

IN SEARCH OF THE REAL

# Grace Flandrau

GEORGIA RAY

Nearly a dozen editions of *Who's Who* and other official compendia of prominent Americans include the name of Minnesota writer Grace Hodgson Flandrau, but few readers today are familiar with her work. The novelist, short-story writer, and journalist who was published internationally for four decades was largely forgotten after her death in 1971. During her career's full bloom, however, legendary literary editors such as H. L. Mencken, Maxwell E. Perkins, Kyle S. Crichton, and Harold Ross purchased her works; New York and London agents and publishers pursued her; filmmakers bought screen rights to her fiction and journalism; and at least eight anthologies of short stories included her fiction. Her extensive oeuvre includes six books, more than four-dozen published magazine stories and articles, and considerable unpublished fiction and nonfiction.<sup>1</sup>

In 1950 critic John T. Flanagan's article "Thirty Years of Minnesota Fiction" listed Flandrau's name first on a roster of the state's successful authors from the period between the two world wars. In St. Paul's Historic Hill District where Flandrau lived, a recent program to erect plaques commemorating prominent neighborhood figures included Zelda Fitzgerald but omitted Grace Flandrau. Yet few women writers of Minnesota, living or dead, have published more or attained more international fame.<sup>2</sup>

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Grace Flandrau, author of novels and popular short stories

Several factors partially explain Flandrau's decline from favor. Writing genres, like schools of painting or women's fashions, come in and out of style. Books go out of print, and one generation's compelling issues are replaced by the next's. To particularize, all of Flandrau's work is out of print, and the fact that her three youthful novels are more readily available in libraries than her mature fiction and journalism does little for her literary reputation.

Chiefly a magazine writer, albeit a well-known one, she suffered the same fate as literary magazines, which began a long, slow decline after World War I. For example, the venerable *Scribner's*, presenter of stories by such luminaries as Stephen Crane, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edith Wharton, Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, Robert Frost, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Wolfe, ceased publication in 1939. *Scribner's* published at least 11 stories and one book review by Flandrau between 1930 and 1936, but by the time of its demise, its annual sales had dropped from 200,000 to 39,000.<sup>3</sup>

Flandrau's case, however, goes beyond these general explanations. While her best work earned high praise from distinguished American editors, publishers, and critics of her time, long obscured evidence suggests that the author suffered a devastating fall from grace at the height of her career, erasing her from literary memory. The record demonstrates, too, that Flandrau simply gave up writing for publication after maturing as a writer.

Interviews with her acquaintances and extensive archival research reveal that the St. Paul author was an unusually controversial woman whose secrecy-filled life story began overshadowing her four-decade literary record long ago. A careful reading of her autobiographical fiction of the 1930s and 1940s also yields clues to penetrating the mystery of her "anomalous" childhood.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, understanding the real Grace Flandrau in her own day was as difficult as recovering the truth about her is today.

THE SEEDS OF GRACE FLANDRAU'S ANGST as an adult and of her inspiration as a writer were planted in the soil of a troubled—but uniquely advantaged—childhood. Her youthful upbringing, which was seldom grounded in reality, aimed her toward great expectations and away from the mundane.<sup>5</sup>

Grace's father, Edward J. Hodgson—a brilliant St. Paul lawyer, mortgage banker, and much-published author—dominated her early childhood. A gifted, ambitious man, Hodgson struggled single-mindedly to recover his lost position as a member of the British

upper class and influenced Grace with his zealous quest for upward mobility and recognition.

