

# HOWELLS' CANADIAN SISTER

*James Doyle*

**I**N MARCH OF 1873, William Dean Howells wrote to his younger sister Annie to discourage her from making a short story out of a trivial experience she had had while travelling in Canada. The main reason for his disapproval, as appears from his letter, is that Howells had already written up the experience himself. "I acknowledge," he writes, "that it was rather selfish of me to employ that little adventure of yours, but you know your sketch had lain unfinished for nearly two years."<sup>1</sup> While Annie thus dabbled laconically at a literary career, her brother published *Their Wedding Journey* (1871) and *A Chance Acquaintance* (1872), two novels largely set in Canada and involving (among other American tourists) Kitty Ellison, who in the modestly exotic settings of Niagara Falls, Montreal, and Quebec, emerges as one of the many resourceful and independent international heroines who pervade the fiction of Howells and his friend Henry James. As Howells insisted in another letter, his sister provided only the suggestion for his American heroine in Canada, and there is no justification for making a detailed identification between Kitty Ellison and Annie Howells.<sup>2</sup> But Annie did not need the glamour of such an identification, for she had already embarked on a real-life Canadian adventure of her own. If her semi-autobiographical sketch lay unfinished while her brother wrote two novels, there was some reason for her idleness. In the 1870's Annie was busy creating a new life for herself north of the border; perhaps after she settled down as wife, mother, and Canadian, she would be able to give more attention to her incipient literary career.

In 1877, at Quebec City — where her father William Cooper Howells was American consul — Annie Howells married the French-Canadian journalist and civil servant Achille Fréchette, the younger brother of Louis Fréchette, who was ultimately to become known as unofficial poet laureate of French Canada. Various psychological inferences might be made about this marriage of the younger siblings of the leading American and French-Canadian men of letters in

the late nineteenth century; and it is undoubtedly true that Annie and Achille were to some extent drawn together by the similarities in their respective family situations. The basic facts of Achille's career, however, suggest that he was not intimidated by the achievements of his brilliant and popular brother. Initially, he hoped to follow Louis' footsteps as a poet (his narrative poem "Les Martyrs de la foi au Canada" won honourable mention in the Laval *concours de poésie* of 1868, and was published in the *Revue canadienne*), but his ambitions soon turned towards journalism. Shortly after graduating from Laval in 1868, Achille emigrated to Chicago to establish (subsequently with the help of his brother Louis) a newspaper for the small francophone community of Illinois. There he met Annie Howells, recently of Hamilton, Ohio, the young and clever literary editor of the Chicago *Inter-Ocean*. When the Fréchette brothers' enterprise was wiped out by the Chicago fire of 1871 and they decided to return to Canada, Annie was able to follow them, with the excuse of visiting her father in Quebec City and her brother who was established as a writer and editor in Boston. By the time Achille felt prepared to take on the responsibilities of marriage, he had abandoned full-time journalism to become chief translator of the Canadian House of Commons. He and Annie settled in Ottawa, where they remained until Achille's retirement in 1910.<sup>3</sup>

From the 1870's until around the turn of the century, after which she wrote for publication only very occasionally, Annie regularly contributed to various American magazines. For the most part she inclined toward the so-called "domestic sentimentalist" school of popular fiction which exalted romantic love, the virtues of home and fireside, and the domination of resourceful women over well meaning but less capable men. At the same time, she absorbed some of the realist principles expounded by her brother, particularly the emphasis on the ordinary and commonplace experiences of middle-class Americans. Unfortunately, she did not follow William's precepts about the importance of writing from personal experience, and thus she left completely undeveloped the one aspect of her own life which might have provided the most fruitful literary material. Her one attempt at a story based on her Canadian experiences was abandoned after William wrote of the American girl in Canada in *A Chance Acquaintance*. But in spite of its very clear limitations, Annie's fiction is by no means devoid of interest.

Her first significant publication, a short novel entitled "Reuben Dale," appeared serially in the *Galaxy* during the winter of 1874-75. As a first work it is quite promising, especially in its reflection of the new realist trends in fiction. The central situation involves a woman in her late twenties who has been disappointed in love and who marries a much older man to avoid spinsterhood. Shortly afterward, she meets Reuben Dale, a young and handsome army officer recently returned from the western frontier. The conflict and psychological

interest of the story arises, however, not from a conventional representation of illicit love in the manner of nineteenth-century melodrama, but rather from the tension between the heroine's awareness of her sexual attraction to Dale and her recognition of the relative comfort and security she has found with her unromantic but dutiful husband. The best scenes in the novel trace in detail the heroine's growing devotion to the placid course of domestic and social routine, and her acceptance of both the virtues and defects of her husband's personality. But the ultimate direction of the story is towards an emphatic assertion of traditional morality: the would-be lovers are punished by a gratuitously violent catastrophe, even though they have committed adultery only in thought.

The conclusion of "Reuben Dale" also involves a false report of death by train wreck, a plot development which William Dean Howells was to use in *The Quality of Mercy* (1892). Like the American girl in Canada motif of *A Chance Acquaintance*, the train wreck episode is one of several examples of the fruitful exchange of ideas between William and Annie throughout their respective writing careers. This exchange is probably reflected, although indirectly, in Annie's next published work of fiction, a short story entitled "Le Coureur des Bois" which appeared in the May 1876 *Scribner's Monthly*. The immediate inspiration for the story was the latest volume in Francis Parkman's narrative history *France and England in North America*, for Annie took as an epigraph a quotation from *The Old Regime in Canada* (1874) describing the colourful renegade fur traders of New France. But she undoubtedly found her way to Parkman through William, for her attitude towards Parkman's version of Canadian history is similar to that which William expressed in a tribute to the historian in *Their Wedding Journey*. Although Howells had great admiration for Parkman's narrative skill and found in the histories many clues to an understanding of the differences between the United States and Canada of his own time, he rejected Parkman's exaltation of the epic struggle between France and England. For Howells, the most positive aspect of New World history was the fact that the primitive world of the French and Indian wars had been replaced by a peaceful, progressive, unheroic, and essentially democratic way of life. Much the same point, although expressed in a very different way, is made in Annie's "Le Coureur des Bois."

