

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Little Selves

MARY LERNER

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Very little is known about the life of the Cambridge, Massachusetts storyteller Mary Lerner, not even the dates of her birth and death. She published several short stories in national magazines, including “Little Selves” which first appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in September 1916 and was collected among The Best American Short Stories for that year. Lerner was writing at a time when Irish immigrants were still largely unwelcome, but tolerated for the need to fill open jobs during World War I. Many of these immigrants treasured vivid memories of their younger—and, at least in memory, more magical—days back in Ireland. This story highlights the memories of one of these immigrants, Margaret O’Brien, an elderly Irish-American woman at the very end of her life, as she struggles with the realization that her stories will likely disappear when she does.

What do we know of the life of Margaret O’Brien? What, at the end of her (childless) life is the “something [that] grew and fattened on her strength” beneath her heart? Who or what are the “little selves” and what accounts for Ms. O’Brien’s preoccupation with them, and also with the legendary leprechauns and fairies of old Ireland? What is the reason for the pride in her roots or for the near-mystical identification with the ethnic heritage of this American immigrant? Do you think, for example, that Ms. O’Brien would be as involved with her childhood if she had had children of her own? And would she say that “them little whips [her memories of herself when young] seem to be the real ones, and the live children here the shadders [shadows]”? Or are pride in roots and identification with the old homeland something naturally felt by immigrants to America, and not only Irish ones? What does receiving these stories do for Anna? Anna says of the priest that he was a “good and sympathetic man . . . but, American-born, he was . . . outside the magic circle of comprehension.” What is the magic circle of comprehension? Does this story enable American-born readers to enter it? Is there something to be gained by trying to do so?

Margaret O’Brien, a great-aunt and seventy-five, knew she was near the end. She did not repine, for she had had a long, hard life and she was tired. The young priest who brought her communion had administered the last rights—holy oils on her eyelids (Lord, forgive her the sins of seeing!); holy oils on her lips (Lord, forgive her the sins of speaking!), on her ears, on her knotted hands, on her weary feet. Now she was ready, though she knew

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the approach of the dread presence would mean greater suffering. So she folded quiet hands beneath her heart, there where no child had ever lain, yet where now something grew and fattened on her strength. And she seemed given over to the pleasant reverie.

Neighbors came in to see her, and she roused herself and received them graciously, with a personal touch for each.—“And has your Julia gone to New York, Mrs. Carty? Nothing would do her but she must be going, I suppose. ’Twas the selfsame way with me, when I was coming out here from the old country. Full of money the streets were, I used to be thinking. Well, well; the hills far away are green.”

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Or to Mrs. Devlin: “Terence is at it again, I see by the look of you. Poor man! There’s no holding him? Eh, woman dear! Thirst is the end of drinking and sorrow is the end of love.”

If her visitors stayed longer than a few minutes, however, her attention wandered; her replies became cryptic. She would murmur something about “all the seven parishes,” or the Wicklow hills, or “the fair cove of Cork tippytoe into the ocean”; then fall into silence, smiling, eyes closed, yet with a singular look of attention. At such times, her callers would whisper: “Glory b’ t’ God! she’s so near it there’s no fun in it,” and slip out soberly into the kitchen.

Her niece, Anna Lennan, mother of a fine brood of children, would stop work for the space of a breath and enjoy a bit of conversation.

“Ain’t she failing, though, the poor afflicted creature?” Mrs. Hanley cried one day. “Her mind is going back on her already.”

“Are you of that opinion? I’m thinking she’s mind enough yet, when she wants to attend; but mostly she’s just drawn into herself, as busy as a bee about something, whatever it is that she’s turning over in her head day-in, day-out. She sleeps scarce a wink for all she lies there so quiet, and, in the night, my man and I hear her talking to herself. ‘No, no,’ she’ll say. ‘I’ve gone past. I must be getting back to the start.’ Or, another time, ‘This is it, now. If I could be stopping!’”

“And what do you think she is colloguing about?”

