⁵ published in 1901, added nothing to Sarah Barnwell Elliott's stature. Neither particularly good nor especially bad, the novel is little more than a long, rambling story, which makes but a token pretense to either realism or social comment. The story concerns itself with the clash between two strong-willed women, and the flight of one, Jane Ormonde, from her fashionable, sheltered existence for uncomfortable independence in a small Southern town.

Because of his poverty, Mr. Ormonde sends his oldest child, Jane, to New York to be adopted by his wealthy cousin, Henry Saunders. A lethargic man, Mr. Saunders allows his domineering wife to have complete charge in rearing Jane. Being poured in a mold has no attraction for Jane, but she quietly endures the tyranny of Mrs. Saunders. The years pass and Jane comes into society, but still Mrs. Saunders makes all decisions regarding Jane's affairs. She even selects eligible young men for her to see. One of the men, Lawrence Creswick, being well-mannered, comes and goes as Mrs. Saunders bids, but the other, Mark Witting, shows no reverence or even respect for her. In Mrs. Saunders' eyes, Mark is not quite so eligible as Creswick, for he has no money of his own. Making up in cunning for what he lacks in fortune, Mark plans to win Jane and Jane's inherited

²⁵The Making of Jane (New York: 1901), 432 pp.

wealth by first paying special attention to Mrs. Saunders, still a very handsome woman, with the idea of gaining her consent to marry Jane. Flattered by his attention and jealous of Jane, Mrs. Saunders connives to terminate Mark's suit for Jane. Mark fascinates Jane, also, but Mrs. Saunders demands that she marry Creswick, on account of his wealth. In this part of the novel much of the dialogue, particularly the love-making, is stilted and unintentionally amusing. Mark thus addresses Jane:

"Have you missed me, little one, little violet? I have walked in many rose-gardens, darling, and have gathered more flowers than ever I wanted, but never has any flower so held me, so charmed me, so made me long to be better, so made me loathe myself, as my little violet, and for none, child, would I have done what I have done to win you."²⁶

Creswick, too, is capable of conversing in a high-flown, artificial language: "My dear Mrs. Saunders, you are mistaken in your suggestion; pray do not make it again. For Miss Marion Ormonde's sake, for your own sake, I beg you to desist."²⁷

When Jane finds that Mark's interest in her depends partly on her fortune, she decides to leave New York and the useless life she has been leading. Through an advertisement in the newspaper she gets a position as teacher in a small town in the South. Leaving the wealth she has been used to for the crude, plain, country town depresses her considerably, but her new-found independence more than compensates

²⁶The Making of Jane, p. 155.

²⁷Ibid., p. 377.

for the discomforts and loneliness. At the end of a year, with the salary she has saved, she goes into business for herself. Creswick, who is still faithful to her as a dog, becomes her buyer in New York, and her hat shop begins to make money. Admiring her pluck and business ability, a Southern mine-owner hires her to run his commissary, which she successfully does. Eventually Jane has done so well that she owns stock in the company. But she is still dissatisfied with her one-sided existence and her attempt, by training herself to be "hard as nails," to live unemotionally.

Returning to New York on vacation, she finds that the Saunders have gone to Europe, taking with them Marion Ormonde, Jane's pretty, younger sister, who has replaced her in their household. Marion has become heir to Mrs. Saunders' fortune, and soon afterwards, engaged to Mark Witting. Jane, seeing Creswick once again, realizes that she finally loves him. The book ends with the two in one another's arms.

Such a conventional happy ending recalls to the reader a critical remark made earlier in the story about pat, too-neat conclusions. Mark Witting tells Jane:

"There's a pathos in unfinished things, a mystery. You remember Michael Angelo's statues in San Lorenzo, where the unfinished faces look at you from out the stone? A parable of life. You remember how I laughed at your books . . . those finished books, where all the characters come together at the last. . . ? Absurd; 'tis not so in life, we catch glimpses. . . ."28

The condemnation may be applied to The Making of Jane, which also fails

²⁸The Making of Jane, p. 169.

to reflect real life.

