MARY E. WILKINS FREEMAN
1852–1930

Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, best known for her depiction of New England village life, was born on October 31, 1852, in Randolph, Massachusetts, a small town twenty miles south of Boston. She was not a strong child, and two other Wilkins children died before they reached three years of age, her sister Anne lived to be seventeen. Freeman’s parents were orthodox Congregationalists, and she was subject to a strict code of behavior. The constraints of religious belief, and the effect of these constraints on character formation and behavior, is, indeed, one of her chief subjects.

In 1867 Freeman’s father became part owner of a dry-goods store in Brattleboro, Vermont, where she graduated from high school. In 1870, she entered Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which Emily Dickinson had attended two decades earlier. Like Dickinson, Freeman left after a year in which she realized the school’s pressure on all students to offer public testimony as to their Christian commitment. She finished her formal education with a year at West Brattleboro Seminary, though the reading and discussion with her friend Evelyn Sawyer of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Sarah Orne Jewett were probably more important than her schooling in developing her literary tastes.

After the failure of her father’s business in 1876, Freeman’s family moved into the home in Brattleboro of the Reverend Thomas Pickman Pyle, where her mother became housekeeper. Poverty was hard for the Wilkins to bear, especially because their Puritan heritage led them to believe that poverty was a punishment for sin. Freeman’s mother died in 1880, her father three years later, leaving Freeman alone at the age of twenty-eight, with a legacy of less than one thousand dollars.

Fortunately, by this time she had begun to sell poems and stories to such leading magazines of the day as Harper’s Bazaar, and by the mid-1880s she had a ready market for her work. As soon as she achieved a measure of economic independence, she returned to Randolph, where she lived with her childhood friend Mary Walker. Her early stories, especially those gathered and published in A Humble Romance (1887), are set in the Vermont countryside, but as she put it in a preface to an edition of these stories published in Edinburgh, the characters are generalized “studies of the descendants of the Massachusetts Bay colonists, in whom can still be seen traces of those features of will and conscience, so strong as to be almost exaggerations and deformities, which characterized their ancestors.” More specifically, the title story dramatizes a theme Freeman was to return to frequently: the potentially for unchangeable, unchangeable need in sternly marked and downcast natures, such as the sisters in A Mistakes Charity.

A New England Nun and Other Stories, which appeared in 1891, contains several of her best stories, most notably the title story, which treats (with particular dramatic success) the pervasive theme of psychic oppression and rebellion of women. At the same time as she provides a vivid sense of place, local dialect, and personality types, Freeman also uses her craft to work an insight into the individual psychology and interior life produced when confining, inherited codes of village life are subject to the pressures of a rapidly changing secular and urban world. This is a world in which, as the critic Marjorie Pryse has argued, women begin to assert, individually and collectively, their vision and power against those of an exhausted Preakness partnership.

Freeman continued to write for another three decades. Although she is best known today for her stories, she also wrote plays and a substantial number of successful novels on diverse topics from local history to labor unions, but always with a focus on women. Among these novels are Passbrack (1894) and The Shoulders of Atlas (1908). She married Dr. Charles Freeman in 1902, when she was forty-three, and moved to Metuchen, New Jersey, after a few happy years, her husband’s drinking turned into destructive alcoholism, and he had to be institutionalized in 1920. In 1926, she was awarded the W. D. Howells medal for fiction by the American Academy of Arts and Letters and elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters; signal honors, and seldom given to women written in those days. She died of a heart attack four years later.

A New England Nun1

It was late in the afternoon, and the light was waning. There was a difference in the look of the tree shadows out in the yard. Somewhere in the distance cows were lowing, and a little bell was tinkling; now and then a farm wagon tilted by, and the dust flew; some blue-shirted looers with skewers over their shoulders plodded past; little squirmers of flies were dancing up and down before the peoples faces in the soft air. There seemed to be a gentle stir arising over everything for the mere sake of subsistence—a very premonition of rest and lushest and night.