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“There’s no telling. Himself does be saying it’s in an elevator she is, but that’s because he puts in the day churning up and down in one of the same. What else can you expect? ’Tis nothing but ‘Going up! going down!’ with him all night as it is. Betune the two of them they have me fair destroyed with their traveling. ‘Are you lacking anything, Aunt Margaret?’ I call out to her. ‘I am not,’ she answers, impatient-like. ‘Don’t be ever fussing and too-ing, will you?’”

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“Tch! tch!”

“And do you suppose the children are a comfort to her? Sorra bit. Just a look at them and she wants to be alone. ‘Take them away, let you,’ says she, shutting her eyes. ‘The others is realer.’”

“And you think she’s in her right mind all the same?”

“I do. ’Tis just something she likes to be thinking over,—something she’s fair dotty about. Why, it’s the same when Father Flint is here. Polite and riverintial at the first, then impatient, and, if the poor man doesn’t be taking the hint, she just closes up shop and off again into her whimsies. You’d swear she was in fear of missing something.”

The visitor, being a young wife, had an explanation to hazard. “If she was a widow woman, now, or married—Perhaps she had a liking for somebody once. Perhaps she might be trying to imagine them young days over again. Do you think could it be that?”

Anna shook her head. “My mother used to say she was a born old maid. All *she* wanted was work and saving her bit of money, and to church every minute she could be sparing.”

“Still, you can’t be telling. ’Tis often that kind weeps sorest when’t is too late. My own old aunt used to cry, ‘If I could be twenty-five again, wouldn’t I do different!’”

“Maybe, maybe, though I doubt could it be so.”

Nor was it so. The old woman, lying back so quietly among her pillows with closed eyes, yet with that look of singular intentness and concentration, was seeking no lover of her youth; though, indeed, she had had one once, and from time to time he did enter her reverly, try as she would to prevent him. At that point, she always made the singular

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comment, “Gone past! I must be getting back to the beginning,” and, pressing back into her earliest consciousness, she would remount the flooding current of the years. Each time, she hoped to get further,—though remoter shapes were illusive, and, if approached too closely, vanished,—for, once embarked on her river of memories, the descent was relentlessly swift. How tantalizing that swiftness! However she yearned to linger, she was rushed along till, all too soon, she sailed into the common light of day. At that point, she always put about, and laboriously recommenced the ascent.

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To-day, something her niece had said about Donnybrook Fair—for Anna, too, was a child of the old sod—seemed to swell out with a fair wind the sails of her visionary bark. She closed her mind to all familiar shapes and strained back—way, way back, concentrating all her powers in an effort of will. For a bit she seemed to hover in populous space. This did not disturb her; she had experienced the same thing before. It simply meant she had mounted pretty well up to the fountain-head. The figures, when they did come, would be the ones she most desired.

At last, they began to take shape, tenuously at first, then of fuller body, each bringing its own setting, its own atmospheric suggestion—whether of dove-feathered Irish cloud and fresh greensward, of sudden downpour, or equally sudden clearing, with continual leafy drip, drip, drip, in the midst of brilliant sunshine.

For Margaret O’Brien, ardent summer sunlight seemed suddenly to pervade the cool, orderly little bedchamber. Then, “Here she is!” and a wee girl of four danced into view, wearing a dress of pink print, very tight at the top and very full at the bottom. She led the way to a tiny new house whence issued the cheery voice of hammers. Lumber and tools were lying round; from within came men’s voices. The small girl stamped up the steps and looked in. Then she made for the narrow stair.

“Where’s Margaret gone to?” said one of the men. “The upper floor’s not finished. It’s falling through the young one will be.”

“Peggy!” called the older man. “Come down here with you.”

There was a delighted squeal. The pink dress appeared at the head of the stairs. “Oh, the funny little man, daddy! Such a funny little old man with a high hat! Come quick, let you, and see him.”

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The two men ran to the stairs.

“Where is he?”

She turned back and pointed. Then her face fell. “Gone! the little man is gone!”

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Her father laughed and picked her up in his arms. “How big was he, Peg? As big as yourself, I wonder?”

“No, no! Small.”

“As big as the baby?”

She considered a moment. “Yes, just as big as that. But a man, da.”

