

## A Violet in the "Sahara of the Bozart": Sara Haardt Mencken and Her Writings

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Among the literary flowers that bloomed in what H. L. Mencken referred to as "The Sahara of the Bozart"<sup>1</sup> was his future wife, Sara Powell Haardt of Montgomery, Alabama. In her brief lifetime of thirty-seven years, Sara Haardt published one novel and more than three dozen short stories and essays. At her death she left sketches for a second novel and plans for a collection of shorter pieces to be called "Southern Album." Also among her literary remains were several completed stories which would no doubt have been published had she lived.

Sara Powell Haardt was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 1, 1898, the daughter of John Anton and Venetia Hall Haardt. Her paternal grandfather had migrated to the United States from Otterberg, Bavaria, in 1842, and settled in Montgomery, Alabama, where he married Sara's grandmother, also a native of Otterberg, on November 29, 1848. Sara's father was the tenth child of this marriage, and Sara was the first of five children, four girls and a boy (*One Hundred Years* 18). The Haardt family were Episcopalians, and Sara was baptized in St. John's Church, Montgomery, on July 1, 1898 (Mencken, Preface xiv). She was educated in the city schools until she enrolled in the high school program of the Margaret Booth School for Girls<sup>2</sup> in 1914, the year of the school's founding. She graduated from this private school on May 24, 1916 (Mayfield 24-26).

In the fall of 1916, with some financial aid from her maternal grandmother, Sarah Powell Farrar Hall, Sara Haardt enrolled in the freshman class at Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland. She entered and won the freshman short story contest with a piece titled "The Rattlesnake." The story was published in the April, 1917 issue of the Goucher literary magazine *Kalends*, and soon thereafter Sara was listed as an "editorial assistant" on the magazine. Over the next

three years she became a regular contributor of prose and verse to *Kalends*. Her grandmother, Sarah Hall, died in November, 1917, which Mencken writes, "greatly reduced her resources, and she had to live very economically. For a while she made a little extra money by serving as the college postmistress" (Mencken, Preface xiii). In her junior year, Sara was editor of the Goucher yearbook *Donnybrook Fair*, and in her senior year she was editor-in-chief of *Kalends*. Between her junior and senior years, she became actively involved in the suffrage movement and served as chairman of the Alabama branch of the National Woman's Party. With several ladies from out of state, Sara demonstrated at the Alabama Capitol in a vain effort to persuade the legislature to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment. In the spring of 1920, Sara Haardt graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in history from Goucher (Mencken, Preface viii-xiii).

Sara Haardt returned to Montgomery after she graduated, and for the next two years she taught at the Margaret Booth School. She began sending her prose and verse to national magazines with the hope that some of them might get published. Her first success in a national publication came when *Bookman* put her poem "White Violets" in the January, 1922 issue. This five line poem reads:

I laid hot thoughts of you  
Between cool petals of white violets  
That grew pale-lidded in a hidden place,  
And knew their scentless breaths would leave no trace—  
Like crimson roses breathed upon. (439)

She was offered an instructorship in English at Goucher and returned to Baltimore in the summer of 1922 to take the position and to pursue graduate work at Johns Hopkins University (Mencken, Preface xv).

The bulk of Sara Haardt's college fiction had "concerned itself with faraway places" and romantic subjects for which her talents were ill suited (Manchester 235). Back in Baltimore, she began to explore the rich material in her Southern background, which ultimately led to establishing her as an important new voice among Southern authors (Mencken, Preface xv). In July, 1922, she published her first piece of prose, "Strictly Southern," in the *Reviewer*, a literary periodical edited by Emily Clark at Richmond, Virginia.

