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John Townsend Trowbridge and The Carpet-Bag

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John Townsend Trowbridge and *The Carpet-Bag*

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Introduction

John Townsend Trowbridge, a bright nineteen-year-old country boy, arrived in New York City in May of 1847, not only with "secret hopes of becoming an author"— but also with a dream of making a living by his *literary* pen (*My Own Story* 92). He did not wait long before offering "a volume of verses—in a variety of styles, derived from Byron, Scott, and Burns, with here and there a reminiscence of Hudibras"—to several publishers. All but one of the publishers, however, declined even to take a look, and Trowbridge was repeatedly told "that no book of poems unless written by a man of established reputation could possibly attract public attention" (*My Own Story* 89-94). To his credit, Trowbridge ascertained and accepted his situation with a positive attitude. He plunged ahead in the only way he saw possible:

> "I must make a reputation before I can get anybody to print my volume," I said to myself; and I could see but one way of doing that. I selected some of the shorter pieces from my collection, and began offering them to *the weekly papers*, along with some prose sketches which I had brought from the country, or completed after my arrival. (*MOS* 94, my emphasis)

Eventually, these weeklies *would* help Townsend to develop a reputation and allow him to publish his book-length "literary" fiction. There is little doubt, however, that the writing he did for these weeklies shaped his prose style greatly and influenced his thoughts on how best to tell his stories in a manner that would enable him to connect with a general audience as wide and large as possible. It is

the main purpose of this paper to examine the type of writing he did for one such weekly *The Carpet-Bag*— a weekly that survived for two years (1851-1852), and to enumerate the tendencies he displayed in his years as an "apprentice" writer for this type of weekly.

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In 1847, the weeklies in New York City were little interested in Trowbridge's poetry, but his prose pieces they could often find a place for—even if they could not always pay him for them. Then, in August of 1848, Trowbridge moved on to Boston, having heard of greater opportunity there, "chiefly for the purpose of securing new vehicles for [his] tales and sketches, in the periodical press outside of New York" (*MOS* 132). Indeed, in Boston, he found many periodicals eager to print his prose.

> I found the Boston weeklies ready to accept about everything I had to offer, and *set gleefully to work to furnish the sort of contributions most in demand.* "Stories, give us stories!" said they all; and stories they had from me from that time forth. (*MOS* 135-136, my emphasis)

Sometimes the pay from these weeklies was "two dollars a column," sometimes less—and sometimes "nothing at all" (*MOS* 136); still, Trowbridge was developing a name for himself, though, interestingly, it was not his own, *Trowbridge*, but rather a pseudonym:

> I was then using chiefly the pseudonym of Paul Creyton, which I kept for some years for two reasons,—first, because I was well aware of my work being only that of a 'prentice hand, and wished to reserve my own name for more mature compositions; and second, as Paul Creyton grew in popularity, I found an ever increasing advantage in retaining so good an introduction to editors and readers. (*MOS* 118)

That he was *becoming* Paul Creyton (and *not* Trowbridge) is highly significant. While he could think of himself as "a 'prentice," not yet capable of the "mature compositions" that *Trowbridge* might be capable of, he was, in reality, "gleefully"

at work producing "the sort of contributions most in demand," that is, perfecting the style of *Creyton* and developing both *Creyton's* understanding of audience and, ultimately, *Creyton's* understanding of how to succeed in the world of publishing. "Creyton" was the byline Trowbridge used for all five prose pieces discussed in this article.[1]

The Carpet-Bag

What sort of weekly was *The Carpet-Bag?* The editors, S.W. Wilder and Benjamin Penhallow Shillaber, answered that question in the very first issue. They wrote that the name, *The Carpet-Bag,* "expressed the miscellaneous character of a good paper, into which are crowded a variety of things, necessary for comfort and happiness while on the highway of life." They hoped their paper would become "an agreeable fireside or wayside companion, affording both amusement and instruction." One of the main goals would be to "promote "cheerfulness." "Not," they wrote, "that we shall strive to be exclusively funny, ever toiling to pick up something that shall make the vulgar laugh; but a good joke, or a pleasant satire, or a harmless witticism, we shall welcome to our columns, though in so doing we may sometimes hit our best friends, or disregard our own prejudices" (No. 1, "To the Reader," March 29, 1851). According to Mott, *The Carpet-Bag's* "satire, with a few exceptions, was mild, and its comedy was not so crude as that of many of its compeers" (181).

