

# World's Greatest Short Stories

## No. III.

### A MUNICIPAL REPORT

By O. HENRY

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Twenty-four famous authors were asked recently to name the best short story in the English language. Montague Glass, Gouverneur Morris and Richard Harding Davis all declare that O. Henry's "A Municipal Report" is one of the world's greatest short stories.



O. HENRY



MONTAGUE GLASS

#### PART I.

**E**AST is east and west is San Francisco, according to Californians. Californians are a race of people, they are not merely inhabitants of a state. They are the southerners of the west. Now, Chicagoans are no less loyal to their city, but when you ask them why, they stammer and speak of lake fish and the new Odd Fellows building. But Californians go into detail.

Of course they have in the climate an argument that is good for half an hour while you are thinking of your coal bills and heavy underwear. But as soon as they come to mistake your silence for conviction, madness comes upon them and they picture the city of the Golden Gate as the Bagdad of the new world. So far, as a matter of opinion, no refutation is necessary. But, dear cousins all (from Adam and Eve descended), it is a rash one who will lay his finger on the map and say, "In this town there can be no romance—what could happen here?" Yes, it is a bold and a rash deed to challenge in one sentence history, romance and the atlas.

Nashville—A city, port of delivery and the capital of the state of Tennessee, is on the Cumberland river and on the N. C. and St. L. and the L. and N. railroads. This city is regarded as the most important educational center in the south.

I stepped off the train at 8 p. m. Having searched the thesaurus in vain for adjectives, I must, as a substitution, hie me to comparison in the form of a recipe:

Take of London fog, thirty parts; malaria, ten parts; gas leaks, twenty parts; dewdrops gathered in a brick yard at sunrise, twenty-five parts; odor of honeysuckle, fifteen parts. Mix.

The mixture will give you an approximate conception of a Nashville drizzle. It is not so fragrant as a mothball nor as thick as pea soup, but 'tis enough—twirl serve.

I went to a hotel in a tumbrel. It required strong self suppression for me to keep from climbing to the top of it and giving an imitation of Sidney Carton. The vehicle was drawn by beasts of a bygone era and driven by something dark and emancipated.

The hotel was one of the kind described as "renovated." That means \$20,000 worth of new marble pillars, tiling, electric lights and brass cuspidors in the lobby and a new L. and N. timetable and a lithograph of Lookout mountain in each one of the great rooms above. The management was without reproach, the attention full of exquisite southern courtesy, the service as slow as the progress of a snail and as good humored as Rip Van Winkle. The food was worth traveling a thousand miles for. There is no other hotel in the world where you can get such chicken livers en brochette.

At dinner I asked a negro waiter if there was anything doing in town. He pondered gravely for a minute and then replied, "Well, boss, I don't really reckon there's anything at all doin' after sundown."

Sundown had been accomplished. It had been drowned in the drizzle long before. So that spectacle was denied me. But I went forth upon the streets in the drizzle to see what might be there.

It is built on undulating grounds, and the streets are lighted by electricity at a cost of \$32,470 per annum.

I walked through long streets, all leading uphill. I wondered how those streets ever came down again. Perhaps they didn't until they were "graded." On a few of the "main streets" I saw lights in stores here and there; saw street cars go by conveying worthy burghers hither and yon; saw people pass engaged in the art of conversation and heard a burst of semilively laughter issuing from a soda water and ice cream parlor. There was indeed little "doing." I wished I had come before sundown. So I returned to my hotel.

In November, 1864, the Confederate General Hood advanced against Nashville, where he shut up a national force under General Thomas. The latter then sallied forth and defeated the Confederates in a terrible conflict.

All my life I had heard of, admired and witnessed the fine marksmanship of the south in its peaceful conflicts in the tobacco chewing regions. But in my hotel a surprise awaited me. There were twelve bright, new, imposing, capacious brass cuspidors in the great lobby, tall enough to be called urns and so wide mouthed that the crack pitcher of a lady baseball team should have been able to throw a ball into them.

