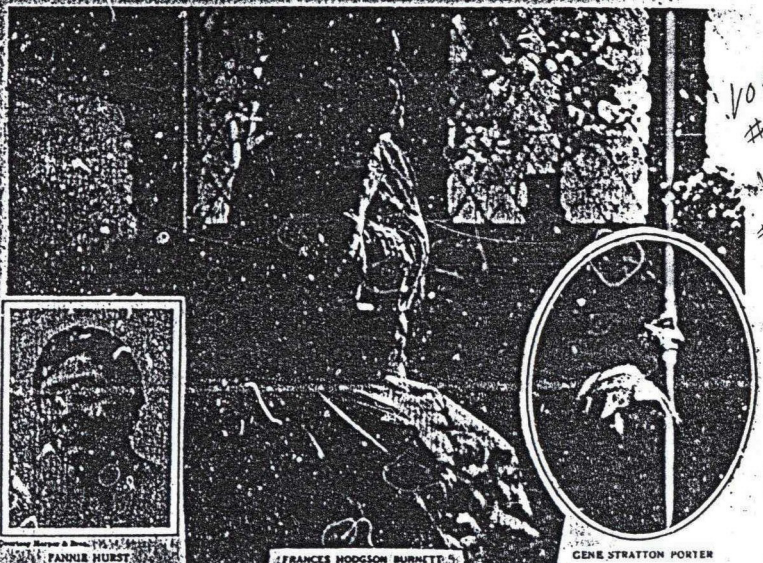


# THE BOOK-MART

*A Monthly Journal for Book Buyers, Sellers & Collectors*



FANNIE HURST



FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT



GENE STRATTON PORTER

COLLECTING 19th CENTURY WOMEN WRITERS

## Special Issue: Women Writers

Andre Norton  
 Frances Hodgson Burnett  
 A Groatworth of Wit  
 Gene Stratton-Porter  
 Collecting Cook-Books



Harriet Beecher Stowe



# A LAMP IS LIGHTED: MARIA CUMMINS

By Andre Norton

Of all the Scribbling Women Maria Cummins presents the greatest problem to a modern biographer. Her work is known as *The Lamplighter*, a hundred years after its first appearance is still to be found on library shelves - but the woman herself remains a mystery. A handful of bare facts constitutes the record of her short life.

She was born on April 9, 1827, in Salem, Massachusetts, the daughter of Judge David Cummins and Mehitable (Cane). The Cummins family was one long established in New England. Judge Cummins traced his ancestry directly to Isaac Cummings, of Scottish blood, who held an estate of some value in Ipswich prior to 1638.

And Judge Cummins, himself, had literary leanings. He seems to have early detected in his daughter a talent for writing and eagerly fostered it. Her formal schooling was gained at the fashionable school kept by Mrs. Charles Sedgwick in Lenox.

She was but a little past twenty when she began to write stories and articles which were accepted by the *Atlantic Monthly* and other serious periodicals. There appears to have been no financial goal, Maria produced fiction because her desire for expression was strong enough to overcome that prejudice against learned ladies which was just beginning to lift.

When she was twenty-seven her masterpiece, *The Lamplighter*, was published. It was an instant success, and sections of it could stand in full equality beside the best work of the day. The first few chapters dealing with the slums of Boston can be favorably compared with Dickens' pictures of the London underworld. Forty thousand copies were sold within the first eight weeks of publication. And this first edition, issued by John P. Jewett in Boston, was not unattractive. The fat volume was bound in black cloth, gold stamped on the back strip with the title and the picture of the lamplighter, his ladder in his hands, the whole priced at seventy-five cents.