Shillaber's fictional creation, Mrs. Partington, who was to become a bastion of malapropisms, homespun and somewhat accidental insight, and good-heartedness — and the publication's *de facto* symbol — was also allowed to explain the purpose of *The Carpet-Bag,* in a combination of rhyming couplets and triplets no less! Her vision of the *The Carpet-Bag,* Shillaber has her tell us, came to her in a dream. Below is an excerpt. In her dream—

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[1] Though *The Carpet-Bag* survived for two years, I have so far only been able to gain access to the first volume (the first year) of issues. Thus, this analysis is limited to the first volume, March, 1851-March, 1852.

She rushed to the door,
And, standing before,
Saw a queer-looking chap who a *Carpet-Bag* bore.
He thrust it in,
With a nod and a grin,
Nor waited for thank'ee or for tin.
It was a goodly bag to see,
Crowded to its capacity,
And covered with flowers as "flagrant" and gay
As a garden-bed in genial May[.]
. . . . . .
She oped its lock with a puzzled air,
And marveled what she'd discover there;
Then she threw up her hands in wild amaze,
At what then met her astonished gaze!
There were books and papers of various hue,
Ancient writings and writings new,
Poems and fables and talks and jokes,
And fancies to please all sorts of folks,
With unique crotchets and items quaint,
And prints whose fun would move a saint,
With sighs for the sighing and tears for the tearful,
And hope for the hopeful and cheer for the cheerful;
A medley was there,
Of the choice and fair,
A treat for the seeker of "rich and rare."

("Mrs. Partington's Dream: Or the Opening of *The Carpet-Bag*," No. 1, March 29, 1851.)

Midway through their first year in print, the editors inserted a marvelous drawing of a "Man who Sees No Fun in *The Carpet-Bag*" (No. 30, October 25, 1851). He was tight-collared with narrowed eyes cold and unfeeling. His tightly pursed lips curled downward—in all, Scrooge at his worst exemplified. The next

week (No. 31, November 2, 1851), the editors followed up with a portrait of a cheerful fellow relaxing in a cushioned chair and smiling over their latest issue. That picture was captioned "Portrait of a Man Who *Can* See Fun in *The Carpet-Bag*." A brief article entitled "Our Pictures," explained clearly what sort of person didn't read the weekly, and what did. The man who cannot enjoy *The Carpet-Bag*, the editors claimed, knows "where to buy stocks to advantage," and is "punctual to the minute in calling for rents," and "his face never relaxes when told that sickness or sorrow has prevented the payment." "Pity," they wrote, "is a weakness that his heart never was guilty of," and everyone who passes by his home's "cold exterior," understands all too well that "benevolence" does not "form any part of that family's sins.

On the other hand, the man who *can* see fun in *The Carpet-Bag* is described as "genial, warm-hearted, and generous"—"[t]o be happy is his governing principle." "Moroseness and ill-nature he holds in abhorrence," the editors wrote, and he never loses "his confidence in human nature, because a few are false, but makes a just distinction between the exception and the rule" (November 2, 1851).

This, then, was *The Carpet-Bag* that Trowbridge/Creyton wrote for from 1851, and clearly, this Trowbridge/Creyton saw an ultimate purpose of providing "cheerfulness." He saw that, to that end, wit and humor (including word play that sometimes became a bit silly) were highly encouraged. A bit of melodrama could be accepted, and was perhaps even preferred, as long as there were sincerely intended "sighs for the sighing," "tears for the tearful," and "hope for the hopeful"—and as long as there was "both amusement and instruction" that the great majority of people—the "genial"—would find "agreeable."

In its second issue, the editors printed a short piece entitled "Moral Influence of Mrs. Partington." It told of "a kind lady" provoked by a young son who had just made a mess of her newly swept room. "Her first impulse," she herself narrated, "was to cry [. . .], but at that moment the idea of Mrs. Partington crossed her mind, standing calmly amid the ruins of her broken crockery without a shade of anger upon her venerable brow." By remaining calm, Mrs. Partington had managed both to soothe and instruct her young nephew, and recalling this, "the kind lady" had been able to allow "the sweet spirit of Peace" to imbue *her* response to her son. Finally, in response to this lady's expression of gratitude to Mrs. Partington (and

The Carpet-Bag), the editors commented, "We feel more proud of the above compliment than of all the others which we have ever received." *The Carpet-Bag* wanted to cheer and amuse, for sure, but it also wanted to help readers confirm the brightness of their own better angels.

