

THE CREATION OF *THE FOUR MILLION*:
O. HENRY'S INFLUENCES AND WORKING METHODS

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In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts

by
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THE CREATION OF *THE FOUR MILLION*:
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Presented by Gary Kass

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And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT

Though O. Henry's *The Four Million* was intended as an attack on Ward McAllister's idea of the Four Hundred, each man is mentioned only in passing in studies of the other. One chapter therefore contrasts the two men by bringing together readings of McAllister's memoir, accounts of his career, and the secondary literature on O. Henry. Another chapter examines the work of Anne Partlan, the writer that O. Henry said inspired him to write about the shopgirls of New York. This section focuses on "Among Themselves," the story O. Henry singled out as a special influence, and Partlan's other work for *Success* magazine around the turn of the century. A final chapter attempts to assemble material for a compositional history of *The Four Million*. While the results are necessarily inconclusive, some tentative conclusions are reached about how much O. Henry was involved in the selection and arrangement of stories for the book and how much was left to his publisher and others.

The results demonstrate that some established ideas about O. Henry—that he was in the vanguard in pushing back against the idea of the Four Hundred and that he moved in on Partlan's fictional territory—are not borne out by the facts and must be tested against original sources.

Chapter 1 Introduction

It can seem that everything has already been said about O. Henry and his work. His life has been written several times, and both scholars and memoirists have also focused on certain segments of it: the Texas years, the interlude in Central and South America, the years in prison, and the New York years. As early as 1931, Robert H. Davis, who had been O. Henry's editor at *Munsey's*, could write: "The wealth of material already collected and published concerning the Caliph of Bagdad [Davis's name for O. Henry] is almost beyond classification, but there will always remain an insatiable demand for new matter bearing upon his life, letters and tribulations" (Davis and Maurice, 206).

The problem is the unreliability of much of this material, as writers quoted parts of each other's accounts and introduced discrepancies in the process. "Whosoever knew the inside story of Bill Porter's life was present when it was unfolding—on the spot, so to speak, an eye-witness," Davis continues. "From the Caliph's own lips little fell" (Davis and Maurice, 208). Different witnesses therefore had different parts of the story and were forced to quote each other at length if they wanted to assemble the complete picture. There are many contradictions between these accounts that have never been resolved. For instance, the story of how O. Henry came to be hired to write for the *New York Sunday World* differs in matters of fact both large and small between its first appearance in George MacAdam's 1922 article in the *New York Times* and its reappearance in Davis and Maurice's 1931 biography, *The Caliph of Bagdad*. By the time it appeared in

William Wash Williams's 1936 book *The Quiet Lodger of Irving Place*, three different men had claimed to be the one who tracked down the hard-to-find author and signed him to a contract to write for the *World*. Such discrepancies cast doubt on the entire episode. Williams tells his version of the story without even acknowledging the earlier versions, but Gerald Langford at least tries to reconcile the different accounts in his 1957 biography, *Alias O. Henry* (164–65). Langford's overall assessment, however, is that “although half a dozen books and hundreds of magazine articles have been written about the man and his work, the information which can be assembled from all these publications is disappointingly incomplete” (xi).

There are also a number of stories about O. Henry that have been passed along almost verbatim from study to study, always taken at face value but never investigated. Some of these stories play an important role in the legend that built up around O. Henry in the years following his death. The following chapters are an attempt to investigate the standard account of how O. Henry came to write his breakthrough book, *The Four Million* (1906).

The weekly stories that O. Henry began writing in 1903 for the New York *Sunday World* made him nationally famous; the *World*, with a readership of half a million, was the largest circulation newspaper in the country at the time. The first book collection of these New York-set stories, *The Four Million*, extended his fame around the world.¹ The book contained twenty-five of the stories he wrote in 1903–1905, mostly for the New York *Sunday World*. Other books followed at the rate of two a year, with New York-themed collections alternating with collections of stories set in Texas and

¹ This was O. Henry's second book; the first was *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), a loosely related collection of stories set in Honduras.

elsewhere. Critical acclaim was added to popular acclaim with an appreciative essay in the prestigious *North American Review* in 1908. Other critical appreciations followed after O. Henry's death in 1910, some quite lavish in their praise—O. Henry was called “the American Maupassant” and “the Bret Harte of the City.” The first biography appeared in 1916, and its author, C. Alphonso Smith, claimed O. Henry as a major American writer.

That same year, however, a backlash set in, begun by F. L. Pattee's essay “The Journalization of American Literature” and joined by H. L. Mencken (who called O. Henry a “cheesemonger”) and others. The Canadian humorist and critic Stephen Leacock entered the fray with a counterattack titled “O. Henry and His Critics,” and the battle over O. Henry's literary stature continued through the mid-1920s. Over the next few decades, O. Henry came to seem passé and the argument over his reputation moot. Though he lived on in anthologies and his name was kept before the public through the O. Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories (begun in 1919), literary historians often took no notice of him. O. Henry scholarship picked up somewhat in the 1960s, but was still at a low ebb compared to the attention paid to his realist contemporaries Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London.

It did not help matters that even O. Henry's supporters failed to read him closely. An appreciative 1914 essay in the *Sewanee Review* by Hyder E. Rollins “set the pattern for such critical analysis by skimming rapidly through each collection, synthesizing action, situation, and/or personae in a succession of stories” (Current-Garcia 1993, 162–63). Those who did take the trouble to subject the work to close scrutiny, such as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren in their book *Understanding Fiction*, did so in

order to highlight O. Henry's shortcomings: "thin and sketchy characterization," a "mawkish and wheedling tone," "far-fetched coincidence," and an ending that is "a shabby trick" is their verdict on O. Henry's "The Furnished Room" (Brooks and Warren, 97, 98).

Typical of the initial backlash is a 1923 essay by N. Bryllion Fagin about *The Four Million*. The title of the book was O. Henry's response to Ward McAllister, a New York City arbiter of taste who in 1892 coined the phrase "the Four Hundred" to define the number of people who mattered in New York society. Fagin writes: "It was [O. Henry's] bold challenge to the world that he was the discoverer . . . of four million people instead of four hundred in America's metropolis that first attracted attention and admiration. The implication was that he was imbued with the purpose of unbaring the lives of these four million and especially of the neglected lower classes. . . . But to what extent was he successful in carrying out his assignment[?]" ("O. Henryism," excerpted in Current-Garcia 1993, 167). Fagin goes on to complain specifically about one of the stories in the book that had been acclaimed as a masterpiece, "The Gift of the Magi," arguing that the story shows us little of "the life of the four million" (168).

This study seeks to recover something of the context and original impact of the book by looking at it in tandem with the two figures who are known to have exerted the greatest influence on its contents: Ward McAllister and Anne Partlan. The first figure is well documented, the second quite obscure and more elusive; her name appears only in certain studies of O. Henry and in the byline of her magazine pieces preserved on microfilm. Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted to McAllister and Partlan, respectively. A fourth chapter focuses on O. Henry himself in an attempt to determine the extent of his

involvement in the process of making the *World* stories into a book. In other words, how were the stories selected and arranged, etc., and who performed these tasks? Here the facts are even more elusive.

It may be that some of these questions about O. Henry's career can never be answered conclusively. In that respect, they would resemble the many questions about his activities as a fugitive in New Orleans and Honduras, which remain a source of speculation. However, a review of the original and secondary sources with a focus on these questions can serve to draw together the available evidence and begin to add to the store of "new matter" that Robert H. Davis described.

Chapter 2

O. Henry and Ward McAllister

The best thumbnail account of the life of William Sidney Porter (1862–1910) is provided by Arthur Hobson Quinn in *American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey* (1936):

Born in Greensboro, North Carolina, where he varied his experience as a drug clerk by drawing caricatures, he went to Texas in 1882 and knew ranch and city life in the West. He became teller in the First National Bank of Austin and in 1896, when accused of embezzlement, he fled to Honduras in Central America. Returning, on account of his wife's illness, he was convicted and spent three years in the Ohio Penitentiary at Columbus. His first short story, "The Miracle of Lava Cañon," appeared in 1898. He had been a columnist for the *Daily Post* of Houston, Texas, but his real work as a short story writer began during his days in prison. On his release in 1901 he took the name "O. Henry," went to New York City in 1902, and there made his reputation, first as a writer for the popular magazines and later for the *New York World*. (Pp. 545–46)

Porter published only three stories under his own name, all in 1902 before he became famous.² The reason for taking a pen name was his desperate desire to hide his past, particularly his conviction for embezzlement and three years in state prison.³

Besides "O. Henry" (and sometimes "Olivier Henry"), he also used the names S. H. Peters, T. B. Dowd, Howard Clark, and James L. Bliss (Smith, 169n). He decided to stick

² In the confusion that often surrounds Porter, even such a simple matter as the correct way to give his name has yet to be settled. Born William Sidney Porter, he is often referred to as William Sydney Porter, since he changed the spelling of his middle name in 1898. But he also dropped his first name at the same time, so he should properly be called either Sydney Porter or William Sidney Porter (Langford, 261n1).

³ Even had he not been trying to hide his past, he might well have adopted a pen name to distinguish himself from William T. Porter, founder and editor of the New York weekly *Spirit of the Times*. Known for its sports and theater coverage, the *Spirit* also helped popularize Southwestern humor, a tradition on which William Sidney Porter drew. The earlier Porter died in 1858, but his paper continued on into the 1890s. Strangely, none of O. Henry's biographers mention this other William Porter.

with “O. Henry” when he realized it had become “a trade-mark that carried a story at once to an editor’s desk, and, what was more, meant a boosting of the story’s price” (Davis, 164).

The title of O. Henry’s breakthrough book, the 1906 collection *The Four Million*, itself became a trademark of sorts. For one thing, it let readers know what kind of collection a new O. Henry book was. In the years of his peak fame following *The Four Million*, O. Henry published two collections a year, of various kinds: stories of the West, stories about confidence men and criminals, and stories set in the South and other regions, as well as additional stories set in New York City. The subsequent volumes of New York stories all referenced *The Four Million* in a subtitle: *The Trimmed Lamp, and Other Stories of the Four Million* (1907), *The Voice of the City: Further Stories of the Four Million* (1908), and *Strictly Business: More Stories of the Four Million* (1910).

Gerald Langford, O. Henry’s most thorough biographer, refers to two of the posthumous collections, *Whirligigs* (1910) and *Sixes and Sevens* (1911), as the final volumes of New York stories (Langford, 218). But only half the stories in these books are set in New York, which explains why they don’t carry a “Four Million” subtitle. Even during his lifetime, some of O. Henry’s most popular New York stories were scattered throughout his non–New York books: “A Tempered Wind” in *The Gentle Grafter* (1908), “The Halberdier of the Little Rheinschloss” in *Roads of Destiny* (1909), “The Third Ingredient” and “Thimble, Thimble” in *Options* (1909).⁴ Some other New York stories appeared in these books as well, but the majority of stories had Southern, Western, or foreign settings. Conversely, O. Henry’s most celebrated Southern story, “A Municipal

⁴ Langford calls “Thimble, Thimble” a Southern story, but though the characters are Southern, the story is set in New York.

Report,” appeared in *Strictly Business*, a collection that is otherwise made up of stories set in New York. As Langford observes, “[a]ll of the O. Henry collections had been assembled somewhat haphazardly”—even those with a unifying theme (Langford, 230). It is clear that O. Henry had the material to assemble another strong New York collection had he wanted to.

The “Four Million” trademark was also a sign of quality, since O. Henry’s New York stories were widely considered to be his best. *Heart of the West*, for instance, a collection of Western tales, was not well reviewed. One critic wrote: “We never like O. Henry quite as well anywhere else as when he writes of ‘little old New York,’ as his characters call it” (*Outlook*, Nov. 2, 1907, p. 497). Another wrote: “After the intrinsic delicacy and fancy of *The Four Million*, Mr. Porter’s new volume of short stories is a distinct disappointment,” calling the Western stories “cheaply clever” in comparison (*Nation*, Nov. 28, 1907, p. 496; both reviews quoted in Langford, 212). Of *The Voice of the City*, on the other hand, the *Outlook* wrote: “A new book of stories about New York by O. Henry is sure of a welcome” (July 4, 1908, p. 532) and “proceeded to comment on the unity of purpose in a collection of stories all growing out of the author’s great love for the city and his sure knowledge of its people” (Langford, 218). Perhaps this bias was due to provincialism by New York reviewers. In any case, by 1909, “it was his New York stories on which O. Henry’s chief significance rested” (Langford, 230).

Another connotation of the “Four Million” trademark had to do with a thematic element of all the New York stories. O. Henry biographer Dale Kramer writes that “the title referred, of course, to the anonymity of the characters” (Kramer, 278). Kramer argues that living in New York satisfied a psychological need for O. Henry: “He was in

hiding from his past more than he had ever hidden from the law. His single aim was to bury himself” (211). The “Four Million” label therefore reflects O. Henry’s desire for anonymity. Kramer claims that O. Henry “felt better in the company of anonymous people, or at any rate those not burdened with fame or the urge to it” and that “this extreme passivity of Porter’s was the key to his character” (280, 311).⁵ William Wash Williams, who knew O. Henry, agrees: “Repression, repression and more repression was the keynote of O. Henry’s make-up,” he writes, noting O. Henry’s “unwillingness at all times to do anything which would attract special attention to himself” (Williams, 104, 108–9).

In addition, “Four Million” alludes to the wealth of story material in New York for a writer who is willing to include everybody. Kramer describes O. Henry’s lack of anxiety at meeting the weekly deadline he committed to when he signed on with the *New York World*: “As for the stories, there was no worry about them. At the bar were six customers. Counting the bartender, that made seven stories” (Kramer, 254).

The frontispiece of *The Four Million* in the Authorized Edition of 1917 suggests several of these connotations. It’s a photograph, a bird’s-eye view apparently taken from a skyscraper window, of masses of people on a wide city street. Some are heading for a streetcar, and an automobile is also visible. But the majority—mostly men, from the preponderance of straw hats—are making their way along a sidewalk. The crowd is thick; it could be the lunch hour or the end of a workday. The caption is: “‘The Four Million’ on Parade.”

⁵ Kramer, who cast his biography in the form of a novel, portrays O. Henry telling a confidant that the *O* in his pen name is not a letter at all, but a cipher (286). This scene is apparently based on Kramer’s interview with O. Henry’s friend Anne Partlan.

But in addition to all these meanings, the phrase was primarily a statement of philosophy. It was a rejection of the late-nineteenth-century idea that the only people in New York City who mattered were “the Four Hundred”—the uppermost tier of New York society. A note at the beginning of *The Four Million* explains the title:

Not very long ago some one invented the assertion that there were only “Four Hundred” people in New York City who were really worth noticing. But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker—and his larger estimate of human interest has been preferred in marking out the field of these little stories of the “Four Million.”

The phrase appears as the closing words of Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice’s 1931 biography/memoir *The Caliph of Bagdad*, but with a sentimental twist: At O. Henry’s grave, an admirer says: “I see that some one has placed a wreath against the headstone. No card . . . I wonder who?” Davis answers: “Probably one of The Four Million” (Davis and Maurice, 401–2). The phrase was subsequently kept alive by other biographers, critics, and admirers. Mark Hellinger, for example, titled his 1934 short-story collection *The Ten Million* and went on to produce the 1948 movie *The Naked City*, which closed with the famous lines: “There are eight million stories in the Naked City. This has been one of them.”⁶

Most readers today encounter O. Henry in selections or anthologies. If they go on to seek out more of his stories in print, they will likely turn to one of the many one- or two-volume editions of his complete works, the first of which appeared in 1926. The note at the beginning of *The Four Million*, however, is omitted from most, if not all, such editions, leaving readers to make of the title what they will. Modern readers will realize

⁶ “Mark Hellinger: The Adventure of One in Eight Million, Part II,” by Moira Finnie, posted December 19, 2007, on the Web site MovieMorlocks.com <http://www.moviemorlocks.com/blog?action=detail&entry_id=8a258bca16f4af630116f4cef0b10002>. The *Ten Million* title was an exaggeration—the population of New York in 1934 was no more than 7.5 million—but the *Naked City* figure was accurate for its time.

that it refers to the population of New York City in a bygone time, and, if they don't initially guess, they will know after reading the stories that it announces the author's determination to pay attention to the kinds of people who are often overlooked. But the precise nature of the allusion, as an answer to the "assertion" about the Four Hundred, has faded over the years.