Though the novel may not have suited the tastes of the fastidious critics of the day, (Hawthorne's comment was: "What is the mystery of these innumerable editions of the *Lamplighters*," and other books neither better nor worse? - worse they could not be, and better they need not be when they sell by the 100,000?") but the public greeted it eagerly. It had an intricate plot, good descriptions, two pairs of lovers parted for most of the tale but satisfactorily reunited in the end, and a touch of mystery, as well as the required orphan heroine. For background it ranged from the slums of Boston, through the country estate of wealth to the fashionable spa of Saratoga - all this and sentiment too. In May 1855 it was parodied in Harper's, the parody probably written by N.P. Willis or one of his New York circle. But this only added to its fame, not detracted. Maria Cummins was to write three more novels, *Mabel*



Vaughan, a story of New York society life, mannered and without much of the melodrama which heightened and speeded the action of *The Lamplighter*. (Though the scene of the young "Bloods" of the city racing their fancy sleighs through the first great snowfall of the year lingers in the reader's memory.) Interesting because of its careful depiction of social customs of the 1850's; *El Fureidix*, a highly imaginative tale of Palestine and Syria; and *Haunted Hearts*, a sentimental tale first published anonymously.

The Cummins family moved from Salem to Dorchester where they bought a colonial house on Bowdoin Street, set in grounds extensive enough to include both a fish pond and a large orchard. Here Maria lived an extremely quiet and retired life with apparently no contact with her literary contemporaries. Her name is mentioned in no biographical sketch of feminine writers of her day, nor in any accounts of the period. To all evidence her world was bound by the house, the garden, and her church.

Continued on page 30.



CHARLOTTE M. YONGE



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Scribbling Women

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## CUMMINS *continued*

Soon after the publication of *Haunted Hearts* in 1864 she became a complete invalid and her painful illness was ended by death, at the age of thirty-nine, on October 1, 1868.

As a novelist she possessed one outstanding gift - that of characterization. Had not the deadening influence of the "moral" not weighted down all her books she might have occupied a far higher place in literary history. *The Lamplighter* is still readable and as late as 1915 libraries were ordering copies in quantity for circulation.

Her love interest is the most anemic to be found in a so-called "domestic" or "sentimental" novel. In a regular pattern from book to book her hero is briefly introduced near the beginning of the narrative and then whisked away (in *The Lamplighter* he is shipped to India, in *Mabel Vaughan* to the wilds of the Illinois frontier) until very close to the end, when he is as speedily returned for no other reason than to provide the long suffering heroine with the only happy ending possible in a Victorian novel - marriage. The sterility of the love affairs only underlines the accurate pictures of relationships between two generations - parents and children - or between women upon which depend most of the drama of her books.

In *The Lamplighter* Gertie's undercover battle with the selfish daughters of her blind friend's stepmother is acutely and reasonably described to the last detail. In fact Gertie's rise from her sordid beginnings to her sturdy independence in life is believable and holds interest throughout. One critic says bluntly that: "But if the student of taste wants to know thoughts and feelings of the majority who lived during Franklin Pierce's administration he will find it in *The Lamplighter*" rather than in *Walden*."

The novels abound in accounts of travel - was this the wishful thinking of one who was tied to a narrow scene by ill health and perhaps family cares? In *Mabel Vaughan* there is a detailed description of a visit to Niagara Falls and of a long, tedious journey westward. While characters in *The Lamplighter* spend weeks in New York and at Saratoga.

Social problems are not ignored. The alcoholism of Mabel Vaughan's brother and his slow moral collapse is outlined in a perfectly credible sequence of events. Miss Cummins' heroines are independent to a degree not to be found in many books of the same date. Gertie, the orphan of *The Lamplighter*, chooses to alienate her wealthy benefactor on a matter of principle, believing it to be far better to be self supporting in a humble position than to enjoy the pleasures of travel and wealth as a parasite.

Translated into German and French and circulated widely abroad, *The Lamplighter* must have presented a new facet of American life to Europeans. What Susan Warner did for the country districts, Maria Cummins equalled for the urban centers - portraying contemporary American life in a realistic manner.

## The Scribbling Women

will continue in future issues.

*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.

BOOK-MART is indeed honored to be able to bring you this chapter from a never-before-published Norton book.