Two Daughters of Tennessee

By GILBERT R. ADKINS

A NOTE ON ARTHUR COLYAR

Arthur St. Clair Colyar moved to western Franklin County in February 1837 at the time his father, Alexander Colyar, bought one hundred eighty-six acres on Robinson Creek. Arthur was born June 23, 1818, in Washington County, Tennessee, and received an education that did not extend beyond elementary school. In Franklin County he taught school, zealously advocated teetotalism, and in 1846 was licensed to practice law after studying under Winchester's illustrious Micah Taul. As counsel for B.F. McGhee and Company, the Winchester firm that built the railroad from Cowan to Tracy City (1852-58), Colyar devoted himself to untangling legal knots created when impatient creditors were awarded overlapping and conflicting judgments in federal and state courts against the Sewanee Mining Company. In 1858 Colyar opened a law office in Nashville, although his family remained in Franklin County until after the War Between the States.

At the wartime state Democratic convention summoned by Governor Isham Harris in Winchester on June 17, 1863, Colonel Colyar, earlier an opponent of secession, was nominated to the Confederate congress as representative of a district which included Franklin County. The war eventually came to an end, and with it Colyar's lackluster service in Richmond, Virginia, but his personal fortunes improved. The conflict had wreaked such havoc on countless investments that Colyar himself emerged as sole owner of the Sewanee Mining Company, a major holding that had been financed by Wall Street and was controlled from New York City. He assumed the presidency of the company in 1866, by which time it had been renamed the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company.

Arthur Colyar had developed a fervor for politics as leader of a faction in the last years of the Whig party. After the final disintegration of that party, he continued in politics, making two unsuccessful races

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for the Tennessee governorship in 1870 and 1872.(1) Before the decade was out he had settled down to a more workaday life of publishing a Nashville newspaper and writing a two-volume biography of Andrew Jackson. He died December 13, 1907.

The Colyar name is a familiar one in Franklin County history, but the natural interest in Colonel Colyar's public and private career has led to the easy surmise that no one else in his family was of more than passing interest. The lives of Colyar's sister Martha and her daughter Viola contradict that hasty assumption.

MARTHA COLYAR: MRS. ROSEBORO'

It was natural that Martha Clarissa Colyar should regard Franklin County as a refuge in time of trouble. She was born here, the twelfth of thirteen children, on April 20, 1834, while her parents were temporarily living in a portion of Franklin County that is now in Coffee County. Because she thought herself so excellently educated she maintained that instruction in Tennessee was the best in the country, and she was intensely fond of Winchester and its schools all her life. Her undated diploma from the Winchester Female Academy, signed by Jno. G. Biddle, J.W. Tyler, P.S. Decherd, and F.A. Foughmiller, was a treasured keepsake.(2)

Samuel Reed Roseboro', who prepared for the ministry at college in Lebanon, was born in Lincoln County, son of John Alexander Roseborough.(3) The family was one of obvious substance, generosity, and culture. It was in Winchester that Samuel saw Martha Colyar for the first time, when they passed on a sidewalk. True to his Presbyterian background, Samuel claimed he was not swayed by Martha's attractively fussy clothes, sapphire blue eyes, or faint violet perfume; it was the look on her face, "as if she had just left off prayer." Later, when they became well acquainted, he asked her to share his manse in Selma, Alabama. Martha objected on the ground that a devout Methodist with an appetite for the fiction of Sir Walter Scott should not be the wife of a Presbyterian minister who drew the line at poetry of Pope and Shelley. The courtship nevertheless progressed toward wedding plans after settlement of a difference of opinion about the officiating clergy-

(1) Some of these biographical details are treated more fully by Eleanor Templin, "The Worlds of Arthur St. Clair Colyar," *Franklin County Historical Review* VIII (January 1977), 19-29.