“Well, why aren’t you after catching him and holding him for ransom? ’Tis pots and pots o’ gold they’ve hidden away, the little people, and will be paying a body what he asks to let them go.”

She pouted, on the verge of tears. “I want him to come back.”

“I mistrust he won’t be doing that, the leprechaun. Once you take your eye away, it’s off with him for good and all.”

Margaret O’Brien hugged herself with delight. *That* was a new one; she had never got back that far before. Yet how well she remembered it all! She seemed to smell the woody pungency of the lumber, the limey odor of whitewash from the field-stone cellar.

The old woman’s dream went on. Out of the inexhaustible storehouse of the past, she summoned, one by one, her much-loved memories. There was a pig-tailed Margaret in bonnet and shawl, trudging to school one wintry day. She had seen many wintry school-days, but this one stood out by reason of the tears she had shed by the way. She saw the long benches, the states, the charts, the tall teacher at his desk. With a swelling of the throat, she saw the little girl sob out her declaration: “I’m not for coming no more, Mr. Wilde.”

“What’s that, Margaret? And why not? Haven’t I been good to you?”

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Tears choked the child. “Oh, Mr. Wilde, it’s just because you’re so terrible good to me. They say you are trying to make a Protestant out of me. So I’ll not be coming no more.”

The tall man drew the little girl to his knee and reassured her. Margaret O’Brien could review that scene with tender delight now. She had not been forced to give up her beloved school. Mr. Wilde had explained to her that her brothers were merely teasing her because she was so quick and such a favorite.

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A little Margaret knelt on the cold stone floor at church and stared at the pictured saints or heard the budding branches rustle in the orchard outside. Another Margaret, a little taller, begged for a new sheet of ballads every time her father went to the fair.— There were the long flimsy sheets, with closely printed verses. These you must adapt to familiar tunes. This Margaret, then, swept the hearth and stacked the turf and sang from her bench in the chimney-corner. Sometimes it was something about “the little old red coat me father wore,” which was “All buttons, buttons, buttons, buttons; all buttons down before”; or another beginning—

“Oh, dear, what can the matter be?
Johnny’s so long at the fair!
He promised the buy me a knot of blue ribbon
To tie up my bonny brown hair.”

Then there was a picture of the time the fairies actually bewitched the churn, and, labor as you might, no butter would form, not the least tiny speck. Margaret and her mother took the churn apart and examined every part of it. Nothing out of the way. “’Tis the fairies is in it,” her mother said. “All Souls’ Day a-Friday. Put out a saucer of cream the night for the little people, let you.” A well-grown girl in a blue cotton frock, the long braids of her black hair whipping about her in the windy evening, set out the cream on the stone flags before the low doorway, wasting no time in getting in again. The next day, how the butter “came”! Hardly started they were, when they could feel it forming. When Margaret washed the dasher, she kept an “eye out” for the dark corners of the room, for the air seemed thronged and murmurous.

After this picture, came always the same tall girl still in the same blue frock, this time with a shawl on her head. She brought in potatoes from the sheltered heaps that wintered

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out in the open. From one pailful she picked out a little flat stone, rectangular and smoother and more evenly proportioned than any stone she had ever seen.

“What a funny stone!” she said to her mother.

Her mother left carding her wool to look. “You may well say so. ’Tis one of the fairies’ tables. Look close and you’ll be turning up their little chairs as well.”

It was as her mother said. Margaret found four smaller stones of like appearance, which one might well imagine to be stools for tiny dolls.

“Shall I be giving them to little Bee for playthings?”

“You will not. You’ll be putting them outside. In the morning, though you may be searching the countryside, no trace of them will you find, for the fairies will be taking them again.”

So Margaret stacked the fairy table and chairs outside. Next morning, she ran out half reluctantly, for she was afraid she would find them and that would spoil the story. But, no! they were gone. She never saw them again, though she searched in all imaginable places. Nor was that the last potato heap to yield these mysterious stones.

Margaret, growing from scene to scene, appeared again in a group of laughing boys and girls.

“What’ll we play now?”

“Let’s write the ivy test.”

