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February 18, 1868.

New Series



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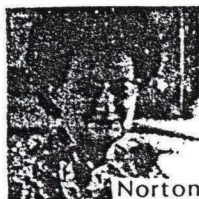
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Scribbling Women

Susan Warner



TEARS, BUSY TEARS

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is a continuation of the fascinating, but unpublished book by world-reknowned fantasy fiction writer Andre Norton.

By ANDRE NORTON

Only there were no servants—except an odd job man in periods of affluence later on—and they did darn socks, and wash the dishes as well.

Susan found work to occupy her mind as well during these hard months by teaching both her young sister and a cousin who chose to share part of their exile. She taught Italian, French and music. And struggled herself to keep up her own studies, reading *l'asso*, French history, and keeping her journal in French for practice.

But lessons with Susan had many of the attributes of the old "talking stories" of happier days. Instead of the lists of names and countries for imagined heroic action, the children drew strips of paper daily from a box provided by Susan. Letter-

ed on each in decorative Old English script was the name of a city, a country, a state, or a personage. This was to be studied thoroughly with all references tracked down. It might be "Richard, the First," to include "warriors of his reign," "learned men," "events," etc.

In spite of their poverty and the crudeness of their new surroundings the entire Warner family continued to live in an atmosphere of learning and books. Friends reported years later that they would sit at the breakfast table for hours—talking of some subject, fetching reference books one after another to prove some point, until the dishes were banished and the table covered with volumes.

Susan became so obsessed with the necessity for research, so governed by her meticulous desire for absolute truth, that in later years one could hardly force a direct assertion out of her. She was determined on unwavering correctness. It is this humorless, dutiful, searching approach to life which plunged her at last into the center of emotional religious experience.

A snub from an associate of earlier days hurt her so deeply that she turned to search for the promise of another life in which lost wealth and forfeited social position would not matter. And, with that

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intensity and drive with which she attacked all intellectual questions, she began the study of the principles of religious belief, coming at last to the moving "conversion" of the Victorian era.

The Warner financial position declined steadily and uncertainty about the future must have been an abiding ogre ever at Susan's shoulder.

Henry Warner, with dim hopes of recovering his law practice, went to New York for a winter, leaving the women alone on the island. It was in these dark, lonely days that Anne Warner suggested they develop one of their childhood games into a commercial product which might be sold to bring them the needed ready cash for supplies of food, candles, and clothing.

The game, based on natural history, was christened "Robinson Crusoe's Farmyard." Anne, tied to the couch in the big living room by illness for most of the winter, worked with the books her sister brought her, the girls choosing the proper animals together. There were twenty-four cards in the pack, tame and wild animals mixed, and these were painted by hand--their own cat striving as one of their models. Their father brought them the necessary white cardboard from New York. Each card contained questions which were answered in a small accompanying book.

Henry Warner offered the finished product in New York and it was purchased by George Putnam. The girls were to color the cards at so much a sheet to add to their meager earnings.

This offer arrived at a dark moment. The law suit so long a burden had been settled against the Warners and they were gathering family treasures which must be sold to satisfy the claim when the cases of cards arrived. That evening the sisters sat down in a stripped room, barren of many loved heirlooms, to paint cards. For a year and a half they continued this work, adding their bit to the family funds.

But it was during this same busy winter that Susan began writing what was to be her masterpiece--The Wide, Wide World. Again it is Anne who provides us with a picture of Susan's essay as an author. She tells the story of how they were engaged in washing the tea dishes one

evening when Aunt Fanny said suddenly:

"Sue, I believe if you would try, you could write a story."

And as Susan Warner put away teacups the first glimmer of plot crossed her mind--the picture of a child tossed out on the world.

Religion was the keynote of the book--its whole atmosphere was emotionally pious. As Anne tells us:

"It was written in closest reliance upon God: for thoughts, for power, and for words. Not the mere vague wish to write a book that should do service to her Master; but a vivid, constant looking to him for guidance and help: The worker and the work both laid humbly at the Lord's feet. In that sense the book was written upon her knees; and the Lord's blessing has followed it, down to this day."

In New England at this date the morbid beliefs of the Puritan had either been distilled into a seeking liberalism as typified by the circles in which the Alcotts, Emerson and the Concord philosophers moved, or turned into the highly emotional channels feeding upon the "revivals." Susan Warner was too reticent to be given an outlet by the "revival," but she was not attracted either by the liberalism of the transcendentalists. Her beliefs, as expressed in her books, were tinged with the gloominess of the older day.

On the other hand, apart from the highly emotional attitude toward religious subjects, she gave in her writing pictures of contemporary life which are still arresting, drawing upon the backgrounds furnished by the old Warner New England properties and the New York she had known as a girl.

As she worked Anne and Aunt Fanny read the manuscript, though never quite to the point of her daily stint. And it was Anne who named the book which took little over a year to write.

The manuscript was speedily returned from Carters with no explanation. And the comment scrawled upon its first page by a Harper's reader--"Fudge"--was humiliating. But Henry Warner continued to offer it to publisher after publisher. George Putnam, receiving it in turn, took it home over the week-end and gave it to his mother to

read. She returned it with the solemn injunction that if she never published anything else, he should this. Mrs. Putnam knew the reading public—she was entirely correct.

But, still uncertain as to the fate of her first effort, Susan was already writing again. That summer Mrs. Sigourney announced a four hundred and fifty dollar prize for the best essay on female patriotism, to be eventually published in a magazine called *The Ladies' Wreath*. And Miss Warner took up her pen to compete.

When the news of acceptance of *The Wide, Wide World* came from Putnam's, Susan was totally ignorant as to the mechanics of proof-reading. The Putnam family knowing of the isolated life of the Warner island, suggested that she come to New York and spend some weeks with them, correcting proof—since the mails were uncertain and time was essential. Together Susan and Anne painstakingly copied the list of corrections for proof-out of an old encyclopedia, and Susan ventured out into the world as an authoress.

For three weeks in September and October of 1850 she lived with the Putnams, correcting the proof. It became her custom—and later a set pattern of life—to rise early in the morning and correct ten pages or more before breakfast. Since it was still considered not quite in the best of taste for a wellborn young lady to write for publication, she used as a pen name that of her grandmother, Elizabeth Wetherall. (While Anne, in her own literary efforts later used that of their other grandmother, Amy Lathrop.)

The book was issued on December 12, 1850, and within three months had sold fifteen hundred copies. Within two years it had gone into fourteen editions. It was just what the reading public wanted: religion, sentiment, and an American scene contrasted with elegant Scottish social life.

The *New York Times* trumpeted: "One book like this is not produced in an age." And it became the first best seller in the history of American fiction.

Here was the ideal Christian maiden, the perfection of young womanhood (though

far removed from the ordinary mortals one met in daily life). The *Wide, Wide World* was the history of the education of such a maiden, how she could be forced into the pattern of perfection, the mold desired by her elders—taught the virtues of resignation, suffering, loving kindness, faith and charity.

Of course there were those who remained stubbornly set against the perfection of Ellen Montgomery. After the issue of the book in England, Lord Frederick Hamilton described it somewhat snappishly as being about "a tiresome little girl named Ellen Montgomery, who apparently divided her time between reading her pocket Bible and indulging in paroxysms of tears."

And the London Review of 1853 stated that it was "too emotional for children."

But such dissenters were few. On the other hand we have "Incomparable work, read with the most heartfelt sympathy and delight" or "Almost faultless excellence of *The Wide, Wide World*." Those critics liked tears.

For Susan Warner's productions were teary, the salt streams flowed across the pages in endless waves. Her readers loved it. And according to the Christian Review she succeeded "better than any other writer in our language in making religious sentiment appear natural and attractive, in a story that possesses the interest of a romance." Romances were bad—*The Wide, Wide World* was entirely pure and good.

The fortunes of the Warner family had reached a very low ebb in the month preceding the publication of Susan's work of art. Against all her instincts and desires she was about to try for a position as governess. But writing had already become so much a part of her that she had started Queechy, finishing the first chapter before the first of December. Good news came on December seventh—she had won Mrs. Sigourney's prize and could now buy the winter cloaks and hats for all three Warner ladies.

And on December seventeenth Henry Warner returned from a New York trip with the author's copies of *The Wide, Wide World* in his luggage. Susan's Christmas gift to Anne this year was one of these prized

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volumes, appearing appropriately enough for the season patterned with red page edging.

And in January came the first public notice of her work when her father read aloud the reviews printed in *The Evening Post*, *The Boston Chronicle*, and *The Literary World*.

But one could not eat reviews, however laudatory--nor burn them for work candles. And there was no cash in the winter-darkened island home. The sisters, when they wanted to read their work to each other in the evenings, were forced to depend upon the unsteady light furnished by a strip of rag embedded in a saucer of lard. It was not until later that Henry Warner made one of his periodic visits home, bringing food and other supplies--and the new one-volume edition of *The Wide, Wide World* brave with gilt.

February twenty-second found the last of the first edition sold. And by now the book had become so popular that, it being temporarily out of print, those shops still fortunate enough to have one or two copies left raised the price to two dollars and a quarter, or two dollars and a half.

That was all very well but Susan herself had not yet received any of the money her work had earned. And she had no idea of whether the book was a success or not. Undecided about the future she wrote George Putnam a frank letter, asking whether or not he deemed it well for her to continue her literary efforts or to turn to the needle for support. His reply was that the book was now selling well in the second edition and that "many have chosen the pen with less warrant and encouragement."

Now the money came. While most of it was banked against a future the Warners for the rest of their lives never quite trusted to be bright, some went for a piano, the black silk dresses which were then the badge of the respectable lady, and for riding habits and a mount. Once, long before, they had planned a course of rides about the island; now they were going to see that early dream come into partial realization.

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