This soft dimwitted commotion was over Louisa Ellis also. She had been peacefully sewing at her sitting-room window all the afternoon. Now she quivered her needle carefully in her hand, which she folded precisely, and laid in a basket with her thimble and thread and scissors. Louisa Ellis could not remember that ever in her life she had missed one of these little feminine appearances, which had become, from long use and constant association, a very part of her personality.

Louisa tied a green apron round her waist, and got out a flat straw hat with a green ribbon. Then she went into the garden with a little blue crockery bowl, to pick some currants for her tea. After the currants were picked she sat on the back door-step and stemmed them, collecting the stems carefully in her apron, and afterwards throwing them into the hen coop. She looked sharply at the grass beside the step to see if any had fallen there.

Louisa was slow and still in all her movements, it took her a long time to prepare her tea, but when ready it was set forth with as much grace as if she had been a veritable guest to her own self. The little square table stood exactly in the centre of the kitchen, and was covered with a starched linen cloth whose border patterns of flowers glistened. Louisa had a damask napkin on her tea-tray, where were arranged a cut-glass tumbler full of teapoans, a silver cream-pitcher, a china sugar-bowl, and one pink china cup and saucer. Louisa used chinas every day—something which none of her neighbors did. They whispered about it among themselves. Their daily tables were laid with common crockery, their sets of best chinas stayed in the parlor closet, and Louisa Ellis was no richer nor better bred than they. Still she would use the chinas. She had for her supper a glass dish full of sugared currants, a plate of little cakes, and one of light white biscuits. Also a leaf or two of lettuce, which she cut up daintily. Louisa was very fond of lettuce, which she raised to perfection in her little garden. She ate quite heartily, though in a delicate, sipping way, it seemed almost surprising that any considerable bulk of the food should vanish.

1. From A New England Nun and Other Stories (1891), the source of the present text.
After tea she filled a plate with nicely baked thin corn-cakes, and carried them out into the back-yard. "Casser! Casser!" she called. "Casser! Casser!

There was a little rush, and the clank of a chain, and a large yellow-and-white dog appeared at the door of his tiny hut, which was half hidden among the tall grasses and flowers. Louisa put him and gave him the corn-cakes. Then she returned to the house and washed the teathings, polishing the china carefully. The twilight had deepened; the chorus of the frogs floated in at the open window wonderfully loud and shrill, and once in a while a long sharp drone from a tree-road pierced it. Louisa took off her green gingham apron, disclosing a softer one of pink and white print. She lighted her lamp, and sat down again with her sewing.

In about half an hour Joe Daggett came. She heard his heavy step on the walk, and rose and took off her pink-and-white apron. Under that was still another—white linen with a little cumbic edging on the bottom; that was Louisa's company apron. She never wore it without her calico sewing apron over it unless she had a guest. She had barely folded the pink and white one with methodical haste and laid it in a table-drawer when the door opened and Joe Daggett entered.

He seemed to fill up the whole room. A little yellow canary that had been asleep in his green cage at the south window woke up and fluttered wildly, beating his little yellow wings against the wires. He always did so when Joe Daggett came into the room.

"Good evening," said Louisa. She extended her hand with a kind of solemn cordiality.

"Good evening, Louisa," returned the man, in a loud voice. She placed a chair for him, and they sat facing each other, with the table between them. He sat bolt- upright, toeing out his heavy feet squarely, glancing with a good-humored seriousness around the room. She sat gently erect, folding her slender hands in her white-linen lap.

"Been a pleasant day," remarked Daggett.

"Real pleasant," Louisa asserted, softly. "Have you been having?" she asked, after a little while.

"Yes, I've been having all day, down in the ten-acre lot. Pretty hot work." "It must be."

"Yes, it's pretty hot work in the sun."

"Is your mother well to-day?" "Yes, mother's pretty well."