In the spring of 1923, Sara Haardt, who had just turned twenty-five, was introduced to the famous author and editor Henry Louis Mencken, a forty-two year old bachelor (Stenerson 234), who had just made one of his lectures to the Goucher girls.<sup>3</sup> Mencken was impressed by Sara's beauty and intelligence, and in a letter to his friend

Philip Goodman he wrote that " 'It greatly astonished me; I always thought education ruined the complexions of women'" (Manchester 232). In their first meeting Mencken also remembered that Sara had submitted a story to the *Smart Set*, the magazine that he and George Jean Nathan were then editing. He had obviously rejected the story, but he encouraged her to send him some more of her writings (Bode 281). On August 17, 1923, in one of his earliest letters to Sara Haardt, Mencken offered the following criticism of one of her stories and of her style:

I have a feeling that the center of gravity of the story wobbles — that it is about the mother one minute and the daughter the next minute. Take a minute and prayerful look at it, and see if you can't pull it together better.

Incidentally, get yourself cured of the quotation-marks disease: you have quoted every fourth phrase in some paragraphs. It is a clumsy device, and unnecessary. Ruth Suckow had it, and I had to use an axe on her to cure her. (*Letters* 256)

Mencken's comments in this letter seem to be about Sara's story entitled "Miss Rebecca," which he rejected. However, he accepted and published her "Joe Moore and Callie Blasingame" in the October number of the *Smart Set* (Manchester 235), the last issue of that magazine that he and Nathan edited before they launched the *American Mercury* in January, 1924 (Stenerson 3).

Just before Christmas in 1923, Sara Haardt was stricken with tuberculosis, and in February, 1924, she was hospitalized in Maple Heights Sanitarium near Baltimore. Mencken was a frequent visitor and a constant correspondent to Sara until her discharge from the hospital in September. Sara returned home to Montgomery to recuperate, and remained there for more than a year. During her convalescence she decided to pursue a career as a free-lance writer with the encouragement of Mencken (Bode 283-285). While she was in the sanitarium, Sara had revised and sent her story "Miss Rebecca," which Mencken had turned down, to the *Reviewer*, where it was readily accepted and published in July, 1924. Mencken was to admit later that Sara's "Miss Rebecca" was one of the best stories she ever wrote (Preface xvi). Her only publication in 1925 was an article for the *American Mercury* entitled "Alabama." In this article, Sara examined, among other things, the origin of the state's name, Klan activities, and industrial development. In her discussion of religion in Alabama, she labeled evangelicalism the "eighth lively art" and stated that "political spoils and remunerations [go] to the more numerous Methodists and Baptists; social eminence to the Episcopalian" (91).

Sara Haardt's career took an upturn in 1926 as three of her best stories were published. In March, the *American Mercury* printed "Mendelian Dominant," and *Century* magazine published "All in the Family." In September, her story "Commencement" appeared in the *American Mercury*. Her income from the stories and essays she sold was not large, but she began to earn extra money by doing reviews for Mencken. She also received an excellent fee from Joseph Hergesheimer for the research she did for his book *Swords and Roses*. As her writing career began to bloom, Sara's relationship with Mencken was maturing into what would eventually be marriage. Of this relationship, Manchester wrote:

For all the separation of years, they were much alike, these two: both enormously complicated personalities, both complicated in the same ways. Mencken's yearning for the past, for the old days in West Baltimore, . . . was echoed sharply in this dark-eyed, enormously sensitive girl who loved the Confederate tradition she wanted to destroy and attacked the vestiges of decadence with the poise and bearing of a matriarch. There was something almost comical, and equally almost pathetic, in the spectacle of these two genteel rebels drinking illegal brew in Shellhase's, she gracious and charming, he courtly and cavalier; discussing their *avant garde* ideology enthusiastically, he in the literary English of a Congreve, she in the lilting, pleasant accent of old Alabama. It was, from its inception, a friendship of people ideally suited to one another, in weaknesses as in strengths. (234-235)

The year 1927 provided Sara Haardt with her greatest literary adventure and was also her most successful financially. She sold her short story "Licked" to the *American Mercury*; the piece centers on a group of patients in a tuberculosis sanitarium, revealing their hopes and fears, their optimism and, as the title suggests, their pessimism with regard to recovery from the disease (51-62). The great adventure began when she signed a contract with The Famous Players of Hollywood to write screen plays. The contract provided her with a salary of \$250 per week for five weeks and round-trip fare to Hollywood. If she produced an acceptable screen play she would receive \$3,500 for it and \$5,000 for a second acceptable script (Manchester 235). She left for the West Coast on September 28, 1927.

