



NETTA SYRETT (1865-1943)

Netta (née Janet) Syrett's fiction from the 1890s, as well as later works set in the Victorian period, often feature young women rebelling against rigidly conservative families. Syrett came, however, from an unusually progressive background. She was born in Landsgate, Kent, to a family in which everyone (four girls and a boy) was encouraged to pursue educational and artistic ambitions. After attending the Training College for Women Teachers at Cambridge, she took a position at the London Polytechnic School for Girls and lived in London with her sisters, without a chaperone. Thanks to friendships with the Beardsley family and with Aline and Henry Harland—as well as a distant relationship by marriage with the novelist Grant Allen—Syrett became a member of the *Yellow Book* “set” before the magazine even existed.

Between 1894 and 1897, Syrett contributed three short stories to the Bodley Head's quarterly and eventually brought in her sisters Mabel and Nellie Syrett as visual artists to supply images and cover art towards the end of the magazine's run. Perhaps more important, however, was the record she left of the *Yellow Book* milieu. Her 1939 autobiography, *The Sheltering Tree*, documents social gatherings where young decadents and dandies (including Max Beerbohm) amused one another and planned projects. In her 1915 novel *The Victorians*, she also conveyed the liberating effect on a budding New Woman of encountering arts-and-crafts interiors, Socialist oratory, realist fiction, and a performance of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* in the early 1890s.

Of all the *Yellow Book* authors, Syrett had one of the longest, most lucrative careers, with her novels enjoying transatlantic popular success well into the 1930s. She worked in a variety of genres, including fairy tales and plays for children. Unlike many New Women contemporaries, however, Syrett did not excel at short stories. Her first two novels, both published by John Lane—*Nobody's Fault* (1896, in the Keynotes Series) and the more psychologically complex *The Tree of Life* (1897)—showed her comfort with long forms. In comparison, her *Yellow Book* stories seem derivative and flat. “A Correspondence” (volume 7), for example, borrowed too much of its letter-writing-in-disguise plot from Thomas Hardy’s “On the Western Circuit” (1891), while giving little indication as to why either of the two female protagonists would have been attracted to a man who remained such a shadowy and unappealing figure. Unpersuasive motivation also marred “Far Above Rubies” (volume 12), which transformed a duplicitous female aesthete, in search of fresh sensations, into a vengeful harpy determined to destroy the upright young male physician who sees through her—a Hedda Gabler-like figure, but without pathos or grandeur.

Only in “Thy Heart’s Desire” (volume 2), the first of her *Yellow Book* contributions, did Syrett create a genuinely affecting narrative. If there was any emotion that she understood and portrayed well, it was frustration, especially the frustration of women who, lacking any positive alternatives, make poor choices and wind up entrapping themselves in impossible domestic circumstances. Through her portraits of such characters, Syrett expressed subtly her feminist sympathies.

The protagonist of “Thy Heart’s Desire,” a woman who has married someone she cannot love, is too ethical to consider having an affair, even after meeting a man who appears to be her intellectual and spiritual soul-mate. At the same time, she cannot keep herself from wishing her husband dead. Sensing that this is the “Heart’s Desire” of the woman he adores, her husband finds a way to kill himself that will neither look like suicide nor result in blame being laid upon her. Yet not even this act can free her. She remains tormented by the knowledge that she was morally responsible for her husband’s fate and, therefore, sends away forever the other man, to suffer on her own. The only thing

that spoils this otherwise haunting story is its cardboard setting—an unconvincing and quite featureless settlement in rural India, seemingly lifted from Syrett’s reading of Rudyard Kipling’s *Plain Tales from the Hills* (1888) and having nothing to do with her own experience.

The closer Syrett came not only to feelings but to locations with which she was familiar, the more memorable her short stories were. With the post-*Yellow Book* “An Idealist” (1903) she created one of her most powerful and painful works. Once again exploring the isolation and hopelessness of an educated woman who discovers too late that she has missed her chances for a satisfying life, Syrett drew the unsparing portrait of someone like herself, a teacher at a girls’ school. A passionate and imaginative instructor who makes literature come alive for her students, the protagonist realizes suddenly that she is no longer young, and that no one has ever loved her or is likely to do so. The narrative is both a tribute to intelligent women and a bitter protest against the social limitations placed upon them. In that story, Syrett achieved in miniature what she would accomplish in the more than three dozen novels that would constitute her more important legacy.

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