

TWO STORIES TO HISTORY

Olivia Howard Dunbar

It wasn't long ago that I discovered Olivia Howard Dunbar. I was browsing the net, albeit systematically as I usually do, when the name jumped out at me. I inspected it, opened the online reading version and there it was: *The Long Chamber* (1914). An absolute unknown author and a title I had never heard of. I read the first lines: *'There was perhaps no warrant for the vaguely swelling disquiet that possessed me from the moment that, late in the sultry August after noon, there arrived the delayed telegram that announced the immediate coming of Beatrice Vesper.'* '...disquiet...', the central word in the first paragraph, gets to the reader: the author has achieved her goal. And we will be narrated Beatrice Vesper's experience in that long room. The 'Long' of the title, in my opinion, is an excellent choice, because it can be applied both to space and time, as 'prolonged', and Beatrice Vesper's stay, in that room, becomes *prolonged*, and so her change, which becomes absolute, takes place. Beatrice Vesper's experience is unique, and the narrative is wonderfully direct. I think it is one of the best stories I have ever read.

Spurred on, I looked for more. And I found: *The Shell of Sense* (1908): as fantastic as the previous one. Right from the start, as in *The Long Chamber*, Dunbar lays her cards on the table: *'It was intolerably unchanged, the dim, dark-toned room. In an agony of recognition my glance ran from one to another of the comfortable, familiar things that my earthly life had been passed among.'* The character/narrator recognises the familiar things in her familiar room: everything is just as it used to be, which she finds 'intolerable', and immediately warns us: *'...my earthly life had been passed among.'* Undoubtedly another ghost story, this time the narrator is the ghost, and again a wonderful story.

I liked Dunbar's clarity, her well-structured language, her measured words (note that beginning: *'intolerably unchanged, the dim, dark-toned room'* in which with a simple resource of 'fronting' (change in word order) she tells us her feelings and then what triggered them. Because what she, ghost, seeks, as we will learn later, is change, a radical change, and probably a not very well regarded one at that time.

I searched for more of Olivia Howard Dunbar's works. I only found one essay (*The Decay of the Ghost in Fiction*) and one biography (*The House in Chicago*). And that was all. I feel as if I were missing something, something that may never have been written.

Olivia Howard Dunbar was born in Massachusetts in 1873 and died in 1953. She graduated from Smith College and went into journalism as critic and short story writer. She published in prestigious magazines such as *Harper's* and *Dial*. Being an active and politicized woman, she joined the women's suffrage movement. In 1914, she married the American poet Frederic Ridgely Torrence.

Nowadays we can find *The Shell of Sense* in an anthology on Project Gutenberg, and *The Long Chamber* on Internet Archive.

I find amazing the number of great women writers the English-speaking world produced in the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries (in the second half they are still active) and seem not to be remembered, always sticking to Mary Shelley, Jane Austen (not to my taste), Aurore Lupin (pseud. George Sand), Mary Anne Evans (pseud. George Elliot) – I prefer their christening names to their *noms de guerre* –. Then again, they might not be read now, when I read, but they might be read again one day, in the same way that others were not and now they are. I think something of the kind happened with Cervantes during the eighteenth century, when he fell into oblivion.

The Shell of Sense <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15143>

Long Chamber: Internet Archive

<https://ia801009.us.archive.org/15/items/1914longchamberdunbarharpersnew129various/1914%20Long%20Chamber%20Dunbar%20harpersnew129various.pdf>