Before she arrived in Hollywood, Mencken had written to his friend Jim Tully, a hobo writer, who was then working in the movie capital, asking him to see her. "The life of Hollywood will probably shock her half to death," Mencken wrote; and then he added, "I think you'll like her very much. She is immensely amiable. Moreover, she has a great deal of talent" (*Letters* 300).

Sara readied a script based on Confederate refugees in Brazil she called "The Promised Land," but the studio failed to buy it. When

her contract with Famous Players ended, she sold the script to director James Cruze for \$1,500. After the sale, Famous Players offered her another five-week contract. At the termination of this second contract, Sara decided that she had had enough of Hollywood and headed East, stopping in Montgomery for Christmas and arriving back in Baltimore for the New Year (Bode 286). As a result of the Hollywood venture, she had received a round-trip to Hollywood and about \$4,000. This provided her with a financial security that she had not previously enjoyed.

She began to concentrate on completing her novel, did book reviews for the *Mercury*, and sifted through piles of clippings of anti-Mencken vituperation which Mencken had collected from publications across the country. From among the worst of these, Mencken assembled and published *Menckenianna: A Schimpflexikon*, giving credit to Sara for the "tedious job" she did in searching through "thirty volumes of newspaper clippings" (Preface xvi). In addition to her other activities for the year, she wrote and published a sketch of the hobo writer Jim Tully which appeared in the May, 1928, *American Mercury*.

After a brief respite, Sara Haardt began to suffer another siege of bad health. In the fall of 1928 she entered Union Memorial Hospital for the removal of a cyst, and in April, 1929, she was hospitalized with an infected kidney, which had to be removed. It was following this operation that the discovery was made that the tuberculosis had spread, and the doctors gave her but three years to live (Bode 288). Amidst these difficulties, she managed to publish several pieces, including two essays in *Bookman* and one in the *American Mercury*. The two for *Bookman* were literary interviews with Ellen Glasgow and Joseph Hergesheimer. The *Mercury* article, entitled "Etiquette of Slavery," maintains that the slave owners were as trapped by the institution as the slaves themselves (34).

As the closing months of 1929 slipped by, Sara slowly recovered from the kidney surgery and worked on her novel while Mencken prepared for his trip to cover the Naval Conference in London. It was during this time that they no doubt decided to marry sometime in 1930. Mencken left for Europe in December and returned to Baltimore in February, 1930. Preparations for the marriage began in earnest in the months that followed. Sara went home to Montgomery to rest and to tell her family of the impending marriage. She was able to complete her novel and had it accepted by Doubleday, Doran. She also published an essay called "Southern Credo" in the May number of the *American Mercury*, debunking some Southern myths.

Sara Haardt's engagement to H. L. Mencken was announced by her mother in Montgomery on August 2. The announcement "took all but a few of their closest friends by surprise" (Wagner 24), as Mencken had been alerting friends about the coming nuptials since June (*Letters* 318). The wedding took place on August 27 at 4:30 p.m. at the Episcopal Church of St. Stephen the Martyr in Baltimore. Neither Mencken nor Sara had wanted a religious ceremony, but Maryland law did not recognize civil marriage so Mencken arranged to have his friend Herbert Parrish, an Episcopal priest, perform the service (Kemler 240-241). Sara's mother, sister and brother-in-law were there as were Mencken's two brothers, sister, sister-in-law, and niece (Manchester 247). After a brief service, the couple departed for a honeymoon in Canada, going first to Montreal, then to Quebec, and later to Halifax. On their return to Baltimore they settled in their newly decorated seven-room apartment, and both resumed their accustomed activities.

