

O. HENRY AS LETTER-WRITER AND SKETCH-ARTIST

THERE ARE TWO WAYS OF ENCOUNTERING GENIUS away from the limelight—by handshake or by a letter. The handshake and exchange of words may be “eternally impressive,” but they haven’t the negotiable quality of letters, which can be passed on to others. A new series of letters by that effervescent genius who wrote under the name of O. Henry is introduced, with the foregoing genial generality, by their receiver, Mabel Wagnalls, who publishes them through Doubleday Page and Company. Her account of how the letters came to be written is given thus in the preface to her little volume:

Some months before, I had read a story that greatly impressed me; it was “The Roads of Destiny.” Not only was I impressed by the originality of the idea and style, but also by the originality of the author’s name. Just “Henry” with an exclamation before it. I wondered how a writer could hope to be remembered with such a casual tag-mark. What superb indifference to fame! Then, on second thought, I considered it a clever bid for fame—a name so coy as to be conspicuous. Then, on third thought, that Henry name began to stir up activities in other crevices of my brain. I had a great grandmother named Henry. Our family tree I had long since discovered to be sadly lacking in decorations. No stars or coronets hung on its boughs, nor even a horse-thief to vary the respectable monotony. Perhaps here was an offshoot I had missed—a Henry branch that might prove illustrious. I searched in “Who’s Who?” and asked literary friends, but “O. Henry” was on no list of celebrities I could find. So I scribbled a few lines to his publisher, told who I was—or rather who my father was—and, as one publisher to another, so to speak, I begged to know whether O. Henry was man, woman, or wraith.

I mailed the missive—and forgot it. Time—but why be prosaic? “The days,” to quote from my favorite author, “with Sundays at their head, formed into hebdomadal squads, and the weeks, captained by the full moon, closed ranks into menstrual companies carrying Tempus Fugit on their banners.”

By the time Thirty-fourth Street was displaying sport suits and parasols and the trunk stores were announcing instant removals, my mother and I made our annual visit to my grandmother’s home in Lithopolis. You have possibly never heard of this town. Don’t look for it on the map: it isn’t there. And don’t look for it from any railroad train window: it isn’t there, either. Lithopolis stands alone—faithfully guarding an ancient stone quarry so long disused that no one knows when it last was drilled or blasted. Again let me say that Lithopolis stands alone, maintaining an aloofness, an exclusiveness, that is unmatched, I believe, by any other cluster of frame houses radiating around a one-block trading area of single-story shops. Not even the famous walled-in town of Rothenburg is so difficult to enter and so difficult to get out of after you’re in. The daily mail-wagon was, at the time of our visits there, the sole public means of transit thither and thence; and likewise the one excitement of the day.

There are three hundred and fifty inhabitants in Lithopolis—

never more, never less. The two hundred and eight houses it contains are kept in repair, and even rebuilt, but a new house is never added. Rather than do this people leave the town—or die. It is cheaper. . . . There is a millinery shop that cuddles close to the post-office, and just beyond the second lane sounds a blacksmith’s shop. The hardware store plies a good trade in plows—and also deals in coffins. There are four churches to say prayers over the coffins when they are filled, and on the other street (there are only two) is the shop of a tombstone-maker (her name is Alta Jungkurth). And opposite to this shop stands the house and surrounding trees, the little garden and chicken corral of my eighty-year-old grandmother, whose mother had been born a Henry.

It was here that Miss Wagnalls received the first of a number of characteristic letters from the man whose fame was later to cross the country, and the seven seas beyond. He wrote:

NEW YORK,
June 9th, 1903.

MY DEAR MADAM:

The *Cosmopolitan Magazine* forwarded to me yesterday the little note you wrote on May 9th, in regard to some of the short stories I have been perpetrating upon the public. I do not know why they held

your letter so long unless they thought it was a ms. submitted for publication, and finally decided to reject it—in which case I think they showed very poor taste and judgment.

I’m glad to be able to tell you that I am a man, and neither a woman nor a wraith. Still I couldn’t exactly tell you why I’m glad, for there isn’t anything nicer than a woman; and I have often thought, on certain occasions, that to be a wraith would be exceedingly jolly and convenient.

When you were looking for “O Henry” between the red covers of “Who’s Who,” I was probably between two gray saddle blankets on a Texas prairie listening to the moonlight sonata of the coyotes.