In this story, a young French-Canadian girl leaves her father's farm on the St. Lawrence to marry a renegade fur trader and try to adapt to his nomadic life in the wilderness. The brutishly masculine world of the *coureurs* almost destroys her, and she finally attempts to make her way through the winter wilderness back to her father's house. The possible victory of primitivism over civilization is thwarted by a last-minute rescue from a freezing death after the repentant husband has set out in pursuit of her. The conclusion, with the triumph of what the nineteenth century would regard as female values, is as domestic and sentimental as some of the early scenes of "Reuben Dale," or (to compare great things

with small) the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*. But the story is also a celebration of progress and civilization over primitivism and wildness: a rejection of Parkman's *ancien Canada* in favour of William Dean Howells' America.

AFTER THE LIMITED but promising beginning of "Reuben Dale" and "Le Coureur des Bois," Annie's literary career followed, somewhat like her brother's but on a much smaller scale, a rather eclectic course. In the 1880's she published in *Harper's* a couple of articles on Canada designed to inform Americans about certain unique facets of life in the northern Dominion, and to advertise the attractions of the country as a tourist resort. "Life at Rideau Hall" (July 1881) is a gossipy description of the English governor-general's residence in Ottawa and the brilliant social life associated with it. "Summer Resorts on the St. Lawrence" (July 1884) is a rather snobbish account of the various spas in the Thousand Islands region which attracted the fashionable tourists every summer. Her short stories, with such titles as "A Visit to a Country House and What Came of It" (*Harper's*, Sept. 1877), "Isabel, Elsie, and I" (*New England Magazine*, Oct. 1890), "How Cassie Saved the Spoons" (*McClures*, Sept. 1893), are mostly slight and semi-comic domestic adventures, vaguely resembling in theme and tone the many dramatic farces which William was turning out at about the same time for quick profit from periodical publication and amateur production. In addition, Annie published two collections of short stories for children, *On Grandfather's farm* and *The Farm's Little People* (both 1897).

In other words, Annie developed into an efficient but unremarkable magazine writer, most of whose efforts have justifiably remained buried in the periodicals or limited editions where they first appeared. Only two of her later stories are worth further brief mention. "The Chances of War and How One Was Missed" (*Harper's*, Sept. 1881) is a civil war story which explores defeated illusions and the destruction of a society in dream-like retrospective episodes, and avoids the sentimental ending inherent in the rather trite romantic situation involving a wounded Union officer and a southern belle. Of greater interest, however, and perhaps Annie's best work of fiction, is the brief "Widow in the Wilderness" (*Harper's*, Dec. 1899). Here, the subject is an Indian woman who has been abandoned with her children near a trading post somewhere in the northern wilderness. The story consists of the vaguely sympathetic but uncomprehending comments on the woman made by a group of white men. In the end, they leave a small supply of food near her, which she neither accepts nor acknowledges; and the white men pass on, uncertain of but eventually indifferent to her fate.

The concise and entirely objective representation of the Indian woman recalls

the poems of Duncan Campbell Scott, another Ottawa resident and civil servant with whom the Fréchettes were possibly acquainted. If, as is quite likely, Annie had been reading such poems as "The Forsaken" or "The Onondaga Madonna," she found a literary model which might have provided fruitful compensation for the excessive sentimentality, the simplistic characterization and other faults which derived partly from the influence of her brother's writing, and from her own limitations. But Annie not only failed to develop this line of fiction; after 1900 she published only one short story, and a tribute to her brother on his death in 1920. Her rather abortive literary career reflects two facts: she was essentially an amateur without the all-absorbing commitment which is surely one of the distinguishing features of the true artist, and she was an unoriginal writer who in her best work merely shows a talent for reproducing certain techniques and themes developed by others. Whatever interest her work may have belongs to the obscure corners of literary history where one finds the curious and occasionally interesting stories of the relatives of important authors.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Manuscript letter, quoted in Jonathan Thomas and David J. Nordloh, "Introduction," *A Chance Acquaintance*, by W. D. Howells (Bloomington, 1971), p. xxv.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
- <sup>3</sup> A brief account of the career and family life of Achille Fréchette is given in Lucien Serre, *Louis Fréchette: Notes pour servir à la biographie du poète* (Montréal, 1928), pp. 173-76.

## ONE BOUND, ONE FREE

*James Harrison*

Struggled and felt the bonds tighten that manacled  
 Wrists behind the mast at his back; shouted  
 And watched his words break like waves over barnacled  
 Heads of rowers he never knew he hated  
 Till then, sealed in their petty to-fro rocking  
 Preoccupation with being somewhere tomorrow  
 Other than where they were today, and blocking  
 Out the unendurable joy and sorrow  
 All around them.

Safe from success, allowed  
 Himself to understand, as a dying  
 Body poised between being and unbeing  
 Since birth understands what it has swallowed,  
 The burden of that song that only he  
 And Orpheus heard unscathed, one bound, one free.