In fact, the note refers not to some unsourceable urban legend but to a specific person. The idea of the Four Hundred was almost twenty years old when O. Henry responded to it, but that only testifies to its staying power. The "some one" who coined the phrase was Ward McAllister (1827–1895), a self-appointed leader of New York society, and "not very long ago" was 1888. Furthermore, "the Four Hundred" was not just a figure of speech but referred to an actual list. O. Henry scants McAllister by not mentioning his name, but his contemporary readers, even without the benefit of the prefatory note, would have recognized *The Four Million* as a response to Ward McAllister and his list of the Four Hundred.

The Four Hundred has been called "perhaps the greatest single American contribution to the idea of aristocracy" (Homberger, 4). But McAllister had no intention of publicizing the idea and it leaked out quite by accident. By the time O. Henry began to set his stories in New York City, McAllister's idea had already inspired much controversy and even ridicule.

Ward McAllister's part in helping create the idea of an American aristocracy has been examined by a number of social historians, who typically mention O. Henry only in passing or not at all. Similarly, O. Henry scholars mention McAllister only in passing, if at all. This chapter is an attempt to recover the context in which *The Four Million*

appeared and was received. What exactly was O. Henry reacting against with his stories of the New York underclass and his provocative title? The answer can perhaps be found by going to the source of the Four Hundred and looking at O. Henry and Ward McAllister together.

In 1890, McAllister published a memoir titled *Society as I Have Found It*, in which he gave his version of the invention of the Four Hundred. His account is self-serving and incomplete—in fact, he never even uses the phrase with which his name had become linked. Moreover, in an author’s note that strikes a far less ambitious tone than O. Henry’s in *The Four Million*, he disclaims any skill as a writer: “One who reads this book through will have as rough a mental journey as his physical nature would undergo in riding over a corduroy road in an old stage-coach. It makes no pretension to either scholarship or elegant diction” (McAllister, vii). But he was far from “a terrible writer,” as one historian claims (Patterson, 79).⁷

McAllister begins with the sentimental claim that his mother “followed the precepts” of her great-great-grandfather, who wrote in his will: “As to the poor, I have always treated them as my brethren. My dear family will, I know, follow my example” (McAllister, 4). However, there is little evidence in the pages that follow that McAllister or anyone he knew gave much thought to the poor or anyone but those in their own circle. The curiosity and sympathetic nature that led O. Henry, throughout his life, to “go bumming” in the poor sections of town were foreign to McAllister.

There are some parallels between their lives, however. When McAllister was a young man, he left his hometown of Savannah for New York, where he lived with a

⁷ Eric Homberger dismisses occasional suggestions that the book was ghostwritten, citing the absence of any proof and similarities of style between the book and McAllister’s journalism (Homberger, 300n13).

relative on Tenth Street, not far from where O. Henry found lodgings when he arrived in New York fifty years later. He had grown up hearing tales of “the delights of New York social life” from his mother, a displaced and nostalgic New Yorker (Churchill, 79). While working as a bookkeeper in New York, McAllister assiduously attended social events, but failed to make a dent in society. Back in Savannah, he devoted himself to courting the girls, as O. Henry did as a young man in Austin, and to studying law, in which he had no more interest than O. Henry did in dispensing pills at his uncle’s drugstore. In 1850, he moved to San Francisco to practice law with his brother, who had built a successful practice there handling the claims of gold prospectors.⁸ In the lives of the two men, McAllister’s time in California is the equivalent of O. Henry’s years on a Texas ranch. San Francisco was then “the outposts of civilization,” where “[a]ll men . . . went armed day and night” and where McAllister felt it necessary to sleep with a revolver under his pillow (McAllister, 20, 24).

It would be a mistake to push these parallels too far, but the two men did have certain experiences in common: the Southern childhood, the training for a profession that held no interest, the abrupt removal to a western state that still embodied the popular myth of the Wild West. Yet these experiences had completely opposite effects on them, as one man became a consummate snob and the other perhaps the most sympathetic writer about the poor since Defoe. Of course, there were differences as well in the men’s backgrounds. For one thing, they grew up in different eras—McAllister in the gracious antebellum years and O. Henry in the postbellum years when the Old South had all but vanished. For another, McAllister’s family had money and O. Henry’s never had enough.

⁸ The brother, Matthew McAllister, became a civic leader in San Francisco, and McAllister Street is named for him.

The McAllister ancestor who cited the poor in his will had emigrated from France to Charleston, where he bought a plantation. McAllister's father and mother were from well-to-do families in Savannah and New York, respectively. His great-uncle Francis Marion was the "Swamp Fox" of the Revolutionary War; one of his cousins was Julia Ward Howe; and his uncle Samuel Ward, a Washington lobbyist, married an Astor (making McAllister and his patron, Mrs. Astor, distant cousins). His father was twice mayor of Savannah, a U.S. district attorney, presided over the state senate, was nominated for governor, and was finally a U.S. circuit judge in San Francisco. As a result of some bad business dealings, McAllister's father was saddled with debt "for one-third of his life" (McAllister, 6), but he was far better off than O. Henry's father, who was forced by poverty to move with his family into the home of his sister.

Yet O. Henry, too, came from accomplished stock. A great-uncle was governor of North Carolina, and his maternal grandfather, William Swaim, was the editor of the Greensboro *Patriot*, which he used to speak out against the evils of slavery (Smith, 38, 18–22). But the family's trajectory traces a decline from those beginnings. O. Henry's father had been a popular general practitioner in Greensboro, but he stopped practicing medicine after the death of his wife. Throughout most of O. Henry's childhood, he was an eccentric recluse, spending his days pattering at impractical inventions that were never completed. McAllister's unquestioning sense of entitlement was matched by O. Henry's sense that both his family and the South had fallen on hard times.

By the time McAllister left San Francisco in 1852, he was well set up, having made a "modest fortune" in his brother's practice and increased it by marrying the

daughter of a Georgia millionaire (Patterson, 74).⁹ He gave up the law and went to Washington, where he served on the Committee of Management for the Inaugural Ball of Franklin Pierce. He then took off for Europe, living in the kinds of places that O. Henry read about in the popular novels of his day but never saw for himself. McAllister's experiences overseas helped refine his ideas about high society: "It was here [Florence] that I first learned what a ball supper should be, and what were the proper mural decorations for a ball-room and the halls opening into it" (McAllister, 46).

There is virtually no introspection in *Society as I Have Found It*. Much of the book is a manual on how to gain entry into society, how to entertain, etc. An eighty-page appendix contains numerous examples of visiting cards, invitations to various events, possible responses to those invitations, and dinner menus. Much of the main text is a diary-like account of balls attended and possessions acquired: "Passing two winters at Pau [in the French Pyrenees] and the summers at Baden-Baden, keeping four horses at the former place, following the hounds at least once a week, giving all through the winter from one to two dinners a week, . . . and living as well as I could possibly live" (McAllister, 74).

In the book that presented itself as a rebuke to McAllister, O. Henry also inventoried the contents of a life. The items he so carefully described, however, were not prized possessions but only borrowed for a while by the serial occupants of a rented flat:

A polychromatic rug like some brilliant-flowered, rectangular, tropical islet lay surrounded by a billowy sea of soiled matting. Upon the gay-papered wall were those pictures that pursue the homeless one from house to house—The Huguenot Lovers, The First Quarrel, The Wedding Breakfast, Psyche at the Fountain. The mantel's chastely severe outline was ingloriously veiled behind some pert drapery drawn

⁹ In his remarkably self-centered book, he characteristically has nothing to say about his wife other than that he returned East "as a married man" (McAllister, 25), and he never even mentions their three children.

rakishly askew like the sashes of the Amazonian ballet. Upon it was some desolate flotsam cast aside by the room's marooned when a lucky sail had borne them to a fresh port—a trifling vase or two, pictures of actresses, a medicine bottle, some stray cards out of a deck. (“The Furnished Room,” p. 243, *The Four Million*)

The furnishings of this room are pathetic precisely because they aspire to McAllister's high standards. Mass-produced tokens of elegance, they fall woefully short, only underlining the shabbiness they are meant to mask.

When McAllister had learned all he could in Europe, he returned to Savannah, where he encountered resistance in his plan of

giving to my Southern friends, the benefit of my European education in the way of dinner giving. I found this, at first, instead of gratifying my father's friends rather piqued them; they said—“Heydey! here is a young fellow coming out here to show us how to live. Why, his father did not pretend to do this. Let us let him severely alone,” which for a time they did. I took up the young fry, who let their elders very soon know that I had certainly learned something and that Mc's dinners were bound to be a feature in Savannah. (McAllister, 81)

As a result of this word of mouth, he soon found himself “in the front social rank in that little, aristocratic town” (83). Later, in the far larger arena of New York, he would repeat this strategy of winning over society's elders by first winning over its younger members.

By this time the country was torn by war, but McAllister has hardly a word to say about it in his book except to note “the change in values caused by the Civil War.” Moreover, the values that interest him in this passage are not moral but financial: He is comparing what his brother-in-law's estates (with six hundred slaves) would have brought before the war and after (McAllister, 102). He devotes much of one chapter to describing a party he gave in Madison, N.J.; the chapter concludes, “This country party I gave in November, 1862” (151). Less than two hundred miles away, at Antietam Creek, the first major battle on northern soil had taken place a month before, resulting in the

largest single-day death count in American history. McAllister is characteristically oblivious to this. It does not occur to him to contrast the two events or to consider how the suffering of others might help make possible his style of living. Instead, he draws a different conclusion: “The success of this party evidenced that a country house can be made as perfect and enjoyable here as in any other country, provided you will take the trouble and bear the expense” (150–51).

There is more than mere obliviousness, however, behind McAllister’s neglect of the war in his memoir. In the late 1860s, when Mrs. Astor, with McAllister’s help, assumed leadership of New York society, the ostensible reason was that she had daughters to introduce into society, but it was also largely to repel the invasion into society of people who had made their fortunes in the war. The desire to have one’s daughter make the greatest possible impression at her debut was often the spur that caused a matron to shoulder a share of the responsibility for planning and managing social events after years of leaving these tasks to others, and Mrs. Astor had no less than four daughters coming of age. But she also had another reason to get involved. Frank Crowninshield, editor of *Vanity Fair*, wrote that “she had little use for novelties or newcomers. Her taste was always for old families, old ways” (quoted in Patterson, 66). That’s not to say that Mrs. Astor and McAllister did not admit any of the new rich into society—by several accounts, they were more relaxed in their standards than some—but they did reserve the right to do the choosing themselves. Since the war to McAllister was all about the creation of a group of uncultured war profiteers who expected entry into society, he largely ignored the whole situation.

McAllister mentions the war again at only one other point in the book. In describing a masquerade ball in New York, he acknowledges that “[o]ur Civil War was then raging” by way of introducing an anecdote about a woman at the ball who pins a “Secession badge” on an unwitting guest. The badge is soon discovered and removed, and the incident is seen by the other guests as an “affront” given by a “cruel, mischeivous, and silly woman” (McAllister, 171). The incident is presented as an embarrassing faux pas. Similarly, the revolution and expulsion of the French in Haiti is mentioned by way of explaining how “good French cooking” came to the States (312–13). McAllister’s tin ear becomes even more evident when one considers that in the same year Jacob Riis published *How the Other Half Lives*, McAllister could write this:

The mistake made by the world at large is that fashionable people are selfish, frivolous, and indifferent to the welfare of their fellow-creatures; all of which is a popular error, arising simply from a want of knowledge of the true state of things. The elegancies of fashionable life nourish and benefit art and artists; they cause the expenditure of money and its distribution; and they really prevent our people and country from settling down into a humdrum rut and becoming merely a money-making and money-saving people, with nothing to brighten up and enliven life. (160–61)

It would be at least ten years before Edith Wharton began publishing the novels that skewered the elegancies that McAllister valued. Even if those novels had appeared and caused a stir during his lifetime, they would likely have had little effect on him, as he apparently lacked all sense of irony.

For all his faults, though, McAllister does a passable job of explaining the genesis of the Four Hundred. The idea of a group of the select first makes an appearance in the description of a series of parties he gave at his farmhouse in Newport, Rhode Island:

Now, do not for a moment imagine that all were indiscriminately asked to these little fêtes. On the contrary, if you were not of the inner circle,

and were a new-comer, it took the combined efforts of all your friends' backing and pushing to procure an invitation for you. For years, whole families sat on the stool of probation, awaiting trial and acceptance, and many were then rejected, but once received, you were put on an intimate footing with all. To acquire such intimacy in a great city like New York would have taken you a lifetime . . . , for our best society was so small, every one in it had an individuality . . . [and had] every movement chronicled. . . . [Newport] is the place of all others to take social root in. (McAllister, 118–20)

A few pages later, he writes: "Society must have its leader or leaders. It has always had them, and will continue to have them. Their sway is more or less absolute" (McAllister, 123). He goes on to acknowledge his New York predecessors in this position: first, "a lady living in Washington Place" who, in the early 1870s, gave subscription balls called "Blue Room parties" (125). Then came "a new era," led by two women "descended from old Colonial families." Dinners became more artistic, and "[w]e imported European habits and customs rapidly." This is the point at which all of McAllister's training in Europe and Newport paid off. One of these women became "the prominent leader . . . society's queen." People were "only too happy to be [her] subjects" and "we, the young men of the period, loved her" (126–28).

As suggested by the preceding quotations, while McAllister drops the names of a number of illustrious people throughout his book, he avoids naming society's leaders. He refers to them only as, for instance, "a beautiful woman" or "a man of great energy and pluck" (McAllister, 182, 183). Caroline Webster Schermerhorn Astor, wife of William Backhouse Astor, Jr., and generally known as Mrs. Astor, is identified as "a great personage" (221). This seems an odd approach for a man whose fame rests on having made a list of four hundred specific names. If it was an attempt to honor the desire for privacy among some of the old guard and not just a coy affectation, it didn't work: the

book was still regarded as an unseemly display by many among in McAllister's elite crowd, and it outraged some (Homburger, 154). The book made the rich realize "that their goings-on look ridiculous when committed to the cold objectivity of print," and McAllister was widely ostracized for the next two or three years (Tully, 160).

Moreover, the book was "greeted with scorn and mockery" by the press (Homburger, 150). On the theory that all publicity is good publicity, Pulitzer's *World* offered McAllister a weekly column. The column, "Ward McAllister's Letters," ran from October 1891 until McAllister's death in January 1895. He used it to extol the virtues of society in general and, once society had accepted him back into the fold, to give exclusive reports on balls and other functions (Homburger, 217–18). McAllister and O. Henry therefore shared one other experience: that of writing a weekly column for the *World*.

Europe was McAllister's school, where he studied the rituals of society much as he had read the law several years earlier. Newport was his laboratory, where he tested and refined what he had learned. His apprenticeship continued in New York, where he spent years attending dinners and balls and serving on reception committees for visiting dignitaries such as the Prince of Wales. Despite his family and personal credentials, his rise to the top of New York society was a long, hard slog.

The first glimmering of the idea of a Four Hundred comes in this passage:

At this time [the 1860s] there were not more than one or two men in New York who spent, in living and entertaining, over sixty thousand dollars a year. . . . [H]ow easily one or two men of fortune could then control, lead, and carry on society, receive or shut out people at their pleasure. . . . All this many of us saw, and saw how it worked, and we resolved to band together the respectable element of the city, and by

this union make such strength that no individual could withstand us.
(McAllister, 157)

McAllister presents this idea as not only practical but also altruistic, even patriotic:

[I]f one in any way got out with the powers that be, his position might become critical, and he so forced out of the way as to really lose his social footing. Where then was the remedy for all this? . . . On reflection I reached this conclusion, that in a country like ours there was always strength in union; . . . therefore, . . . I . . . invoked the aid of the then quiet representative men of this city, to help me form an association. (209–10)

We thought it would not be wise to allow a handful of men . . . to have a sovereign's prerogative, i.e. to say whom society shall receive, and whom society shall shut out. We thought it better to try and place such power in the hands of representative men. (216–17)

The strength of this union was established first with a series of cotillion dinners, then reinforced with the Patriarch Balls, subscription balls that were modeled on Almack's Assembly Rooms in London, admission to which were controlled by a small group of "Lady Patronesses": "I resolved in 1872 to establish in New York an American Almack's, taking men instead of women, being careful to select only the leading representative men of the city, who had the right to create and lead society" (McAllister, 212). Since there was no formal organization for regulating New York society, McAllister created one, taking a leadership position for himself. The group consisted of twenty-five Patriarchs, including two Astors, a Schermerhorn, and a Van Rensselaer, along with McAllister and others. As social historian Jerry E. Patterson points out, "The name 'The Patriarchs' was feebly humorous, as the members were actually for the most part quite young" (Patterson, 77). They represented the new rich, but only those of whom McAllister approved. Under a system based on the voucher system used by Almack's, each Patriarch was allowed to invite, or "sponsor," nine guests to each ball—four women

and five men. The group's rules and regulations were precise, reflecting McAllister's law training. McAllister named Mrs. Astor—who, like him, was moving at this time to consolidate a leadership position in society—special adviser to the Patriarchs. She was forty-two and he was forty-five (Patterson, 79).