Despite its sentimental conclusion, The Making of Jane marks a technical improvement over Miss Elliott's two preceding novels, John Paget and The Durket Sperret. Occasionally Miss Elliot reveals character through stream-of-consciousness writing as when she records the introspective thoughts of her people to show how an observed incident or a statement heard can cause a reverberation in the character's mind of past incidents or statements that have been unconsciously preserved.

Though not a technical matter but rather a deepening of Miss Elliott's sense of reality is the belated recognition in The Making of Jane of the characters' physical life. In The Felmeres the reader is shocked when Helen suddenly has a child, even though she is married, for there has been no previous indication that either Helen or her husband is aware of male and female physical characteristics. No children are born in The Making of Jane, but Miss Elliott suggests that personality may be influenced by sexual drive. She thus describes Mrs. Saunders' feeling about the man she loves:

She shivered a little; easy-going men like her husband could be terrible; she had roused him once, long ago, and ever since, in her heart, she had been afraid of him. Why had he not beaten her, trampled upon her? she would have been a happier woman. A brute beast she would have loved, or a sneering, scornful cynic like Mark. She struck her hands together. Mark, Mark, Mark! she would like to strangle him slowly. . . .²⁹

Certainly this one paragraph comes closer to revealing a real character

²⁹The Making of Jane, p. 227.

trait than all the delicate references made to love, ignoring its physical side, in Miss Elliott's previous fiction.

CHAPTER III

SHORT STORIES

In her short stories, Sarah Barnwell Elliott shows the same oscillation between plain sentimentality, on the one hand, and pertinent social criticism on the other, that is characteristic of her novels. Similarly, the short stories, as a group, show the same lack of progression. That is, from one decade to the next, her stories do not improve. The same year that she writes an excellent one, she may also write two unimportant sentimental ones, and the next year she may write nothing better than a propaganda story. 1898 is an illustration of this contention. In that year she wrote her excellent "Without the Courts," but she also wrote such cliché-filled propaganda as "Hands All Around." Miss Elliott, as a writer, then, does not develop. She is full-grown—at least at her full growth—when she is first published, and from that time on, she has, either good or bad moments. Because of this stable level of achievement, it is impossible to judge from its quality whether a story by Miss Elliott was written in 1885 or thirty years later.

The best of Sarah Barnwell Elliott's short stories (excepting "Without the Courts") have as their themes the social problems of the age, such as the nineteenth century's over-emphasis on acquiring money, and the attempt to change ingrained Southern customs simply by passing laws.

Of the twenty-nine known short stories written by Miss Elliott,

twenty-one have been found. The remaining eight are buried in volumes of unindexed periodicals.¹

The earliest known published short story by Miss Elliott is "Jack Watson—A Character Study."² It is a humorous conversational piece, written in the dialect of an uneducated Tennessean. It resembles the later "An Ex-Brigadier" in that it is a story within a story, with the inner story being narrated by the main character. Jeff Sidberry, at present a Texas cattleman, and formerly a Tennessee horse-thief, tells the passengers on a train of his old friend, Jack Watson. Watson has recently been shot, an occasion of celebration by the law-abiding, since Watson was a trigger-happy renegade who killed numerous men. Jeff tells the passengers that Jack was not really as bad as the papers make him out to have been. He says that Jack was wild only when drunk. When reminded that Jack was most frequently drunk, he replies that there is a reason. Jeff and Jack escaped from Tennessee into Texas years ago. Jack took up with a pretty young girl and was a decent man while living with her. He accidentally shot and killed her, and the tragedy of it drove him to drink. Watson

¹B. Lawton Wiggins reports in his article on Sarah Barnwell Elliott in Library of Southern Literature, IV, 1557, that Miss Elliott wrote, besides those stories which have been found, "Stephen's Margaret," "As a Child," and "A Florentine Idyl" for The Independent; "Beside Still Waters," "A Little Child Shall Lead Them," "The Opening of the South-western Door," and "The Wreck" for Youth's Companion; and "Rest Remaineth" for The Pilgrim.

²The Current, VI (Sept. 11, 1886), 164-167.

always became shooting mad when drunk. Jeff also tells the passengers of Watson's unknown acts of kindness. The moral of the story is that there is good in everyone, and there sometimes is a reason for the badness.