Born on the Isle of Man in 1841, Hodgson was the son of Charollet Corrin, member of the Manx landed gentry, and her sickly young husband or suitor, an English aristocrat who died about the time of Edward's birth. Corrin was reputedly a descendent of the ancient Scandinavian kings of Man, originally named "Thor-rin." To give her infant son a father, Corrin quickly married Thomas Hodgson, a mining superintendent somewhat beneath her station. After another son, Thomas Corrin Hodgson, was born, the family immigrated to the United States in 1843. They lived first in Galena, Illinois, and then moved to Minnesota Territory to homestead and farm in Dakota County. Five more children were born.<sup>6</sup>

After attending Hamline University for three years, Edward Hodgson enlisted in the U.S. Army during the Civil War. Following a medical discharge in 1863, he traveled in Great Britain and Europe, studied law for a year, and then established a career in law, real-estate speculation, and mortgage loans in Red Wing. In 1868 Hodgson married Mary Staples, a Hamline University student and daughter of a prosperous horse breeder.<sup>7</sup>

In 1875 the couple moved to St. Paul, where, according to a history of Hamline University, "his business increased with great rapidity." They lived at 518 Dayton Avenue for nearly 30 years. Here they raised a foster daughter, Lucille, and the younger Grace, born in 1886, the same year that Edward's widowed mother came to live with them.<sup>8</sup>

During the 1880s Hodgson served as president of the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce and a board member of the Commercial Club. He also became active in state politics and frequently spoke at political conventions. Hodgson wrote frequently and professionally for Minnesota newspapers and British magazines on economic, agricultural, and political matters such as the Boer War. In 1880 he established the annual Hodgson Prize for excellence in composition and oratory at Hamline University.<sup>9</sup>

In 1891 Hodgson founded Security Trust Company bank; he served as its president for 12 years. During the panic of 1893, however, the bank suffered severe losses, harshly reducing the Hodgson family's lifestyle. Grace Flandrau's unpublished reminiscences, written in middle age, describe her father's ambivalent efforts to cope with their straitened financial circumstances after the bank panic:

It was a tradition in the household that although there was generally not enough money for the barest necessities, there was always enough for the luxuries.

When we had not food enough to eat or money to pay for warm clothes and coal to heat the house, we had nevertheless a French governess. When my father was staving off the bank we gave a large dinner for the governor of the state. When we had visitors from England my father drove them about in a hired brougham, and my mother ran up incredible bills for fine linen at the best department stores.

We were poor. My father drove himself as no galley slave has ever done to stave off bankruptcy to which he would under no circumstances resort. . . . "I'm ruined," he would cry, driving the blood from my heart, "The game is up. We'll all starve to death. We're going to the poor house."

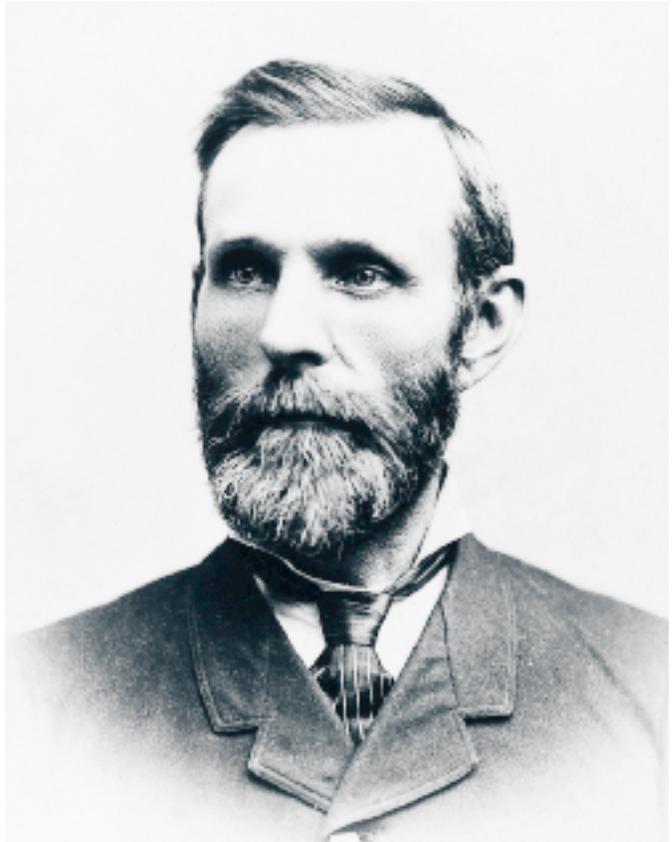
But at other times he would talk suavely and like a rich man. How he would buy fine horses and especially statues. . . . He would build a mansion on the bluff, with stained glass windows and a porte cochere.