The first Patriarch Ball was given in winter 1872. McAllister recognized that “the whole secret of the success of these Patriarch Balls lay in making them select; . . . in making it extremely difficult to obtain an invitation to them . . . ; to make them the stepping-stone to the best New York society.” At the same time, he says: “I saw at once the rock on which we must split: that the pressure would be so great to get in, no one could resist it; that our parties must become too general, and that in the end the smart set would give up going to them” (McAllister, 215, 229).

The old, established families, “feeling secure in their position” or because they “avoided display,” often “took no leading part in society's daily routine” (McAllister, 158, 159). These families would come forward, as already noted, when they had daughters they wished to introduce into society. One argument against the Patriarchs was that under this new system, “the married women took a more prominent place than the young girls; *they* were the belles of the balls, and not the young girls. This was Europeanizing New York too rapidly” (McAllister, 225). The Patriarchs' solution was to start up a series of smaller-scaled events called the Family Circle Dancing Class, a sort of “‘Junior Patriarchs,’ under the same management” (226).

By the 1880s, McAllister had managed to launch himself into what proved to be a decade of social authority and public fame, aided by frequent pronouncements to the press. New York society news, first featured prominently by the *New York Herald*, was

now a staple of newspapers across the country (Churchill, 105). New York had about fifteen dailies, and their readers were hungry for gossip about the rich. McAllister was in the right place at the right time. He had become the “go-to” man for managing social events because he was able to use his long-term relationships with florists and caterers to keep costs down (Patterson, 82, 86). It was only natural that he should also have developed a relationship with daily reporters, who “often waited on the sidewalk outside his home and club” for a quote (Churchill, 161). They needed a cooperative society source as much as he needed constant publicity, though they were not above poking fun at his stiffness and self-promotion at the same time that they retailed the tidbits he fed them.

Though *Society as I Have Found It* is essentially an ode to the Gilded Age, McAllister never uses that term; he calls it “An Era of Extravagance” instead. More oddly, he never mentions the Four Hundred, the idea he was famous for. A year after the book appeared, however, he abandoned any attempt at confidentiality and revealed the names of the Four Hundred. He apparently calculated that, if he could not regain the social standing he had lost with the chilly reception of his book, he could at least recoup his usefulness as an inside source with the press.

The story of how the Four Hundred became a popular catchphrase is a comedy of errors. The generally accepted version is that the number represented the capacity of Mrs. Astor’s ballroom (in her house at 350 Fifth Avenue, where the Empire State Building now stands)—that is to say, the number of people who could feel comfortable there and who belonged there. A more convincing version of the story, though, has the press, as it still does, seizing on a stray remark and exaggerating its significance:

A reporter asked McAllister how many guests he expected at the next Patriarchs' Ball. "Well," said McAllister, "I suppose about as many as the ballroom at Delmonico's will hold." When asked to be more specific, he consulted his wife, who said, "About four hundred." (This is the only recorded remark by Sarah Gibbons McAllister.) The next day the newspapers declared in excited language that Ward McAllister had said there were only four hundred people in Society in New York. (Patterson, 83–84)

McAllister's careless remark first appeared in the *New York Tribune* on March 24, 1888.

Once the phrase caught on, McAllister jumped on the bandwagon and used it often. "Four hundred was deemed by McAllister to be sufficiently limited; it was an orotund number, and when pronounced solemnly by McAllister it assumed an almost mystical significance, which it has retained for the last century" (Patterson, 8). McAllister did not just coin the term Four Hundred, he used it—and the Patriarchs—to actively persecute and humiliate those who didn't belong; it became a "national symbol of snobbish exclusivity" (Homburger, 154, 156).

In his memoir, though McAllister acknowledges the previous leaders of New York society, he does not mention the predecessors of his famous list. The first list of socially acceptable New Yorkers was the hostess Mrs. John Jay's "Dinner and Supper List for 1787 and 1788." The existence of this list was publicly known at the time, and it was the object of much curiosity. Now, a hundred years later, the press began demanding a copy of the names on McAllister's list. Of course, no such list existed, and McAllister put off the repeated requests for a few years. At the same time, he continued to stoke interest in it by such ploys as releasing a breakdown of the list into five categories: Original Inner Circle (150), Contingent Inner Circle Margin (19), Star Members Inner Circle Fringe (26), Plain Inner Circle Fringe (49), and Fringe to Plain Inner Circle Fringe (156). The categories were named with a degree of precision so fussy as to verge on

insanity, but they were perhaps merely evidence of an unsuspected sense of humor. The number of names in the categories totaled 400 (Churchill, 161).

In 1892, however, McAllister finally drew up a list. His hand was forced by the appearance of a purported “shortened” list of 150 names in the *World* and reprinted in other papers. The existence of an Original Inner Circle category had somehow led to the rumor that the list of 400 had been abridged to 150. To repudiate the *World*’s list, McAllister provided the “full” list in an interview with the *New York Times* that appeared on February 16, 1892. Typically, he timed the release of the list to publicize Mrs. Astor’s annual ball. The list quickly appeared in most of the city’s other newspapers and was reprinted in a pamphlet (Patterson, 84).

But McAllister’s list was far from full: it had only 319 names, and only 169 different family names. Some of the listings were numerically ambiguous (“the Misses Cameron,” for instance), and some deceased people were erroneously included. The issue was further confused when McAllister approved a volume titled *McAllister’s Four Hundred*, which contained 554 names (Churchill, 163). Nevertheless, the idea of the Four Hundred took such a strong hold on the public imagination that it is still updated in annual lists like the *Forbes* 400, the magazine’s ranking of the four hundred richest Americans, and in similar lists based on social prominence. According to Patterson, “About ten percent of those named to today’s social lists are either descendants of McAllister’s Four Hundred or kin to them” (Patterson, 8, 9).

McAllister had long been ridiculed for having no other accomplishments than the management of society, which as a rule was left to the women. The release of the list gave new life to a derisive nickname he had already acquired for his habit of compiling

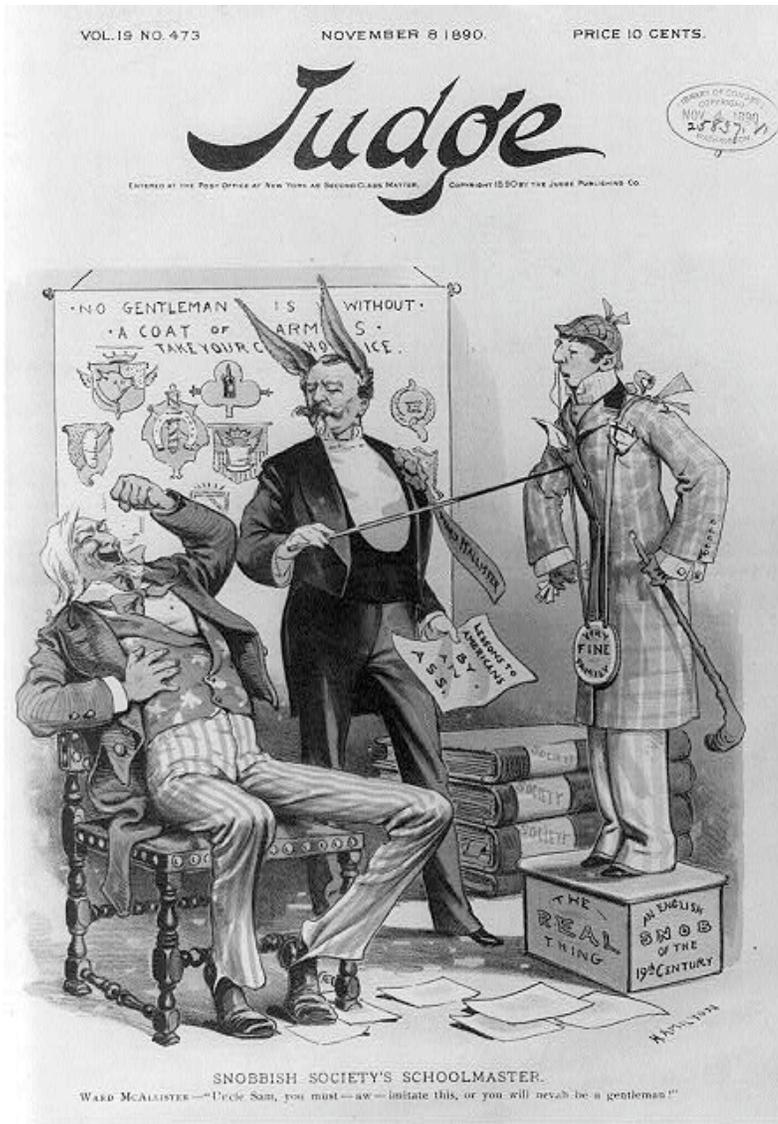
guest lists and making menus, and “it became the pinnacle of contemporary wit to refer to this energetic fellow as Ward Make-a-Lister” (Churchill, 91). He was easy to caricature since his large moustache and goatee made him look as pompous and affected as he indeed was. Charles Dana Gibson, who regularly lampooned high society before developing the famous Gibson Girl, drew him often in *Life*.¹⁰ As early as 1890, humor magazines such as *Judge* were having fun at McAllister’s expense. One cover cartoon (see next page) was titled “SNOBBISH SOCIETY’S SCHOOLMASTER,” and the caption, imitating McAllister’s affected drawl, reads: “WARD MCALLISTER—“Uncle Sam, you must—aw—imitate this, or you will nevah be a gentleman!”

McAllister was also subjected to parody in print. Richard Harding Davis wrote a series of stories about Courtlandt Van Bibber, a young bachelor of the Four Hundred. (The stories were illustrated by Gibson.) Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” with its refrain about the six hundred, was a natural for parodying the Four Hundred, and in 1904 someone obliged with a poem poking fun at the idle class’s enthusiasm for automobiling:

Half a block, half a block
Half a block onward
All in their motobiles
Rode the Four Hundred
“Forward!”: the owners shout
“Racing car!” “Runabout!”
Into Fifth Avenue
Rode the Four Hundred
“Forward!” the owners said
Was there a man dismay’d?
Not, though the chauffeurs knew
Some one had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,

¹⁰ Ironically, Gibson met his future wife and model for the Gibson Girl, Irene Langhorne, at the 1893 Patriarchs’ Ball, where McAllister had chosen her to lead the grand parade on his arm.

Theirs but to kill or die
Into Fifth Avenue
Rode the Four Hundred.
(quoted in Patterson, 137)



When McAllister saw fit to offer advice on how Chicago society might improve itself, the Chicago papers responded by calling him a “New York Flunky” and “Head Butler.” *Town Topics*, a widely read society weekly in the late 1880s, frequently attacked McAllister, calling him an “inflated and preposterous man.” Even society people attacked him publicly. The banker and railroad president Stuyvesant Fish, for instance, told a

reporter, “All this talk about McAllister’s Four Hundred is the sheerest nonsense” (Homburger, 213, 210, 214). When *Society as I Have Found It* appeared, it was greeted by a parody titled *Society as It Has Found Me Out*, and the *New York Times* wrote: “No suspicion that he is making a continental laughing stock of himself must disturb his mind . . . The degree of fervor that the author puts into undertakings that adults commonly leave to adolescents is really wonderful” (October 19, 1890, p. 19; quoted in Homburger, 216).

In attacking McAllister, therefore, O. Henry was late to the game. By the time he published *The Four Million*, McAllister had been dead for ten years; Mrs. Astor was seventy-six and suffering from dementia. Moreover, “[t]he phrase [Four Hundred] and the assumptions which lay behind it” had been widely criticized in more serious formats than cartoons and parodies (Martin, 3n9). In 1890, as noted above, Jacob Riis had pushed back against the idea of the Four Hundred. The title of Riis’s book, *How the Other Half Lives*, didn’t play directly off the Four Hundred as did O. Henry’s title, but it lodged in the public consciousness just as surely.¹¹ In *The American People’s Money* (1896), Ignatius Donnelly (author, under a pseudonym, of the popular 1890 novel *Caesar’s Column*) imagined a book-length conversation between a farmer and a bank president over the course of a four-day train trip. At one point, the farmer, who speaks for the common man, says that “the society of the 400 is only a kind of a hog-show, where men are rated by their financial weight, because it indicates how many shoats they have butted and bumped away from nature’s universal trough, wherein enough was provided for all

¹¹ Riis paid less scrupulous attention to the census taker than O. Henry did: with 1.2 million New Yorkers living in slums, the “other half” was actually the other three-quarters. “The Other Half,” Matthew Power, *New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 2008, p. 19, review of *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York*, by Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom (New York: New Press, 2008).

by the Great Farmer, who amuses Himself keeping hogs” (Donnelly, 100–101). The passage is accompanied by a drawing of a huge hog, labeled “Plutocracy,” monopolizing a trough while smaller pigs are reduced to sniffing at its discarded cigar butts.

A book of stories like *The Four Million* was a more subtle weapon than Riis’s and Donnelly’s tracts. In a discussion of New York’s sweatshops, Donnelly’s farmer says: “The work in the week of one man amounted to \$4.00; and out of this \$2.50 went for rent!” (Donnelly, 171).¹² What O. Henry did in his stories was to tell how that remaining dollar and a half was spent. Dulcie, the protagonist of “An Unfinished Story,” works at a counter in a department store and takes home six dollars a week: “During her first year in the store, Dulcie was paid five dollars per week. It would be instructive to know how she lived on that amount. Don’t care? Very well; probably you are interested in larger amounts. Six dollars is a larger amount. I will tell you how she lived on six dollars per week.” (*Four Million*, 176). O. Henry goes on to describe Dulcie’s mental calculations as she decides which luxuries she can afford to dole out to herself to get her through her dreary week:

For the room, Dulcie paid two dollars per week. On week-days her breakfast cost ten cents; she made coffee and cooked an egg over the gaslight while she was dressing. On Sunday mornings she feasted royally on veal chops and pineapple fritters at “Billy’s” restaurant, at a cost of twenty-five cents—and tipped the waitress ten cents. . . . She had her lunches in the department-store restaurant at a cost of sixty cents for the week; dinners were \$1.05. The evening papers—show me a New Yorker going without his daily paper!—came to six cents; and two Sunday papers—one for the personal column and the other to read—were ten cents. The total amounts to \$4.76. Now, one has to buy clothes, and—

I give it up. (*Four Million*, 179)

¹² The farmer says he is citing a report in the May 1, 1895, edition of the *New York World*, the paper in which O. Henry’s New York stories later appeared.

Jim and Della Young of “The Gift of the Magi” are a little better off; they live in an eight-dollar-a-week furnished flat that they took when Jim’s weekly salary was thirty dollars. But now his salary has shrunk to twenty dollars, a week, and the story opens with Della’s calculations:

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one’s cheeks burned . . . Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas. (*Four Million*, 16)

In showing what it was like to live from day to day on such salaries, O. Henry revealed the individual human dimension behind Donnelly’s statistics in a way that even Riis’s time-frozen photographs could not. He was also, though implicitly, helping to expose the source of fortunes like that of the Four Hundred’s Mrs. Astor. The heart of the Astor real estate empire was the numerous tenements the family owned on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, on some of the same streets O. Henry roamed when he went “bumming” and where furnished rooms like Dulcie’s were found.

O. Henry, however, studiously avoided giving the impression that he intended to fold any message of reform into his stories. Nor was he much concerned with criticizing high society for its narrowness or lack of cultivation, as Edith Wharton did. He tended to see individuals where others saw groups. According to his friend William Wash Williams: “He had no crow to pick with the Four Hundred, as such, but preferred to pick his bits of life from the Four Million” (Williams, 127). In his prefatory note to *The Four Million* (“But a wiser man has arisen—the census taker”), O. Henry took care to modestly sidestep the obvious implication that he himself was the “wiser man” than McAllister by attributing that wisdom to the anonymous census taker. This maneuver is echoed at the

end of “The Gift of the Magi,” where O. Henry compares the gift-giving young couple of his story to the magi of the Bible. The magi, he says, are “wonderfully wise,” but Jim and Della Young are the “wisest” (*Four Million*, 25). Here and elsewhere in the book, O. Henry makes a point of privileging the anonymous over the famous.