I must tell you how I came to be in Nashville, and I assure you the digression brings as much tedium to me as it does to you. I was traveling elsewhere, and I had been told that I had

suffered. Bright, new, imposing, capacious, untouched, they stood. But shades of Jefferson Brick—the tile floor, the beautiful tile floor!

Here I first saw Major (by misplaced courtesy) Wentworth Caswell. I knew him for a type the moment my eyes suffered from the sight of him. A rat has no geographical habitat. My old friend A. Tennyson said, as he so well said almost everything:

Prophet, curse me the blabbing lip  
And curse me the British vermin, the rat.

Let us regard the word "British" as interchangeable ad lib. A rat is a rat.

This man was hunting about the hotel lobby like a starved dog that had forgotten where he had buried a bone. He had a face of great acreage, red, pulpy and with a kind of sleepy massiveness like that of Buddha. He possessed one single virtue—he was very smoothly shaven. The mark of the beast is not indelible upon a man until he goes about with a stubble. I think that if he had not used his razor that day I would have repulsed his advances, and the criminal calendar of the world would have been spared the addition of one murder.

I happened to be standing within five feet of a cuspidor when Major Caswell opened fire upon it. I had been observant enough to perceive that the attacking force was using Gatlings instead of squirrel rifles, so I sidestepped so promptly that the major seized the opportunity to apologize to a noncombatant. He had the blabbing lip. In four minutes he had become my friend and had dragged me to the bar.

I desire to interpolate here that I am a southerner. But I am not one by profession or trade. I eschew the string tie, the slouch hat, the Prince Albert, the number of bales of cotton destroyed by Sherman and plug chewing. When the orchestra plays "Dixie" I do not cheer.

Major Caswell banged the bar with his fist and the first gun at Fort Sumter re-echoed. When he fired the last one at Appomattox I began to hope. But then he began on family trees and demonstrated that Adam was only a third cousin of a collateral branch of the Caswell family. Genealogy disposed of he took up to my distaste his private family matters. He spoke of his wife, traced her descent back to Eve and profanely denied any possible rumor that she may have had relations in the land of Nod.

By this time I began to suspect that he was trying to obscure by noise the fact that he had ordered the drinks on the chance that I would be bewildered into paying for them. But when they were down he crashed a silver dollar upon the bar. Then, of course, another serving was obligatory. And when I had paid for that I took leave of him brusquely, for I wanted no more of him. But before I had obtained my release he had prated loudly of an income that his wife received and showed a handful of silver money.

When I got my key at the desk the clerk said to me courteously: "If that man Caswell has annoyed you and if you would like to make a complaint we will have him ejected. He is a nuisance, a loafer and without any known means of support, although he knows to have money most of the time. But we don't seem to be able to hit upon any means of throwing him out legally."

"Why, no," said I, after some reflection, "I don't see my way clear to making a complaint. But I would like to place myself on record as asserting that I do not care for his company. Your town," I continued, "seems to be a quiet one. What manner of entertainment, adventure, or excitement have you to offer to the stranger within your gates?"

"Well, sir," said the clerk, "there will be a show here next Thursday. It is—I'll look it up and have the announcement sent up to your room with the ice water. Good night."

After I went up to my room I looked out of the window. It was only about 10 o'clock, but I looked upon a silent town. The drizzle continued, spangled with dim lights, as far apart as cur-rants in a cake sold at the Ladies' exchange.

Nashville occupies a foremost place among the manufacturing centers of the country. It is the fifth best shoe market in the United States, the largest candy and cracker manufacturing city in the south and does an enormous wholesale dry goods, grocery and drug business.

I must tell you how I came to be in Nashville, and I assure you the digression brings as much tedium to me as it does to you. I was traveling elsewhere, and I had been told that I had

picked up a greenhorn, ignorant of rates, he had come upon an inheritance. "You confounded old rascal!" I said, reaching down into my pocket, "you ought to be turned over to the police."