That we should be about to starve and also about to buy mansions and statuary seemed as plausible as anything. And at the time when we were poorer than any other, when my father came home at nine or ten o'clock at night, white, exhausted, with a look of anguish on his beautiful thin face, suddenly it was announced that he was sending all three of us to Europe to Paris to school. A perfect French accent was the indispensable attribute of gentility.<sup>10</sup>

Grace attended both public school and Mrs. Backus's finishing school in St. Paul and studied violin and French at home. Influenced by her literary father, she read and was read to constantly as a child and often recited long passages from memory for relatives. She had devoured the classics in her father's library by the time she was 12.<sup>11</sup>

Because living expenses on the continent were cheaper than in America, she, Lucille, and Mary Hodgson spent more than three years abroad during Edward's bank crisis. Grace attended a convent boarding school in Paris, where she excelled in her classes, acquired a flawless French accent, and developed a passion for everything French.<sup>12</sup> Edward, however, did not join his family.

Shortly after they returned to Minnesota from France in 1903, Edward Hodgson died of cancer, and after his death disturbing news about his private life surfaced. Grace learned that her father had had a mistress, Anna Redding Hodgson, for nearly 20 years. She had borne him two children: Grace herself in 1886 and William in 1892. Edward's legal wife, Mary, childless after nearly a decade of marriage, had agreed with him to raise Grace with their foster daughter, Lucille, keeping the truth hidden. Grace, who was 17 when she



Edward J. Hodgson, the father Grace adored

learned of her illegitimacy, suddenly felt betrayed by the father whom she had always adored.<sup>13</sup>

As soon as Hodgson's estate was settled and the house on Dayton rented, Mary, Lucille, and Grace embarked on six years of travel throughout the United States and the Orient, returning to St. Paul as infrequently as possible.<sup>14</sup> Evidently Mary had decided that absence and secrecy were the best policies for minimizing the pain of scandal.

Grace followed her foster mother's example. She continued to introduce Mary Hodgson as her mother, and she is not known to have had any contact with her birth mother. Hodgson's relatives distanced themselves from his family after his death.<sup>15</sup>

Grace's written memories recollect her youthful premonition that she would suffer a fall from grace as Hodgson had:

I had always loved my father with an excessive, almost violent, intensity. As I sat there, with my back against his tomb stone, my awareness of the pity and love I

felt for him filled me with an acute premonition of sorrow known usually only in dreams. I felt not only the confusion, the loss, the failure of my father's own life but the significance of it and how it was part of a time not quite passed, from which I myself had suffered and by which I felt myself throttled, stifled, and would suffer more in many simple and intricate ways.<sup>16</sup>

Masking her insecurity with gaiety and confidence, the young Grace Hodgson became a skilled actress adept at dominating social situations and thwarting intimacy. She "lit up a room," recalled one acquaintance, and "she could make the dullest guest seem interesting," but she "never spoke about her family." Her life-of-the-party personality conflicted with her other self, however—a contemplative, intellectual loner. The fact that "men adored her and women were jealous of her" complicated things further.<sup>17</sup>

Later, Grace would describe herself as a youthful "rebel" who often felt her relationships with others were "unreal." Longtime friend and writing colleague Brenda Ueland noted something similar in a 1935 diary entry: "Grace is a curious person. . . . She is emotional and rich and affectionate and says darling very much—and yet elusive and far away; I keep expecting warm contact; can't get it; she withdraws from it. . . . She doesn't want to be alone with anybody at all. She wants excitement, diversion. Communists, gangsters, society people, wits, literary lights all together." Perhaps it was Grace's emotional detachment that enabled her to become the dispassionate—and slightly cruel—social satirist of her early writings.<sup>18</sup>