Chapter 3

O. Henry and Anne Partlan

Anne Partlan's influence on *The Four Million* was as important as Ward McAllister's, if not more so. She was the person who provided O. Henry with the idea of how he could present an alternative view to McAllister's that had not been presented before. While McAllister's life and work is well documented, however, Partlan long ago lost what little recognition she had and fell into obscurity. She is remembered today only by students of O. Henry for the part she played in his life and for her influence on his work.

Almost all of O. Henry's biographers tell the story of how, after relocating to New York, he sought Partlan out because of his admiration for her work. But none of them has anything to say about that work or gives any indication of having seen it. To read Partlan does require some digging: The pieces she contributed to newspapers and periodicals were too short to be included in tables of contents or indexes, and she never collected her work in books as her friend O. Henry did. Given the countless sources that O. Henry's biographers have tracked down, however, it seems odd that Partlan's work, including the piece that O. Henry said inspired him to write his shopgirl stories, has remained unexamined. From the evidence of archival collections, Partlan was right to leave her pieces uncollected—slight and formulaic, they were apparently never meant to last longer than the issues in which they originally appeared. In fact, O. Henry's enthusiasm for Partlan's work is somewhat inexplicable.

His earlier influences are easier to understand. Arthur Hobson Quinn, in his 1936 survey *American Fiction*, groups O. Henry with other writers who began as journalists in the late nineteenth century: Ambrose Bierce, Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, and Jack London. The market for their short fiction, according to Quinn, was created by “competition among newspapers for special correspondence, in all quarters of the globe, for stories of so-called ‘human interest’ in large cities, for startling tales of strange countries.” Having worked on the *Houston Daily Post* and other Texas papers; written and edited his own weekly, the *Rolling Stone*; and traveled extensively in Central and South America, O. Henry was well suited for this kind of work, which Quinn calls “glorified reporting” (Quinn, 521).

Trying to find his place in the magazine and newspaper market after his release from prison in 1901, O. Henry took these writers as his models. He had made his first story sale in 1897 to the McClure Syndicate and three more after entering prison the following year, but was still far from established. With his early stories, he “successfully invaded the province of Richard Harding Davis, and . . . Jack London” (Langford, 157). This was a logical move for O. Henry. Davis had exploited his experiences in the Spanish-American War and Second Boer War, and London had drawn from his experiences as a sailor, hobo, and gold prospector. O. Henry saw that his six months as a fugitive from the law in Honduras and other countries provided him with material he could exploit in the same fashion. Determined though he was to conceal his criminal record, he was willing to mine this part of his past, his decision perhaps dictated by the necessity of finding a way to break into the market. When he later assembled these stories for his first book, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), one reviewer said: “With his stories of life

in the Central American republics Mr. Henry is seriously threatening the supremacy of Richard Harding Davis, in a field in which for several years that most widely known writer has been absolutely alone” (*Bookman*, February 1905, p. 561, quoted in Langford, 194). Davis’s popular novels and stories were set in South America, Europe, Cuba, and elsewhere—often with a reporter as the protagonist, justifying Quinn’s charge of “glorified reporting.” O. Henry’s time in Central America provided him with the kind of material he could use to write stories in the Davis vein, but set in a part of the world that Davis had not covered.

He had a good sense of which genres he could work in successfully. Though he published nine stories in *McClure’s* from 1903 to 1906, he never tailored his work to complement that of the muckraking tradition exemplified by that magazine’s triumvirate of Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, and Ray Stannard Baker; his social criticism was usually soft-pedaled and implied rather than explicit. Nor did he copy the popular novels of the day. The best-seller lists of 1902, the year O. Henry came to New York, were dominated by historical romances such as Gertrude Atherton’s *The Conqueror*, Thomas Dixon’s *The Leopard’s Spots*, Ellen Glasgow’s *The Battlefield*, Booth Tarkington’s *The Two Van Revels*, and the biggest seller of them all, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. In 1902, even Edith Wharton was writing historical fiction (*The Valley of Decision*). Robert H. Davis, an editor with the *New York World* at the time, later characterized the popular fiction of the day:

It was an age that ran riot with stories of Americans, usually from the Midwest, who in imaginary kingdoms or principalities of the Balkans, flashed sword play, defended castle staircases against astonishing odds, eventually marrying reigning princesses and thereafter administering affairs of state with wisdom and discretion. This kind of tale made a

profound impression on Porter. He never wrote one himself. (Davis and Maurice, 180–81)

Another reviewer of *Cabbages and Kings* said the book's popularity "will necessarily be limited by the fact that it is essentially a man's book" (*Bookman*, February 1905, p. 561, quoted in Langford, 195). And in fact the book sold poorly despite some good reviews. But O. Henry had already made a practical decision and lit on another relatively neglected subject.

In May 1904, his first shopgirl story, "A Lickpenny Lover," appeared in the *World*. In this case, he cheerfully admitted to co-opting the subject matter of another writer, Anne Partlan. When O. Henry met her in 1903, he was forty-one and she was "a thirty-year-old career woman who in addition to her job in advertising had published short stories about the laboring class" (Langford, 167). She later said: "He told me the hand-to-mouth life that girls led in New York rooming houses interested him, and when he came to New York he looked me up" (*The Writer*, August 1914, p. 117).¹³ According to Partlan, he complimented one of her stories in particular, saying: "When I read 'Among Themselves,' I resolved, some day to camp on your territory" (Moyle, 16).

This last quotation is from Partlan's "unpublished reminiscence" of O. Henry, as reproduced in Seth Moyle's 1914 booklet *My Friend O. Henry* (Moyle, 16). (It is unclear whether the 1,100 words Moyle quotes constitute part of the reminiscence or all of it.) As mentioned above, while several of O. Henry's biographers quote the line about moving in on Partlan's territory, none have anything to say about Partlan's stories themselves. And only Moyle quotes the lines that immediately follow, in which Partlan

¹³ This is from a paragraph that Partlan contributed to a section of the magazine that carried the header: "Short practical articles on topics connected with literary work are always wanted for THE WRITER. Readers of the magazine are invited to join in making it a medium of mutual help."

identifies the source of the story O. Henry so admired: “O. Henry said this to me when I first met him in New York. The trifle to which he referred was one of a series of sketches which had appeared in the early numbers of ‘Success’ and had been copied in the ‘Dallas Times’” (Moyle, 16). Perhaps the neglect of Partlan’s story is due to her characterization of it as a “trifle,” but O. Henry himself often exhibited the same sort of casual modesty about his work. What makes it especially odd that no one has investigated this debt to Partlan is that it involves O. Henry’s shopgirl stories, the series for which he was most renowned. C. Alphonso Smith, O. Henry’s first biographer, wrote in 1916: “Certainly no other American writer has so identified himself with the life problems of the shop-girl in New York as has O. Henry. In his thinking she was an inseparable part of the larger life of the city,” and Vachel Lindsay memorialized O. Henry in 1912 as “The little shop-girl’s knight” (Smith, 217, including quotation from Lindsay).

Smith covered in some detail O. Henry’s use of Partlan in researching shop-girls. He interviewed Partlan in the Buckingham Hotel in New York City on February 11, 1916,¹⁴ and his seven pages of handwritten notes from that interview are in the O. Henry Collection of the Greensboro (NC) Public Library. A notation at the top of the first page reading “\$25⁰⁰” suggests that Partlan was paid for the interview. However, Smith used almost none of the material in his notes, instead quoting most of the Partlan reminiscence that had been reproduced by Moyle. The reminiscence was worth quoting at length because it had not been widely circulated. The 32-page booklet by Moyle, who had been O. Henry’s occasional literary agent, was not available for direct purchase—it was a promotional item given away free by the publisher H. K. Fly Company to readers who

¹⁴ The Buckingham Hotel that still stands on Sixth Avenue and 57th Street is a different one; it opened in 1925.

returned a form printed on the last page of *Once to Every Man*, a Western novel by Larry Evans.¹⁵

In her reminiscence, after reporting what O. Henry said about moving in on her territory, Partlan continues: “In the months that followed our meeting I was glad to introduce Mr. Porter into the toiling element, of which the sketches had given him some insight” (Moyle, 16). It is at this point that Smith’s excerpt picks up:

There was nothing of the brilliant wit about the great story writer when in the atmosphere of the shop-girl, clerk or salesman. Instead, there was a quiet, sympathetic attitude and, at times, a pre-occupied manner as if their remarks and chatter reminded him of his old days of bondage in the country drug store, the perpetual pillmaking which he was wont to describe with an amusing gesture, indicating the process of forming the cure-all.

One evening a group of department store employees were having dinner with me. Among them were sales-girls, an associate buyer, and one of the office force. I asked O. Henry to join us so that he might catch the spirit of their daily life. He leavened their shop-talk with genial, simple expressions of mirth as they told their tales of petty intrigue and strife for place amid the antagonism and pressure which pervades the atmosphere of every big organization. On leaving, he remarked to me: “If Henry James had gone to work in one of those places, he would have turned out the great American novel.” (Smith, 185–86)

O. Henry had written about shopgirls at least once before, in an 1895 sketch for the *Houston Post* about a sidewalk encounter between a shopgirl and a regular customer whom she believes has designs on her (Langford, 95). But that was written from the outside looking in, and he now had access to a trove of firsthand experience. Smith goes on to quote Partlan concerning O. Henry’s “detailed knowledge of the craft” of feather

¹⁵ The connection between Evans’s novel and O. Henry is explained by Moyle’s note to Evans in the front of the booklet: “Like O. Henry and ‘Good-Heart Taylor,’ when my need was great, it was your re-assuring hand-clasp . . . that restored confidence and helped set right many things.” Moyle goes on to explain that an act of kindness by Evans “has prompted my dedication to you and your work, of this little volume with its many intimacies of a privileged affectionate association for many years with the Master himself” (Moyle, 5).

curling, which he learned from a chance meeting with a New York woman who “explained her work and showed him the peculiar kind of dull blade which was used in it” (Smith, 186). Smith then briefly paraphrases the following paragraph:

My father, who was an expert mechanic and an inventor of blacksmith’s tools, once asked me to accompany him to a convention of master workmen who had gathered from all over the country. On our way to the car we met O. Henry and he asked to join us. [In Smith’s version, Partlan’s father extends the invitation.] When we reached the hall where the men and their wives had assembled, they greeted my father with a great deal of enthusiasm because his tools had greatly simplified their work. O. Henry’s attitude during this ovation might have been that of a respectful apprentice. (Moyle, 17)

It is easy to imagine that O. Henry would have liked his own work to be of similarly practical use, and perhaps that is what he hoped for his stories of the Four Million. Smith resumes quoting directly from Partlan’s text:

Speeches were made by masters of their craft, filled with references to “side hill plows,” “bolt cutters,” and “dressing chisels for rock use.” The speeches referred to the most humane make of horse shoes, bar iron, toe calks, and hoof expanders. All of this fell on no more attentive ears than O. Henry’s. A Scotchman presently arose and spoke on coach building. He told of a wood filling which he once made of the dust gathered from forges, mixed with a peculiar sort of clay. His enunciation was not clear and more than once O. Henry turned to me to ask me if I had caught the indistinct word.

After the speeches came dancing of the Lancers and the Virginia Reel. O. Henry threw himself into the spirit like a boy. He danced and whistled and called out numbers, laughing heartily when in the maze of a wrong turn. No one there dreamed he was other than a fellow-working man.

“Where do you keep shop, Mr. Porter?” asked the wife of a Missouri mechanic.

“Mr. Porter is an author,” I replied impulsively.

“Well, I can do other things,” he retorted with a note of defense as he continued, “I can rope cows, and I tried sheep raising once.” (Smith, 186–87)

Here Smith ends his quotation, and his discussion of Partlan. But Partlan’s reminiscence continues:

The chairman of the association asked my father to tell how he came to perfect a hammer which is now used in every forge in the world. When he had finished, the men cheered loudly. O. Henry shook hands with him and said, "Tom, I would give anything if I were as valuable a man as you are."

It occurred to me that he was gathering copy, and I said, half in jest, "Hands off this territory—it's mine."

"I don't blame you," was his smiling reply.

When we arrived home it was past two in the morning. My father intended leaving the city on a three o'clock train and O. Henry asked if he might wait and go to the station with him. I made coffee and the two men talked until train time. Mechanics and metallurgy were the subjects. O. Henry asked discriminating questions which revealed his amazing power to absorb a vast and unknown theme in the short space of one evening. (Moyle, 18)

Partlan skips over her close friendship with O. Henry over the next several years, ending her account with O. Henry's phone call to her in 1910 on learning that her father had died. His own death would come a few months later. Partlan may have exaggerated the warmth of her father's reception at the convention. But O. Henry's respectful, even envious, attitude toward him accords with the description his contemporaries give of a modest, practical man who saw himself more as a craftsman than as a litterateur.

Despite Smith's lengthy quotation from Partlan's reminiscence and his recognition of the important role she played in the evolution of O. Henry's career, it would be decades before she was mentioned again in a book about O. Henry. Memoirs of the author by friends and colleagues appeared through the years—most notably, *Through the Shadows with O. Henry* (1921), by Al Jennings; *The Caliph of Bagdad* (1931), by Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice; and *The Quiet Lodger of Irving Place* (1936), by William Wash Williams—but none of them so much as mentions Partlan. Given O. Henry's preference for one-on-one relationships, it is possible that the authors of these books were unaware of Partlan's existence. If they did know of her, they would have had

good reason to omit her from their accounts. Jennings, Davis, and Williams each presents himself as the person with the closest access to the notoriously private O. Henry, and acknowledging Partlan would only have interfered with this picture. It would also have opened a breach in the myth of the all-male circle that was part of the mystique his friends built around O. Henry.

Partlan fared no better when scholarly books on O. Henry began to appear. *A Bibliography of William Sydney Porter* (1938), by Paul S. Clarkson, is invaluable in many ways. But the section on biographical and critical sources omits Partlan's reminiscence of O. Henry, apparently because it was never published as a stand-alone text. Clarkson also omits the one other source that Smith cites for his section on Partlan: the brief item she contributed to *The Writer* in 1914 (see page 35, above). As a result, Partlan is absent from this book. In *O. Henry: The Man and His Work* (1949), the first book-length study of the author by one who had not known him personally, E. Hudson Long mentions Partlan only in passing: Without identifying her in any way, Long reports that it was Anne Partlan who summoned the physician who attended O. Henry in his final illness (Long, 134).

Partlan did not receive attention again until the mid 1950s, when two books restored her to the prominent place in O. Henry's career that Smith had acknowledged. These books were *The Heart of O. Henry* (1954), by Dale Kramer, and *Alias O. Henry: A Biography of William Sidney Porter* (1957), by Gerald Langford. Both Kramer and Langford made use of Smith's notes on his interview with Partlan, incorporating material that Smith did not use in his own book. Kramer went even further, and tracked down Partlan herself.

Kramer's book, while carefully researched, is in the form of a novel. He explains in an author's note that "it seemed to me that . . . Porter's . . . elusive personality could best be captured in a dramatic narrative." He invented dialogue and dramatic situations, arguing that "such a method is justified when care is taken to ground the story in solid fact" (Kramer, 309). This decision permits him to make some interesting and convincing conjectures about O. Henry's motivations at various points in his life. But it also positions his book in a gray area between fiction and serious scholarship.¹⁶

Kramer found that Smith's notes on Partlan "indicated that Porter had spoken more freely to her than to others of his New York friends. . . . Naturally I was intrigued by Anne Partlan" (Kramer, 311–12). But the only other sources of information he had were descriptions of Partlan in a letter sent to him by Witter Bynner and in a newspaper interview with the doctor she summoned to O. Henry's side. He placed inquiries in the book sections of the New York newspapers and managed to locate some relatives of Partlan. But even then, he writes, "I was unable for a long time to find out whether she was alive or dead" (312).

Though he doesn't say how he made the discovery, Kramer continues: "At last I found Anne Partlan—living in New York City a mile or two from my own home" (Kramer, 315). Eighty years old, she met with Kramer and filled out her story:

Born in Ulster county in upstate New York, she had come to the city, a

¹⁶ Steven Saylor takes an even freer approach in *A Twist at the End* (2000), casting O. Henry as the hero of a mystery novel that mixes fact and "fantasia" (author's note, 459). Though the book cannot be taken seriously as scholarship, it calls attention to a historical fact that none of O. Henry's biographers has noted. Saylor discovered that O. Henry's early years in Austin coincided with a series of grisly murders there, the first recorded serial killings in the United States. In the novel, O. Henry discovers the identity of the murderer, who in fact was never found. Though O. Henry flippantly referred in a May 10, 1885, letter from Austin to "the Servant Girl Annihilators, who make things lively in the dull hours of the night," no one had looked into the connection before Saylor. Saylor claimed in an interview that the murder investigation led to a series of political "scandals that blew the lid off 1885 Austin, Texas," which makes its omission by O. Henry scholars even more startling (www.mysterynet.com/books/testimony/0004.shtml).

courageous and strong-willed girl, more than sixty years ago to make her own way. She was a pioneer woman in advertising and industrial public relations. Her many stories and poems appeared in *Munsey's*, *Smart Set*, *Success* and other magazines. With other young writers she frequented the salon of poet E. C. Stedman. In spare time she volunteered assistance in the Bellevue dispensary. Thus her dash to Porter's aid in his last crisis was more than friendship—her custom was to rush to others in distress.

