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THE BOOK-MART

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SCRIBBLING WOMEN
A GROATSWORTH
IMAGINARY QUENT

Andre Norton
Illustrations by
Howard Potts

The Scribbling Women

For My Mother

Whose collection of Victorian novels first introduced me to the work of the "Scribbling Women" and without whose aid this book could never have been written.

MAGNOLIAS

AND MELODRAMA

By Andre Norton



Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth

Emma Dorothy Eliza Nevitte Southworth did more than earn a very comfortable and genteel living with her pen - she mothered a type of writing which, in the hands of - shall we say - her "spiritual" - great-granddaughters, was split into two forms, both still widely popular.

For the melodramas which flowed in steady waves of ink from under her racing fingers were the far off ancestors of both the *Gone With The Wind* historical novel, and the "If-I-Had-But-Known" school of mystery story, so ably produced in our own time by Mary Roberts Rinehart and Mignon Eberhart, to mention but two of the leading portrayers of the innocent-damsel-in-distress.

The pillared southern mansion, while not her personal property alone (Augusta Evans Wilson had also staked a claim upon that profitable backdrop), was one of her cherished stage settings. Her faithful and kindly Negro slaves, drooping like maidens, rakish villains or villain-heroes, appear before its chaste white columns over and over again, to engage in carefully plotted murders, disasters of nature, and all forms of sudden death, wild accusation, in a welter of tangled motive and climax. Here may live that heiress changed in her cradle, the pure young man who is victim of

"America is now wholly given over to a d..... mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while public taste is occupied with their trash."

Hawthorne to Ticknor (1855)

a suppressed will, or the hidden bride rising to confront an errant spouse. And though this plantation may vary in favor of wild and rugged mountains or the saloons of fashionable Washington, or even a Scottish castle, the action remains practically the same.

In her own life Emma, herself, played several of her favorite roles. She was in turn, a half-orphan, misunderstood and forlorn, a deserted wife, and, last of all, a wealthy and famous authoress queening over a salon of celebrities in the nation's capital. In addition she also possessed the heritage she was so fond of bestowing upon her hapless heroines, she was the descendant of a notable "First Family", maybe not of Virginia, but of that sister state almost as renowned, Maryland.

She was the eldest daughter of the second family of Captain Charles le Compte Nevitte, an importing merchant of Alexandria, Virginia. Once wealthy, the Captain suffered severe losses during the War of 1812 when he had placed his fleet of ships at the service of the government, only to have them and his fortune swept away. In addition his army service of the same period left him with a wound from which he never recovered.

In 1816, when he was forty-five and a widower, he married Susanna George Wailes of a well known Maryland family. The bride was only fifteen, the daughter of a widow

Magnolias and

Editor's Note: Andre Norton truly needs no introduction from us, since she is not only one of the most popular, most honored, and most prolific Fantasy writers of our (or any) time, but also, by common critical consent, one of the very best. Her legion of fans have made her one of the top sellers in the field, as anyone knows who deals in books: a visit to any large, new paperback store will usually find dozens of her titles in the Science Fiction section, and her out-of-print rarities sometimes go for galactic sums. If BOOK-MART is indeed honored to be able to bring you this chapter from a never-before-published Norton book, in

response to our readers' requests for more on Nineteenth Century Women Writers (and Mrs. Southworth in particular.) We will bring you further chapters in future issues.

We freely confess that BOOK-MART would normally never be able to afford a writer who commands the advances Miss Norton does. But the Editor's wife Rebecca Pohle and her mother Ernestine B. Donaldy are life-long friends of Miss Norton's, and we are delighted that this bond has enabled us to begin this new series for you.

(And of course Miss Norton herself will eventually feature in our *Librarians Who Write* series.)

who accompanied the Nevittes to their new home in Washington. This was the Hillman house built by George Washington as a haven for his old age.

Here Emma was born in December, 1819 (according to tradition in the very room the Father of his country had selected as his own), and from the first she seemed to be shadowed by as unfortunate a destiny as those she forced upon her major characters. When she was no more than a year old she developed an eye infection which left her blind until she was almost four. In addition, she was not an attractive child in either features or manners, and both imaginative and sensitive beyond her years. The death of her father in 1823, made doubly melodramatic by her baptism in the Catholic faith beside his death bed, came as a great emotional shock.

She was small, thin, dark, and, in her own words, "shy, awkward, and unattractive. ... Year after year from my eighth to sixteenth year I grew more lonely, retired more into myself, until notwithstanding a strong, ardent, demonstrative temperament I became cold, reserved and abstracted, even to absence of mind."