"I suppose Lily Dyers is with her now?"

Daggett colored. "Yes, she's with her," he answered, slowly.

He was not very young, but there was a boyish look about his large face. Louisa was not quite as old as he, her face was fairer and smoother, but she gave people the impression of being older. "I suppose she's a good deal of help to your mother," she said, further. "I guess she is; I don't know how mother'd get along without her," said Daggett, with a sort of embarrassed warmth.

"She looks like a real capable girl. She's pretty-looking too," remarked Louisa.

"Yes, she is pretty fair looking." Presently Daggett began fingerimg the books on the table. There was a square red autograph album, and a Young Lady's Gift-Book which had belonged to Louisa's mother. He took them up one after the other and opened them; then laid them down again, the album on the Gift-Book. Louisa kept eying them with mild uneasiness. Finally she rose and changed the position of the books, putting the album underneath. That was the way they had been arranged in the first place.

Daggett gave an awkward little laugh. "Now what difference did it make which book was on top?" he asked.

Louisa looked at him with a deprecating smile. "I always keep them that way," murmured she.

"You do beat everything," said Daggett, trying to laugh again. His large face was flushed.

He remained about an hour longer; then rose to take leave. Going out, he stumbled over a rug, and trying to recover himself, hit Louisa's work-basket on the table, and knocked it on the floor. He looked at Louisa, then at the rolling spools; he ducked himself awkwardly toward them, but she stopped him. "Never mind," said she; "I'll pick them up after you've gone."

She spoke with a mild stiffness. Either she was a little disturbed, or his nervousness affected her, and made her seem constrained in her effort to reassure him.

When Joe Daggett was outside he drew in the sweet evening air with a sigh, and felt much as an innocent and perfectly well-intentioned bear might after his exit from a china shop.

Louisa, on her part, felt much as the kind-hearted, long-suffering owner of the china shop might have done after the exit of the bear.

She tied on the pink, then the green apron, picked up all the scattered treasures and replaced them in her work-basket, and straightened the rug. Then she set the lamp on the floor, and began sharply examining the carpet. She even rubbed her fingers over it, and looked at them.

"He's tracked in a good deal of dust," she murmured. "I thought he must have." Louisa got a dust-pan and brush, and swept Joe Daggett's track carefully. If he could have known it, it would have increased his perplexity and uneasiness, although it would not have disturbed his loyalty in the least. He came twice a week to see Louisa Ellis, and every time, sitting there in her delightfully sweet room, he felt as if surrounded by a hedge of lace. He was afraid to stir lest he should put a clumsy foot or hand through the fairy web, and he had always the consciousness that Louisa was watching fearfully lest he should.

Still the lace and Louisa commanded perfume his perfect respect and patience and loyalty. They were to be married in a month, after a singular courtship which had lasted for a matter of fifteen years. For fourteen out of the fifteen years the two had not once seen each other, and they had seldom exchanged letters. Joe had been all those years in Australia, where he had

2. Gift-Books (c. 1825-65) were popular annual publications containing stories, essays, and poems, usually with a poesy or moral tone. They were typically printed and decorated for use as Christmas or New Year's gifts.
gone to make his fortune, and where he had stayed until he made it. He would have stayed fifty years if it had taken so long, and come home feeble and tottering, or never come home at all, to marry Louisa. But the fortune had been made in the fourteen years, and he had come home now to marry the woman who had been patiently and unquestioningly waiting for him all that time.

Shortly after they were engaged he had announced to Louisa his determination to strike out into new fields, and secure a competency before they should be married. She had listened and assented with the sweet serenity which never failed her, not even when her lover set forth on that long and uncertain journey. Joe, buoyed up as he was by his sturdy determination, broke down a little at the last, but Louisa kissed him with a mild blush, and said good-bye.

"It won't be for long," poor Joe had said, huskily; but it was for fourteen years.