WHEN GRACE RETURNED TO ST. PAUL in 1909 after her second extended stay abroad, she was 23, wearing Paris-designed dresses from Hong Kong, and accompanied by a French chaperone, not Mary Hodgson. The diminutive, worldly Grace quickly caught the eye of William Blair Flandrau, a Harvard-educated member of St. Paul's elite who was 11 years Grace's senior. Blair, a tall charmer with playboy tendencies, was smitten. They married that year.<sup>19</sup>

Grace's memoirs reconstructed a frank but appealing image of her as a bride:

I was nineteen [*in fact* 23], and I had been in and out of love several times. Of what is called learning I knew nothing except the French language. I spoke French like a French girl . . . and I did like to read—in a desultory way I had read a good deal. I could play the violin fairly well for an amateur.



In no school, however, had I learned anything. Neither in school nor out had I received any discipline. I was idle, and I was spoiled. I was used to being amused and to being waited upon. I could not sew, and I could not even pack.<sup>20</sup>

In marrying Blair Flandrau, Grace joined an unusually literary St. Paul family. Blair's father, mother, brother, and Blair himself were all published writers.<sup>21</sup> Blair's late father, Charles E. Flandrau, had been an affluent St. Paul attorney and a prominent political figure in Minnesota during the nineteenth century.



The Flandrau men (from left): Blair, John W. Riddle (stepson of Charles E. who became ambassador to Russia), Charles M., and Judge Charles E., with dog and skin rug, about 1900

Blair's mother, Rebecca, was favorably impressed with her new daughter-in-law. In a letter to John Riddle, a son by her first marriage, she wrote: "Grace is bright and has a great deal of common sense and is pretty . . . without being a beauty. But she looks like a lady and appears well in any society."<sup>22</sup>

At the turn of the century, critics regarded Grace's new brother-in-law, Charles M. Flandrau, as one of the country's leading young essayists. In 1908 he had authored the internationally famous essay collection *Viva Mexico* at age 37 and then retired several years later to devote his life to reading and travel. From 1915

to 1922 he wrote theater and music criticism for St. Paul newspapers. Flandrau relatives, St. Paulites generally, and the local press revered Charles's writing and were proud of his position in American letters.<sup>23</sup>

Charles, who never married, was notoriously temperamental. (Grace labeled him "impossible" and Blair called him "a spoiled old man baby.") Charles frequently demeaned Blair, referring to him as "GooGoo" and "Cuckoo." Both brothers drank immoderately.<sup>24</sup>

Charles quickly learned that he had acquired a strong-minded new relative. Writing his half-sister Martha ("Patty") Flandrau Selmes a year after Grace and Blair's wedding, Charles complimented the bride: "I have grown to like her and admire her very much. She has works in her head and the very few things that jar are merely a matter of youth and inexperience. Her understanding of Blair is complete and marvelous. . . . Blair's salvation and future consist in Grace's appropriating and wearing 'the pants.' She is devoted to him and has . . . realized every fault he has . . . Mother is very fond of her." A decade later, however, Charles wrote his half-sister with a different outlook: "Grace . . . has always been a victim of temperament and ungratified ambitions. She cares only for the rich and the hec-tically fashionable, but has to be a perpetual parasite and 'hanger-on' because Blair has no money, and has always been incompetent to make any. . . . Mother never liked her."<sup>25</sup>

Although Grace was 15 years younger than her famous brother-in-law, she eventually challenged his domination of Blair and charmed Flandrau relatives into her camp. While Charles and Grace maintained outwardly cordial relations and corresponded steadily, he harbored ambivalent feelings toward her. His biographer believes that the influential Charles became Grace's secret literary rival.<sup>26</sup>

Following the Flandraus' wedding in 1909, Grace moved with Blair to his isolated coffee plantation near Vera Cruz, Mexico, until danger associated with the Mexican revolution forced her to leave in 1912. Traveling alone, she sought refuge first in nearby Jalapa, next in Mexico City, later in New Orleans, and finally at the Flandrau home at 385 Pleasant Avenue in St. Paul. Aware of the uncertainty of Blair's income and their

future, Grace began to develop her talent for writing. New York agent Paul Revere Reynolds sold her first stories to *Sunset* magazine in 1912.<sup>27</sup>