(2) Jane Kirkland Graham, *Viola, the Duchess of New Dorp* (Danville, Illinois, 1955). Full text of the diploma printed on p. 56 of her book. Mrs. Graham, once an aspiring writer under the tutelage of Viola Roseboro', provides 631 pages of unindexed, haphazardly arranged, and often undigested information on her teacher. The book is indispensable for anyone interested in V. R. and her family. This article is profoundly in debt to Mrs. Graham's research.

(3) The family name underwent a series of spelling changes. After years of experimentation, Viola settled on the form (with apostrophe) used in this article.

man's denomination.

Miss Martha (Mattie) Colyar, whose parents were dead, married Reed Roseboro' on January 8, 1857, near Winchester, in the humble surroundings of an unpainted country home on the side of a hill. Martha was clutching a Scott novel as the couple left for a short journey down the Mississippi River. Reed and Mattie returned to live in Pulaski, Tennessee. Dr. Houston by request had omitted the word "obey" from their marriage ceremony,(4) and it was whispered among the women that Martha, "with that Colyar look," told her best Winchester friend, Lou Murrell, that she would never accept a letter addressed to Mrs. S. R. Roseboro'. She insisted on her identity as Mrs. Martha Colyar Roseboro', a radical position at the time.(5) Her husband signaled capitulation by buying his wife a set of the Waverley novels.

In those prewar years, Martha, an emancipationist, goaded her husband on what to say in his slavery sermons. He occasionally took a walk in order to get away from the barrage only to return four hours later and have Martha pick up at her monologue's breaking-off point. Reed and the Pulaski neighbors listened while Mat talked. She actually kept a blue notebook in which she recorded what he *said* he thought he had said on slavery from the pulpit. Martha was successful in radicalizing her husband on the issue, although he had presumably heard similar arguments from his seminary professors. Because of Martha's suasion, her husband consented to move to Missouri, and when war came, Martha refugeed to Mattoon, Illinois, while the minister enlisted as a chaplain on the Union side. The Yankee enlistment resulted in his parents' disowning him.(6)

POSTWAR FINANCIAL STRAITS

When the war was over, Martha Colyar Roseboro' fled a cramped Illinois hotel room and returned to family and friends in Tennessee. Her chaplain-husband was discharged from the United States Army on July

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(4) It is unlikely that such an alteration of the wedding service in Franklin County could have been called common until after World War II, when brides with increasing frequency promised to cherish. A deletion of the kind Martha requested in 1857 would have met with elevated eyebrows, and was probably regarded as quite daring. Martha Colyar Roseboro's dislike for slavery and her protests against the abject legal status of women were crusading impulses that reflected a single national phenomenon. The women's anti-slavery movement (organized in 1837) and the women's rights movement (1848) were historically interconnected. (Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, 1970), 39, 66, 80-84.)

(5) Another manifestation of Martha's twin passions for abolition and women's rights. Those acquainted with the fine points of Victorian convention and etiquette would have seen here a blow for personal identity and individuality: a woman in sophisticated circles who was addressed in this form was customarily one who had been divorced and was therefore on her own. See *Manners and Social Usages* (no author given) (New York, 1884), 11, and Frederick H. Martens, *The Book of Good Manners* (New York, 1923), 269-70. Martha used the same form on a professional basis for magazine bylines (see footnote 4).

(6) Graham, 47.

MARTHA COLYAR ROSEBORO'
Viola's mother

12, 1865, and joined his wife in a round of visits to relatives. The trip had to be brief because Mr. Roseboro' had already been appointed pastor of a Congregational church in Macon, Missouri. Mrs. Roseboro', that fall, put down roots by purchasing a small Missouri farm with money earned during the war from teaching school, sewing, and working in a hotel at Mattoon, Illinois. In part because of this investment, by the spring of 1866 the young family was financially distressed, and Martha made plans to return to Tennessee to consult her brother, for if he could not help personally he would at least advise her. "Arthur," she said, "has a genius about money." Foremost in Martha's mind was the hope that Arthur would help with her daughter's education.