In that length of time much had happened. Louisa's mother and brother had died, and she was all alone in the world. But greatest happening of all—a noble happening which both were too simple to understand—Louisa's feet had turned into a path, smooth maybe under a calm, serene sky, but so straight and unswerving that it could only meet a check at her grave, and so narrow that there was no room for any one at her side.

Louisa's first engagemen was when Joe Dagget came home (he had not applied her of his coming) was consternation, although she would not admit it to herself, and he never dreamed of it. Fifteen years ago she had been in love with him—at least she considered herself to be. Just at that time, gently acquiescing with and falling into the natural drift of girlhood, she had seen marriage ahead as a reasonable feature and a probable desirability of life. She had listened with calm docility to her mother's views upon the subject. Her mother was remarkable for her cool sense and sweet, even temperament. She talked wryly to her daughter when Joe Dagget presented himself, and Louisa accepted him with no hesitation. He was the first lover she had ever had.

She had been faithful to him all these years. She had never dreamed of the possibility of marrying any one else. Her life, especially for the last seven years, had been full of a pleasant peace, she had never felt discontented nor impatient over her lover's absence; still she had always looked forward to his return and their marriage as the inevitable conclusion of things. However, she had fallen into a way of placing it so far in the future that it was almost equal to placing it over the boundaries of another life.

When Joe came she had been expecting him, and expecting to be married for fourteen years; but she was as much surprised and taken aback as if she had never thought of it.

Joe's consternation came later. He eyed Louisa with an instant confirmation of his old admiration. She had changed but little. She still kept her pretty manner and soft grace, and was, he considered, every whit as attractive as ever. As for himself, his stent was done; he had turned his face away from fortune-seekers, and the old winds of romance whistled as loud and sweet as ever through his ears. All the song which he had been wont to hear in them was Louisa; he had for a long time a loyal belief that he heard it still, but finally it seemed to him that although the winds sang always that one
which this mild-visaged, altogether innocent-looking old dog might be capable; but whether or not he had encountered remorse, he had encountered a full measure of Caesar's sharp white youthful teeth, and for that he had lived at the end of a chain, all alone in a little hut, for fourteen years. The neighbor, who was churlish and smarting with the pain of his wound, had demanded either Caesar's death or complete ostracism.

So Louisa's brother, to whom the dog had belonged, had built him his little kennel and tied him up. It was now fourteen years since, in a flood of youthful spirits, he had inflicted that memorable bite, and with the exception of short excursions, always at the end of the chain, under the strict guardianship of his master or Louisa, the old dog had remained a chaste prisoner. It is doubtful if, with his limited ambition, he took much pride in the fact, but it is certain that he was possessed of considerable cheap fame. He was regarded by all the children in the village and by many adults as a very monster of ferocity. St. George's dragon could hardly have surpassed in evil repute Louisa Ellis's old yellow dog. Mothers charged their children with solemn emphasis not to go too near him, and the children listened and believed greedily, with a fascinated appetite for terror, and ran by Louisa's house stealthily, with many sidelong and backward glances at the terrible dog. If perchance he sounded a hoarse bark, there was a panic. Wayfarers changing into Louisa's yard eyed him with respect, and inquired if the chain were stout. Caesar at large might have seemed a very ordinary dog, and excited no comment whatever, chained, his reputation overshadowed him, so that he lost his own proper outlines and looked darkly vague and enormous. Joe Dagget, however, with his good-humored sense and good nature, saw him as he was. He stood valiantly up to him and patted him on the head, in spite of Louisa's soft clamarion of warning, and even attempted to set him loose. Louisa grew so alarmed that he desisted, but kept announcing his opinion in the matter quite forcibly at intervals. "There ain't a better-natured dog in town," he would say, "and it's downright cruel to keep him tied up there. Some day I'm going to take him out."