Following "Jack Watson," the next of Miss Elliott's short stories to be published was "Miss Eliza."³ It is a promising story until near the conclusion, when the writing degenerates into soggy sentimentality. Miss Eliza lives in Paris, where she is unhappy in keeping house for her niece Rosalie, an art student. Rosalie talks in her art jargon of Paris' "delicious opalescent tints," but Miss Eliza silently prefers her own America and her Southern home amid the tall, clean-smelling pine trees. Miss Eliza's brother Charles, always selfish, has persuaded her to be his daughter's guardian. Miss Eliza reflects that she has devoted her best years to Charles, who might have been a fine writer. She believes that after his marriage he dissipated his talent. She even gave up the opportunity to marry years ago because Charles needed her to help him with his writing. Soon afterward, Charles married, leaving Eliza with nothing but the feeling that she was not needed by anyone.

After this respectable beginning, the story breaks down. Miss Eliza unexpectedly meets Reginald, the man who wanted to marry her. Reginald now has a young son, but his wife is dead. He asks Eliza if she will care for his son, and once again Miss Eliza feels that

³The Independent, XXXIX (Mar. 24, 1887), 382-383.

she is needed. Suddenly, Reginald's son steps in front of a carriage, and in pushing the boy out of the way, Miss Eliza is fatally injured. In the last paragraph, Miss Elliott says that the moral of the story is: "When self-sacrifice becomes the impulse of a soul, that soul is surely fitted for some other world than this." Driving her point so hard, Miss Elliott virtually clubs the reader with an idea dear to her --that usefulness is the best means of achieving happiness. Miss Eliza is unhappy with her niece because the niece does not need her, but she dies exceedingly happy, for she has been useful to Reginald. The idea is important in Miss Elliott's writing, but the story is an unfortunate expression of it.

Another of Miss Elliott's stories, "A Simple Heart,"⁴ was published in 1887. It appeared separately in booklet form. It is her only symbolic story, and its theme is sincerity in religion. The protagonist, Nat Carton, an honest and simple Texas carpenter and minister, is a frontier symbol of Christ, his life closely paralleling that of Jesus, even to his being turned upon, after his triumph, and banished. Nat, like Christ, cannot compromise, which leads to his rejection, and like Christ, he is appreciated more after his death. Without resorting to sentimentality, Miss Elliott makes Nat Carton a sympathetic figure. The story belongs with the best of her writings.

In 1893, during one of her bad moments, Miss Elliott published a short story called "Some Data."⁵ Extremely trivial, it is the story

⁴A Simple Heart (New York: 1887), 69 pp.

⁵Printed in a Souvenir Book, From Dixie (Richmond: 1893), pp. 133-166.

of a Confederate officer who finally, after the war, is able to forgive the Yankees. His act of toleration is born with his realization that Northerners are human since they like daffodils just as he does.

The story's inferiority may be partially explained by its having been written for inclusion in a book commemorating the Confederate dead.⁶

Having neither moral nor excessive emotion, "Miss Ann's Victory"⁷ is satisfactory, even if it belongs in the category of the conventional, happy-ending magazine story. Miss Ann Miller manages to have her niece Sylvia married to Cecil Osborne, the son of Miss Ann's rival, Mrs. Jane Osborne. Years before, Jane won George Osborne, who, until the marriage, was engaged to Ann. Mrs. Osborne opposes the marriage of her Cecil to Miss Ann's niece for no better reason than that she knows Miss Ann favors it. The marriage takes place, a minor victory for Miss Ann, but she knows that she has won an even larger victory when Cecil reveals to her that, when dying, his father asked for some lilies to be buried with his body. The lilies hold symbolical significance in Miss Ann's relations with George. Though the idea that lilies mean so much to Miss Ann through all the years is sentimental, Miss Elliott does not dwell on it to the point where it becomes maudlin.

Sarah Barnwell Elliott's best short stories are in her book, An

⁶Original articles contributed by Southern writers for publication as a Souvenir of the Memorial Bazaar for the benefit of the Monument to the Private Soldiers and Sailors of the Confederacy. . . ." (Title-page of From Dixie.)

⁷Harper's Bazar, XXXI (Apr. 9, 1898), 317-318.