Trowbridge's Five Contributions to Volume 1 of *The Carpet-Bag*

Trowbridge/Creyton had a total of five pieces in *The Carpet-Bag*'s first year. The first three pieces—"Elias Mills in Town" (No. 13, June 8, 1851), "Mr. Feersley's Exploit" (No. 29, October 18, 1851), "Shot Between the Eyes" (No. 36, December 6, 1851)—are short, anecdotal sketches, while the last two pieces –"The Betrothal Ring" (No. 49, March 7, 1852) and "Harvey Beakley; Or a Lover's Progress" (No. 52, March 27, 1852)—are more fully-realized short stories.

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Part of *The Carpet-Bag*'s intention was to capture the color of life in Boston, and as the young Trowbridge spent his first years in Boston living in a boarding house (*MOS* 134), he was more than capable of painting pictures of life there. In "Elias Mills in Town," a country bumpkin shows up at a boarding house and makes himself at home. The other boarders think he is a new boarder, while the landlady thinks he is a friend of a boarder. That the city folk and the country man are suspicious of the other soon becomes apparent, as does the snobbery of one the current boarders, who doesn't want Elias to sit next to him at the dinner table. When it's realized that he's neither anyone's friend nor a new boarder, Elias is quickly judged an "imposter"—which infuriates him. There ensues a big to-do over the first week's money he says he has paid, as well as the whereabouts of his "bundle." Tensions rise until fisticuffs seem at hand—and then, in the nick of time, the mystery is solved. On the same street, there are *two* boarding houses with a No. 20 address. Elias has actually checked in to the other one. The boarders "burst into a roar of laughter" and a great relief is felt by all.

It is a light-hearted anecdote, but one that hints at how easily — and too quickly—we sometimes judge others—and how easy it can be to assume oneself as superior to someone who speaks and behaves a little differently. Its message is simple and absolutely undisguised. Much of the story's appeal comes from the skill

with which Trowbridge reproduces Elias's dialect and with which he describes Elias's mannerisms. Here's the passage in which Elias first speaks, after making himself comfortable in the parlor.

> The stranger had a red, coarse, good-natured face, which lighted up with a smile, as he inquired of the boarders in general—
>
> "Beout what time d'ye hev supper here?"
>
> Taking the stranger for a new boarder, some one politely replied—
>
> "At half past six."
>
> The stranger drew an enormous watch from his pocket—a silver watch of such formidable proportions that time might be said literally to hang heavily on his hands—and said in a modulative tone—
>
> "Wants ten minutes yit—by my time. Guess now I think on't, I'll wash, and com' my hair 'fore supper, ef you'll tell me where I kin find water and a brush."

And it's when Elias finds himself in his most precarious moment that Trowbridge brings him most fully to life.

> "Loo, 'ere now! this won't do," said the stranger, changing color. "I aint goin' to be cheated and robbed o' my baggage in this way. I engaged board for a week—and paid you three dollars 'n' a 'af in advance. Now 'taint no use tryin' to to suck Elias Mills in this way, I tell ye. I've hearn tell o' the city folks afore, and I've got my eye teeth cut, you'd better believe. 'Though 'f you're sick o' your bargain, I haint a word to say ag'in goin',—but not till I've got my money in my wallet and my bundle on my shoulder, I give you fair warning!"

Trowbridge's ability to reproduce Elias's speech rhythms so perfectly and to make readers feel the intensity of the pride Elias feels in his rural origins surely caught the attentions of *The Carpet-Bag*'s editor, Shillaber. That Trowbridge had his hero show up at the boarding house "without even a *carpet-bag* in his possession" certainly showed Shillaber that he knew the importance of tickling a specific audience's funny bone.