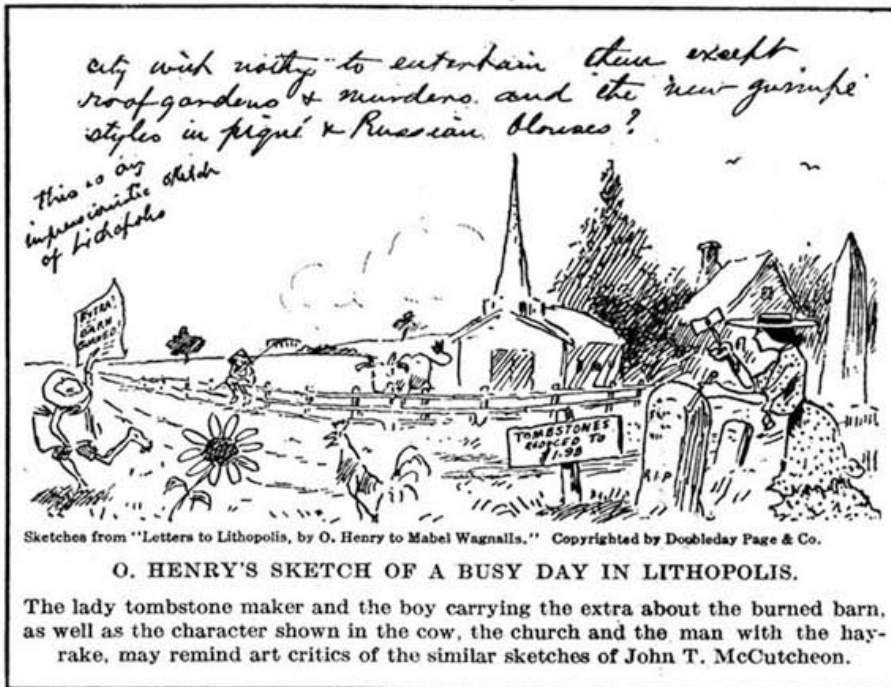
Since you have been so good as to speak nicely of my poor wares. I will set down my autobiography. Here goes!

Texas cowboy. Lazy. Thought writing stories might be easier than “busting” bronecos. Came to New York one year ago to earn bread, butter, jam, and possibly asparagus that way. Last week loaned an editor \$20.

Please pardon the intrusion of finances, but I regard the transaction as an imperishable bay. Very few story-writers have done that. Not many of them have the money. By the time they get it, they know better.

I think that is all that is of interest. I don’t like to talk about literature. Did you notice that teentsy-weentsy little “I”? That’s the way I spell it. I have much more respect for a man who brands cattle than for one who writes pieces for the printer. Don’t you? It doesn’t seem quite like a man’s work. But then, it’s quite often a man’s work to collect a cheque from some publications.

I was very glad to get your letter, even tho it comes as to a wraith or an impersonality. Why? Well, down in Texas we are sort of friendly, you know, and when we see a man five miles off, we holler at him “Hello, Bill!” In New York the folks—well—(I wish I could show you right here how the Mexicans shrug one shoulder). Your letter seemed to read like a faint



voice out of the chaparral calling: "Hello, Bill, you old flop-eared wraith, how're they comin'?" In Texas the folks freeze to you; in New York they freeze you. Sabe?

But I do not consider this a fault in New York. After one gets acquainted with the people they prove to be very agreeable and friendly. I have made a number of friends among the magazine men, whom I like very much.

What a pity it is that a downtrodden scribbler can't manage to claim kinship with a publisher's family! 'Way down in Louisiana is where my "Henry" name came from. Can't you dig up an ancestor among the old southern aristocracy so we can be cousins?

Do you know, Miss Wagnalls, what would be the proper procedure on this occasion if this happened to be Texas? I'll tell you. I'd get on my bronco and ride over to 15th Street and holler "Hello, folkses!" And your pa would come out and say: "Light and hitch, stranger"; and you would kill a chicken for supper, and we would all talk about literature and the price of cattle.

But as this is New York and not Texas I will only say I hope you will overlook the nonsense, and believe that I much appreciate your cheering letter.

There are one or two stories that I think you have not seen that I would like to have your opinion of if you would let me submit them to you some time. I think the judgment of a normal, intelligent woman is superior to that of an editor in a great many instances.

Sincerely yours,

O. HENRY.

47 West 24th Street.

Later, assisted by Miss Wagnalls's bits of epistolary description, O. Henry drew the "impersonistic sketch of Lithopolis" reproduced herewith. His sketching, it might be observed, has something of the quality, at once racy, humorous, romantic and naturalistic, of his writing. Quite as lively is the series of character portraits, inspired by Miss Wagnalls's guess at what the "O." in his name might stand for.