Incident and Other Happenings.⁸ Seven of the eight stories in the collection had previously been printed in magazines. There is no plan in the order in which the stories of An Incident appear, but it will be in keeping with the rest of this section to consider them in the order of their publication.

"Mrs. Gollyhaw's Candy-Stew" was, according to Miss Elliott, published by S. S. McClure "in 1886 or 1887."⁹ It is, strictly speaking, not a short story, but a short novel, and is divided into chapters. For all its length, however, it is not important, being nothing more than a melodrama. Its setting is the rough little town of Pecan, Texas (where "A Simple Heart" was also set), and its theme is the murder and revenge of feuding families, with the moral that love and humility can put an end to hostility where courage or cowardice fails.

"An Ex-Brigadier" was first published in 1890.¹⁰ It is a story within a story. It is one of Miss Elliott's more humorous pieces of writing.) The ex-brigadier is old General Stamper, a member of the Southern aristocracy and officer under Forrest in the Civil War.

⁸An Incident and Other Happenings (New York: 1899), 273 pp. Included in the collection: "An Incident," "Miss Maria's Revival," "Faith and Faithfulness," "An Ex-Brigadier," "Squire Kayley's Conclusions," "Without the Courts," "Mrs. Gollyhaw's Candy-Stew," and "Baldy."

⁹Interview in the Nashville Tennessean, Sept. 28, 1907.

¹⁰Harper's, LXXX (May, 1890), 888-898; An Incident, pp. 87-120.

The inner story is introduced by the account of the negotiations between the General and young John Willoughby, representative of a railroad that is ready to extend its line to the General's town of Booker City, Alabama. General Stamper, finding that his land is rich in mineral deposits, plans to profit considerably. But finding that Willoughby is a member of a fine old Southern family, he takes him into his confidence, telling him of his post-war experiences as an evangelist in Texas. This inner story, a satire on religion and evangelists, is light in its tone, not meant to be taken seriously. One passage illustrates the sort of humor found in "An Ex-Brigadier." The General explains to Willoughby how he convinced a doubting Texan of his true religious depth: "'My brother,' I said, gravely, and I laid my hand on his shoulder in a way that would have done credit to an archbishop, 'you don't understand; I got my sense before I was called to be a preacher; I was a man first, and then a preacher.'"¹¹

Another story in the collection that treats religion humorously is "Miss Maria's Revival."¹² Miss Maria Cathcart, the central character, also is the main character in two other stories in the book, "Faith and Faithfulness," and "Baldy." Though frowning on revivals and other exhibitions of fervor in religion, Miss Maria herself repents her neglect of the heathen one Sunday afternoon, and she alternately

¹¹"An Ex-Brigadier," An Incident, p. 105.

¹²First published in Harper's, XCIII (1894), 461-66. In An Incident, pp. 43-58.

sings, prays, and takes money from her strong-box until she has donated twenty dollars to foreign missions. Fearing that she will outdo herself, she allows her maid to keep the key to her strong-box until she recovers her poise. Though humorous in tone, the story reveals the sincerity and goodness of the old lady, without being sentimental about it.

Less humorous in tone, "Faith and Faithfulness"¹³ has as central characters Miss Maria and her Negro maid, Kizzy. The story has as its theme the pride of the Southerners after their defeat, even when forced to suffer from poverty. A Northern pastor and his wife, newly come South, help Miss Maria by giving her (unknown to the old lady) fuel and baskets of provisions. Accepting the food as belated recognition from God of her strength in adversity, Miss Maria uses the supplies to re-establish her accustomed standard of living. This disgusts the pastor's wife, who thinks sensibly that economy would be wiser. Irony is added to the story when Kizzy, who has been working for the pastor to keep Miss Maria from starving, quits when her mistress again has plenty. The story is better for being sympathetic to both the Southerners and Northerners, and it points to the fact that the proud nature of the Southerners cannot be changed altogether by either defeat or generosity.

¹³First printed in Harper's, XCIII (1896), 791-797. In An Incident, pp. 61-83.