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"Mr. Feersley's Exploit" also took advantage of Trowbridge's boarding house experience. In it, the boarding house at No. 15 has, a few weeks back, been robbed of the landlady's "German silver spoons." Both her husband, Mr. Killow, who heard a sound but thought it nothing, and Mr. Feersley, who—though a trained pugilist—snored out the noise made by the intruder, look forward to another opportunity to prove themselves. In the night, a noise is heard. Mr. Feersley tiptoes from his bedroom, whacks "the robber" over the head with his cane, and wraps him up in a bed quilt. All the boarders wake up and come down to see what's transpiring. Bedlam ensues. No one can make out the muffled muttering of the man inside the quilt. The man finally bursts free from the quilt, sending Mr. Feersley sprawling across the floor, and scattering the others, all but Mrs. Killow, that is — who now discovers that "the robber" is none other than her husband. As everything settles, everyone realizes that someone is at the front door, ringing the bell. It proves to be another boarder, a Mr. Robinson, who has tried to come in through the window, so as to not inconvenience anyone, but once such a racket has been made, no longer has any reason not to ring the doorbell.

> "This is the c-----dest house I ever was in!" growled Robinson. "I came home so late I didn't like to wake the people up, and, having tried hard to get into the dining-room window without being able to do it, I was just going to a hotel to sleep, when I heard the thunderingest racket! and I thought after that I needn't be afraid of disturbing anybody, and so I rang. And here you've kept me standing on the door-steps."
>
> "Not half so bad, Robinson, as lying on the floor, smothered by a blanket!" muttered Killow, with a savage look at Feersley.

Here, Mrs. Killow steps in to provide the moral.

> "And even that," said Mrs. K, recovering her cheerfulness —"that is not so bad as having spoons stolen! so let us thank Feersley for his exploit on our behalf and go to bed."

Robinson has been inconvenienced, her husband has suffered a few bruises, but they should all be grateful that it has not been worse. That's the simple message of this pure piece of slapstick. Here, the humorous descriptions of Mr. Feersley "bravely" approaching the dining-room and Mr. Killow struggling beneath the quilt, unable to make himself heard, make the story. Given the nature of the piece, Trowbridge surely thought, there was no need to strive for any sort of verisimilitude; readers of *The Carpet-Bag*, knowing the story's comic nature, would not hold him accountable for any.

*

The third short sketch, "A Shot in the Dark," is one with a clear moral—and the least interesting of the three. In anger, Dick Anker shoots his own dog, and then "meditate[s] on the evil consequences of bad passions." However, when he sees another hunter, from across a river, shoot a wolf, he realizes that he can change the positions of the dead animals, and make it look as if he is the one who's killed the wolf, and the other, Major Nutto, is the one who has shot his dog. At first, he tricks Nutto into paying compensation for his dog, but when he sneaks off in a greedy attempt to get the hide of the wolf, Nutto catches him—and sees through all his lies. We see that Anker has failed to learn the lesson he has supposedly meditated on.

This story, though, without any humor, and without any particularly skillful use of language, falls flat.

*

Trowbridge's first major story in *The Carpet-Bag* was "The Betrothal Ring," a melodramatic, "touching tale" of a woman whose husband is lost to "[c]ards and wine." The story begins with Clarissa and her two children eking out a miserable life in a rented garret. She stares into the coal fire, remembering the days in which Clarence, her husband, treated her with such tenderness, but it has been years now since she's seen him and she can see no way of paying her delinquent rent but by selling her treasured betrothal ring—her last fond memory of him. Elsewhere in town, we see Clarence just returned from abroad. He's straightened himself out, made a fortune, is ready to seek out the wife and children he's hurt so much. But he's tempted into a gaming place, where, amazingly, his luck is all good. At last, his pitiful opponent, desperate, pulls out a ring he's purchased recently. It's the last

thing of any monetary value he possesses. When Clarence sees that it is his wife's betrothal ring, he is overwhelmed with remorse — once again. He gives the man all his money back, asking only if he may buy the ring. The "astounded" player responds that he will gladly give it to him —"I have been *taught a lesson* which I shall never forget," he exclaims to Clarence, "This is the last of my gaming!!" (my emphasis). Before long, Clarence, "the reformed husband, the affectionate, generous father" is reunited with Clarissa and their children—and all, we assume, live very happily ever after.