For the first time I saw him smile. He knew, he knew, HE KNEW. I gave him two one-dollar bills. As I handed them over I noticed that one of them had been torn through in the middle, but I joined again. A strip of blue tissue paper pasted over the split preserved its negotiability.

The house, as I said, was a shell. A paint brush had not touched it in twenty years. I could not see why a strong wind should not have howled it over like a house of cards until I looked again at the trees that hugged it close—the trees that saw the battle of Nashville and still drew their protecting branches around it against storm and enemy and cold.

**PART II.**  
AZALEA ADAIR, fifty years old, white haired, a descendant of the cavaliers, as thin and frail as the house she lived in, robed in the cheapest and cleanest dress I ever saw, with an air as simple as a queen's, received me.

The reception room seemed a mile square, because there was nothing in it except some rows of books, on unpainted white pine bookshelves, a cracked marble top table, a rag rug, a hairless horsehair sofa and two or three chairs. Yes, there was a picture on the wall, a colored crayon drawing of a cluster of pansies. I looked around for the portrait of Andrew Jackson and the pine cone hanging basket, but they were not there.

Azalea Adair and I had conversation, a little of which will be repeated to you. She was a product of the old south, gently nurtured in the sheltered life. Her learning was not broad, but was deep and of splendid originality in its somewhat narrow scope. She had been educated at home and her knowledge of the world was derived from inference and by inspiration. Of such is the precious, small group of essayists made. While she talked to me I kept brushing my fingers, trying unconsciously to rid them guiltily of the absent dust from the half calf backs of Lamb, Chaucer, Hazlitt, Marcus Aurelius, Montaigne and Hood. She was exquisite, she was a valuable discovery. Nearly everybody nowadays knows too much—oh, so much too much—of real life.

I could perceive clearly that Azalea Adair was very poor. A house and a dress she had, not much else, I fancied. So, divided between my duty to the magazine and my loyalty to the poets and essayists who fought Thomas in the valley of the Cumberland, I listened to her voice, which was like a harpsichord's, and found I could not speak of contracts. In the presence of the nine muses and the three graces one hesitated to lower the topic to 2 cents. There would have to be another colloquy after I had regained my commercialism. But I spoke of my mission and 3 o'clock of the next afternoon was set for the discussion of the business proposition.

She reached and shook a little iron bell. In shuffled a small negro girl about twelve, barefoot, not very tidy, glowering at me with thumb in mouth and bulging eyes.

Azalea Adair opened a tiny, worn purse and drew out a dollar bill, a dollar bill with the upper right hand corner missing, torn in two pieces and pasted together again with a strip of blue tissue paper. It was one of the bills I had given the practical negro—there was no doubt of it.

"Go up to Mr. Baker's store on the corner, Impy," she said, handing the girl the dollar bill, "and get a quarter of a pound of tea—the kind he always sends me—and 10 cents' worth of sugar cakes. Now, hurry. The supply of tea in the house happens to be exhausted," she explained to me.

Impy left by the back way. Before the scrape of her hard, bare feet had died away on the back porch a wild shriek—I was sure it was hers—filled the hollow house. Then the deep, gruff tones of an angry man's voice mingled with the girl's further squeals and unintelligible words.

Azalea Adair rose without surprise or emotion and disappeared. For two minutes I heard the hoarse rumble of the man's voice, then something like an oath and a slight scuffle, and she returned calmly to her chair.

"This is a roony house," she said, "and I have a tenant for part of it. I am sorry to have to rescind my invitation to tea. It was impossible to get the kind I always use at the store. Perhaps tomorrow Mr. Baker will be able to supply me."

I was sure that Impy had not had time to leave the house. I inquired concerning street car lines and took my leave. After I was well on my way I remembered that I had not learned Azalea Adair's name. But tomorrow would do.

That same day I started in on the course of inquiry that this uneventful city forced upon me. I was in the town only two days, but in that time I managed to lie shamelessly by telegraph and to be an accomplice—after the fact, if that is the correct legal term—to a murder.