The retirement was undoubtedly caused; or at least greatly aggravated, by the character of her only full sister Charlotte, a beautiful child of whom both the household and any visitors made much. Emma was deeply jealous of her, and her family contacts became limited to her grandmother, Mrs. Dorothy Wallis, and the company of the slaves. From Uncle Biggs, one of these servants, she drew her early religious beliefs, and from the others she learned a wealth of old family lore, ghost stories, and legends of the countryside. One of her few and deeply enjoyed pleasures was to sit in the kitchen and listen to the talk - not only at home in Washington, but also on the plantations of her mother's kin in St. Mary's, Maryland.

Captain Nevitte's death left his family in straitened circumstances. Mrs. Nevitte turned to one of the few possible occupations then open to a lady of birth in Washington - the keeping of a boarding house. In that baldly new city the hotels were few, and senators and members of the House were glad to find decent lodging in semi-private homes. But the Nevitte venture failed and the family was only kept afloat by Mrs. Wallis' moderate income.

However, in 1828, when Emma was six, her mother married Joshua Laurens Henshaw of Boston. He had come to Washington as secretary to Daniel Webster. But after his marriage he opened a school, and to him Emma was indebted for her education. She not only acquired a taste for the classics, but in addition she read everything she could lay her hands upon. This semi-self education by wide reading was enriched during her visits to St. Mary's by an unobscured form of research which was to prove priceless to her in the future. An excellent rider and a fearless explorer, she roamed the countryside, mounted or afoot, listening to the turns of speech, treasuring the stories of family disaster, secrets, skeletons which she heard

And, when she was in her teens, her own family was involved in a mystery which could have been lifted from one of her novels-to-come. Her half brother, Leonidas Nevitte of Georgetown, left Washington on the Philadelphia stage. He never reached the port, nor was he ever heard from again, in spite of family and police efforts to trace him.

By the time she was sixteen her education was considered complete. She graduated from her stepfather's school and took up her own teaching career. And in 1840 she married Frederick S. Southworth of Utica, described, beyond charity as an inventor. The couple moved west to Wisconsin.

Whatever Mr. Southworth invented, he was not successful. In fact, Emma's husband and his activities are mysteries over which she herself threw much veiling cover. Her account of the following few years is extremely hazy. For Emma was a lady of her day, and domestic difficulties were never then publicly aired. But it is apparent that, from the first, Mrs. Southworth was required to contribute to the family support, for there are records of her teaching in Plattville, Wisconsin.

In 1844 she returned to Washington with two children, Raymond and Charlotte Emma. The evidence, scanty as it is, points to the conclusion that Mr. Southworth was an impractical gentleman who lived on his wife's earnings and finally departed to greener pastures - perhaps California. The bitter scenes in *The Bridal Eve* and *Ishmael* which treat in detail the fate of wives cursed by such husbands may be, and probably were, written from her own knowledge of the straits to which a woman in this position could be reduced.

References made by her in 1855 to "supporting a family of five" suggest that, after her success as a writer was secure, Mr. Southworth returned, to become a drain on her finances. But it is not certain that they ever lived together again and he died in Europe at the beginning of the Civil War.

Returning to Washington as she says, "a widow in fate, but not in fact," she gave such an impression of respectability (something of a feat in the days when separation and divorce were the deepest of social sins) that Reverend William Matthews and other leaders in the community used influence to have her appointed assistant teacher in the Fourth District school. For the salary of two hundred and fifty dollars a year she taught for three years and then was assigned as assistant in the girls' grammar department. And in 1848 she became the principal of the new Primary Department, turning over two rooms on the first floor of her home for the use of the school. Here she taught eighty pupils at one time, putting into practice methods of her own for which she is still remembered in the history of Washington education. But her pay continued to be pitifully small, and it was increasingly difficult, as her own children grew older, to make ends meet. There was one auxiliary to school teaching which could be followed in moments of unoccupied time - a woman might write. And there was now just opening a period which welcomed the creations

Melodrama

scribbling women.
On Christmas Eve, 1845, Emma set down on paper her first serious attempt at fiction, an old Christmas legend of St. Mary's. *The Irish Refugee*. She sent this to Dr. Snodgrass of the Baltimore Saturday Visitor and it was accepted.

To a woman of immense powers of imagination, and a natural gift of plotting, both of which were her best tools, this taste of success must have been an almost unneeded spur. Here was work which satisfied her inner longings, which she could enjoy doing, and for which she would actually be paid the good cold cash so badly needed in the family. All one had to have was a pen, paper, and some scraps of time in which to allow the flood of material in her mind to spill out for print.