"Squire Kayley's Conclusions"¹⁴ has a social problem as its theme—that of the South's code of honor as opposed to the law of the courts. The theme is important to Miss Elliott, for it recurs in two other stories in the collection. Squire Kayley, the leading lawyer of the Southern town of Greenville, comes back to the town after serving in Congress, and is determined to enforce the law of the courts. The men of the town, however, believe that suits brought for "assault and battery" and "alienating affections" are cowardly, and could better be settled by "a word and a blow." The Squire persuades a Negro to sue an old Southern man for assault. The old man has caned the Negro, as he has done many times before. Squire Kayley wins the suit for the Negro. The town, of course, turns against the Squire. In another case, the Squire has persuaded a hot-headed boy named Nick to sue the man who has run off with his wife, instead of killing him. Again the Squire wins the case. But the ironical conclusion of the story takes place in a prison (as in "An Incident") where both the Negro and Nick are serving. The Negro has got into trouble with the money he won and Nick has killed his rival, anyway. Miss Elliott implies that there is no solution to the problem—at least not a quick one. The Squire is right in his civilizing attempt, but the two men cannot be changed from their ways of life so abruptly.

The story "An Incident,"¹⁵ which gives the book its title, has

¹⁴First printed in Scribner's XXII (July-Dec., 1897), 758-769. In An Incident, pp. 123-145.

¹⁵An Incident and Other Happenings, pp. 3-42.

the same theme as "Squire Kayley's Conclusions," but its plot is the attempted lynching of a Negro who is suspected of assaulting and killing a white woman. There is no evidence of his guilt, since no one has seen the act, and the woman is not to be found. Only because the sheriff is unusually dutiful is the Negro saved. The white woman reappears, saying that the Negro has not touched her, because she escaped through the swamp in a boat. In the final scene, which is in a prison, the Negro, who was spared a lynching, tells a home mission teacher that he is in prison because he attempted to assault a woman, but that he is happy because either in or out he would have to work, and that if let out his life would still be in danger because the woman's husband would try to kill him.

Miss Elliott's finest story, "Without the Courts,"¹⁶ achieves subtlety through understatement. It is an account of a duel—the central part of the Southern code of honor—without moral comment on whether the code is right or wrong. George Beverley astounds his lawyer by telling him that he wants the ancestral home and plantation sold at once, and that Mrs. Beverley and the child will go to Europe, while he will stay and plant a smaller farm that he owns. A messenger arrives saying that the body of Beverley's cousin Sandy has just been found riddled with buckshot. Since Sandy has gone hunting that morning and his shotgun has been fired, it is suspected that he has accidentally

¹⁶First printed in Harper's, XCVIII (1899), 575-579. In An Incident, pp. 149-160.

shot himself. Mrs. Beverley collapses when hearing the news, for George had taken her to a dance the night before, and she and Sandy had been together most of the evening. Alone, George tersely tells his lawyer that Sandy, for once, has been honorable, having fired both barrels into the air. Nothing more. The story ends very dramatically, with George telling his lawyer: "You must take the old dog with you," he said, "out of my sight. This morning I had to beat him to make him come away, and at the last he ran and licked his face."

B. W. Wells, reviewing An Incident,¹⁷ writes that he considers An Incident and Without the Courts "really admirable in the precision of an art that suggests that of Maupassant."¹⁸ He particularly praises "Without the Courts" for its terse and subtle manner of suggesting its tragic theme. He says: "There seems here no superfluous word. . . ."¹⁹ After praising the volume at greater length, Mr. Wells writes: "All this makes the book more universal in its appeal than any other book Miss Elliott has yet written. It shows progress in every direction. The critic may commend its permanence,

¹⁷In Sewanee Review, VIII (1899), 245-247.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 246.

¹⁹Ibid. Mr. Wells' admiration of the conciseness of "Without the Courts" suggests a story which Miss Elliott related to Professor Tudor Long, head of the English Department of the University of the South. Professor Long recalls that Miss Elliott told him that an editor of Harper's magazine had shown the story to a friend, offering the friend a reward if he could find a superfluous sentence, and the friend was unable to collect. Miss Elliott was evidently proud of "Without the Courts," and justifiably. (Statement by Professor Long, personal interview.)

but will take even greater pleasure in its promise of work to come."²⁰

The promise Mr. Wells thought he detected was never fulfilled, however, for An Incident contains the best of Sarah Barnwell Elliott. Nothing in the years following 1899 approached her "Without the Courts," and even in the same year she could write such trivial stories as "Baldy," which is contained in the collection, and "Progress." In "Baldy"²¹ Miss Maria Cathcart is again the central character. The story is a dull account of how her servant Jack tries to keep an old horse's tail from shedding down to a nothingness. Its humor is labored, and the story falls flat. As the final story in the volume, it is unfortunate and inferior.