“Here’s leaves.”

Each wrote a name on a leaf and dropped it into a jar of water. Next morning, Margaret, who had misgivings, stole down early and searched for her leaf. Yes, the die was cast! At the sight of its bruised surface, ready tears flooded her eyes. She had written the name of her little grandmother, and the condition of the leaf foretold death within the year. The other leaves were unmarred. She quickly destroyed the ill-omened bit of ivy and said nothing about it, though the children clamored. “There’s one leaf short. Whose

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is gone?” “Mine is there!” “Is it yours, John?” “Is it yours, Esther?” But Margaret kept her counsel, and, within the year, the little grandmother was dead. Of course, she was old, though vigorous; yet Margaret would never play that game again. It was like gambling with fate.

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And still the girls kept swinging past. Steadily, all too swiftly, Margaret shot up to a woman’s stature; her skirts crept down, her braids ought to have been bobbed up behind. She let them hang, however, and still ran with the boys, questing the bogs, climbing the apple trees, storming the wind-swept hills. Her mother would point to her sister Mary, who, though younger, sat now by the fire with her “spriggin” [*embroidery*] for “the quality.” Mary could crochet, too, and had a fine range of “shamrougue” patterns. So the mother would chide Margaret.

“What kind of a girl are you, at all, to be ever lepping and tearing like a redshanks [*deer*]? ’Tis high time for you to be getting sensible and learning something. Whistles and scouting-guns is all you’re good for, and there’s no silver in them things as far as I can see.”

What fine whistles she contrived out of the pithy willow shoots in the spring! And the scouting-guns hollowed out of elder-stalks, which they charged with water from the brook by means of wadded sticks, working piston-wise! They would hid behind a hedge and bespatter enemies and friends alike. Many’s the time they got their ears warmed in consequence or went supperless to bed, pretending not to see the table spread with baked potatoes,—“laughing potatoes,” they called them because they were ever splitting their sides,—besides delicious buttermilk, freshly-laid eggs, oat-cakes and fresh butter. “A child without supper is two to breakfast,” their mother would say, smiling, when she saw them “tackle” their stirabout the next day.

How full of verve and life were all these figures! That glancing creature grow old? How could such things be! The sober pace of maturity even seemed out of her star. Yet here she was, growing up, for all her reluctance. An awkward gossoon leaned over the gate in the moonlight, though she was indoors, ready to hide. But nobody noticed her alarm.

“There’s that long-legged McMurray lad again’ scouting after Mary, I’ll be bound,” said her mother, all unawares.

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But it was not Mary that he came for, though she married him just the same, and came out to America with their children some years after her sister's lone pilgrimage.

The intrusion of Jerry McMurray signaled the grounding of her dreambark on the shoals of reality. Who cared about the cut-and-dried life of a grown woman? Enchantment now lay behind her, and, if the intervals between periods of pain permitted, she again turned an expectant face toward the old childish visions. Sometimes she could make the trip twice over without being overtaken by suffering. But her intervals of comfort grew steadily shorter; frequently she was interrupted before she could get rightly launched on her delight. And always there seemed to be one vision more illusive than the rest which she particularly longed to recapture. At last, chance words of Anna's put her on its trail in this wise.

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When she was not, as her niece said, "in her trance, wool-gathering," Anna did her best to distract her, sending the children in to ask "would she have a sup of tea now," or a taste of wine jelly. One day, after the invalid had spent a bad night, she brought in her new long silk coat for her aunt's inspection, for the old woman had always been "tasty" and "dressy," and had made many a fine gown in her day. The sharp old eyes lingered on the rich and truly striking braid ornament that secured the loose front of the garment.

"What's that plaster?" she demanded, disparagingly.

Anna, inclined to be wroth, retorted: "I suppose you'd be preferring one o' them tight ganzy [*sweater*] things that fit the figger like a jersey, all buttoned down before."

A sudden light flamed in the old face. "I have it!" she cried. "'Tis what I've been seeking this good while. 'Twill come now—the red coat! I must be getting back to the beginning."

With that, she was off, relaxing and composing herself, as if surrendering to the spell of a hypnotist.