Anne Partlan's memories of Porter (or O. Henry, since she was one of the few who called him that), were almost as if she had seen him yesterday. (Kramer, 315)

Unfortunately, Kramer's notes on this interview cannot be consulted in the way that he consulted Smith's; they are not included with the collections of his papers.¹⁷

Presumably, those notes are the reason that his version of events differs from Smith's in some respects. While Smith (quoting Partlan in 1916) says that O. Henry sought her out because of his admiration for her stories, Kramer (quoting Partlan almost forty years later) says: "They had been first introduced a year or two earlier by a mutual neighborhood acquaintance who knew that both wrote" (Kramer, 266–67). Of course, both statements could be true. But Kramer also portrays Partlan as asking O. Henry to tell *her* the formula of *his* stories (285). And he does not portray her as introducing O. Henry to working girls she knew. Kramer explains in his author's note that his portrayal of Partlan is based on the talk he had with her, but he never addresses the discrepancy between his account and Smith's.

Kramer's book is the first to provide a sketch of Partlan's activities and character:

Though a modern "career woman"—in advertising—she wrote articles, stories, jokes and verses for the magazines. . . . Subtle, of an unobtrusive personality despite her courage in competing in a man's field, Anne was—though there was no romantic interest between them—the only person in New York with whom Will spoke freely about himself. (Kramer, 266)

¹⁷ Kramer's papers are at the University of Iowa Libraries and the Newberry Library.

A few years later, Gerald Langford further rounded out the picture of Partlan. Though he did not meet with her, he too draws on Smith's notes. He writes in a foreword: "Of the wealth of biographical material which C. Alphonso Smith assembled for his authorized biography in 1916, a very considerable portion was not used by Smith himself and has not been used by any subsequent writer" (xi). Perhaps Langford was unaware of Kramer's book, but that seems improbable. More likely, Langford, the author of several scholarly studies, didn't think that a novel, however well researched, was a proper source for a serious biography or that it required any acknowledgment (he does not cite it at all).¹⁸

Like Kramer, Langford concluded from Smith's notes that Partlan was "perhaps [O. Henry's] closest confidant" (Langford, 55). He reports that O. Henry spoke to her of parts of his background that he kept hidden from everyone else: his addled and ineffective father (30), unhappy childhood (15), brother (6), first wife (55), his months as a fugitive (104, 105), and his years in prison. Again, this is perhaps why Robert H. Davis and William Wash Williams ignored Partlan in their memoirs. Each man presented *himself* as O. Henry's close—if not closest—confidant, and the presence of a female rival would have complicated their narratives. Langford does say that *Ainslee's* coeditor Gilman Hall was O. Henry's "closest friend in New York," but also says that "with the possible exception of Gilman Hall, [Partlan] was Porter's closest confidant at this time" (159, 181). In any case, Partlan "became one of the three or four close friends he made in New York" (167). There is no evidence that O. Henry confided in Hall about his past as he did with Partlan. He obviously felt more comfortable speaking freely to her than to his male

¹⁸ Langford published two studies of Faulkner's revisions—collations of the published books with earlier versions—and followed them with his biography of O. Henry, an author who hardly revised at all (see Chapter 4).

friends. Even so, “he did not see a great deal [of Partlan] apparently, close as their relationship was,” and he saw “little or nothing [of her] since his [second] marriage” (196, 232). But he called on her after the death of her father, and she was with him at the end, one of the last two people allowed to visit him in the hospital.

O. Henry had had other women friends in whom he felt he could confide to some extent. In Texas, for instance, there were Betty Hall (no relation to Gilman Hall), in whose home he lived while working on her husband’s ranch, and Lollie Cave, who turned down his proposal of marriage but remained a friend. During his years in New York, O. Henry conducted several flirtatious correspondences with women. One of these was Mabel Wagnalls, daughter of the cofounder of Funk & Wagnalls, whose fan letter to O. Henry led to a correspondence. Another was a working woman named Ethel Patterson, who answered an ad that O. Henry had placed in a personals column. Both affairs progressed to the point where O. Henry sent his photograph, but they soon fizzled out. Another fan letter, from childhood sweetheart Sara Coleman, sparked a correspondence that was longer-lived, and she eventually became his second wife. While O. Henry “limited his circle of friends almost exclusively to the series of editors who happened to become involved with his work,” he believed, as he wrote Wagnalls, that “the judgment of a normal, intelligent woman is superior to that of an editor in a great many instances” (Langford, 176, 162).

Cave and Wagnalls each published a book about O. Henry after his death.¹⁹ Given the number of people who knew O. Henry at some point in his life and who wrote about him after his death, Partlan’s relative reticence is noteworthy. After sharing her

¹⁹ Lollie Cave Wilson, *Hard to Forget: The Young O. Henry* (Los Angeles: Lymanhouse, 1939); Mabel Wagnalls, ed., *Letters to Lithopolis, from O. Henry to Mabel Wagnalls* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1922).

reminiscences with Moyle and Smith in the 1910s, she kept silent until Kramer found her in the 1950s. Perhaps she felt that Smith had already given her her due. It is also possible that she felt misused by Smith—who, as revealed by Kramer and Langford, omitted most of her testimony about her closeness with O. Henry—and resolved to keep her memories to herself after that.

Smith identifies the source of one his quotations about O. Henry—“His compassion for suffering was infinite. He used to say ‘I know how it is.’ That was his gift. He had a genius for friendship”—as a “woman whom he had helped over many rough places in New York” (Smith, 168–69). It was not until Langford drew on Smith’s notes that this source was identified as Partlan. But those same notes also imply that any help that was given went the other way—that it was Partlan who helped O. Henry over the rough spots. Citing Smith’s notes, Langford reports: “He had so much trouble with ‘The Country of Elusion’ . . . that he allowed Anne Partlan to help him finish it, and on another occasion in the same year (1906) he was reduced to buying from her—for \$40—the plot of the story he entitled ‘The Trimmed Lamp’” (Langford, 193).²⁰

Subsequent biographers have drawn on the same material that Kramer and Langford used. In *O. Henry: The Legendary Life of William S. Porter* (1970), Richard

²⁰ Between Langford and Kramer, most of Smith’s unused notes on Partlan entered the public record. The one significant note they both omitted was about a letter Partlan sent Smith the day after their interview: “Miss Partlan writes Feb. 12. 1916: ‘Chita on Last Island’ by Hearn was a favorite book – he considered a passage in ‘The African Farm’ the most rhythmic [word unclear: bit? list?] in Eng. prose” (Smith notes, p. 6). Partlan here refers to Lafcadio Hearn’s *Chita: A Memory of Last Island* (1889) and Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* (1883). To my knowledge, none of O. Henry’s critics has taken account of this note. Yet there are some interesting parallels between Hearn and O. Henry: As a reporter in Cincinnati in the early 1870s, Hearn wrote about the city’s disadvantaged. In 1874, he and a partner “wrote, illustrated, and published a weekly journal of art, literature, and satire . . . that ran for nine issues,” similar to the *Rolling Stone*, the short-lived comic weekly that O. Henry wrote, illustrated, and published with a partner twenty years later. Finally, Hearn’s writings about his adopted city of New Orleans are “credited with ‘inventing’ New Orleans as an exotic and mysterious place” in the words of one biographical entry, just as O. Henry did for his adopted city of New York (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lafcadio_Hearn). On his way to Honduras in 1896, O. Henry stopped for a time in New Orleans, and he later set four of his stories there.

O'Connor writes of O. Henry's interest in the modern, or "new," woman:

His effort to observe the working girl and career woman as closely as possible led him to a long platonic relationship with Miss Anne Partlan, a thirty-year-old, tactful, attractive and intelligent woman who worked in an advertising agency and wrote short stories about working-class life as an avocation. . . .

His interest in her stories caused him to visit her shortly after coming to New York . . . (O'Connor, 122)

O'Connor goes on to quote from Smith's account of their first meetings. The only biography to follow O'Connor's was David Stuart's *O. Henry: A Biography of William Sydney Porter* (1990). Stuart employs a breezy style and is mainly concerned with exonerating O. Henry of the crime for which he went to prison, which has limited the usefulness of his book to scholars.

Several biographers, therefore, have noted Partlan's importance and told the tale of her first meeting with O. Henry. But the question remains of what it was about her work that so inspired O. Henry. As noted above, Partlan wrote that "Among Themselves," the story that O. Henry praised, had appeared in one of "the early numbers of 'Success' and been copied in the 'Dallas Times'" (Moyle, 16), and O. Henry could have seen it in either publication. The story appeared in *Success* in 1899, and would have been reprinted in the *Dallas Times* around the same time.

The period during which Partlan contributed to *Success* roughly corresponded with O. Henry's time in the Ohio Penitentiary, which he entered in April 1898 and emerged from in July 1901. (He was given a five-year sentence but received the maximum reduction for good behavior.) His prison job as night drug clerk—a plum position he received because of his youthful drugstore experience—and, later, private secretary to the prison steward, gave him plenty of time to read as well as write letters and stories. In one

letter, O. Henry told his mother-in-law that he had access to “all kinds of books, the latest novels, etc. brought in every day or two, [and] three or four daily papers.” The night doctor at the prison later remembered, “He received all the magazines and did lots of reading” (quotations in Smith, 157, 150). It is likely that he read “Among Themselves” while in prison.

The first issue of *Success* magazine appeared in December 1897. Its founder and editor was Orison Swett Marden, a proponent of the New Thought Movement and author of popular books such as *Pushing to the Front: or, Success under Difficulties* (1894) and *How to Succeed: or, Stepping-Stones to Fame and Fortune* (1896). The magazine’s masthead promised “An Up-to-Date Journal of Inspiration, Encouragement, Progress and Self-Help.” Contributors in the first year included George Washington Cable, Edward Everett Hale, Julia Ward Howe, Margaret Sangster, Octave Thanet, Booker T. Washington, and Charles Dudley Warner. They were later joined by Zona Gale, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Theodore Dreiser, who conducted a series of “Photographic Interviews” with Thomas Edison, William Dean Howells, and other successful men. Some of the regular departments in the magazine’s pages were “Character Building,” “The Young Man in Business,” “Talks with Young Men,” and “Talks with Girls.” Another regular feature was “Science Up to Date.” Marden and other “apologists for the business ethic used science, on the one hand, to support the Social Darwinist thesis of inevitable, immutable, progress; and religion, on the other, to justify the accumulation of wealth in the name of Christian stewardship” (Martin, 216).

A year’s subscription to *Success* cost \$1.00. Circulation rose from 50,000 in April 1898 to 100,000 in January 1900, doubled again by November and kept climbing,

reaching 300,000 in 1903. By December 1898, *Success* had already succeeded so well that it changed from a monthly to a weekly, only to change back to a monthly a year later, citing reader demand for a more elaborate publication. As it grew, the magazine found it necessary to move from its office in New York's Cooper Union building to a larger space on Washington Square. By 1906, Marden had added to the editorial mix a series of ambitious muckraking articles such as the six-part "Fighting the Telephone Trust." After *Success* folded, Marden became a regular contributor to *Nautilus*, another magazine associated with the New Thought Movement.

The early issues of *Success* contained serious articles, inspirational items, and energetic self-promotion. A typical example of the latter reads:

Do you feel that your life is a failure, that you have never found your place, that there is success for others, but none for you? Then read SUCCESS. It will give you a new outlook upon life.

In short, whatever your circumstances, your age, occupation, or profession, however unfortunate you may have been, or whatever mistakes you have made, SUCCESS will help you back to your normal condition, (which should be healthy and happy). (*Success*, April 1901, p. 764)

If O. Henry read these words in April 1901, just months before his release, they would undoubtedly have had special meaning for him. There is no way to know whether he found inspiration and comfort in such writing or dismissed it as claptrap. But the story of his meeting with Partlan suggests that he was susceptible to it, since Partlan's contributions to *Success* were similar in tone. Those contributions were not high-profile articles; they did not even appear in the magazine's table of contents. They were short pieces, from a paragraph to a full column, that served as "filler."

Partlan's first appearance in *Success* was not through a piece written by her but in an item about her, one of several under the heading "Ten Line Tales":

—JOKES FOR A LIVING.—Miss Annie Partlan, of New York, is known to all the comic weeklies as one of the readiest and keenest joke-makers of America. Miss Partlan is of Irish extraction, with a large share of Ireland's proverbial wit. She is modest and friendly in manner, and decidedly feminine in accent and gesture. She receives from one to three dollars for a joke, and from one to two cents a word for comic sketches and fillers. She declares that she seldom sees a person who does not suggest some joke. (*Success* 1:5 [April 1898], p. 16)

This is just the sort of item that would have caught the eye of someone like O. Henry, who was looking to sell his own work to the periodicals. He had done this sort of thing before, in the late 1880s, when he supplemented his income as a draftsman in the Texas Land Office by selling sketches, jokes, and verse to the *Houston Daily Post*, the *Detroit Free Press*, and other markets (Langford, 56; O'Connor, 36). The *Success* item would have brought him up to date on the rates paid for this kind of material. O. Henry would also have agreed with Partlan's belief that there is a story in everyone a writer meets. (Joke-making was apparently considered a man's field, since *Success* felt the need to assure its readers that a woman could write jokes and still be feminine.)

This item was perhaps meant to introduce Partlan to readers and establish her credentials in advance of her first contribution to the magazine, which appeared a few months later, below a patriotic poem by Oliver Wendell Holmes. Unlike most of the short pieces in the magazine, Partlan's carried a byline, either because she had already been introduced or because the first-person narrative required it. (It is possible that she had earlier contributed anonymous pieces.) This first signed sketch has more in common with the fictional world that O. Henry later developed than did most of the sketches that followed:

CATCHING LIFE'S ELEVATOR

ANNIE PARTLAN

On the main floor of one of New York's large department stores, a man was running back and forth, looking very much annoyed. After watching him a moment, I saw the cause of his distress was his failure to catch an up-going elevator. Standing at the entrance to one, he saw another at the extreme end of the store, descending. Starting after it, he reached it just as it had started on the upward trip. Meanwhile, the first had come and gone. Continuing this running back and forth, he finally succeeded in boarding one, having wasted time and energy unnecessarily, and believing himself very much abused.

How typical is this of the lives of many of us,—the secret of many failures!

If everything does not come our way at once in our chosen pursuit, we rush off to some other field, only to find it filled, or that we are not fitted for it; while, if we are only patient at the outset, Time's own elevator-man will open his gate and bear us up, stopping only to call out Fame, Fortune, Power, or whatever department in Life's great store we wish to enter. (*Success* 1:8 [July 1898], p. 14)

Here, like O. Henry, Partlan is a close observer of the mundane, extracting a comic parable from an everyday occurrence. The last two paragraphs are tendentious, but the first is a straightforward and humorous observation about human nature. Moreover, the sketch is set in a department store, though it concerns one of the customers rather than one of O. Henry's shopgirls. Partlan engages her readers by using an example taken from modern city life to illustrate a timeless truth. Stores like Macy's had been in New York for decades, though the term "department store" did not become common until the 1890s (Bube, 679). Store elevators were also not a new development. But among the magazine's many other sketches that had rural settings, this one would have come across as quite up-to-date. It is amusing to read that the customer thinks himself "very much abused," but part of the humor comes from Partlan's implied critique of the supposed convenience of department stores.

Almost a year passed before Partlan's next contribution to *Success*, "Among Themselves." In the interim, the magazine ran another piece about Partlan: "One Woman's Hard Road to Fortune," by Georgina G. Smith. The 600-word article gives a fuller picture of Partlan's career than the earlier item, which identified her primarily as a joke writer. The article is subtitled "How Miss Annie Partlan Became a Successful Designer in Face of Apparently Crushing Obstacles" and begins in typical *Success* fashion: "That pluck, perseverance and pure grit will overcome adversity and grasp success is illustrated in the career of Miss Annie Partlan, celebrated in New York City as an advertising designer" (*Success*, January 21, 1899, p. 128).