"Progress"²² is a sentimental story of a Southern farmer who is persuaded to go into real estate and the general-store business when the railroad is built across his land. Being too generous, unacquainted with the mercenary ways of the "New South," he eventually becomes bankrupt and is forced to auction off what remains of his farm. His old mother states the moral: ". . . it's the new times that done it. It takes new people to fight new times." "Progress" is inferior because of an excess of emotion, that to the reader seems absurd, but it is a significant story because of its reiteration of

²⁰Sewanee Review, VIII (1899), 246-247.

²¹First printed in Harper's, XCVIII (1899), 416-422. In An Incident and Other Happenings, pp. 253-273.

²²McClure's, XIV (Nov. 1899), 40-47.

a theme close to Miss Elliott--the increasing money-madness of the age.

Published in the back of The Durket Sperret, "An Idle Man"²³ stresses Miss Elliott's often repeated theme of happiness found through useful service. On an ocean voyage, Alan Melhis, a wealthy Englishman, seeing that an American girl, Miss Morden, is having difficulties in adequately caring for her sick, old father, cancels his plans to continue his trip to Australia, and helps the two find a comfortable hotel in Cairo. Unable to see the forest for the trees, Miss Morden, who has a martyr complex, abuses Melhis for his apparently aimless existence, saying that he should do some useful work. She learns after he has left that his only purpose in life is to spend his inherited fortune on those who need help the most. The story suffers because of the flat characters who are used simply to state the moral. Also, over-emphasis of Melhis's goodness and Miss Morden's lack of appreciation gives it too large a dose of didacticism.

"Fortune's Vassals"²⁴ surpasses every story Miss Elliott ever wrote for sheer absurdity. Characters, particularly men, personify extreme insipidity. The length of "Fortune's Vassals" only makes more intense its aimlessness. Hetty, the heroine, comes South to an out-of-the-way-town, and tries to isolate herself. No one knows her past, and she gives no hint of it. Men love her, but with no encouragement. She finally returns to the North to marry the man she

²³"An Idle Man," The Durket Sperret (New York: 1899), pp. 195-222.

²⁴Lippincott's, LXIV (July-Dec. 1899), 163-253.

was engaged to.

Published in 1906, "Hybrid Roses"²⁵ is long, involved, and at times nearly ridiculous. A well-bred Southern girl, suspecting that her parents, who were English, were not of the nobility as they pretended to be, goes to England and finds that they were servants. Ashamed, she hires herself out as a maid when she returns, but finally comes to her senses. The story is valuable only because it contains an idea that Miss Elliott occasionally toyed with in her writing—that of pre-natal influence and heritage. Betsy, the main figure in "Hybrid Roses," first suspected that her father was not of the aristocracy when she became conscious of his gnarled hands. Sure enough he had been a gardener. Betty confuses herself by believing that the daughter of a gardener and maid cannot rise above her class, and the story becomes foolish after this.

Mixed together in "What Polly Knew"²⁶ is some of the understatement that makes "Without the Courts" successful, and some of the sentimentality that ruins so many stories. Polly and her escort, Arthur, see a handsome man near them at a concert. Deeply interested, Polly quizzes Arthur about the man and learns that he is a notorious playboy who has run through two fortunes—his own and his mother's—has had an illegitimate child, has broken an engagement, has finally returned and married the fiancée because of a threat of disinheritance

²⁵Harper's, CXIII (Aug. 1906), 434-449.

²⁶The Smart Set, IX (Feb. 1903), 121-124.

by his mother, and has recently failed in a plan to elope with another man's wife. Polly asks why the elopement failed and Arthur replies that the man received a telegram just as he was leaving which stunned him. He seemed grief-stricken, muttering over and over, "I've killed her." Naturally, Arthur is getting annoyed with Polly's unusual interest in the man. Polly then announces that she sent the telegram, having been at the time with the man's illegitimate child, who died of a broken heart. She says: "'Alas! I was with her when she died, and I'll help him kill his mother.'" The implication is that Polly is the mother of the illegitimate child, and seeks revenge. The sentimentality of the child's unrealistic death cancels the effectiveness of the conclusion's understatement, however.