Louisa had very little hope that he would not, one of these days, when their interests and possessions should be more completely fused in one. She pictured to herself Caesar on the rampage through the quiet and unagitated village. She saw him in the path. She was herself very fond of the old dog, because he had belonged to her dead brother, and he was always very gentle with her; still she had great faith in his ferocity. She always warned people not to go too near him. She fed him on acerbic fare of corn-mush and cakes, and never fired his dangerous temper with heating and surging diet of flesh and bones. Louisa looked at the old dog munching his simple fare, and thought of her approaching marriage and trembled. Still no anticipations of disorder and confusion in lieu of sweet peace and harmony, no forebodings of Caesar on the rampage, no wild fluctuating of her little yellow canary, were sufficient to turn her hair's-breadth. Joe Dagget

had been fond of her and working for her all these years. It was not for her, whatever came to pass, to prove untrue and break his heart. She put the exquisite little stitches into her wedding-garments, and the time went on until it was only a week before her wedding-day. It was a Tuesday evening, and the wedding was to be a week from Wednesday.

There was a full moon that night. About nine o'clock Louisa straddled down the road a little way. There were harvest-fields on either hand, bordered by low stone walls. Luxuriant clumps of bushes grew beside the wall, and trees—wild cherry and old apple-trees—at intervals. Presently Louisa sat down on the wall and looked about her with mildly sorrowful reflectiveness. Tall shrubs of blueberry and meadow-sweet, all woven together and tangled with blackberry vines and horehedges, shot her in on either side. She had a little clear space between. Opposite her, on the other side of the road, was a spreading tree; the moon shone between its boughs, and the leaves twinkled like silver. The road was bespread with a beautiful shifting dapple of silver and shadow; the air was full of a mysterious sweetness. "I wonder if it's wild grapes?" murmured Louisa. She sat there some time. She was just thinking of rising, when she heard footsteps and low voices, and remained quiet. It was a lonely place, and she felt a little timid. She thought she would keep still in the shadow and let the persons, whoever they might be, pass her.

But just before they reached her the voices ceased, and the footsteps. She understood that their owners had also found seats upon the stone wall. She was wondering if she could not steal away unobserved, when the voice broke the stillness. It was Joe Dagget's. She sat still and listened.

The voice was announced by a loud sigh, which was as familiar as itself. "Well," said Dagget, "you've made up your mind, then, I suppose?"

"Yes," returned another voice; "I'm going day after to-morrow.

"That's Lily Dyer," thought Louisa to herself. The voice embodied itself in her mind. She saw a girl tall and full-figured, with a firm, fair face, looking fairer and fitter in the moonlight, her strong yellow hair bordered in a close braid. A girl full of a calm rustic strength and bloom, with a masterful way which might have become a princess. Lily Dyer was a favorite with the village folk; she had just the qualities to arouse the admiration. She was good and handsome and smart. Louisa had often heard her praises sounded. "Well," said Joe Dagget, "I ain't got a word to say.

"I don't know what you could say," returned Lily Dyer.

"Not a word to say," repeated Joe, drawing out the words heavily. Then there was silence. "I ain't sorry," he began at last, "that that happened yester-

day—that we kind o' let on how we felt to each other. I guess it's just as well we knew. Of course I can't do anything any different. I'm going right out an' get married next week. I ain't going back on a woman that's waited for me fourteen years, an' break her heart."

"If you should jilt her to-morrow, I wouldn't have you," spoke up the girl, with sudden vehemence.

"Well, I ain't going to give you the chance," said he; "but I don't believe you would, either."

"You'd see I wouldn't. Honor's honor, an' right's right. An' I'd never think anything of any man that went against 'em for me or any other girl; you'd find that out, Joe Dagget."

"Well, you'll find out fast enough that I ain't going against 'em for you or
any other girl," returned he. Their voices sounded almost as if they were angry with each other. Louisia was listening eagerly.

"I'm sorry you feel as if you must go away," said Joe, "but I don't know but it's best."

"Of course it's best. I hope you and I have got common-sense."