Reluctantly abandoning his ranch and investment in Mexico, Blair returned to St. Paul in 1916 to join his wife. He volunteered for army service in World War I, but his modest pay as an enlisted man added to Grace's chronic anxiety over finances and reinforced her belief that she needed to earn income from writing.<sup>28</sup> When her work continued to sell to New York publishers and Blair went into the auto business, the popular couple bought a fashionable townhouse in 1919 at 548 Portland Avenue, where they resided for nearly 20 years.

Eventually Blair's inheritance grew to afford them a modest life of leisure without the necessity of employment, and he retired permanently in 1922 at the age of 47. The couple maintained a busy social life, and when Grace was away on business, she wrote him constantly. Although he disliked their separations, he was proud of his wife's success, considering her "exceptional," and settled for his life as a sought-after extra man at Twin Cities dinner parties.<sup>29</sup>

Like novelists Edith Wharton and George Sand, the intensely ambitious Grace habitually absented herself from home and husband for weeks at a time in search of seclusion for her work. She also conducted a private professional life over many years through her friendships and correspondence with other literary figures, explaining why Meridel LeSueur described her one-time friend as "double." Outspokenly critical of idle people, Grace seemed to disparage the type of people in Blair's crowd—and her own—raising dander, eyebrows, and questions among St. Paul socialites.<sup>30</sup>

FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS of her marriage Grace Flandrau wrote constantly. When she wasn't working on fiction or journalism for publication, she wrote letters, speeches, memoir notes, and entries in her diary. Her writing evolved from genre to genre until she found her own voice in the mid-1920s in journalism and autobiographical fiction. Depending at first on Charles Flandrau's name to gain entree to New York publishers, she quickly established her own national reputation as an up-and-coming writer, publishing



**William Blair Flandrau, Grace's husband and a sought-after extra man at parties when Grace was away**

stories in *Ainslee's*, *McClure's*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Smart Set*, *Harper's Monthly*, and *Hearst's International*.<sup>31</sup> Her early short magazine fiction evidenced the influence of the antiromantic populists Theodore Dreiser and Hamlin Garland. She next demonstrated skill at writing entertaining pot-boilers for popular magazines and then manifested the cynicism and racy sophistication of anti-Victorian rebels like H. L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, her editors at *The Smart Set*.

Flandrau's first three novels, *Cousin Julia* (1917), *Being Respectable* (1923), and *Entranced* (1924)—all satirical studies of high society—reflected the influence of gentrified mannerists Edith Wharton and Henry James just as those writers were passing out of popular

favor. Nevertheless, national critical response to her early fiction was positive, and her work sold well. D. Appleton's, Charles's publisher, brought out *Cousin Julia*, but other publishers sought Grace's later works.<sup>32</sup>

A large photo of the attractive author ran with an extended caption mentioning *Cousin Julia*, but no review, in the society section of the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* on September 9, 1917. Apparently no *Pioneer Press* critic was about to take seriously the aspirations of Charles Flandrau's ambitious young relative. It would be more than 10 years before Grace won praise from a St. Paul reviewer for her work. Charles, however, had bragged about *Cousin Julia* a week earlier in his column in the September 2, 1917, *Pioneer Press*: "My sister-in-law has just . . . produced a 365-paged narrative that is at all times diverting, and often extraordinarily precocious and shrewd." Charles never again published his views about Grace's writing. His other comments—mostly very positive—appear only in correspondence with her.