Early in 1931 Sara Haardt's most ambitious literary work, her novel *The Making of a Lady*, was published by Doubleday. The book received mixed reviews, but was generally praised as a good first novel with promise for the future. The novel is the story of Beulah Miller, who rises from humble beginnings to marry the son of the town's leading citizen. The town is called Meridian, but the surroundings and the atmosphere are unmistakably those of Montgomery. The reader of the book gets a very good picture of the changes that take place in the town as industry begins to replace agriculture as the economic base, and the reader is also given an insight into the social strata of Meridian in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Aside from the theme of upward social mobility, the novel explores the more interesting socio-historical theme of changing values in a progressive South in conflict with the myths of the past which were "passing into legend" (100). This New South attitude is expressed by one of the characters who sees Meridian as merely "a place to earn a living. . . . He hadn't seen it as a fatal conflict between the Old and the New South" (155). As Beulah rises socially to become Mrs. Haviland she "had not only become a lady, she would be indistinguishable as a lady" (285). As a wife and mother in this most distinguished family in the town she had become "freed from the shackles of the past and set her feet securely in the path of the future" (*New York Times Book Review*).

The *New York Times* reviewer of *The Making of a Lady* recognized Sara Haardt's failure "to fuse the two themes" and pointed out other technical errors in the book, but concluded that "there is good reason

to believe that her second [novel] will be better" (6). Another review emphasized, with some justification, that the novel is really more of a story about the city than about the characters who inhabit it and that "Miss Haardt has brought to life in her book a Southern town that stays with one after the reading, while the characters are gone with the story" (Graham 629). What one concludes after reading the novel is that Sara Haardt was an excellent evoker of atmosphere, a keen observer of the social structure of this Southern town, and a facile prose stylist. One can only lament the fact that she was never to complete the novel upon which she was working at the time of her death. She had learned much from the shortcomings of her first novel, according to Mencken, and certainly would have eliminated the obvious flaws in a second (Preface xvii-xviii).

The two years that followed the publication of *The Making of a Lady* were busy ones for Sara Haardt. She placed stories and essays in the *North American Review*, *Woman's Home Companion*, and *Country Life*. One of these, "Absolutely Perfect," from the June, 1932, *Woman's Home Companion* was selected for the *O. Henry Prize Stories* of 1933. She published six more stories and articles in 1933, adding *Harper's Bazaar* and *The Delineator* to the growing list of national magazines in which her work had appeared. Among her 1934 publications was the short story "Little White Girl" which came out in the April issue of *Scribner's* and was selected by Edward O'Brien for his collection *Best Stories of 1935* (Mencken, Bibliographical Note xxviii).

During the nearly five years that Sara and Mencken were married, she suffered a series of debilitating illnesses. She was hospitalized in January and February 1931, with influenza and pleurisy, and was often confined to her bed for a variety of lesser ailments. Both of them had influenza at Christmas time in 1932, and on January 9, 1933, they sailed on an eighteen day Caribbean cruise which proved to be beneficial to Mencken as well as to Sara. On their return to Baltimore and in order to avoid more of the harsh winter, the two of them left for Sea Island, Georgia, on February 24. Before heading back to Baltimore in March, they went to Montgomery, the only trip that Sara and Mencken made together to her home town. She had no serious setbacks in the summer and fall of 1933, so they planned a Mediterranean cruise for early in the new year. On February 10, 1934, the Menckens sailed on the *Columbus*, visiting Algiers, Egypt, and the Holy Land before returning to New York on April 5 (Manchester 268). In May Sara had an infection, probably contracted in Algiers, which put her in the hospital. Because of the illness of her mother, Sara made the trip to Montgomery in Septem-

ber, and soon after getting back to Baltimore she was hospitalized again for pleurisy. While recovering at home from this illness, she received the news of the death of her mother on Christmas Eve. In a letter to Theodore Dreiser, Mencken wrote that "Christmas in my house was a horror" with Sara's illness and her mother's death (*Letters* 386).