A second story, *The Wife's Victory* was taken by Dr. Gamaliel Bailey of the National Era. And Dr. Bailey became not only her editor, but a valued friend. At his home she was introduced to the shining knight of the Abolition forces, John Greenleaf Whittier, and made such an impression upon the Quaker poet that he suggested to Bailey her engagement for a weekly contribution.

But Emma was not, subconsciously, satisfied with the limited scope of the short story form. She began a novelette for the Era, *Sybil Brotherton*, only to discover that she could not artistically conclude it within the agreed upon space. It was bringing her ten dollars a column and she began to fear that the editor might believe that she was guilty of padding for this reason alone. However, Dr. Bailey called upon her after school only to assure her that she was doing right to continue it to what she believed the proper length.

Having tasted the freedom of plot-action allowed in the novel, she now ambitiously embarked on one she intended from the beginning to be a complete book, and not just an over-grown novelette. And her instinctive belief in her powers to write an interesting long narrative proved right. *Retribution* was first printed as a serial in the Era in 1849. It had been written after school hours in snatched moments of time, but it was so popular with the reading public that Harpers issued it between boards.

Her popularity held not only with the general public. John Greenleaf Whittier, corresponding editor of the Era, continued to take an interest in her career. How much sales value his review of *Retribution* might have had is, as always, problematical. He grouped the novel with current offerings of Bulwer, James and Andersen, and his conclusion was:

"It may well be doubted whether, in terseness of diction, searching analyses of character, intensity of passion, and power of description, any one of them can be regarded as superior to this production of our country woman."

But the reading and book buying public did not need such a hearty spur from any reviewer. They had already discovered Mrs. Southworth and found her products good.

On the other hand a single adverse review appeared in the Saturday Evening Post, finding fault with her free use of foreign words, commenting harshly on her distinction between divine and moral retribution.

If ever a writer worked against odds Emma Southworth did when she penned her first book. She was teaching more than eighty pupils each school day, as well as keeping house under all the inconveniences suffered by housewives of her unstreamlined era. In addition, her son was seriously ill and she had taken on the duties of a nurse. Most of the book was written in snatched intervals while sitting up at night with the invalid. And her second novel, *The Deserted Wife*, came into being under the same strained conditions. But the surety of an eager market was all the encouragement she needed. For, from the publication of *Retribution*, she never had a story refused. And there is a strong possibility that during these first years when she was be-

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MAGNOLIAS AND

coming established, she was furnishing serials and short stories for both the Era and the Saturday Evening Post.

The result of continued writing was an improvement in finances and a chance to leave the schoolroom for a pleasant day at her desk. In 1850 she was able to rent "Prospect Cottage," in Georgetown, a home she later purchased. Here it was that she entertained Mrs. Stowe; then a struggling beginner in the same field, who had come to Washington in hopes of making a paying contact with the Era. Their acquaintance became strongly cemented and, while they were rivals on "the best seller lists" at a later date, they were always firm friends.

But the constant pressure of work was not conducive to health and Mrs. Southworth's began to fail. In 1850 she spent the summer at Shannondale Springs, Virginia, hoping to find the restful holiday she needed. The result was another novel, *Shannondale*, which promoters of the spa hailed with considerable joy, knowing that it would bring them a larger quota of visitors the following year. And they were in no way disappointed.

In spite of eye trouble and continued ill health she proceeded on her established course of pouring out serials for the Post from 1849 to 1857. Finally her overworked eyes began to fail and her condition was complicated by a complete breakdown in 1855.

She always believed that a firm bond of friendship existed between her readers and her, so from time to time she sent them messages to be printed in the weeklies which carried her fiction. Now she was to inform them of her sufferings and beg their indulgence for her enforced silence. In these five years of overwhelming labor she had written eleven volumes, among them her most powerful and popular novels. And considering that this production came long years before the use of the typewriter and without the aid of a secretary, it is a feat to astound any modern writer or editor.

In 1857 the seal of complete approval was put upon her popularity - she had arrived! For in this year she was engaged to write exclusively for the New York Ledger. No other accolade could mean more to the popular fiction writer of the period. Various figures have since been quoted on her assured income from this contract, the lowest being six thousand a year, the highest ten thousand. But even the minimum gave her an income far beyond the dreams of the two hundred and fifty dollar a year schoolmistress she had been a dozen years before.

Literary piracy flourished on both sides of the Atlantic. If the novels of Dickens, Trollope, and their lesser followers were blithely published without payment to the authors on this shore, American authors suffered after the same fashion from English thefts of their work. In 1859 Mrs. Southworth sailed for England to try to force some sort of a settlement for the thousands of her books which had been issued there. Financially the trip was a failure, but again she came home with a budget of material she was able to draw upon for years. In addition she had moved in British literary circles and Mrs. Stowe had equipped her with an introduction to Lady Byron which had made her a life-long friend and opened to her the world-of-the nobility about which she had written and was to write so much.

It was 1862 before Emma Southworth returned to a Washington which was now the capital of a nation at war. And she immediately threw herself, with the same vigor which had marked her writing into work, for the cause of the Union.

Over the gates of Prospect Cottage, was hailed by her orders the Stars and Stripes, and those who would visit her, Unionist, Confederate, sympathizers, or neutral Marylander, were sternly told, "Whoever comes to my door must pass

under that!" She nursed sick and wounded at camp and hospital until she herself came down with the smallpox.

Her beloved home was turned into a reserve hospital, sometimes housing as many as twenty-seven soldiers. And one of her ever-to-be-prized possessions in after years was the heavy walnut bed used by President Lincoln for three nights on his way to and from the battle fields. When the war was at last over she provided food and shelter for any Union soldier on his way home. Her son, who was studying medicine, worked in the hospitals, and in May, 1864, her daughter married Union Captain James Valentine Lawrence.

The coming of peace brought a new form of social life which Emma Southworth thoroughly enjoyed. The literary society of the capital gathered at her home every Friday for "conversations". Whittier was often her guest and she discussed with him the plot of her own favorite, *Ishmael*, saying afterwards that to his criticism she felt the book owed much of its success. During the Christmas seasons she began to hold receptions for the literati, assisted by her half-sister Mrs. Baden, also a writer.

She moved north to Yonkers in 1876 and lived there for fifteen years. But in 1890 she returned to Prospect Cottage. Although she was now seventy and had almost thirty years of steady literary effort behind her, she was as tied to her desk as ever. Now she used the typewriter, teaching herself the mastery of the keyboard. And it is to her inventive mind that modern writers owe the manuscript box envelope for mailing, though this discovery was later patented by others. For four days a week she worked methodically, sending the finished manuscript by Uncle Aleck, her old servant, to the post office every Friday afternoon. Her last two books, *The Incarnate Fiend* and *An Angel Unawares* were never published.

She died on June 30, 1899, and she had not altogether outlived her public for inexpensive editions of her novels continued to be issued by reprint houses well into the next century. And for certain qualities she can bear re-examination even today.

It was a matter of pride with her that some of her most unbelievable scenes were founded upon actual events, and it is not uncommon to find in her books footnotes explaining such passages with the simple statement, "a fact." Her characters, too, she insisted were often drawn from friends and acquaintances. And she once had an experience not unlike Trollope's when he was led to kill off the redoubtable Mrs. Proddie after hearing her discussed at his club. For, having used a friend as model for the hero of a serial in the Ledger, Emma heard the gentleman criticize her character bitterly, not realizing that he, himself, was the origin of the creature. Emma laughingly vowed, "I'll have the gentlemen shot in the next issue of the paper." She kept her promise, having to introduce in the new installment another hero to preserve the continuity of the tale.

The backgrounds for most of her stories are patterned on those of Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic school - a medley of dark, wild landscapes, steep mountain roads, old, old houses, and, although they are in the main supposed to be located in the Blue Ridge section of Virginia, these possess little kinship to the natural American scene. Her lavishly described plantation homes are also too good to be true. And under the power of her pen pre-War Washington was raised from a provincial city just beginning to climb out of the raw mud of its building to the state of almost royal polish.

Emotionally her created world was also larger than life. Self-sacrifice is generally associated with marriage. Her wistful maidens and forsaken wives are all forgiving and outdo Griselda in meek patience, her heroes (unless patterned on the angelic Ishmael) may be the half-reformed rake of again the earlier sentimental school. On the other hand, she

MELODRAMA

introduces realism with her minor characters, who often to the modern reader come alive among the cardboard of the major players. And the word "players" best describes all of Mrs. Southworth's characters.

It is no wonder that book after book was speedily adapted for the stage, sometimes (as in the case of *The Bridal Veil*) before the serial had been completed. For, upon reading, it is amazing to see how these stories fall naturally into a series of vivid dramatic action scenes. They are played rather than narrated. And the plot is more than the players.

The lack of revision - since the books were written in installments at a white heat of creation and sent directly to meet magazine deadlines - is very apparent. Undoubtedly she was capable of more lasting work, but economic necessity forced her to write what came easily and sold readily.