In "Old Mrs. Dally's Lesson,"²⁷ Miss Elliott has as her theme an undesirable social condition. Mrs. Dally, a widow, has given her farm in the Cumberland Mountains to her daughter Sally and Sally's husband, Luke. (In her childhood, Sally Dally must have been teased about her name.) Mrs. Dally is too old to run the farm herself, but Luke and Sally agree to work it and to care for Mrs. Dally the rest of her life. In time, though, Mrs. Dally, feeling that her usefulness is done, wishes a change. After reading in a newspaper of the Centennial Fair in Nashville, she decides to leave home and go to Nashville, maybe for good. She wants to learn something of the world and its ways. With her grandson Jim helping her, Mrs. Dally saves

²⁷Youth's Companion, LXXVIII (Dec. 29 1904), 660-661.

enough money selling butter and eggs to make the trip. Jim goes with her. The Centennial, however, is too much for Mrs. Dally. Bewildered by noise, the confusion, and most of all, the greed and rudeness of the people, Mrs. Dally returns home after one day at the Fair. The old lady learns that the outside world, in making all its progress, has neglected to include in its way of life the simple virtues of decency and kindness. She is content to resume her old way of living, particularly after Sally says that she and Luke cannot get along without her.

"Readjustments"²⁸ has a theme similar to that of "Squire Kayley's Conclusions"--the readjustment of the Southern code of honor to the post-Civil-War legal codes of civilized society. Its greatest fault is implausibility. A sensitive, artistic son shoots his rugged father's adversary to prevent the old man from becoming a murderer in an inevitable duel. In addition, the son has paid the mortgage on the old home with money earned by writing short stories. He is just too good, and his actions too noble.

Miss Elliott approached but did not attain the conciseness and subtlety of "Without the Courts" in her last published story, "The Last Flash."²⁹ The story begins during the first World War. An old woman, the wife of a Civil War general who has just died, sits by her fire knitting socks, dazed by her husband's sudden death. Her daughter

²⁸Harper's, CXX (Dec.-May 1909-1910), 824-832.

²⁹Scribner's, LVII (Jan.-June 1915), 692-695.

accidentally drops a newspaper whose headlines tell of the terrible battles raging, and the old woman says: "I thought it was all over and my work all done. I'll knit and knit!" And when an old comrade-in-arms of her husband's visits her she asks: "Are you going, too, with your bugle?" If the story had ended with this question, its understatement would have been more effective than the touch of sentimentality that Miss Elliott adds by having the old friend wipe his eyes with the back of his hand.

Sarah Barnwell Elliott wrote one propaganda story, "Hands All Around,"³⁰ published in 1898 during the stir over the Spanish in Cuba and the sinking of the Maine. In it, she justifies the patriotic cliches that excite young men to go to war.

Miss Elliott's short stories reveal that she is frequently over-emotional, and that she is interested in the changes taking place in her time. Miss Elliott is not so reactionary that she is opposed to progress; rather she laments that the new civilization does not include the good qualities of the old. "Progress" and "Old Mrs. Dally's Lesson" are illustrations of this contention. Her comments on problems peculiar to the South are more important. In these she advises the reformers that it will take time to alter conduct appreciably through legislation. She feels, however, that the changes desired by the legislation are for the best. "Squire Kayley's Conclusions," "An Incident," and "Readjustments" are stories that warn of the impotency

³⁰Book News, XVII (Sept. 1898), 1-6.

of laws which oppose the culture.