As I rounded the corner nearest my hotel the Afrite coachman of the poly-chromatic, nonpariel coat seized me, swung open the dungeony door of his peripatetic sarcophagus, flitted his fatherly duster and began his ritual: "Step right in, boss. Carriage is clean—Jus' got back from a funeral. Fifty cents to any—"

And then he knew me and grinned broadly. "Sense me, boss; you is de gen'lman what rid out with me dis mawnin'. Thank you kindly, sub."

"I am going out to 861 Jessamine tomorrow afternoon at 3," said I, "and if you will be here I'll let you drive me. So you know Miss Adair?" I concluded, thinking of my dollar bill.

"I belonged to her father, Judge Adair, sub," he replied.

"I judge that she is pretty poor," I said. "She hasn't much money to speak of, has she?"

For an instant I looked again at the fierce countenance of King Cetewayo, and then he changed back to an extortionate old negro hack driver.

"She ain't gwine to starve, sub," he said slowly. "She has res'ces, sub; she has res'ces."

"I shall pay you 50 cents for the trip," said I.

"Dat is puffedly correct, sub," he answered humbly. "I jus' had to have dat \$2 dis mawnin', boss."

I went to the hotel and lied by electricity. I wired the magazine: "A. Adair holds out for 8 cents a word."

The answer that came back was, "Give it to her quick, you duffer."

Just before dinner Major Wentworth Caswell bore down upon me with the greetings of a long lost friend. I have seen few men whom I have so instantaneously hated and of whom it was so difficult to be rid. I was standing at the bar when he invaded me. Therefore I could not wave the white ribbon in his face. I would have paid gladly for the drinks, hoping thereby to escape another, but he was one of those despicable, roaring, advertising bibbers who must have brass bands and fireworks attend upon every cent that they waste in their follies.

With an air of producing millions he drew two one-dollar bills from a pocket and dashed one of them upon the bar. I looked once more at the dollar bill with the upper right hand corner missing, torn through the middle, and patched with a strip of blue tissue paper. It was my dollar bill again. It could have been no other.

I went up to my room. The drizzle and the monotony of a dreary, eventless southern town had made me tired and listless.

King Cetewayo was at his post the next day and rattled my bones over the stones out to 861. He was to wait and rattle me back again when I was ready.

Azalea Adair looked paler and clearer and frailer than she had looked on the day before. After she had signed the contract at 8 cents per word she grew still paler and began to slip out of her chair. Without much trouble I managed to get her up on the antediluvian horsehair sofa and then I ran out to the sidewalk and yep'd to the coffee colored pirate to bring a doctor. With a wisdom that I had not suspected in him he abandoned his team and struck off up the street foot, realizing the value of speed. In ten minutes he returned with a grave, gray haired and capable man of medicine. In a few words (worth much less than 8 cents each) I explained to him my presence in the hollow house of mystery. He bowed with stately understanding and turned to the old negro.

"Then the charge is 50 cents, I suppose?" said I inexorably.

"Boss," he said, "50 cents is right, but I needs \$2, sub. I'm obliged to have \$2. I ain't demandin' it now, sub, after I knows what you's from. I'm jus' sayin' that I has to have \$2 tonight, and business is mighty pe'."

Some one knocked hollowly at the back of the house. Azalea Adair breathed a soft apology and went to investigate the sound. She came back in three minutes with brightened eye, a faint flush on her cheeks and ten years life.

Consoling Thought.  
Country Vicar (to widow whose best pig has died)—Well, you know, Mrs. Higgs, these little troubles are sent us by Providence for our good.

Mrs. Higgs—Oh, yes, sir. But what a comfort it is to know that there's

give you a cream pitcher full of fresh milk and half a tumbler of port wine. And hurry back. Don't drive—run. I want you to get back some time this week."

The doctor looked me over with great politeness and as much careful calculation as he had decided that I might do.

"It is only a case of insufficient nutrition," he said—"in other words, the result of poverty, pride and starvation. Mrs. Caswell has many devoted friends who would be glad to aid her, but she will accept nothing except from that old negro, Uncle Caesar, who was once owned by her family."

"Mrs. Caswell!" said I in surprise. And then I looked at the contract and saw that she had signed it "Azalea Adair Caswell."

"I thought she was Miss Adair," I said.

"Married to a drunken, worthless loafer, sir," said the doctor. "It is said that he robs her even of the small sums that her old servant contributes toward her support."

When the milk and wine had brought the doctor soon revived Azalea Adair. She sat up and talked of the beauty of the autumn leaves that were then in season and their height of color. She referred lightly to her fainting seizure as the outcome of an old palpitation of the heart. Impy fanned her as she lay on the sofa. The doctor was due elsewhere, and I followed him to the door. I told him that it was within my power and intentions to make a reasonable advance of money to Azalea Adair on future contributions to the magazine, and he seemed pleased.

"By the way," he said, "perhaps you would like to know that you have had royalty for a coachman. Old Caesar's grandfather was a king in Kongo, Caesar himself has royal ways, as you may have observed."

As the doctor was moving off I heard Uncle Caesar's voice inside. "Did he git bofe of dem \$2 from you, Mis' Azalea?"

"Yes, Caesar," I heard Azalea Adair answer weakly. And then I went in and concluded business negotiations with our contributor. I assumed the responsibility of advancing \$50, putting it as a necessary formality in binding our bargain. And then Uncle Caesar drove me back to the hotel.

Here ends all of the story as far as I can testify as a witness. The rest must be only bare statements of facts.

At about 6 o'clock I went out for a stroll. Uncle Caesar was at his corner. He threw open the door of his carriage, flourished his duster and began his depressing formula: "Step right in, sub. Fifty cents to anywhere in the city. Hack's puffically clean, sub. Jus' got back from a funeral!"

And then he recognized me. I think his eyesight was getting bad. His coat had taken on a few more faded shades of color, the twine strings were more frayed and ragged, the last remaining button—the button of yellow horn—was gone. A motley descendant of kings was Uncle Caesar!

About two hours later I saw an excited crowd besieging the front of a drug store. In a desert where nothing happens this was mamma, so I edged my way inside. On an extemporized couch of empty boxes and chairs was stretched the mortal corporeality of Major Wentworth Caswell. A doctor was testing him for the immortal ingredient. His decision was that it was conspicuous by its absence.

The erstwhile major had been found dead on a dark street and brought by curious and ennobled citizens to the drug store. The late human being had been engaged in terrific battle—the details showed that. Loafer and reprobate though he had been, he had been also a warrior. But he had lost. His hands were yet clenched so tightly that his fingers would not be opened. The gentle citizens who had known him stood about and searched their vocabularies to find some good words, if it were possible, to speak of him. One kind looking man said after much thought, "When Cas was about fo'teen he was one of the best spellers in school."

While I stood there the fingers of the right hand of "the man that was," which hung down the side of a white pine box, relaxed and dropped something at my feet. I covered it with one foot quietly and a little later on I picked it up and pocketed it. I reasoned that in his last struggle his hand must have seized that object unwittingly and held it in a death grip.

At the hotel that night the main topic of conversation, with the possible exceptions of politics and prohibition, was the demise of Major Caswell. I heard one man say to a group of listeners:

"In my opinion, gentlemen, Caswell was murdered by some of these no account niggers for his money. He had \$50 this afternoon, which he showed to several gentlemen in the hotel. When he was found the money was not on his person."

I left the city the next morning at 9, and as the train was crossing the bridge over the Cumberland river I took out of my pocket a yellow horn overcoat button the size of a fifty cent piece, with frayed ends of coarse twine hanging from it, and cast it out of the window into the slow, muddy waters below.

I wonder what's doing in Buffalo!