The article goes on to describe the obstacles Partlan faced when she arrived in New York City from Kingston, about 90 miles north. Her first job paid three dollars a week, putting her in the same fix as many of O. Henry's working women: "This income enabled her to board with a cousin, but afforded few luxuries, as she had nothing to spare from car fare, and had to buy clothing and shoes," Smith writes. "There were days when she lunched upon a banana and nothing more." When she asked for a raise, her superintendent "told her there were dozens of girls waiting to step into her place at three dollars a week." In response, Partlan showed more pluck than any of the shopgirls in *The Four Million*: "pushing out a well-worn shoe from beneath her skirts, [she] said: 'Well, if you can afford to have your employees look like that, I suppose I can,'" and she got the raise.

Later, unable to find any other kind of job, she "worked ten weeks in a factory with a very ignorant class of operatives." All the while, she was attempting to break into the advertising business, knocking on doors and encountering more obstacles: "Some of her

ideas were stolen from her and adopted. Some promised work, but neglected to accept or forgot to pay.” Smith does not describe how Partlan finally broke through, saying only that eventually “her peculiar genius as a designer of advertising was fully recognized, and she entered upon a successful and profitable career in connection with some of the best firms in New York.” Her contributions to *Success* are not mentioned.

“Among Themselves” appeared on June 3, 1899, with the misspelled byline “Anne Parlan.” The story is obviously informed by the tribulations of her early days in New York, but Partlan, as private in her way as O. Henry, removed all trace of herself from the story. In fact, she removed people altogether. For “Among Themselves” is about a conversation between a wardrobe and a washstand in a boardinghouse bedroom. The room is empty and, “among themselves,” the pieces of furniture are free to speak. The story is almost entirely a monologue by the washstand, an old-timer, as it tells the brand new wardrobe about the room’s “nearly a hundred” tenants over the years. Starting at the beginning, it describes the first three tenants—a medical student, a shopgirl, and an artist—and seems ready to go on to methodically describe the other tenants in chronological order when it is interrupted by the appearance of the maid and the story ends.

The three tenants are familiar types to readers of O. Henry’s stories. The medical student’s “chief cross in life was a constant lack of money, together with a most ravenous appetite.” The shopgirl sewed dresses in the evenings to make extra money, though “[o]ften she came home pale, and worn with the day’s work, threw herself on the bed and sobbed herself to sleep.” The artist, unsuccessful in selling his work, held a revolver to his head and considered suicide. Prefiguring O. Henry’s insistence on the individuality of

the oppressed, the washstand observes, “They were different, only they nearly all had trouble of one kind or another.” And like O. Henry, the washstand exhibits—according to a subhead used to break up the column—“Involuntary Sympathy With Trial and Trouble” (*Success*, June 3, 1899, p. 450).²¹

The closest O. Henry comes to this kind of fantasy is the story “Memoirs of a Yellow Dog,” narrated by a dog who has “spent most of his life in a cheap New York flat” (*Four Million*, 110). Like the pieces of furniture in Partlan’s story, the dogs in “Memoirs” discuss with each other the humans they come in contact with. But the O. Henry story that most seems inspired by “Among Themselves” is “The Furnished Room,” which appeared in the *World* on August 14, 1904. In this story, one of his most admired by Stephen Leacock and other contemporary critics, O. Henry makes the furnishings of a boardinghouse room come alive—not through anthropomorphism but through close observation.

An extended example of this description has already been quoted in Chapter 2 (pages 15–16). In another passage, O. Henry describes the marks left by previous tenants: “A splattered stain, raying like the shadow of a bursting bomb, witnessed where a hurled glass or bottle had splintered with its contents against the wall. Across the pier glass had been scrawled with a diamond in staggering letters the name `Marie’” (*Four Million*, 244). In her story, Partland has her washstand describe similar acts of petty vandalism by the medical student:

He had the instincts of his prospective calling strongly developed, and was fond of carving and of cutting up things in general. He amused himself, at times, by seeing how skillfully he could make incisions into my veneering,—`cuticle,’ he called it,—and left many tokens of his

²¹ The complete text of “Among Themselves,” too long (850 words) to be included here, is reproduced in the appendix.

skill in this line as remembrances for his landlady. (*Success*, June 3, 1899, p. 450)

The washstand's tale of the artist's attempted suicide is also echoed in "The Furnished Room," in which a young man unwittingly commits suicide in the same room in which the woman he loved killed herself. O. Henry seems to acknowledge the earlier story when he writes that the young man "reclined, inert, upon a chair, while the room, confused in speech as though it were an apartment in Babel, tried to discourse to him of its divers tenantry" (*Four Million*, 243).

"Among Themselves" is Partlan's most imaginative and interesting contribution to *Success*. In subsequent contributions, she reverted to the parable style of "Catching Life's Elevator." But even that piece was livelier than the formulaic parables that followed "Among Themselves." In "The Helpers," which is short enough to reproduce here, there is no observation from everyday life, only abstractions and overripe prose in a setting that is decidedly pre-modern:

Genius walked, one springtime, along a flowery way. His step was free and buoyant. His eye was gay and frank. "I'll gather for my brow," he said, "a wreath of fadeless bloom. Success is mine already. Sorrow shall not come near. I'll teach the world to wonder. My soul fears naught."

Two figures crossed his path. "Take us with you, young Genius," they whispered; "we help in the rough places; we comfort when others cannot, — without us, oh! fair dreamer, the road may prove too rough and hard."

He laughed, and cried, "I can conquer without your aid," and, leaning on his staff of hope, pursued his sunlit way; but after springtime, summer came all hot and fierce; then autumn, with dead branches and cold, keen blasts.

Poor struggler, worn and weary in searching for success, he had lost his smile of sunlight. Once again, the strangers found him, prostrate in his weariness. He gave no scornful gestures as before. He held out trembling fingers and pleaded: "Come to me, I faint and fail without you. Oh friend Diplomacy, and you, great Tact, come, ere my bloom

shall wither. Take my hand and lead me,—lead me to Ambition’s promised land.” (*Success* 3:72 [May 1900], p. 168)

Partlan, tailoring her writing for a particular market, could well have taken her inspiration from the cover design of the first issues of *Success*, which featured borders drawn to look like pillars emblazoned with words like “Tact,” “Pluck,” and “Self-Control.” (Some pillars made up an alliterative series: “Purity,” “Perseverance,” “Patience,” “Prudence,” “Promptness,” “Purpose.”) Diplomacy and Tact’s whispered promise anticipates C. Alphonso Smith’s description of Partlan as a “woman whom [O. Henry] had helped over many rough places.”

Partlan’s other sketches were set in a more recognizably real world, but still a timeless one shorn of the characteristics of any particular place or time:

The Boy Who Learned The Way

HE was very young,—about thirteen,—this boy who spent most of his time in the studios watching the artists draw and paint, and wishing he could do the same.

“What kind of pencils do you use?” he said one day, and they gave him one of the kind. That night he tried to make a figure he had seen one of the artists draw,—it seemed so easy. But he could not do the same kind of work.

“Perhaps I haven’t the right kind of paper,” he reasoned. “I will get a piece to-morrow.” Even the right kind of paper did not help him any.

“I need a studio and an easel,” were his next conclusions. “I have the desire; surely, all I need now are the necessary surroundings.”

A few years of impatient waiting passed before he secured the “necessary surroundings;” and, when he had them all, and still found it impossible to draw, the truth dawned upon him.

“I know now what is wrong,” he cried, throwing down his pencil; “I know nothing of the principles of art. I must learn them first.”

He was still young when his name as a great painter was known on two continents. He had learned the “principle.” A bit of brown paper and a burnt match would then enable him to draw as easily as all the art essentials. (*Success* 3:76 [September 1900], p. 347)

The sketches that followed are equally devoid of firsthand observation. In the October 1900 issue of *Success*, three of Partlan’s sketches are grouped under the title “Philosophic

Reflections.” In the first, “Looking Both Ways for Danger,” a mother tells her child to be careful crossing the road, and “he with the sunny curls looked back, opening his wide eyes wider, and said: ‘Me looked bofe ways, mamma; no horse is tummin’, me won’t get runned over.’” Years later, as a man, he carelessly crosses a city street and is run over by a cable car (*Success* 3:77, p. 404). Decades earlier, Mark Twain had parodied this sort of moral tale in his stories of the Bad Little Boy and the Good Little Boy, but even Twain was unable to lay the genre to rest. The other sketches in the group, “The Moral Backing of a Good Home” and “A Mother’s Farewell Words of Wisdom,” are as tedious as their titles make them sound. Writing to a friend about his own contributions to *Success* and similar magazines, Dreiser called them “saccharine . . . sentiment and mush,” and the description fits these pieces as well (Shi, 242). Partlan’s final sketch for *Success*, “One Thing Done Well,” appeared in January 1901 and was equally bland (*Success* 4:80, p. 575).

Partlan was certainly right to characterize these pieces as trifles, and it is difficult to see in them what it was that inspired O. Henry. There is no record of any interest on his part in the New Thought Movement, and the language of self-help is not evident in his work. His stories did not have the conduct-manual quality of so much of the writing in *Success* and in the books of popular authors such as William Makepeace Thayer and Horatio Alger. Readers of Alger’s books, which continued to appear regularly even after his death in 1899, “could find out *what* to do, *where* to go, *how* to begin, and *how* to proceed in the city. They are effortless guidebooks, not simply to success but to life in the city” (Susman, 244). O. Henry’s stories were guides to conduct only in the sense that they advocated keeping an eye out for the unexpected, and they were guides to success only in

the sense that they insisted that everyone counts and deserves a fair shake. The largest part of Alger's audience was rural, while O. Henry wrote for subway riders and readers of the Sunday supplements—city people who already knew their way around and were merely looking for entertainment.

It could be that O. Henry was so dejected in prison that he was susceptible to the kind of uplifting writing he might otherwise have scorned. Whatever it was that drew him to Partlan, she was by all accounts a key influence in his decision to write about shopgirls and their sisters in the workforce. He went on to write about various incarnations of “the early-twentieth-century working girl, not only the shopgirl but the clothier's model, the waitress, the stenographer, the showgirl, and the would-be artist” (Langford, 218). The *Four Million* collection alone features, in addition to the shopgirls in “An Unfinished Story” and “The Green Room,” a laundress (“A Service of Love”), a factory worker (“The Coming-out of Maggie”), a stenographer (“The Romance of a Busy Broker”), two typists (“The Skylight Room” and “Springtime à la Carte”), and two waitresses (“An Adjustment of Nature” and “The Brief Début of Tildy”). As often as not, these characters are seen in their rooming houses rather than at work. “It's not the sales-girl in the department store who is worth studying, it is the sales-girl out of it,” O. Henry once said, and it was with Partlan's help that he began his studies (quoted in Davis and Maurice, 296–97).

Chapter 4

The Creation of *The Four Million*

The Four Million occupies a secure place in the history of American popular literature, and deservedly so. In its range of protagonists it cast a wider net than other collections; it created the myth of New York City as a modern-day land of Arabian Nights; and it launched its author into worldwide fame. But certain entrenched ideas about the book don't stand up to scrutiny. For example, O. Henry has received considerable credit for pushing back against the elitist philosophy of Ward McAllister. But, as described in Chapter 2, McAllister and his ideas had been widely ridiculed for years by the time O. Henry came to write his New York stories. Though O. Henry did contribute the perfect anti-McAllister slogan, the time was long past when public opinion required any swaying on the subject. For another example, Anne Partlan is routinely credited with inspiring O. Henry to move in on her "territory" and write a series of stories about working women. But an examination of Partlan's work reveals that she can hardly be said to have staked out this territory at all. Continuing the attempt to see *The Four Million* more clearly, this final chapter will try to determine, as far as that can be done, the extent of O. Henry's participation in selecting and arranging the stories for the book; this will entail a discussion of O. Henry's working methods. The chapter will also look at how the book was received by contemporary reviewers.

Although O. Henry's biographers have described in some detail how he put together his first book, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), they have little to say about how his

subsequent books were assembled. Of course, *Cabbages and Kings* is a special case in the O. Henry oeuvre. It was the only book in which O. Henry tried to stitch his magazine stories together in order to create a continuous narrative (some writers on O. Henry call it a novel). It is also the book on which he worked most closely with an editor, who later discussed the process. For these reasons, there is simply more to tell about the creation of his first book than about the others.

As C. Alphonso Smith reports in the first biography, O. Henry was at first “better known as a writer of Central American and South American tales than of those dealing with the West or with New York.” In 1903, in Smith’s vague account, “O. Henry was urged to put his Latin American stories together, to add others, and to publish the whole as a novel” (Smith, 194). It was later revealed by Robert H. Davis and Arthur B. Maurice in *The Caliph of Bagdad* that this urging came from Witter Bynner, who was then in his early twenties. According to Bynner, his relationship with O. Henry began in the spring of 1903 when, as an office boy and manuscript reader for the McClure Company, he singled out “Tobin’s Palm” from the pile of unsolicited manuscripts, pronouncing it “a new note in fiction” and the important “find” he had been hoping for. When the principal reader, Viola Roseboro’, did not agree, he went over her head to S. S. McClure, who caught his enthusiasm, and the story appeared in the August 1903 issue of *McClure’s* (Davis and Maurice, 263–64).²² Perhaps McClure was disposed to like the story because, like the fictional Daniel Tobin, he too had emigrated to America from Ireland.

²² Roseboro’ had been a freelance reader for McClure since his syndicate began in 1889 and was a “formidable presence” in the magazine’s office (Weinberg, 196). She was instrumental in bringing Willa Cather to the magazine’s editorial staff in 1906 and has been proposed as the model for Myra Henshawe in Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy* (Skaggs, Merrill M., “Viola Roseboro’: A Prototype for Cather’s *My Mortal Enemy*,” *Mississippi Quarterly* 54:1 [Winter 2000], 5–21). Cather was not promoted to managing editor until 1908 and had no recorded dealings with O. Henry.

Bynner's account is repeated by subsequent biographers E. Hudson Long, Gerald Langford, and Richard O'Connor. But his version of events is hard to square with the fact that O. Henry had already published three stories in *McClure's*. It is true that these were signed with the name O. Henry while "Tobin's Palm" was signed Olivier Henry, but that should not have prevented recognition. The first of the three earlier stories had appeared as far back as 1899, but the other two were recent, the latest appearing only the month before "Tobin's Palm" (Clarkson 1938, 107).²³ The most plausible explanation for the failure of anyone at McClure's to recognize the author is that the earlier stories are set in New Orleans and South America, while "Tobin's Palm" is set in New York. At a time when local-color authors found their niche and stuck to it, Bynner and his colleagues might have assumed that stories with such different settings had come from different authors—which is presumably how "Tobin's Palm" ended up in the slush pile for Bynner to "discover." Submitting a story under an unfamiliar name to a market he had already cracked seems counterproductive but is typical of O. Henry's disorganized and casual approach to publishing. In any case, "Tobin's Palm" marked the beginning of a professional relationship and friendship between O. Henry and Bynner that resulted in six more stories in *McClure's* through 1906, which was when Bynner left New York to embark on a career as writer and translator. By that time, "Tobin's Palm" had reappeared between hard covers as the lead story in *The Four Million*.

In 1904, volumes of short stories were regarded unfavorably by publishers, and so Bynner "conceived the idea of running through the collected tales [O. Henry's stories of Latin America] a plot thread that would weld them into a continuous narrative" (Davis

²³ The stories and their dates in *McClure's* are "Whistling Dick's Christmas Stocking" (December 1899), "The Phonograph and the Graft" (February 1903), and "The Fourth in Salvador" (July 1903).

and Maurice, 267). A precedent for this method had been established by Owen Wister, who had cobbled together his best-seller *The Virginian* (1902) from previously published magazine stories, refining an approach he had taken with his 1898 novel *Lin McLean* (Quinn, 504). Bynner apparently planned to refine this approach still further to create a more ingenious and well-constructed plot than those of Wister's, and he "convinced the McClure people that such a book would sell" (Long, 112). Davis and Maurice call the book a "collaboration" that "drew Porter and Bynner very close together for a time" (Davis and Maurice, 268, 267). O. Henry wrote a few new chapters to fill out the plan for the book, but the sequencing of the stories, the title, and very possibly the plot itself was Bynner's (Clarkson 1938, 54).