Modern readers with a hunger for realism in their stories, stories that need no moralizing on the parts of their authors, will find many things to dislike in the story. One is the melodramatic and overly sentimental nature of the entire piece, with the characters' feelings of the moment being bent and molded and changed to fit its twisting, turning, coincident-dependent, over-the-top plot. Another is the overwrought and not-so-very original use of language, as in this passage from the very beginning of the story, in which Clarissa is staring at the dying embers in the grate and seeing happier times.

> And out of those embers she saw arise visions bright and beautiful — scenes of sunshine which painted with a golden glow even the dark and heavy cloud of sorrows which overhung her present—a fairy-land of bliss, you would have called it, which filled all the cold and comfortless apartment, and in which she was lost, a clairvoyant exploring the realm of dear and tender memories.

Another is a tendency on Trowbridge's part to gloss over, or to omit completely any detailed account of what he feels might offend a genteel reader. When Mr. Sillings, Clarisa's landlord, tells her "there was no necessity for her to make the sacrifice she contemplated [that is, selling her ring] and "he let[s] fall a word" that leaves her anguished, we can easily deduce the carnal proposal he's made. Still, many modern readers may think, even understanding the nature of the age, that Trowbridge is being a bit too prudish — and more to the point, passing up a true opportunity to bring the story to life and to make the reader feel, viscerally, the truth of it. A final element of the story that modern readers may not like is its need to present, directly, a moral — to have the readers clearly and directly "taught a

lesson." Here's how the story ends.

> ---And thus was the mission of that talisman [the ring] fulfilled. Ah, would that such happiness and virtue might shine at last over every pathway that sorrow and sin have clouded,---would that such love, and joy, and peace, with fewer trials, might always crown the hearts of hands that give and hands that receive such pledges as this simple BETROTHAL RING.

*

"Harvey Beakley; Or a Lover's Progress" is a portrait of a type: the young, "desperately gay" man who is brought to "Byronic misanthropy" by romantic disappointment. When Harvey, twenty-two years old, discovers that Maria Matilda, the woman he's set his heart on, is engaged to another, he declares "gaiety a sin" and "love a disease"— and taking "Melancholy by the hand," swears his "eternal devotion" to it. An invitation by Kate, his cousin, to spend some time in the countryside, seems the perfect opportunity to spurn the world and to pen his tale of woe: "Matilda the Heartless: A Tragedy." At Kate's, though, he meets a second Matilda, and despite himself falls in love again—and finds himself seeing in nature, once again, infinite beauty. There are twists and turns but in the end he and the second Matilda marry and, we assume, live happily ever after.

The story seems, more than anything, a warning against self-absorbedness. At Kate's, Harvey *tries* to seclude himself in his personal and unreasonable gloom. As he prepares to write his tragedy, he keeps a book of Byron's and *The Sorrows of Young Werter* at his side. Drawing "death-heads" on the paper before him, he tries to work himself into "dramatic meditation." In the end, however, he cannot shut out the marvels of nature beyond his window. "The song of birds, and the warm sunshine" draw him out. At first, he *thinks* that he can take his melancholy with him, but he fails, as Trowbridge's description of him, the next day, out by the "mossy banks of Glen Brook," illustrates.

> Our hero might have succeeded very well in his pursuit of seriousness, had it not been for—firstly, a black squirrel, whose gambol diverted his attention; secondly, the wet and uncomfortable state of a mossy log he desired to sit upon, to remedy which, he used the "Sorrows" as a cushion, being forced

> to laugh at the ridiculousness of the circumstance; and thirdly, Kate and Matilda, Number Two, who found him in his solitude, at half past ten, and kept him in a perpetual state of cheerfulness until dinner.

Trowbridge's portrait is light and stylized, but it surely succeeded as a prose piece in *The Carpet-Bag,* for while encouraging the reader to "laugh at the ridiculousness" of Harvey's self-imposed and not-all-so-warranted melancholy (after all, the first Matilda did nothing to encourage him, merely told him that she was engaged to another when he suddenly declared his undying love for her), it also retains a certain affection for its central character, expresses both a certain kindness toward him and an understanding of how absurdly a young man *might* think and behave when he feels his love has not be requited in a manner, which to him, at that moment, seems fair. The story's goal mirrors that of the magazine in which it finds itself: "cheerfulness." As Harvey is forced into cheerfulness despite himself, so will, *The Carpet-Bag* surely hoped, any self-absorbed young men reading the piece.