Throughout her last winter, Sara Haardt, though frequently ill, continued to write. By spring she had sold four more short stories, and was in the process of outlining her new novel tentatively titled *The Plantation*. She also put together preliminary sketches for a collection of prose pieces to be called *Southern Album*. In March she had gone to Johns Hopkins Hospital for x-rays; then in May she was taken back to Johns Hopkins to undergo tests for an undiagnosed condition. The tests revealed a fatal disease, tubercular meningitis. She survived less than a week after being placed on the critical list, and died at 6 p.m. on Friday, May 31, 1935, at age thirty-seven. Sara Haardt's funeral was held on Monday, June 3, and, in accordance with her wishes, her body was cremated and her ashes buried in the Mencken plot in Loudon Park Cemetery, Baltimore.

Three of the four stories that Sara Haardt sold in 1935 came out posthumously in June and July. The year after her death, Mencken edited and published a collection of seventeen of her short stories, using her projected title *Southern Album*. As he stated in the "Preface," the selection and arrangement of the stories was his own and would surely have been somewhat different had Sara lived to make her own choices (vii-viii).

The best of Sara Haardt's writings are those steeped in her native South, and although she "had passionately denounced the contemporary South" and was in revolt against the more cloying aspects of the Old South, "she was also fascinated by her homeland" and wrote out of this background with feeling and understanding (Hobson 177). As William Manchester has said of her "she thought the Old South was wonderful, only she got a little sick of hearing about it sometimes" (234). Critical opinions of her writings are somewhat uniform in rating her as "a minor but fastidious novelist and short story writer" (Wagner 24). That she had true literary talent is admitted by critics and reviewers. "During her brief career her sensitive stories were honored three times by compilers of the annual volumes of short stories," and her novel has been called a pioneer work "along a path later to be followed by such distinguished Southern writers as Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor" (Bode 302).

Sara Haardt came to realize, as her literary skills increased, the truth of Donald Davidson's dictum that "The writer who cuts himself off from a tradition may find himself in a spiritual desert more painful than the Sahara of Mencken's imagination" (quoted in Hobson 160). Her writings always show that "her identity as a Southerner was always foremost in her mind" (177). The elements that go to make her a true Southern writer and a minor but significant voice in the vanguard of the Southern Literary Renaissance were best stated in Sara Haardt's own words at the end of one of her most anti-Southern essays. In "Southern Credo," she wrote:

I had lived too close to these dead and fading things to ever break away. The dying roses, the little mounds with their ghostly headstones, the hauntingly sad April evenings, had brewed a philosophy of futility in my heart that is the curse of all Southerners, and their inescapable tradition. I might dream rebelliously of forsaking it, but it would never forsake me: my spirit was wholly entombed in loss and loneliness. (110) 🌹

## Notes

1. H. L. Mencken first published this essay in the New York *Evening Mail*, November 13, 1917, but it was an expanded version which he printed in his *Prejudices: Second Series* (1920) that set off the denunciations of his views by many Southerners. In the piece Mencken wrote that the South "... is almost as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert." See H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (184).

2. See Campbell. This outstanding private girls' school was founded by Margaret Booth (1880-1953) in her home at 529 Sayre Street, Montgomery, in 1914, and operated there for 39 years. Among its distinguished alumnae is Pulitzer Prize novelist Shirley Ann Grau.

3. In a letter to Philip Goodman, Mencken wrote: "I am lecturing at Goucher College tonight: an annual affair. The audience consists of 250 virgins" (*Letters* 240). Some sources suggest that Sara Haardt and Mencken met at his first Goucher lecture, but the best evidence indicates that they met in the spring of 1923.

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