Martha had not received a letter from Arthur Colyar since her last visit, nor had she heard from her friends in Winchester. Whether in communication or not, relatives have a way of sensing inopportune times for visits. Colonel Colyar was attempting to effect governmental reform in Nashville by openly striking the Alden ring,(7) and he well knew that public reaction to his entertaining a sister with abolitionist sympathies could be damaging. To get Martha out of Nashville he planned a sightseeing trip to his Sewanee Mines. From there he would urge that she visit relatives in Coffee County while he returned to Nashville.

In later life Martha's daughter, Viola, described Tennessee as it appeared that day she and five relatives rode a train toward Cowan.

> Our part of Tennessee had escaped the worst of war's ravages; all over the wide South the fallen walls of houses heaped around gaunt, smokeless chimneys standing straight in desolate dignity made the land strange to the eyes; strange, one would think, to the very birds who were flying so busily in the sky; but here in Middle Tennessee many a man came back to a home little altered; the old roof still stood, and still sheltered his own people; his own fields lay about him, and it was a striking evidence of the metaphysical character of life that these accustomed and solid realities often but sharpened in men's souls the sense of ruinous revolution, and made the glowing sunlight glare the stranger in their eyes.(8)

By contrast, the same trip between Nashville and Cowan had impressed Martha Roseboro' as leading through an exhausted and poverty-stricken part of Tennessee; as she recalled it, innumerable signs of military conflict scarred the earth.

In addition to observing the countryside, there was ample opportunity during the ride for Martha to register objection to her brother's hiring

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(7) Two years of peculation by Nashville Mayor August E. Alden threatened to bankrupt the city through an organized greed that included the street sale of city checks and warrants to high bidders. A. S. Colyar was credited with driving Maine carpetbagger Alden from office and from the state in August 1869. During the controversy, city government cut off the water supply to Colyar's home, and he was threatened with assassination. (Clyde L. Ball, "The Public Career of A. S. Colyar, 1870-1877," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* XII [March 1953], 37-38.)

(8) Viola Roseboro', *The Joyous Heart* (New York, 1903), 208-209.

convict labor in the Sewanee Mines. Arthur Colyar reacted with assumed cheer, pointed out that he had started operations at Moffat, Tracy City, and beyond, in order to help the state, and that the business would soon be on a firmer basis. Recovery was underway from the twin setbacks of war and the outlay of almost two million dollars over a six-year period for railroad construction up Sewanee Mountain to Tracy, during which the company received no monetary return whatsoever. Colyar referred to his company railroad from Cowan as "that daring line of track," and remarked that "already there are summer boarders living up on that high perch of ours."

At Cowan there was a primitive ticket office. Colyar led his party past it with a wave to his employee, the structure's lone occupant, and followed a sooty trainman down the tracks, the rest of the party walking with difficulty over the rough. At last they entered a queer little car that nevertheless had cushioned seats. There was a tin cooler marked "liquid ice water" and a chained, nickel-plated cup "all in grimy completeness." A mountaineer in blue homespun and straw hat who had been down into the valley was seated next to an old woman in a bonnet. In whispers Colonel Colyar told his niece a story about another old mountaineer who thought there was a devil inside the company's train engine, and it was the devil that made the train climb.

> Almost immediately we found ourselves ascending the mountain—our little car clinging to a long empty coal train that, in its turn, held fast to the puffing, straining locomotive as, far before and above us, it climbed a zigzag track up the mountainside. The sight was a novel one even to those of our number who repeatedly had crossed the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains, giving, as if felt, a startlingly distinct impression of climbing.(9)

The trip into the mines never took place. Tracy City had received a telegraphic message that Colonel Colyar was needed in Nashville. He departed while his wife, Agnes,(10) and relatives scattered to Coffee County. Martha returned to penury in Missouri. A second daughter born to her did not survive infancy.