"Well, I suppose you're right. Suddenly Joe's voice got an undertone of tenderness. "Say, Lily," said he, "I'll get along well enough myself, but I can't bear to think—You don't suppose you're going to feel much over it?"

"I guess you'll find out I shan't fret much over a married man."

"Well, I hope you won't—I hope you won't, Lily. God knows I do. And— I hope—one of these days—you'll—come across somebody else—"

"I don't see any reason why I shouldn't."

Suddenly her tone changed. She spoke in a sweet, clear voice, so loud that she could have been heard across the street. "No, Joe Dagget," said she, "I'll never marry any other man as long as I live. I've got good sense, an' I ain't going to break my heart nor make a fool of myself. But I'm never going to be married, you can be sure of that. Ain't that sort of a girl to feel this way twice."

Louisia heard an exclamation and a soft commotion behind the bushes; then Lily spoke again—"the voice sounded as if she had risen. "This must be put a stop to," said she, "we've stayed here long enough. I'm going home."

Lily sat there in a daze, listening to their retreating steps. After a while she got up and shrank softly bneath herself. The next day she did her housework methodically: that was as much a matter of course as breathing; but she did not sew on her wedding-clothes. She sat at her window and meditated. In the evening Joe came. Louisia Ellis had never known that she had any diplomacy in her, but when she came to look for it that night she found it, although much of its kind, among her little feminine weapons. Even now she could hardly believe that she had heard rightly, and that she would not do Joe a terrible injury should she break her trust-plight. She wanted to sound him without betraying too soon her own inclinations in the matter. She did it successfully, and they finally came to an understanding; but it was a difficult thing, for he was as afraid of betraying himself as she.

She never mentioned Lily Dyer. She simply said that while she had no cause of complaint against him, she had lived so long in one way that she shrank from making a change.

"Well, I never shrank, Louisia," said Dagget. "I'm going to be honest enough to say that I think maybe it's better this way, but if you'd wanted to keep on, I'll have trouble to you till my dying day. I hope you know that."

"Yes, I do," said she.

That night she and Joe parted more tenderly than they had done for a long time. Standing in the door, holding each other's hands, a last great wave of regretful passion swept over them.

"Well, this ain't the way we've thought it was all going to end, is it, Louisia?" said Joe.

She shook her head. There was a little quiver on her placid face.

"You let me know if there's ever anything I can do for you," said he. "I ain't ever going to forget you, Louisia." Then he kissed her, and went down the path.

Louisia, all alone by herself that night, wept a little, she hardly knew why; but the next morning, on waking, she felt like a queen who, after hearing lest her domain be wrested away from her, sees it firmly insured in her possession.

Now the tall weeds and grasses might cluster around Caesar's little hermit hut, the snow might fall on its roof yard in and year out, but he never would go on a rampage through the unguarded village. Now the little canary might turn itself into a peaceful yellow bull night after night, and have no need to wake and flutter with wild terror against its bars. Louisia could sew linen seams, and distil roses, and dust and polish and fold away in lavender, as long as she listed. That afternoon she sat with her needle-work at the window, and felt fairly steeped in peace. Lily Dyer, tall and erect and blossoming, went past; but she felt no qualm. If Louisia Ellis had sold her birthright she did not know it; the taste of the potion was so delicious, and had been her sole satisfaction for so long. Serenity and placid narrowness had become to her as the birthright itself. She gazed abroad through a long reach of future days strung together like pearls in a rosary, every one like the others, and all smooth and flawless and innocent, and her heart went up in thankfulness. Outside was the fevered summer afternoon; the air was filled with the sounds of the busy harvest of men and birds and bees; there were halfdoz, metallic clatterings, sweet calls, and long hummings. Louisia sat, prayerfully numbering her days, like an unchristened nun.

1891

4. In Genesis 21, Isaac sells his birthright to his eldest son of Esau and Reuben to his younger brother Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup.