

Sunday, January 10, 1926

Zona Gale Writes Intimate View of Portage, Wisconsin

Novelist Thinks It Strange That Majority of People Have Never Heard of Town

"IT SEEMS a bit strange," writes Zona Gale in the January Century, "that the majority of people in the United States have never heard of Portage, Wis. Here it is, with its memories, its traditions, and its settings, and not even the people who go through it on its seventeen daily 'through' trains ever note its name. There is about this circumstance something as piercing as in the look of the visiting-card of a stranger now dead, or of a nameless photograph on the floor of the attic, or in Milton's line,

"The pilot of some small night-founder'd skiff."

"But we have our revenges. For one midnight I stood at the station and thrilled to see roll upon our tracks a long sealed train of Pullmans, in whose windows were cards bearing the two magic words, 'Ballet Russe.'

"For me all of Broadway and the metropolitan stage came burning to our West. Those fairy feet so close to our brick platform. And while I looked and marveled, as engines were being changed, one of the station men came by and said, 'Some theatrical troupe or other.'

Church History

"In Portage, Wisconsin, there stands an old church which it was once customary to close for a month in summer. It was a fair example of the churches built nearly three quarters of a century ago—a kind of blurred Gothic, with vaulted ceiling, choir-alcove, gallery, and good stained glass. But one September, when after a month's recess the congregation came for service, they found their church transformed. Left to his own devices, the minister

had ceiled over the vaulted roof, masking the oak beams with the plaster, had walled up the choir-alcove with its little rose-window, and had replaced the stained glass with frosted panes. And to this day, though the church has changed its religion, the 'improvements' remain.

"There was a Portage elder with squeaky shoes who used to pass the plate at service, and one morning when the squeaking seemed too violent for the solemnity of the ceremony, the minister spoke out aloud and said to him:

"'Brother—, you'll find my rubbers out there in the entry.'

"But the elder replied over his shoulder, 'Thank you, I've a pair of rubbers of me own,' and went on passing the plate and squeaking

The whole locality has a treasure of funeral lore.

Funeral Lore

In this the small towns have antedated the skepticism of the larger, which no longer wail and hire mourners, but which perhaps still have scant lore of funeral jokes. In the metropolitan theaters, for example, the elision of such humor is in obedience to not less than a tenet of art dictated by audiences. For in the ebb and flow of scenes, in the building to crests and peaks, it is well known that even a faint mention of death will send the listeners down a great steep, and kill the scene. This is not true in clubs and smokers. It may be that the small town corresponds to a club. For here, early in the history of the town, funerals must have been a rich source of anecdote, since so many survive. One, of a layman who was to speak at the burial of a townsman, and who leaned on the pulpit and thus began:

"I was well acquainted with the deceased, with that gentleman down there," and pointed with his thumb to the casket below. And there is a memory of the choir at a funeral singing lustily:

"One sweet flower has drooped and faded;

One dear infant's voice has fled;
One fair brow the grave has shaded;
One dear schoolmate now is dead.

"But we feel no thought of sadness,
For our friend is happy now.

Knowing naught but heartfelt gladness

Where the holy angels bow,"

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and of the soprano at this point going off into sobs in which the whole choir joined.

It was in a town to the south of us that a minister of that period, preaching a funeral sermon for a farmer, cried out, in a strong singsong, compounded of equal parts of drawling and lightning rapidity:

"He's gone. He's gone. Never shall - you - hear - his - voice - at the-foot-of-the - stairs - crying: 'Hulday! Hulday! Get up. Get breakfast.' He's gone."

The Hearse Team

It was in a town to the west of us that in those days a woman telephoned to a livery-stable to ask for the "little blacks" and was told that she would have to take the little bays because the little blacks had gone to the funeral. But when, in half an hour, the carriage arrived, it was drawn by the little blacks; and when she questioned the driver, she heard:

"Well, the blacks was standing right acrost the street outside the church, hitched to the hearse. So I just went and took out the blacks and put in the bays. I says to myself, 'The corp won't care.'"

The word mother has a correspondence in nature, beyond the individual and beyond the possessive. This word appears to signify some spiritual condition which is to the macrocosm what she is to the human atom. Maternity is less a relationship than an extra-physical force, to which shocking violence has been done by children through sentimentality, and by mothers through control.

A Fragrance . . .

In this wise it is that, to one born and bred there, a town may be less a place than a force, less a force than a fragrance. Particularly is this true of a small town; as one can be more moved by a puppy of one's own than by anybody's lion. And the two words "Portage, Wisconsin," have become for me mesmerized as have certain words of power in which Orientals and others find potency, words which through immemorial repetition by the devout have become charged. So these two words, having been written down by me thousands of times, are for me charged words, and they do something which the words Vienna, Paris, Pasadena, and New York cannot accomplish; for such words I have not entered upon, nor have they created in me their current.

There is more to this condition than we suppose. May it not be that one born and bred in a town, and rooted there by ties, by houses in which one has lived, by childhood, by first school, and by a grave—may it not be that such a one does actually see that town heightened,

drawn through into deeper perception, adjusted to contacts not only of the eye and the memory but of other and far more sensitive cells and powers?

I have looked out on the Wisconsin River flowing at the foot of our lawn, and the Caledonia Hills carving the sky-line, and have wondered if these are as beautiful as I think they are, and how a stranger would regard them. And now I wonder whether there is here involved a consideration not of emotion—not of the group soul of Royce and others—but rather of a new physics, intimating that love association does actually unvell properties and perhaps surfaces unknown to the sense of the casual passerby.

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The State Historical Society of Wisconsin

(Quarter of the State)

Madison, Wis.