EARLY YEARS OF A BUDDING AUTHOR

Conditions in Macon, Missouri, further deteriorated, and Reed Roseboro' became embroiled in acrimonious exchanges with an influential churchman. Squabbling, plus an intensifying financial recoil,

(9) Martha Colyar Roseboro', "The Mountaineers About Monteagle," *Century Magazine* XXXVI (September 1888), 771-779. Martha pursued a modest writing career of her own. This local-color sketch, indulging her expert's interest in mountain dialect, is liberaly sprinkled with specific references to Cowan, Monteagle, Winchester, Bean's Cove, Owl Hollow, Altamont, and Pelham. The article appeared before any of Viola's signed work.

(10) The first Mrs. Arthur Colyar was Agnes Erskine Estill, daughter of Wallace Estill of Winchester. They married on December 9, 1847, and she died in 1886. Colyar's second wife was a native of Louisville, Kentucky.

made it obvious that the family must move. In late August 1868 Martha made plans to return to Tennessee for the third time since the war. She had been promised a teaching job by Will Houston, superintendent of schools in Shelbyville. Houston was the husband of Martha's sister Sallie.

Martha Colyar Roseboro' and her daughter Viola left Macon, two counties directly west of Hannibal, Missouri, with a fund of sixty-four dollars. When they boarded a train for Hannibal their problems began. Viola had been born in Pulaski on December 3, 1857, and was therefore not even eleven years old. The conductor, however, said she looked at least twelve and exacted a second adult fare. The purser on the steamboat at Hannibal also demanded another fare. In an anguished letter, written while on the steamer, Martha reported the unanticipated expenses to her husband. She said she had twenty-eight dollars and could thus account for sixty-two, but had no idea what had happened to the other two.

Martha had misjudged when schools opened in Shelbyville and arrived far too early. In order to use up the extra time she began to talk of teaching illiterate black children in Nashville. Her brother Arthur, realizing the peril to his political objectives in this plan, once again, with a notable lack of imagination, suggested that Martha and Viola visit the mines at Tracy City. They dutifully agreed, and again passed through Franklin County. In his office at the end of the Sewanee Mountain rail line Martha talked of her aspirations for Viola,(11) while Arthur attempted to point out that he had a family of his own to look after in addition to brothers and other sisters who seemed to expect aid from him. Meanwhile young Viola found a high stool, a large desk, and writing materials.(12)

Tracy, Tennessee, September 5, 1868

Dear Papa,

I should like to see you very much. Please excuse the heding of my letter, as for that matter, I hope you will excuse the whole letter. Not that I could write a very good one anyway. Now [I am] going to tell you some of the—all about our journey.

Soon after we got on the boat, the scenery was beautiful. Great high cliffs with such beautiful vines hanging over. That was on the Ill. side. On the Mo. side were beautiful trees (I wouldn't have used that word beautiful again only I

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(11) The fact that a main highway through Tracy City coincides with Colyar Street gave encouragement to a guess that the name of a community within the shadow of mountain lands owned by Sewanee Mining Company could refer to Arthur Colyar's niece. But several manuscripts in the possession of Miss Alice Milstead at Viola assert that the Warren County town was christened in 1858 by a postmaster knowledgeable about Shakespeare. Viola post office was named for the heroine of *Twelfth Night* when a previous choice was rejected in Washington. VEE-o-la the writer was born a mere six months before vy-O-la the town.

(12) Graham, 127-130. Mrs. Graham's research included partial access to what she calls *The Old Roseboro' Letters*. Because of the indiscreet nature of some of the items in that family compilation Mrs. Graham believed it too early to consider them publishable.