To reach any desired picture in her gallery, she must start at the outset. Then they followed on, in due order—all that procession of little girls: pink clad, blue-print clad, bare-legged or brogan-shod; flirting their short skirts, plaiting their heavy braids. About half way along, a new figure asserted itself—a girl of nine or ten, who twisted this way and that before a blurred bit of mirror and frowned at the red coat that flapped about her

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heels,—bought oversize, you may be sure, so that she shouldn't grow out of it too soon. The sleeves swallowed her little brown hands, the shoulders and back were grotesquely sack-like, the front had a puss [*pout*] on it.

“’Tis the very fetch of Paddy the gander I am in it. I’ll not be wearing it so.” She frowned with sudden intentness. “Could I be fitting it a bit, I wonder, the way mother does cut down John’s coats for Martin?”

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With needle, scissors and thread, she crept up to her little chamber under the eaves. It was early in the forenoon when she set to work ripping. The morning passed, and the dinner hour.

“Peggy! Where’s the girl gone to, I wonder?”

“To Aunt Theresa’s, I’m thinking.”

“Well, it’s glad I am she’s out o’ my sight, for my hands itched to be shaking her. Stand and twist herself inside out she did, fussing over the fit of the good coat I’m after buying her. The little fustherer!”

For the small tailoress under the roof, the afternoon sped on winged feet: pinning, basting, and stitching; trying on, ripping out again, and re-fitting. “I’ll be taking it in a wee bit more.” She had to crowd up to the window to catch the last of the daylight. At dusk, she swept her dark hair from her flushed cheeks and forced her sturdy body into the red coat. It was a “fit,” believe you me! Modeled on the lines of the riding-habit of a full-figured lady she had seen hunting about the countryside, it buttoned up tight over her flat, boyish chest and bottled up her squareish little waist. About her narrow hips, it rippled out in a short “frisk.” Beneath, her calico skirt, and bramblescratched brown legs.

Warmed with triumph, she flew downstairs. Her mother and a neighbor were sitting in the glow of the peat fire. She tried to meet them with assurance, but, at sight of their amazed faces, misgiving clutched her. She pivoted before the mirror.

“Holy hour!” cried her mother. “What sausage-skin is that you’ve got into?” Then, as comprehension grew: “Glory b’ t’ God, Ellen! ’tis the remains of the fine new coat I’m after buying her, large enough to last her the next five years!”

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“’Twas too large!” the child whimpered. “A gander I looked in it!” Then, cajolingly, “I’m but after taking it in a bit, ma. ’Twill do grand now, and maybe I’ll not be getting much fatter. Look at the fit of it, just!”

“Fit! God save the mark!” cried her mother.

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“Is the child after making that jacket herself?” asked the neighbor.

“I am,” Margaret spoke up, defiantly. “I cut it and shaped it and put it together. It has even a frisk to the tail.”

“Maggie,” said the neighbor to Margaret’s mother. “’Tis as good a piece o’ work for a child of her years as ever I see. You ought not to be faulting her, she’s done that well. And,” bursting into irrepressible laughter, “it’s herself will have to be wearing it, woman dear! All she needs now is a horse and a side-saddle to be an equestrieen!”

So the wanton destruction of the good red coat—in that house where good coats were sadly infrequent—ended with a laugh after all. How long she wore that tight jacket, and how grand she felt in it, let the other children laugh as they would!

What joy the old woman took in this incident! With its fullness of detail, it achieved a delicious suggestion of permanence, in contrast to the illusiveness of other isolated moments. Margaret O’Brien *saw* all these other figures, but she really *was* the child with the red coat. In the long years between, she had fashioned many fine dress—gowned gay girls for their conquests and robed fair brides for the altar. Of all these, nothing now remained; but she could feel the good stuff of the red kersey under her little needle-scratched fingers, and see the glow of its rich color against her wind-kissed brown cheek.

“To the life!” she exclaimed aloud, exultantly. “To the very life!”

“What life, Aunt Margaret?” asked Anna, with gentle solicitude. “Is it afraid of the end you are, darling?”

“No, no, asthore. I’ve resigned myself long since, though ’twas bitter knowledge at the outset. Well, well, God is good and we can’t live forever.”

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Her eyes, opening to the two flaring patent gas-burners, winked as if she had dwelt long in a milder light. “What’s all this glare about?” she asked, playfully. “I guess the chandler’s wife is dead. Snuff out the whole of them starting candles, let you. ’Tis daylight yet; just the time o’ day I always did like the best.”

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Anna obeyed and sat down beside the bed in the soft spring dusk. A little wind crept in under the floating white curtains, bringing with it the sweetness of new grass and pear-blossoms from the trim yard. It seemed like an interval set apart from the hurrying hours of the busy day for rest and thought and confidence—an open moment. The old woman must have felt its invitation, for she turned her head and held out a shy hand to her niece.

“Anna, my girl, you imagine ’tis the full o’ the moon with me, I’m thinking. But, no, never woman was more in her right mind than I. Do you want I should be telling you what I’ve been hatching these many long days and nights? ’Twill be a good laugh for you, I’ll go bail.”

And, as best she could, she gave the trend of her imaginings.

Anna did not laugh, however. Instead, with the ever-ready sympathy and comprehension of the Celt, she showed brimming eyes. “’Tis a thought I’ve often myself, let me tell you,” she admitted. “Of all the little girls that were me, and now can be living no longer.”

“You’ve said it!” cried the old woman, delighted at her unexpected responsiveness. “Only with me, ’tis fair pit’yus. There’s all those poor dear lasses there’s nobody but me left to remember, and soon there’ll not be even that. Sometimes they seem to be pleading just not to be forgotten, so I have to be keeping them alive in my head. I’m succeeding, too, and, if you’ll believe me, ’tis them little whips seem to be the real ones, and the live children here the shadders.” Her voice choked with sudden tears. “They’re all the children ever I had. My grief! that I’ll have to be leaving them! They’ll die now, for no man lives who can remember them any more.”

Anna’s beauty, already fading with the cares of house and children, seemed to put on all its former fresh charm. She leaned forward with girlish eagerness. “Auntie Margaret,” she breathed, with new tenderness, “there’s many a day left you yet. I’ll be sitting here aside of you every evening at twilight just, and you can be showing me the lasses you have in mind. Many’s the time my mother told me of the old place, and I can remember it

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well enough myself, though I was the youngest of the lot. So you can be filling it with all of our people,—Mary and Margaret, John, Martin and Esther, Uncle Sheamus and the rest. I'll see them just as clear as yourself, for I've a place in my head where pictures come as thick and sharp as stars on a frosty night, when I get thinking. Then, with me ever calling them up, they'll be dancing and stravaging about till doomsday.”

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So the old woman had her heart's desire. She recreated her earlier selves and passed them on, happy in the thought that she was saving them from oblivion. “Do you mind that bold lass clouting her pet bull, now?” she would ask, with delight, speaking more and more as if of a third person. “And that other hussy that's after making a ganzy out of her good coat? I'd admire to have the leathering of that one.”

Still the old woman lingered, a good month beyond her allotted time. As spring ripened, the days grew long. In the slow-fading twilights, the two women set their stage, gave cues for entrances and exits. Over the white counterpane danced the joyous figures, so radiant, so incredibly young, the whole cycle of a woman's girlhood. Grown familiar now, they came of their own accord, soothing her hours of pain with their laughing beauty, or, suddenly contemplative, assisting with seemly decorum at her devotional ecstasies.

“A saintly woman,” the young priest told Anna on one of the last days. “She will make a holy end. Her meditations must be beautiful, for she has the true light of Heaven on her face. She looks as if she heard already the choring of the angels.”

And Anna, respectfully agreeing, kept her counsel. He was a good and sympathetic man and a priest of God, but, American-born, he was, like her stolid, kindly husband, outside the magic circle of comprehension. “He sees nothing, poor man,” she thought, indulgently. “But he does mean well.” So she set her husband to “mind” the young ones, and, easily doffing the sordid preoccupations of every day, slipped back into the enchanted ring.