While he sat in his garret "nibbling at my crust (softened by a little dry Sauterne) and battling with the wolf at the door—he's trying to get out—don't like it inside)," he wrote of Lithopolis:

Lemme see! Fairfield County—that's over across the "crick," isn't it, just this side of the woods? And Lithopolis—wait a minute—b'lieve I've heard of— No, it wasn't the town—I guess it was a new \$3 shoe or a trotting horse I was thinking of. (The whole paragraph was inspired by envy. I know it's peaceful & lovely & rural and restful out there. "Lost in Lithopolis; or Lolling among the Lotuses—not to mention the Lima Beans." "Twould make a summer drama that would snow "The Old Homestead" under—paper snow, of course.) . . .

I think Fate has been unjustly kind to you in the bestowal of favors. You are revelling in rural felicity and eggs and country air and scenery. That should be enough to satisfy any one. And yet with all those blessings heaped at your feet you are accorded the additional privilege of having witnessed the thrilling destruction of Bart Kramer's barn by the fire demon. It is not fair. Isn't a holiday enough for you without your demanding holocausts, too? Tho denied the spectacle myself, I can imagine the exciting scene—the lurid flames lighting up the lurid heavens with their lurid glare, and Bart rarin' and chargin' around trying to rescue the buggy harness and the settin'-hen. In such supreme moments do you never give a thought to the unfortunates cooped up in the city with nothing to entertain them except roof gardens & murders and the new gulmpe styles in pique & Russian blouses?

I'm awfully obliged for the nice things you said about my little old stories. I don't think very much of 'em myself, but it sounds kind of friendly, anyway. The only line in which I am convinced

that I am truly great is in Art. This you can see for yourself. I once illustrated a book for a Texas writer. When he saw the pictures he tore up his MS. and threw it into the Colorado River. That's a fact.

I suppose this nonsense of mine is getting to be a nuisance by this time. But I really am not able to take things solemnly. The whole business—life, literature, operas, philosophy & shirt-waists—is a kind of a joke, isn't it? I reckon that riding around on a pony on the Texas prairies thinking about the beans and barbecued beef we're going to have for supper is about as good as anything. When the illusions go the best thing to do is to take it good-humoredly. So, there's some philosophy for you. It isn't solid enough to keep you awake after the frogs begin to croak in Lithopolis.

In another letter he suggests that he would like to hear more of Lithopolis, and inquires: "How are the Domineck chickens getting along, and has your grandmother had the fence painted this spring?" However, New York, at this time was not treating

him badly. He was beginning to attract attention. "Sometimes I get tired of New York," he admits—

And want to be where I can holler "Hello, Aunt Emily!" to the mayor's wife, and go back of the counter in the post-office with a sort of Lithopolitan insouciance and freedom. The other night I went up to the Madison Square post-office and sat on the steps for two hours. Do you know, that postmaster never even came out and said "how's tricks," much less joining in for a social chat. Everybody is so stiff in New York. But I hardly think I'll leave

this year. I've got the editor men chasing me for stuff now, and I want to work 'em a while longer.

There are many other letters, all of them rich in whimsies, philosophy, and genial human nature, in this little volume of "Letters to Lithopolis, from O. Henry to Mabel Wagnalls." They are rounded with Miss Wagnalls's poignant description of the author's funeral. "We went to O. Henry's funeral, my mother and I," she writes:

We had read in the papers of his passing, and had noted the hour and the place; a fitting place it was—the Little Church Around the Corner—the Church of the Strangers, as it sometimes is called. We supposed there would be a large crowd; probably cards of admission would be required. We had none, but we went, intending to stand on the curb, if need be, to pay our last deference to one of America's Immortals. But no crowd edged the curb; we saw a few carriages and a small group at the door that somehow was far from funereal in appearance. On entering the vestibule, we were accosted with a question. So certain were we it must be a request for a card that for a moment we were uncomprehending—and good reason there was for our dismay. We had heard the strangest question ever worded, I believe, at chancel door since the cross of Christ stood over it:

"Have you come for the wedding or the funeral?"

Somehow it was a phrase that stabbed to the heart, tho we soon understood, of course, that a mistake had been made in the time set for the two ceremonies. The wedding-party was already there, but it was decided to hold the funeral first. So a few of us—astonishingly few, unbelievably few—sat forward in the dim hall—while a brief—a very brief—little service was read over the still form of one whose tireless hand had penned pages of truth, humor, and philosophy that will live as long as the foundation stones of our Hall of Fame endure.

One felt a hurried pulse through all the service, and as the cortège passed out a flower or two fell from the casket and then knew that soon the bridal train would be brushing them aside.