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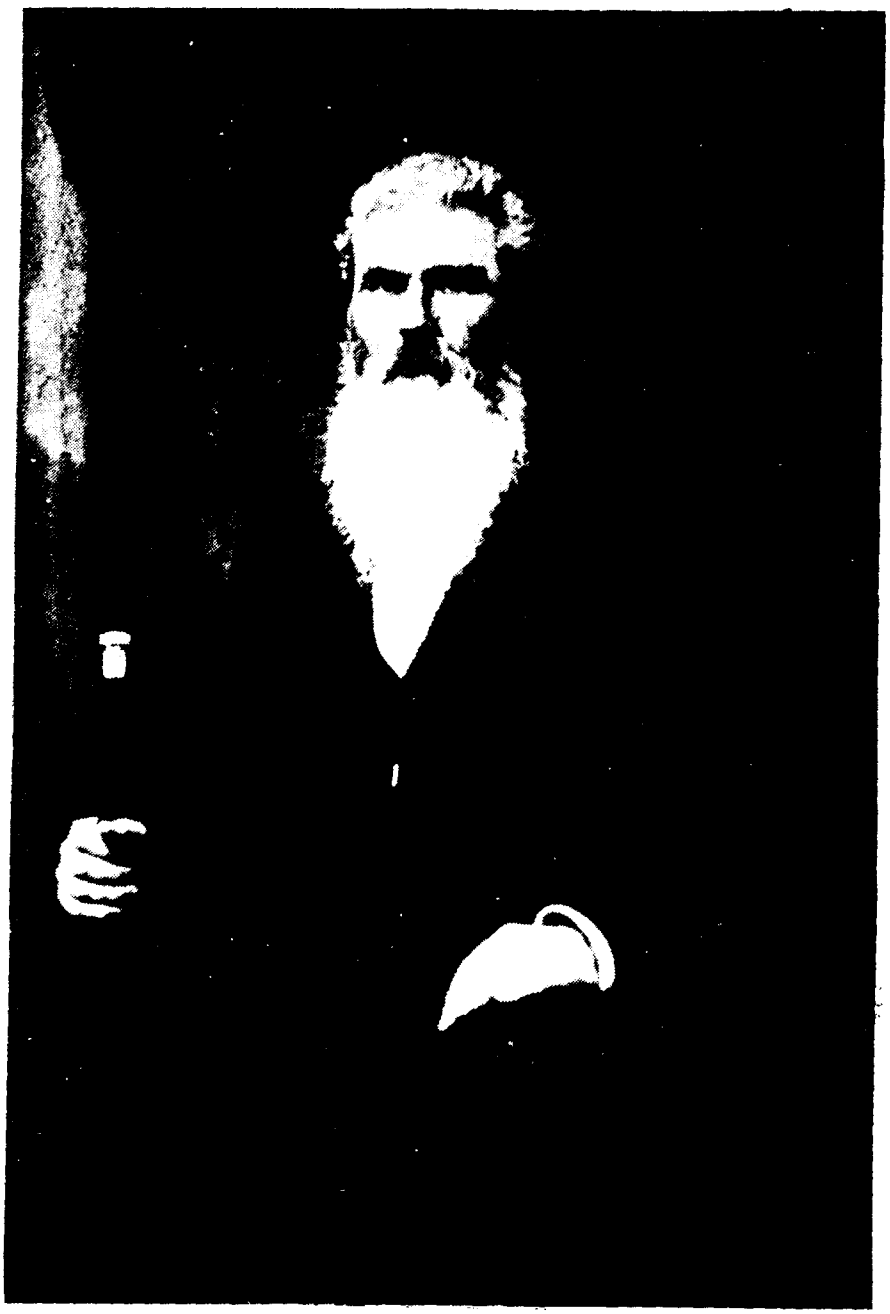

S.R. ROSEBORO'
Viola's father

> couldn't think of any other) with grape vines running all over them. I will tell you how they looked. They had green trunks and the limbs don't show a bit, the vine runs all over it just the shape the tree is. Soon after I turned this page they cut two grate big watermelons, before long dinner was reddy. We had butter beans and apple dumplings: before dinner my dress was loose, after it was tight.
> Your loving Viola.
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> P.S. Love to all our [Macon] friends after a liberal supply for yourself.