Davis and Maurice claim that O. Henry worked up a fair number of new stories for the book from old notes, but as Paul S. Clarkson later showed in "A Decomposition of *Cabbages and Kings*," most of these "new" stories consisted of recycled material; they were pieced together from older stories that had already appeared in magazines. None of the stories in the book required more than minor edits: "There was not even much cutting or altering of the previously published stories except for names of persons and places" (Langford, 194). With one exception, however, O. Henry would never again put even this small amount of work into assembling a book. *Cabbages and Kings* was an experiment that he did not repeat. The motivating forces behind the book were Bynner and the McClure Company, and O. Henry simply did what was required of him—or rather, the least that was required of him. After this, his books consisted of unedited reprints of self-contained stories from magazines and newspapers. His relaxed approach to assembling these books was perhaps a result of how unpleasant he found the process of assembling

Cabbages and Kings. While working on that project, he wrote to a former employer in Houston: “I have been working day and night to complete a book which McClure’s will bring out in the fall” (quoted in Langford, 171). When the book was done, he told a friend that “he would rather write a dozen stories than `tackle another job like that’” (Williams, 193).

(But that is exactly what he did some years later in the case of the exception mentioned above. In 1908, in a “final spurt of productivity,” he wrote eleven stories specifically for the collection *The Gentle Grafter*, which appeared later that year [Current-Garcia 1993, 8]. The fourteen stories in the book all concern con men and swindlers and were based on accounts O. Henry had heard from fellow prisoners in the Ohio Penitentiary. The majority of the stories share a central character, Jeff Peters, but the book is held together by a common theme rather than a continuous plot as in *Cabbages and Kings*.)

Despite letting himself be swept along by Bynner’s plan for *Cabbages and Kings*, O. Henry did not see himself as a novelist. He told William Wash Williams: “It was never intended that I should write novels. I wasn’t cut out on that pattern. I was designed, created and set going to write short stories, and as long as I stick to that I will have my measure of success.” Williams wrote: “He knew what he wanted to do, what he could do and what he couldn’t do, better than anyone else I have ever known” (Williams, 175, 174). Toward the end of his life, though, his health worsening, O. Henry began to take his work more seriously, increased his contacts with literary people, and had an uncharacteristic change of heart. He told friends he wanted to “get at something bigger,” that what he had done was “child’s play” to what he knew he could do (Smith, 248). He

began planning an ambitious novel, which he described in an unfinished letter to his publisher as “the *true* record of a man’s thoughts, his description of his mischances and adventures, his true opinions of life as he has seen it and his *absolutely honest* deductions, comments, and views upon the different phases of life that he passes through” (quoted in Williams, 246). When a reporter for the *New York Times* asked O. Henry (in the only interview he ever gave) if he had any plans to announce, O. Henry responded: “Yes; you may say that I am now at work upon my first novel. It will be published in the Fall” (MacAdam, 21). There is no evidence, however, that O. Henry ever wrote a word of his novel, and the fall publication date was probably taken from a rash promise to a publisher who never really expected to see a manuscript.

O. Henry’s habitual working method was suited to writing short stories, not novels. Like Mark Twain, he would “writhe over plots,” and he would work out an entire story in his head before committing a word to paper (Smith, notes on Partlan interview). He often had to be pushed by impatient editors to undertake the final task of transferring the story from memory to the page. He wrote so close to deadline that Bynner of *McClure’s*, Williams of the *Sunday World*, and others felt compelled to sit with him in his room to make sure he kept at it. By their accounts, he wrote in pencil and rarely revised. He might read through a page when he had finished with it, but never read two or more pages in sequence. He did not consult notes, but did use a dictionary (Williams, 183, 186). His handwriting was unusually neat, as he knew that his first draft would be the last and would go straight to the editor and typesetter. (O. Henry sometimes used a typewriter for letters but never became comfortable enough with it to use in his work.)

In 1903, O. Henry signed a contract with the *Sunday World* to supply a story a week for a year. The first story appeared on December 6, 1903, and O. Henry continued with the *World* through 1904, 1905, and half of 1906. In all, he published 113 stories in the *World* (in December 1905 they began to appear more occasionally), all set in New York. As one biographer notes: “Production in such quantity necessitated writing briefer stories, often merely expanded anecdotes with the characteristic twist at the end: ‘features,’ they might almost be called, the weekly assignments of a reporter-at-large” (Langford, 185). They might also be called performances, given O. Henry’s need to write a story in one sitting. “I have to top it off while my interest is still hot,” he told Williams. “Once I begin a yarn I must finish it without stopping or it kind-a goes dead on me.” Williams reports that “O. Henry wrote practically all of the stories he contributed to the *Sunday World* overnight” (Williams, 176, 191).

During the span of his *World* contract, O. Henry continued writing for the magazines. Williams explains that on weeks when O. Henry managed to write a story before his *World* deadline, he would sell it to one of the magazines and crank out another story just in time for the *World* (Williams, 212–13). This made financial sense, as the *World* paid him \$100 per story and the magazines paid up to three times as much. Langford makes it sound like a frequent occurrence: “Porter had a habit in his *World* days of selling his weekly story to another magazine whenever he managed to get it written ahead of schedule. This meant that a good many of his *World* stories were thought up at the last moment and written in a one-night stint to meet his deadline” (Langford, 193). However, this could not have happened more than a handful of times. Of the more than twenty stories that O. Henry placed in *Ainslee’s*, *Everybody’s*, *McClure’s*, *Munsey’s*, and

other magazines in 1904 and 1905, only five are set in New York. The rest are set in the American South and West or in Central or South America, which would have made them unsuitable for the *World* (Clarkson 1938, “Periodical Appearances,” 103–11). O. Henry might have spent the better part of some weeks writing for the magazines, but he could not have originally intended most of these stories for the *World*.

O. Henry alternated between procrastination and periods of intense work when he would shut himself up in his room for days in an attempt to catch up with his obligations to editors to whom he had promised stories (Williams, 177–79). At other times, he made an art out of procrastination. Williams wrote that he “rarely sent the *World* copy for a whole story in one delivery,” instead sending stories piecemeal to the composing room (ibid., 189). Another *World* editor, Alexander Black, referred to these pieces as “propitiatory fragments” (Black, 166). They enabled the illustrator to begin work, and they bought O. Henry a little more time to complete the story—typically in one or two more fragments. Though this routine is often described as a quirk of O. Henry’s, it was established practice in the newspaper world. In his fictionalized biography, Dale Kramer describes O. Henry’s boss at the *Houston Post* writing an editorial in longhand in 1896: “A boy was running his copy to the compositors in ‘takes.’ He made three trips before the editorial was finished” (Kramer, 164). But it was apparently an unusual practice for fiction submissions, given the contemporary gossip about O. Henry’s relationship with his editors: “Tales of his dispatching of a few manuscript pages at a time to the *World* had been repeated in newspaper and literary circles” (ibid., 279). Black noted that his other contributors of fiction such as Zona Gale and Irvin Cobb were “more professionally

reasonable” in contrast (Black, 166–67). The babysitting that O. Henry’s editors had to do, keeping vigil while he finished a story, became part of his legend.

So did his constant requests for advances against final payment, which he needed because he spent his money just as fast as it came in. Yet another *World* editor, William Johnston,

made it a condition that at least part of the story should be in his hands before any money was advanced. This perhaps accounts for the fact that many of the beautifully written introductions to these stories have no direct connection with the stories themselves. In other words, O. Henry was merely playing for time and money when he wrote them and did not himself know when he wrote these introductions just what the story was to be about. (Marcosson, 268)

A good example of such an introduction is the beginning of “The Green Door” in *The Four Million*:

Suppose you should be walking down Broadway after dinner, with ten minutes allotted to the consummation of your cigar while you are choosing between a diverting tragedy and something serious in the way of vaudeville. Suddenly a hand is laid upon your arm. You turn to look into the thrilling eyes of a beautiful woman, wonderful in diamonds and Russian sables. She thrusts hurriedly into your hand an extremely hot buttered roll, flashes out a tiny pair of scissors, snips off the second button of your overcoat, meaningly ejaculates the one word, “parallelogram!” and swiftly flies down a cross street, looking back fearfully over her shoulder.

That would be pure adventure. Would you accept it? (*Four Million*, 151)

O. Henry goes on for some pages about the spirit of pure adventure before finally settling to his story of Rudolf Steiner, who encounters an unexpected adventure while strolling down a city street. The introduction is characteristically broad; all O. Henry needed to do was come up with a story that could be characterized as an adventure, and those first pages would seem to fit. But the fantastical tone of the opening contrasts with the rest of the story, which is strictly realistic. The nonsensical details of the roll, the button, and the

secret code word would be more at home in a parody of spy stories of the kind O.

Henry's champion Stephen Leacock wrote so well. Here, they are the equivalent of a piano player's "vamping" to fill time.

Another example of the kind of introduction Johnston described is the beginning of "An Unfinished Story," also in *The Four Million*. Here the narrator tells of a dream in which he stood before angels at the bar of judgment. Then, breaking off in midsentence, he says, "But this irrelevant stuff is taking up space that the story should occupy," and begins the story of Dulcie, a shop girl (*Four Million*, 175). Again, the story is decidedly realistic, filled with details of furnished rooms and pennies scrimped. But it is Dulcie's story, not the interrupted introduction, that is "unfinished." Leaving Dulcie in the midst of her endless cycle of depressing days, the narrator abruptly says, "This story really doesn't get anywhere at all," and returns to his dream, which supplies a final snapper and a moral to Dulcie's tale. This is a rare instance of an introduction redeemed by its transformation into a framing device. But the divergence of tone is as jarring as in "The Green Door."

It might seem surprising that O. Henry didn't take advantage of the opportunity to revisit his "propitiary fragments," to minimize or eliminate the evidences of their distracted composition, before sending them out into the world again in book form. But he was on a treadmill of sorts, composing a story in his head and transferring it to paper at least once a week, and then immediately beginning the process all over again. The "secret" of O. Henry's remarkable productivity at this time, according to Davis and Maurice, is that he was "working under pressure." At the same time, he was drinking two

quarts of whiskey a day (Davis and Maurice, 244, 274). There seems to have been little physical or mental energy left over to devote to the book collections.

O. Henry was always behind in his work, and his disorganization and defensive passivity cannot be overestimated. Another clue to his disinclination to revise is contained in a note to an editor at *Munsey's*: “Your story is being typewritten. I had to knock off for a day or so to do the *World* stunt” (quoted in Davis and Maurice, 237). There was indeed a performance, or “stunt,” aspect to fulfilling his contract with the *World*. The weekly feature demanded endless invention, and part of the pleasure that readers took in his stories undoubtedly came from finding out how he would manage to pull it off yet again. And a stunt, by its nature, cannot be revisited—it is a one-time performance.

O. Henry often drew attention to this aspect of his work in the stories themselves.

“A Service of Love” begins with a boast:

When one loves one's Art no service seems too hard.

That is our premise. This story shall draw a conclusion from it, and show at the same time that the premise is incorrect. That will be a new thing in logic, and a feat in story-telling somewhat older than the great wall of China. (*Four Million*, 58)

He loved to pull back the curtain and show his readers the tricks of the writer's trade. He would often second-guess his own choices, as in the opening of “Springtime à la Carte”:

It was a day in March.

Never, never begin a story this way when you write one. No opening could possibly be worse. It is unimaginative, flat, dry, and likely to consist of mere wind. But in this instance it is allowable. For the following paragraph, which should have inaugurated the narrative, is too wildly extravagant and preposterous to be flaunted in the face of the reader without preparation. (*Four Million*, 140)

It is as if we are listening to his thoughts as he sits writing. Perhaps in these asides O. Henry is addressing the impatient editor sitting at his elbow and waiting to take the story to the compositor. In the context of the stories' original appearance in the *World*, where O. Henry's ceaseless production was a weekly wonder, such professional trade talk was more appropriate than when the stories were collected in book form and removed from the weekly grind. In the way that such passages take us outside the frame of the story, they anticipate the metafiction of the 1960s.

There is evidence that O. Henry made a point of reading proof, but it was not for the purpose of revising or improving. Rather, it was to ensure that the galleys matched the manuscript and that no errors had been introduced in the course of setting his manuscripts in type. After Davis had become fiction editor at *Munsey's*, O. Henry wrote to him: "Will you be nice enough to let me go over the proofs of all my stories before they are published? The printer, with his usual hellfiredness, seems always to butcher the meaning by setting up words that do not appear in the MS. Also please kill your proofreader" (quoted in MacAdam, 11).²⁴ Since O. Henry liked to pepper his stories with puns and arcane words that could easily be misread or taken for errors, such vigilance was necessary. In 1908, several years into their working relationship at *Munsey's*, Davis wrote to O. Henry: "Some time ago we sent you proofs of 'A Moment of Victory.' I believe you said you wanted to make some changes in it, but if you are going to do so will you please do it at once and let us have the proofs back, as we want to use the story." He added, "It reads very well to us as it stands, and we should be perfectly well satisfied without any changes" (quoted in Davis and Maurice, 239).

²⁴ In one of his metafictional moves, O. Henry addresses the typographer in "Sisters of the Golden Circle": After introducing a newlywed man and "his Bride," he writes: "Capitalise it, friend typo—that last word—word of words in the epiphany of life and love" (*Four Million*, 198).

Once the stories appeared in print in magazines or the *World*, O. Henry rarely revisited them. It is possible that there was a commercial reason for this—that buyers of O. Henry's books wanted keepsakes of the same stories they'd enjoyed in the *World* and elsewhere. In any case, the changes O. Henry made to the stories that he included in *The Four Million* were few and mostly technical. The titles of "Gifts of the Magi," "A Skylight Room," and "His Courier" were changed to "The Gift of the Magi," "The Skylight Room," and "By Courier," respectively. Equally minor was his tweaking of the ending of "Tobin's Palm." In the story's original appearance in *McClure's*, he somewhat mechanically insisted on saving the surprise discovery of Tobin's long-lost sweetheart for the very last line: "I will ask the new girl we have in the kitchen," says he [the character named Friedenhausman], "to make ye a pot of coffee to drink before ye go. 'Tis fine coffee she makes for a green girl just landed three months. Step in," says the man, "and I'll send Katie Mahorner down to ye." In the book, this speech sounds more colloquial and natural: "'Tis fine coffee Katie Mahorner makes for a green girl just landed three months. Step in," says the man, "and I'll send her down to ye." A change was also made to the ending of "A Cosmopolite in a Café," which first appeared in the *World* on January 22, 1905, but the remainder of the text in the book was exactly as it had originally appeared (Clarkson 1938, 21).

O. Henry is reported to have said: "My stories? No, they don't satisfy me. I see them in print and I wonder why people like them. I wait till they come out in book form, hoping that they may look better to me then. But they don't" (quoted in MacAdam, 13). If this quotation can be trusted—it is, after all, a reporter's version of Davis's paraphrase of O. Henry in conversation—the passive construction of "I wait till they come out in

book form” suggests that O. Henry had little to do with the process. That he had little to do with choosing the stories for his books is suggested by another reported comment, about one of his first published stories. “Georgia’s Ruling” was written and published while O. Henry was in prison; it appeared in the June 30, 1900, issue of *Outlook*. It is one of several stories that draw on his years as a draftsman in the Texas Land Office, a position he got when his friend Richard Hall became land commissioner. According to Hyder E. Rollins in his article “O. Henry’s Texas Days,” the story “is so frankly biographical of Mr. Hall that, after his pseudonym had been revealed, O. Henry forbade its publication in book form, and only after his death did it appear in *Whirligigs*” (quoted in Davis and Maurice, 48). O. Henry’s real name—but not his past as a convicted felon—was revealed in the February 1904 issue of the *Critic*. The item, which ran with a photo of the author from his Austin days, stressed his connection with Texas, and O. Henry realized that Hall could now be easily identified as the land commissioner in “Georgia’s Ruling.” But Rollins’s choice of “forbade” suggests that the selection of stories for the O. Henry collections was made by others, not by the author. Similarly, O. Henry is said to have told Davis, in a discussion about the earning power of his stories: “With a lead pencil I write on these several sheets a tale three or four thousand words in length. You buy the story and print it in one of the magazines you edit. If it is a good tale it gets into a book, or perhaps is dramatized and put on the stage” (Davis and Maurice, 212). Again the construction is passive and the agency by which a story gets into a book is left vague. O. Henry had nothing to do with the stage dramatizations of his stories—aside from agreeing to terms with inquiring producers—and most likely he had little more to do with the creation of his books.

William Wash Williams reports: “Once a story was written, delivered and collected for, O. Henry seemed to have no further interest in it. As far as I ever knew, he kept no scrapbook or file of them” (Williams, 192). Williams goes on to tell how he and O. Henry made “a plan for collecting clippings of the stories he needed” for his first book, *Cabbages and Kings*: “I rounded up those which had appeared in the *World* while he went after those which had been published in magazines” (ibid., 193). Williams fails to mention the help provided by Witter Bynner; he may simply have omitted it in order to highlight his own contribution. A more serious problem with his account is that while *Cabbages and Kings* contains material from *Ainslee’s*, *Everybody’s*, *Smart Set*, and *McClure’s*, none of it is from the *World*. Yet the routine described by Williams is similar to the one O. Henry followed as late as 1910, when he wrote to Harry Payton Steger—his contact at his then publisher Doubleday, Page & Company—“that he was ready to discuss the new collection of stories (*Strictly Business*) which Doubleday-Page was planning for February [and] asked for a list of titles from which to make a selection” (Langford, 235). As *Strictly Business* was the fourth and last “Four Million” collection to appear during O. Henry’s lifetime, this must have simply been a list of the New York stories that had not yet been collected. Here at the end of his life, as he had earlier with Bynner and Williams, O. Henry again relied on a collaborator for the planning of a book.

