

The Worlds and I

by Ella Wheeler Wilcox

1918

Page 87.

In the forenoon of a February day in 1883 I boarded the train at Windsor, Wisconsin, for the ten-mile ride to Madison. Judge and Mrs. A. B. Braley had asked me to go with them to the Inaugural Ball of the Governor that evening. In my suit case I carried a pretty white gown, trimmed with narrow bands of swansdown, made for the occasion. The day was bright and clear and my heart was very light. Life seemed a joyous thing. Suddenly as I took my seat in the

coach I saw a young woman clothed in deepest black, her face partially hidden by her black-bordered handkerchief, her form shaking with the sobs she was trying to suppress. It was the bride of a year, the widow of a week, a lovely girl I had last seen radiant with happiness.

I sat beside her for a little while, just as we were approaching Madison, and her great sorrow seemed to envelop me. All the way up to Judge Braley's home I thought of her and felt I could not enjoy my visit because of her grief.

But I found my friends delighted to welcome me, and the young wife of the brilliant Judge had so many interesting plans for my entertainment that the incident of the day passed entirely from my mind. That evening, as I stood before the mirror, putting the last touches to my white toilet, a swift vision of the young widow in her weeds came before me. With a stricken conscience I realized how quickly I had forgotten her; and I pictured to myself the dark shadows she must have carried into the home she was visiting, and contrasted it with the brightness of my own environment. It was at that moment the poem "Solitude" was conceived—the first four lines coming at once in their present form.

Laugh and the world laughs with you,
Weep and you weep alone.
For the sad old earth must borrow its mirth,
It has trouble enough of its own.

I knew they were the nucleus of a longer poem, and simply tucked them away in the pigeon-hole of my brain until I should have leisure to complete the verses. The majority of my poetical creations have come in this way, a line or a stanza first at unexpected times and in places where I could not, at once, complete them. From the very beginning I learned to carry such an idea with me, and work it out at leisure.

The following morning at the breakfast table I recited the quatrain to the Judge and his wife, acquainting them with the cause of the inspiration. Both were enthusiastic and the Judge, who was a great Shakespearean scholar, said, "Ella, if you keep the remainder of the poem up to that epigram-

matic standard, you will have a literary gem." It was not until the second night thereafter that I found time to complete the poem. We came home from a theater-party and I told my friends I was going to sit up and finish the poem.

There are certain small incidents in all our lives which make an enduring impression on memory. Such an incident was that of taking my verses into the library where Judge Braley sat smoking his morning cigar and reading them to him and his wife, after warning them that I felt I had not kept up to the standard first set by my muse. I can still see the look on the very handsome face of the Judge as he listened with increasing interest, and I can still hear his deep voice lifted in quick spontaneous praise, in which his fair young wife joined. The cigar the Judge was smoking had gone out and he stood up to relight it. He was six feet in height and he had a peculiar little trick of bending one knee back and forth when he stood talking. This knee was very active as he puffed at the freshly lighted cigar and said: "Ella, that is one of the biggest things you ever did; and you are mistaken in thinking it is uneven in merit; it is all good and up to the mark."

I sent the poem to the *New York Sun*, received five dollars therefor, and it appeared in its columns February 21st, 1883, over my maiden name, Ella Wheeler. The verses became remarkably popular and were recited and copied so widely that they became hackneyed. In May, 1883, the poem was included in my book, "Poems of Passion." I have the original manuscript copy in one of the many manuscript books where all the poems I considered worth preserving were copied, with date and place of writing.

In 1885, a year after I had added Wilcox to my name and gone East to reside, a man of whom the literary world had never heard, Mr. John Joyce, of Washington, heard the poem recited and heard some one ask who wrote it. Mr. Joyce immediately declared himself as the author. I have no idea that he was wholly responsible for his words at that time, as I had been told that he was very much addicted to drink—a habit which he afterwards, it is said, overcame, greatly to his

credit. I, of course, indignantly denied his claim, putting forth my own true story, as given above. Mr. Joyce, however, having uttered his lie, deliberately repeated it on every possible occasion from that day to the day of his death, some three or four years ago. He declared that he wrote the poem in 1861 on the head of a whiskey barrel in the wine room of the Galt House in Louisville, Kentucky. He had published a book entitled "A Checkered Life" in 1883, together with a number of very trashy verses. In that volume Mr. Joyce had given the story of his life from youth to maturity. He even admitted the fact that he had, in his early life, been the inmate of an insane asylum for a period of a few months. To quote his own statement I give the following memorandum in "A Checkered Life."

"Eastern Kentucky Lunatic Asylum,
Lexington, Kentucky.

"The records of this asylum show No. 2423, John A. Joyce, 18 years of age; occupation, farmer; habit, temperate; original disposition and intellect good; cause, heredity; form of mania, perpetual motion. Admitted June 20th, 1860: discharged September, 1860.

W. A. BULLOCK, M. D.
Medical Superintendent."

Mr. Joyce's book was written while he was serving a term in prison for whiskey frauds. The book contained twenty-three so-called poems, supposedly all he had ever written. Naturally it did not contain "Solitude" because I had not then composed it. I have a copy of the first edition of this book in my possession. Yet two years later after my poem became famous, the man claimed that he had written "Solitude" in 1861. Why should he have omitted it from this book? In 1885, Mr. Joyce issued a new edition of the book, inserting the poem under the title, "Laugh, and the World Laughs With You," *but retaining the copyright date of 1883.*

My husband wished to start a suit for damages, but was urged by acquaintances to drop it, as they said the general impression of Mr. Joyce was that he was "a harmless old

lunatic whose words no one took seriously." But Mr. Joyce proved himself seriously annoying up to the day of his death. He never allowed more than two years to pass without finding some obscure paper in which he could again set forth his claims to my poem. I repeatedly made an offer of \$5,000.00 to be given to charity, when any one could produce a copy of "Solitude" published prior to February, 1883. I finally offered to present to any charitable institution he might select, *in his name*, that amount of money, when Mr. Joyce produced his proof. Of course it was never forthcoming; and yet he claimed the poem had been in circulation for twenty years before I wrote it.

I believe my experience one which nearly every author has known at some time in his or her career. Though misery may like company, the fact does not prevent one's own suffering, when made the victim of a man of this type, who belongs to the poison insect order of humanity. He is only an insect, and yet his persistent buzz and sting can produce great discomfort.