A few days later, when Martha stepped from the train in Shelbyville, Viola said quietly, "How small." Since the school board had not voted on her application, Martha backtracked to Winchester for a visit with Dr. Murrell's family and with Novella Marks. Viola, maintaining a negative attitude, wrote her father, "Winchester is the dullest place I most ever saw."(13) School in Shelbyville did not open that year until October 12, with Martha finally installed as principal but paid only a pittance. Her volunteer efforts to integrate blacks into the school system of Shelbyville kept the community in turmoil until "Meddlesome Mattie," as detractors called her, departed for Missouri the next spring (1869).

The Roseboro's were away from Tennessee the next five years. When Winchester heard that Martha had gone to the Far West the town buzzed that Arthur had issued free railroad passes to her just to get her out of the way. With his sister far away, her reputation as troublemaker would be less of an issue in his upcoming race for the governorship.

Martha was intensely unhappy during the years Mr. Roseboro' served churches in Nevada and California. Arthur did not become governor, and the radical Roseboro's were soon back to haunt him. The family returned to Tennessee in late August 1874 in order to enter Viola in Fairmount College at Moffat,(14) apparently unaware that Fairmount, like the University of the South, vacationed in the winter. (In the popular mind the school six miles east of the university was frequently regarded as its female branch, though it never officially had that status.)

When Viola began the regular college term the following March it was her uncle who escorted her up the mountain, after requesting that her parents stay in the background for a few days. On their way to Moffat the pair stopped in Sewanee to look at the university buildings, which astonished Viola by their simplicity. The university was in its seventh year of operation, and already a primitive touch of the gothic

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(13) The Roseboro's were received by the Marks family at their new country home, the nucleus of what is now Hundred Oaks. Arthur Handly Marks began expansions to create his thirty-seven room complex in 1889 and was still immersed in the project when struck down by typhoid at age 28 on September 7, 1892.

(14) The name Moffat was changed to Mont Eagle on January 12, 1881, and officially spelled as one word after October 1, 1925. From January 18, 1871 until October15, 1874 the town was Moffat Station. (James L. Nicholson, *Grundy County* [Memphis, 1982], 60.)

was in evidence.(15) She specifically noted the sharply pointed roofs and crudely arched doors and windows of some of the wooden structures. Log buildings served as faculty housing. Fairmount, founded the previous year (1873) on the site now occupied by the DuBose Conference Center, consisted of a main building and separate dormitories. Soon Mr. Roseboro' pleased his wife by taking a church in Moffat, within convenient visiting distance of Winchester. Considering the smothering tendencies of the parents, A. S. Colyar regarded this arrangement as a mistake.(16)

THE CAREER OF VIOLA ROSEBORO'

During Viola's third year at Fairmount a classmate induced her to give a dramatic reading in a church during a visit to Russellville, Kentucky. She had practiced the skill since the winter spent in Shelbyville. A month later, April 18, 1878, fourteen young men signed an advertisement in the Russellville newspaper that pleaded for Viola's return. Henry Watterson, editor of the Louisville *Courier-Journal,* interviewed her and urged that she draw material only from the works of Southern writers. Within a few months, Viola, fired by what was called Colyar ambition, had presented readings from Cincinnati to New Orleans. In November 1878 she enrolled in stage-arts classes in Cincinnati. Thereafter the gossips of the Moffat congregation so reproved Mr. Roseboro' for allowing his daughter to make preparations for a life on the stage that he began looking for a new charge outside Tennessee.