Williams claims he performed the same service for *The Four Million* that he did for *Cabbages and Kings*: “When his publisher prodded him for another book and it came time to produce the second collection, we repeated the process we went through with in the first. When we started he had clippings of just four stories. The rest we rustled together from the files of the *Sunday World* and various magazines” (Williams, 193). The

book actually contained only three non-*World* stories: “Tobin’s Palm” and “An Unfinished Story,” both from *McClure’s*, and “By Courier,” from *Smart Set*. The first two had appeared in 1903 and 1902, respectively; “An Unfinished Story,” from 1905, was the only one of the three to appear during O. Henry’s *World* period. The “unfinished” story of Dulcie the shop girl, with its abrupt shifts from the dream framing device and back again, might have been too experimental, inconclusive, or pessimistic for the *World*. On the other hand, the *World* had already published “The Furnished Room,” the first story O. Henry gave to his editors there that did not conform to their preferred “happy ending” formula, concluding as it does with the protagonist’s suicide (Kramer, 269). Most probably, O. Henry simply completed “An Unfinished Story” before his *World* deadline and seized the opportunity to sell it to a magazine instead.

There were reasons besides their literary merit for adding these non-*World* stories to the collection. As the first story for which O. Henry was paid \$100, “Tobin’s Palm” marked a significant step forward in his career. As for “An Unfinished Story,” it had autobiographical significance: O. Henry once told a friend, “The real Dulcie *was* a shop girl in Wanamaker’s and she did turn Piggy down. And Piggy—I was Piggy” (Davis and Maurice, 309). “By Courier,” in which a ragamuffin acts as go-between for two estranged lovers in a public park, is slight by comparison, but it makes a good fit with the slighter *World* stories in the book.

There was at least one other New York story that predated the *World* contract and that was worthy of inclusion, but it was passed over. According to one source, the story had been singled out for praise by the *New York Times*:

The first stories began to attract attention and in a little time the name of O. Henry came to count for something. Incidentally there was

one issue of *Ainslee's Magazine* in which two stories from his pen were printed, and in order to avoid repetition in the table of contents, one of the two was signed James L. Bliss. That story happened to be "While the Auto Waits," which was one of the best of that period. A few days later there appeared in the *New York Times* an editorial, the gist of which was: "We do not know who James Bliss is. The name is a new one to us. But we defy any one to produce a French short-story writer of the present day who is capable of producing anything finer than 'While the Auto Waits.'" (*Bookman*, October 1915, p. 124)

This is from an article in the *Bookman* titled "The Pretended O. Henry," about an impostor who had claimed to be the famous writer.²⁵ Like much of the commentary on O. Henry, the article contains inaccuracies: The issue of *Ainslee's* in question, that of May 1903, did carry two pieces by O. Henry, but the other piece was a poem, not a story, and it was signed T. B. Dowd, not O. Henry (Clarkson 1938, 103, 142). In addition, it is not clear whether the *Bookman* is quoting or paraphrasing the *Times*. Despite this ambiguity, later writers, citing the *Bookman* article as their source, have presented the words as a direct quotation from the *Times* (Smith, 206; Davis and Maurice, 261; Langford, 161). Langford adds that the *Times* piece was "an editorial comment on two current short stories which it recommended to its readers," but he does not identify the other story. Richard Duffy, coeditor of *Ainslee's*, recalls that O. Henry's story "was picked out by several newspapers outside New York as an unusually clever short story," which would seem to exclude the *Times* (Page, 39). Davis and Maurice say that "While the Auto Waits" was "perhaps the tale that first drew general attention to [O. Henry's] work" (Davis and Maurice, 244). But none of these writers specifically cites the *Times* piece, and it may be apocryphal.²⁶

²⁵ The *Bookman* was edited by Arthur B. Maurice, who coauthored the O. Henry biography *The Caliph of Bagdad* with Robert H. Davis. It regularly carried news about O. Henry, even more frequently after his death.

²⁶ I have so far been unable to track it down.

If “While the Auto Waits” was in fact praised highly, its omission from *The Four Million* presents another puzzle. It is possible that the story was not included because it had originally appeared as the work of James L. Bliss, though the stories under other pseudonyms soon began to appear in O. Henry’s books. Another possible explanation is that the story’s plot is similar to that of another story that was included in *The Four Million*. “While the Auto Waits” involves a double masquerade: a young working-class woman pretends to be a wealthy socialite, while the young man she thinks she is deceiving is a socialite posing as an hourly worker; each character wants to see how the “other half” lives. The plot, inspired by the *Arabian Nights*, is clever but its working out is labored and the dialogue stilted. The story’s admirers apparently valued the author’s skill in working out a double reversal in such a short space. In “Lost on Dress Parade,” from the February 28, 1904, *World*, O. Henry reworked the double masquerade theme, making it both more plausible and more poignant. The inclusion of the second story could explain the omission of the first were it not for the fact that several other plot devices crop up more than once in *The Four Million*. Perhaps the omission of “While the Auto Waits” is simply due to O. Henry’s disorganization. His part in the selection of stories for his books seems to have been as hurried and scattershot as his composition of the stories. Finally, “While the Auto Waits” may not have even been on the list of available stories that Williams compiled; *Ainslee’s* was the magazine in which O. Henry used the greatest number of pen names, and Williams might not have been aware of it as a source of material. In any case, it was not until 1908 that “While the Auto Waits” was collected in one of the Four Million volumes (*The Voice of the City*).²⁷

²⁷ “The Ransom of Red Chief,” which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in mid-1907 and was one of O. Henry’s most popular stories, had to wait even longer—it was reprinted in a posthumous collection.

The Four Million was O. Henry's first collection of his non-Honduras stories, the first to draw on "his fund of New York stories" (Langford, 242). By the end of 1905, O. Henry had written almost all the stories he would write for the *World* and had over a hundred New York stories to choose from. Why, then, did he include, as noted above, stories that use the same plot device? Both "The Gift of the Magi" and "A Service of Love" are about a husband and wife who keep secret the sacrifices they make for each other. In the first story, husband and wife each secretly sell the possession they value most in order to afford a special Christmas gift for the other; in the second story, husband and wife each secretly take an unskilled job so that the other will be free to pursue an artistic career. In both stories, the characters' sacrifices cancel each other out, yet their love is reaffirmed. In another example of a recycled plot device, "From the Cabby's Seat" and "The Romance of a Busy Broker" both feature a protagonist who is so caught up in the routine of his job that he forgets he was married the night before.

The arrangement of the stories in *The Four Million* seems as arbitrary as their selection. There is no indication of how much O. Henry was involved in choosing a sequence for the stories. Changing the chronological order of their original appearance did not present a problem since the stories show no particular growth in artistry. There is not much difference in sophistication between "By Courier," the earliest of the *Four Million* stories to appear in print (May 1902), and "The Gift of the Magi," which is the latest (December 10, 1905). And the chronological order is indeed changed: "Magi," for instance, is the second story in the book and "Courier" third from last. The single rule that one would think should have been followed was to avoid putting stories with similar plots and characters too close to each other. However, this prudent step was ignored in

the case of the two pairs of similar stories noted above. “The Gift of the Magi” and “A Service of Love” have only three stories between them in *The Four Million*, and the same number of stories separates “From the Cabby’s Seat” and “The Romance of a Busy Broker.” When “Service” and “Magi” ran in the *World*, they appeared a year apart, and “Cabby” and “Broker” appeared seven months apart; most *World* readers would not have noticed the similarity. O. Henry often recycled plot ideas, but why should he have drawn attention to that by placing these stories so close together in *The Four Million*? The other question, of course, is why stories with such similar plots were even chosen for the same collection. The answer to both questions seems to be the hurried and casual way in which the book was assembled.

O. Henry’s carelessness extended to the business side of his career. His sometime agent Seth Moyle wrote that “it is doubtful if any short-story writer of genius, performing consistently year after year, earned less from his product. Immediate need . . . made necessary ‘sacrifice prices’ for *instant* cash.” Stories were sold for less than their value, and books “sold outright for a song (a couple of hundred dollars or less)” (Moyle, 30). Too impatient to wait for future royalties, O. Henry often sold himself short, and “it was not until Doubleday, Page & Company became his publisher and took over the earlier copyrights in 1909 that, despite the lack of any such contracts, royalties began to be paid him on his books” (Langford, 215). His naïveté about the publishing business was also on display when he approached Alexander Black, the *World* editor, for permission to use his stories in a book:

When he told me that a publisher had suggested putting together a volume of his stories, and that he would like, for such purpose, to make free of his contributions to the *World* . . . , his pleasure in the consent,

yielded as a matter of course, was quite characteristically expressed in an impulse to be the superior giver.

“I’ll write you a special story,” he said, “and there’ll be no bill for it.” This bargain naturally was refused. The story would be welcome, but the check would go to him in the usual way. As for the privilege to put the stories in a book, it carried the *World’s* blessing. (Black, 170)

Surprisingly, O. Henry did not realize that any editor would be “accustomed to granting such permission” (Langford, 204).

But when *The Four Million* appeared in May 1906, the distracted conditions under which the individual stories and then the book were put together were not what the reviewers noticed. The collection was well received, and it was valued for the reasons O. Henry intended. “The author thinks that no cold ‘Four Hundred’ should limit our interest, as there are at least four million people in the metropolis who are worth writing about,” said one critic, adding, “A bit like ‘The Unfinished Story’ is of more value than many long and labored books upon social conditions” (*Independent*, July 19, 1906, p. 161). Another reviewer wrote: “These sketches of New York life are among the best things put together in many a day” (*Critic*, July 1906, p. 93).

Several months after the initial reviews of the book, the *Atlantic Monthly* weighed in with a more considered response:

In symbolism and color his slang need not yield to that of Mr. George Ade [author of *Fables in Slang*]; he knows his world as well, but he sees it with an eye for its beauty as well as its absurdity. There is imagination as well as vision, and beyond his expert knowledge of our colloquial tongue he possesses in the background, to be used when needed, a real style. . . .

. . . Where their tendency [the French realists] is to forget that they are writing stories, to approximate as far as possible to a literal document, “O. Henry” does not hesitate to round out, to fill in, to take advantage of coincidence, in short, to indulge his reader’s weak-minded craving for a little human enjoyment. . . . And perhaps his picture with its glimmer of arc light and sunshine may be to the full as true as if it

were altogether drawn in India ink and charcoal. (*Atlantic Monthly*, January 1907, p. 126)

But the first serious critical recognition in America of O. Henry's artistry was still two years away. This was Henry James Forman's article "O. Henry's Short Stories" in the prestigious *North American Review*. Forman wrote: "For the first time since the eclipse of Mr. Kipling the short story is again beginning to make public appearance between book covers. . . . The stigma of the genre is wearing off, and for the rehabilitation one man is chiefly responsible. Mr. Sydney Porter . . . has breathed new life into the short story" (*North American Review* 187 [May 1908], p. 781; quoted in Langford, 217). In arguing that "the larger part of humanity is his domain," Forman writes: "The very title of one of his books, 'The Four Million,' is a protest against those who believe that New York contains only four hundred people worth while," continuing that

the poor and the lowly, the homeless lodger of the city park, the vagabond of the "bread line," the waitress, the shop and factory girl, the ward politician, the city policeman, the whole "ruck and rabble" of life, so meaningless to the comfortable, unobservant bourgeois, are set forth always with keen knowledge, with a laughing humour, and infrequently with a tender, smiling pathos." (This part of the article is quoted in the posthumous O. Henry collection *Waifs and Strays*, 1383–84).

Forman's essay, "the first and only serious critique that appeared during Porter's lifetime," proved influential enough to launch what Eugene Current-Garcia calls the "O. Henry Vogue" (Current-Garcia 1993, 150, 156). This vogue lasted well into the 1920s, when the "new" fiction made O. Henry seem passé and his reputation went into free fall. But Forman had helped reinforce the terms by which his work would be valued for the years of his ascendancy: as champion of the shop girl and of the unnoticed members of the Four Million.

Appendix

The complete text of Anne Parlan's brief story "Among Themselves" is reproduced below, both because of the key role it has been assigned in O. Henry's career, as discussed in Chapter 3, and because it has not been reprinted either in whole or in part since its original, hard-to-find publication. The story appeared in *Success*, vol. 2 (June 3, 1899), p. 450.

"Among Themselves" Annie Parlan [*sic*]

The new wardrobe settled himself in a corner of the boarding house bedroom, looked across to his companion, a rather dingy washstand, and asked: "How long have you been here?"

"Oh!" replied the washstand, "I am an old-timer. I came before the first owner left. His daughter had this room. Her dressing-table, — a good fellow, he was, — stood where you are. She died here, and her father sold the house and went to live at Mount Vernon. I have seen him only once since; then he sat in this room for nearly an hour, and he was much broken in spirit as well as in body.

"After he sold the place, Mrs. James took it as a boarding house. Thence dates my knowledge of life and of business matters, and my change from a polished, self-respecting washstand, to the scarred, wrinkled article of furniture, — doing what one of the boarders would call 'a general-utility business,' — that you now see. I once heard it said that something in its time played many parts; but I could never think what that

something was until I tumbled to it, as it were, by experience,—it must have been a boarding house washstand. I've been a chair, larder, bookcase, stove rest, table, and Heaven knows what.

Involuntary Sympathy With Trial and Trouble

“Since Mrs. James has had the house, nearly a hundred people have lived in this room,—odd characters, most of them, too.”

“What were they like?” asked the wardrobe.

“They were different; only they nearly all had trouble of one kind or another

“The first person to take the room was a medical student. He initiated me in the ‘utility business,’ and gave me lots of experience. He cooked his mealson an oil stove, and used me alternately as a footstool, dining table and dresser, and said he preferred me for these purposes, to his trunk. His chief cross in life was a constant lack of money, together with a most ravenous appetite. He had the instincts of his prospective calling strongly developed, and was fond of carving and of cutting up things in general. He amused himself, at times, by seeing how skillfully he could make incisions into my veneering,—‘cuticle,’ he called it,—and left many tokens of his skill in this line as remembrances for his landlady.

“The next occupant was a young girl who worked in a shop. In the evening she made dresses, and used to ‘cut out’ things on me, and use me for a ‘press board,’ and so forth. She found the incisions the medical man had made and immediately made pin-cushions of them, for she had a ready but not a pointed wit. Nevertheless, I think of her

more in sorrow than in anger. Often she came home pale, and worn with the day's work, threw herself on the bed and sobbed herself to sleep.

Etchings Behind an Easel

“Poor girl! Soon after, she left for a better place, I hope.

“Then came an artist. He was `awfully down in his luck.’ He’d get up at daybreak and draw and paint all day, but could n’t seem to sell his work. How he kept alive was a mystery, for he took scarcely any food; although one day he did try to cook some rice in a stew-pan. But he got absorbed in his painting, and when his attention was called to the rice, it was all over the floor, and the chair and everything else in the room were covered with it. He was `absorbed’ the rest of the day in shoveling it up. But with him it was work, work, work, with feverish earnestness, all day long, varied now and then by fits of terrible despondency. Then he’d sit for hours with his hand to his head. One night he determined to put an end to himself. He took his revolver from my drawer, for I was then playing the part of a miniature armory, and placed it at his head. I felt dreadful, for he was a fine, handsome fellow. He held it there for a second. What his thoughts were, God only knows. Then, with a sigh, he put the revolver back, saying, `I have n’t the grit to do it.’ A few days later, he came in with an expression on his face I had never seen there before. He was dressed in a handsome new suit. He packed his trunk, gave me a loving kick, and exclaimed: `Old man, I’ve struck it right!’ I differed from him, but said nothing, though I thought he had no right to strike me at all. He told the landlady, whom he astonished by saying that he had taken a studio on Fifth avenue. I understood then that his `struck it right’ referred to the fortunate sale of a picture.

“Then came a young— Hello! Here comes the maid. They say I’m to be put in the storeroom, for you see I’m old and worn, and don’t match you fellows. I suppose she’s coming after me now. Good-by, young man; some day I may meet you in the auction room.”

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