But her immense popularity also indicates that her work was just what the readers of that day hoped to discover, between the covers of a book when they wanted amusement. And so drastic have even the standards of light fiction changed that we can not adequately judge her novels today. It is also true that she looked backward in writing, for she mirrored the manners, customs and social codes of the twenties, thirties and forties, rather than those of the fifties, sixties, and seventies.

One of her most irritating mannerisms - to the modern reader - though apparently acceptable to her contemporaries, was her habit of stepping into the story with a direct statement. Such expressions as "You and I know, reader," "Mark you this," "the reader is informed already," "I am about to harrow," "Reader! this boy is our hero" abound. Perhaps this came from the same desire to establish a personal relationship with her readers which led her to address those chatty explanations about her work methods and her general state of health in open magazine letters.



She inserted the popular fads of the day into her stories: Magnetism, physiognomy, the slavery question, phrenology, were used in turn as they captured the public's interest. Although she was anti-slavery in her beliefs, she incorporated both sides of the argument into some of her books. And she is perhaps unique in introducing such characters as the "Odd-job Professor" of *Ishmael*, a free man of color, educated enough to teach the orphan Ishmael his first lessons, proud of his own abilities and modest standing in the community. While the picture she paints in "subdued colors" of the slave couple who, in the *Mother-in-Law*, work steadily not only to save the money necessary to buy their gifted daughter's freedom, but also to support their penniless master, is more effective to our modern tastes in showing the real tragedy of slavery than the lurid melodrama of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

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Scribbling Women

In *Broken Pledges* (1855) we have the case of a slave of mixed race who is driven to murder by an unfeeling master, and also the disaster visited upon married slaves divided by the lust of the overseer, a situation which again ends in violent death. In *The Bride's Dowry*, we are told of the plantation owner who is forbidden by law to free his own children.

Not only did she use the institution of slavery itself for plot material, but she was the first American writer to portray the marked social caste system which existed among the slaves themselves, the vast gulf between field hands and house servants. And this caste system was also referred to for action. The Christmas festivities, revival meetings, coon hunting, tall tales of the slaves, are woven throughout her books to lighten the melodramatic action. Her years of listening at kitchen hearths were not wasted.

Of course, true to her era, the moral is dangled constantly before her readers, and she can rightly be accused of didacticism, which was the curse of the fiction of her period. But with the use of strict moralizing asides she was earnestly following the deep belief that fiction must elevate or it had no right to be. Pure amusement was still associated with sin.

To lighten such spates of serious head-shaking she introduces some humor - almost entirely provided by her minor or Negro characters. But it is always gently refined humor, eminently suitable for a book by a lady, and it is in the form of exaggerated dialogue, or the long since discarded style of the misspellings and twisted words used by an uneducated individual.

Not only did she strive to introduce humor in the pattern of dialogue, but she tried also for realism and interest by the same means. In her later books even her didactic ideas spout from the mouths of her characters rather than appear in self-conscious asides.

And she attempted a wide range of idiom - seldom successfully. We find her reporting in garbled words the conversation of low-er class Scottish, German, Irish, Jewish immigrants and servants, in addition to the homely land much more natural speech of American country people, old ladies, and children. Her worst point is the total lack of restraint, the overabundance of "color" gives to the longer speeches a humor not intended.

Her plotting ability was her strongest tool, but even this failed her during the long stream of hastily written books. Having found a certain situation effective once, she tended to use it again and again. Bridges changed just before they reached the altar, secret marriages, bigamy, innocent men accused of murder, appear over and over. And not only situations but types of characters and even names are repeated from book to book.

But her meticulous descriptions of dress, of manners in polite society, of moral codes, can be read with profit by the modern researcher to gain a picture of social life of the period from 1830 to 1850, perhaps not exactly as it was, but as the highest standards of taste expected and hoped it would be.


At any rate Emma Southworth knew how to "give the ladies what they want". *The Hidden Hand*, published serially in the Ledger, was said to be the most popular work that that epitome of public taste ever printed. Forty different versions of it played the theaters here and abroad. At one time three different plays made from the novel were running simultaneously in London. The book was reprinted in 1825 for the third time, twenty-four years after its first appearance.

Her total serial publication, was fifty books, written in the forty years from her first in 1846 to her last new novel, *Deed Without A Name* in 1886.

So much of a drawing card to any publication were her

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With all her faults of style, diction, and lack of revision, she had one superb gift and several minor ones. She was a natural born story teller. Even today it is difficult for any one reading for amusement to put aside one of her tales before its always highly dramatic denouement. In a later period she might have found her place as a creator of day time television serials. In fact, modern script writers are missing inspiration in not surveying her work with thoughts of adaption.

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