Before December was past it was clear to Viola that her plans in Cincinnati were going to cost more than her parents could supply. She wrote to the Colyar-owned *Daily American* in Nashville, offering to submit a "Cincinnati Letter" dealing with dramatic personalities, theater chat, and book reviews. Viola sent a weekly column to the paper for the next six years, until switching to New York's *Daily Graphic.*

Viola made her Nashville acting debut on May 27, 1879, to the predictable laudation of her uncle Arthur's newspaper. By that time her father had become pastor of a church in Michigan and her mother, in a health decline, had returned to Franklin County, staying with Vella Marks at Hundred Oaks.

During the next eight years Viola was a member of several stock companies, gradually transferring her home base from Cincinnati to

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(15) A stained-glass window installed in the All Saints' chapel narthex, University of the South, in 1959, portrays A. S. Colyar, his father-in-law, Wallace Estill, and Samuel Franklin Tracy, first president of the Sewanee Mining Company.

(16) Graham, 181.

New York City (about 1882). All the while she continued to write, sometimes signing herself as Martha Wallace and also occasionally acting under that name. (Her father's mother had been a Wallace.) Viola's life was radically altered in 1887 when she contracted pneumonia while barnstorming in upstate New York. As a result she permanently lost what was called the golden tone of her voice. She remarked that the prayers of people in Moffat had been answered because she was now permanently off the stage. Meanwhile Martha continued to follow her husband as he moved from church to church within Pennsylvania and New York in compulsive efforts to be close to their daughter.

Viola devoted herself exclusively to free-lance writing until being hired in 1893 as a manuscript reader on *McClure's*.(17) Years earlier, Martha and Viola had begun to experience an alienation that Arthur Colyar foresaw as a possibility for two women equally unacquainted with humility. After Viola was on her own she was increasingly annoyed that her mother persisted in sending her copies of her articles with grammatical corrections written in the margins but including no simple word of praise.

Despite difficulties with her mother, Viola dedicated a book of short stories in 1892 thus: "To my mother, my earliest and still my best companion in the blessed world of letters, I wish to inscribe this, my first book." Viola, perhaps remembering how her parents had met on a Winchester sidewalk, paid her mother another compliment no parent could forget. As a child, she said, she could always tell where her mother was in a crowd because that was the direction people were looking. Martha died of cancer in May 1893; her husband died three years later.

Viola developed a passion for discovering genius during her years on *McClure's* as fiction editor. She bought the first stories O. Henry and Booth Tarkington sold.(18) She got Willa Cather an editorial position on the magazine staff, and Miss Cather acknowledged that Viola was her "first critic." Among scores of other writers she shepherded and encouraged were Margaret Culkin Banning, Rex Beach, Samuel Hopkins Adams, Jack London, Ida M. Tarbell, Edwin Markham, and Fulton Ousler. After eighteen years with *McClure's* she moved to *Collier's*. She owned homes in New York, Connecticut, Cape Cod, and Florence, Italy, which, however, she ultimately lost through

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(17) The first of the popular monthly magazines, and the one that by itself transformed the scheme of American periodicals.

(18) Primacy of purchase in O. Henry's case is in dispute, but Will Irwin said that O. Henry told him the honor belonged to Viola Roseboro'. ("Viola Regina," *Saturday Review of Literature*, March 3, 1945, p. 15.)

poor investments.(19) In old age she lived on Staten Island.

Viola Roseboro' died January 29, 1945, murmuring, as if in summary of her life, "People, people, people." Services were held in New York City and the body transferred to a cemetery's vault at Clifton Springs, near Rochester, New York. Burial took place there on April 21, 1945. Viola was placed beside her parents.

VIOLA R
In her twenties

(19) Martha Roseboro' repeatedly expressed the hope her daughter would inherit the Colyar flair for managing money, as opposed to her husband's evident naivete. Samuel Roseboro' sold the Missouri farm his wife had bought with her wartime earnings without consulting her and at a time she was in Tennessee. Furthermore, he signed the deed to the buyer before receiving payment, and the money never came. By losing multiple properties, Viola demonstrated that one of Martha's ardent wishes fell short of fulfillment.