As with the other pieces, the language of this one may seem a bit overwrought for modern readers. Here's how the piece opens.

> "What a hollow, wretched world is this!" exclaimed Harvey Beakley with a tremendous sigh, looking out of his window one beautiful spring morning, when the world was appearing as bright and loveable as a young girl. "How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable is life! I am only twenty-two, and I am tired of it; I exclaim, *all is vanity!*—Oh dear! another day!"

Yet this was the idiom of the day—at least the idiom of *The Carpet-Bag*—and it was not one that did not have its appreciative readers. It is an idiom that lends itself to the melodramatic perhaps, but a good sort of melodrama—one capable of fostering the "cheerfulness" that the editors of *The Carpet-Bag* were always eager to present.

Concluding Remarks

In late 1853, Trowbridge was in Washington, D.C., gathering material for a

biography of then Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase — one of the most powerful men in America. By then, Trowbridge had known the success of a number of full-length novels, including the anti-slavery *Neighbor Jackwood* in 1857, and was in good spirits about how he had risen in the world. He was happy to have earned an opportunity to spend a bit of time with the rich and famous. But in Washington, D.C., he was also thinking quite a lot of Walt Whitman — and spending what free time he had with him. After one visit to Whitman's "garret," he wrote to his wife, describing it.

> His cupboard is in a corner of this *terrible room* & consists of a box nailed up [. . .]. His sugar bowl is a bag of brown paper. His bed was not made; his boots were standing around the room, table & trunk were covered with books & newspapers, & the thing, which should have been under the bed, unfortunately wasn't. All was exceedingly primitive—as much as himself. (Letter to Cornelia Trowbridge, my emphasis).

As much as Trowbridge admired Whitman the poet, he was not particularly pleased with the lifestyle he had allowed himself to settle into. This, however, did not prevent him from acting on Whitman's behalf when Whitman asked him to present a letter to Chase, written for Whitman by none other than Ralph Waldo Emerson, asking for Chase to help secure Whitman a government appointment. Trowbridge presented the letter—and was not at all surprised at Chase's reaction. Chase replied that it would give him "great pleasure to grant this request, out of [his] regard for Mr. Emerson," but he also said that *Leaves of Grass* was a book that had "made the author notorious," that Whitman was a man of "bad repute" (*MOS* 383-388).

Trowbridge's comparison of these two men, Whitman and Chase, for whom he held such tremendous admiration, reveals a lot about who he himself was, and about what he expected to obtain from his work as a writer.

> [. . .] great men both, each nobly proportioned in body and stalwart in character, and each invincibly true to his own ideals and purposes: near neighbors, and yet very antipodes in their widely contrasted lives,—one princely in his

> position, dispensing an enormous patronage, the slenderest rill of which would have made life green for the other, struggling along the arid ways of honorable poverty. Both greatly ambitious; Chase devoutly believing it his right, and likewise his destiny, to succeed Lincoln in the presidency; Whitman aspiring to be for all time the poet of democracy and emancipated manhood, — his simple prayer being, "Give me to speak beautiful words; take all the rest!" [. . .] For the statesman I had a very great admiration and respect; for the poet I felt a powerful attraction, something like a younger brother's love; and I confess a sweet and secret joy in sometimes stealing away from the company of polished and eminent people in the great house, and crossing over to Walt in his garret [. . .]. (*MOS* 383-384).

In spirit, Trowbridge thought himself no less of a poet than Whitman. But both temperament and necessity required of him that he find a way to turn a life in letters into a livelihood—a life in letters that would, in the best sense of the word, leave the world believing him the finest of gentlemen. He surely felt as Whitman did the primal urge to "speak beautiful words," but he was not remotely the type to shout, "Take all the rest!"

Thus, the encouragement he received from *The Carpet-Bag* was of a type that served him well. He learned to approach his subject matter with wit and humor, to write lovingly and evocatively of nature, to provide characters with dignity through the accurate presentation of their unique manners of speech, to show in it a concern for the difficulties people face, but to do so in what he — and apparently quite a lot of readers — thought was a professional, courteous, and gentlemanly fashion. And indeed, in the process, he learned how to turn his desire to write "beautiful words" into a livelihood. He became a moral voice, if a bit melodramatic one, that many people read and paid attention to.

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