From the discussion of the short stories, it can be seen that both the quality and the subject matter of Sarah Barnwell Elliott's writing fluctuate enormously. As a writer, Miss Elliott is paradoxical, for with the same setting--the post-Civil War South--she writes her best and worst stories. The best, "Without the Courts," is written in the style of realism, which is to say, with detached impartiality, and the worst, "Some Data," and "Fortune's Vassals," are sentimentalized. Between these extremes of quality, but with the same milieu, Miss Elliott writes notable stories of social comment, namely, "An Incident," and "Squire Kayley's Conclusions." Occasionally she combines sentiment and comments on social evils, as in "Old Mrs. Dally's Lesson," and "Progress," with unfortunate results. When she chooses settings outside the agricultural South, she maintains a more consistent level of achievement, though not the high one that she reached in "Without the Courts." One exception is her symbolic religious story of a Southwestern preacher, "A Simple Heart." With urban settings--Paris in "Miss Eliza" and a large American city in "What Polly Knew"--Miss Elliott sentimentality treats the theme of happiness through usefulness. Whatever the setting or whatever the theme, then, she may write with degrees of emotion or detachment. She cannot be depended upon to be consistent.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In a final consideration of the significance of Sarah Barnwell Elliott, it is necessary to compare her with other writers of the period, and to estimate her achievement in relation to those writers. First, it must be understood that in the latter half of the nineteenth century realism was a growing genre in serious literature, replacing the romantic and the sentimental in critical approbation. The trend toward realism resembled the earlier romantic movement, with its successful opposition to the artificiality of corrupt eighteenth-century neo-classicism. Both reforms sought to re-emphasize the real, as against the contrived. That is, characters, themes, and motives in sentimental fiction were not life-like, and therefore not real. Realism was, then, a return to the life-like. The effect of real life was to be gained by basing the action on actual human motives, and by allowing the action to produce a natural conclusion.

A leading figure in the emergence of realism from the corrupted romanticism was William Dean Howells, who had practiced and preached its doctrine. In his Criticism and Fiction he writes that the mass of readers who are "sunk in the foolish joys of mere fable, can be lifted to an interest in the meaning of things through the faithful portrayal of life in fiction. . . ."¹ By now this kind of writing

¹William Dean Howells, Criticism and Fiction (New York: 1892), pp. 186-187.

is firmly established, and for that reason the works of Sarah Barnwell Elliott have been passed over as belonging exclusively to the worn, sentimentalized plantation tradition. That is not the case, however, for Miss Elliott makes definite contributions to realistic fiction.

From her first published work in 1880, to the publication of Jerry in 1891, she wrote in the tradition of nostalgic longing for the past. But with Jerry Miss Elliott achieved realism, completely casting off the contrived situations and character motivations of her earlier work. For the next ten years she did her most realistic writing, particularly in the volume of collected stories, An Incident and Other Happenings (1899). Yet during these years from 1891 to 1901, when realism in her writing was most evident, she could not sever herself completely from sentimentality, and for the rest of her productive career she made no notable contributions to realistic fiction. She made her reputation, then, in those ten years from 1891 to 1901.

Changing times, bringing with them changing values, caused Miss Elliott to turn to realism. Noting with concern the social changes that were taking place, she warns against the mercenary values of the growing industrial civilization. By definition realism implies an impartial, detached point of view, but an author may write realistically even though he is biased in one way or another. Miss Elliott's realism is of this nature. Though in Jerry she object to materialism, she achieves realism in the action that leads inevitably to the fatal conclusion. Similarly, in the stories, "Without the Courts,"

"An Incident," and "Squire Kayley's Conclusions," the extremely plausible conclusions, determined by the preceding action and the customs of Southern society, are fine examples of realistic writing.

Delivering her verdict upon the spirit of the age, Miss Elliott writes: "The spirit of the nineteenth century was, in its essence, a scientific spirit. Science is to know—to know accurately—and this spirit that will know has left nothing untroubled."² In a tone reminiscent of an opinion expressed in Jerry, she continues: "Why, in the century just closed—the century of the most progress, the most humane theories, the most emotional charities—has the fiction been so hopeless. . .?"³ An answer to Miss Elliott's question is that the fiction had a hopeless tone because, being realistic, it represented the age. And Miss Elliott's best writing itself expresses the hopelessness. When she writes with the intention of giving pleasure only rather than picturing real life, she allows sentimentality and implausibility to dissipate her creative ability. She will, however, be remembered for her Jerry and An Incident, works made memorable by the realism of her writing.

²"The Spirit of the Nineteenth Century in Fiction," Outlook, LXVII (Jan. 1901), 153.

³Ibid., p. 153.

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