By 1924 Grace had written two more novels, *Being Respectable* and *Entranced*, both published by Harcourt, Brace and Company. *Being Respectable*, a satire of St. Paul society, was an immediate best-seller that won high praise from national critics. Jonathan Cape released an

**Grace and companion on the steps of the Flandrau townhouse at 548 Portland, St. Paul**





English edition, and Hollywood filmed the novel in 1924. Edith Wharton wrote to Charles Scribner (who told Scott Fitzgerald, who reported it in a letter to Grace) that it was the best American novel she had come upon in years.<sup>33</sup>

Locally, *Being Respectable* received lukewarm or negative reviews but sold well. Charles, who praised the book in a letter to Grace, speculated that female rivalry probably explained *St. Paul Dispatch* critic Frances Boardman's noncommittal-to-negative coverage. He also conjectured that Boardman might "editorially have been asked not to comment" because the book's main characters were thought to be thinly disguised portraits of some prominent St. Paul's citizens.<sup>34</sup>

One Minneapolis literary newsletter, however, made a favorable comment: "Mrs. Flandrau has achieved a piece of work in which we feel a great deal of local pride. Our eastern friends continue to write us admiringly about it. We fail to sympathize with the indignation of certain St. Paulites. We'd be as proud as peacocks if we'd been in it."<sup>35</sup>

Grace's last mannerist novel, *Entranced*, had a less enthusiastic reception. By 1924 it was too late to engage most American readers in the subtle complexities of exclusively upper-class life. Even after Edith Wharton's *Age of Innocence* won the 1921 Pulitzer Prize, that author's work fell into obscurity; Lost Generation writers had captured the stage.

Perhaps fortunately for Grace and her readers, she turned her attention in 1925 from fiction to nonfiction. Even before she had finished *Entranced*, Louis W. Hill and Ralph Budd of the Great Northern Railway in St. Paul had hired her to write promotional pamphlets about northwest history and the railroad's role in opening the western frontier for settlement. With this assignment, for which she produced 11 pieces based on exhaustive research, Grace began displaying her analytical mind and knack for colorful writing about nonfiction subjects. This writing won Grace the attention of history publishers and film makers.<sup>36</sup>

*Then I Saw the Congo* (1929), an account of her trip across Africa with Blair, St. Paul philanthropist Alice M. O'Brien, and other friends in 1927, elicited superlatives from leading national critics and propelled the St. Paul author once again into the international liter-

**On March 23, 1930, the St. Paul Pioneer Press published excerpts from Flandrau's new book about trekking across Africa in the company of husband Blair and friend Alice O'Brien**

*Being Respectable's* description of a women's luncheon at a fashionable residence in the 1920s suggests why Grace Flandrau's words alienated local socialites:

There was a shrill uproar—the toneless clatter of voices talking together. There were butter colored jonquils; linen a frenzy of filet lace and embroidery; an odor of sachet, crisp lettuces, and early strawberries. And, when one of the swift waitresses, all dazzlingly black and white, slipped through a swinging door, a prophetic whiff of coffee. In a word, there was minutely everything that in Columbia [St. Paul] is understood to constitute a "luncheon."

And, of course, women, lots of women. Lots of rounded forearms, vivacious eyes, white teeth, velvets, and laces. All the subtle tensions, too, the nerve-charged atmosphere women create—especially women whose occupation is pleasure. Watchful eyes; listening ears; observation sharpened to catch self-betrayals, gaucheries; to ferret out what each one wished to hide; to amass material for talk at other luncheons.

Currents of malice, of kindness; curiosity, shrewdness, cleverness, stupidity, loyalty, disloyalty; an effort to please, to do one's part, to be amused and amusing. Women—intricate, dangerous, persistent—never more terrible than at play. Oh, women, to whom as to the Jews, oppression has given a deadly vigor.

Excerpt from Grace Flandrau's *Being Respectable* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1923), 34–35.



Grace's eccentric brother-in-law Charles Macomb Flandrau, probably on the steps of the family's home, St. Paul, June 1912

ary spotlight. G. C. Harrap in London quickly came out with a British edition, and publishers sought further work from Grace on Africa.<sup>37</sup>

Kermit Roosevelt wrote in *Saturday Review of Literature*: "The book is a very real contribution to the literature of the no longer Dark Continent. . . . Among the most intensely interesting parts . . . are the constant thumbnail sketches of official and trader, and missionary and traveller." In St. Paul, Charles Flandrau's only comment to Grace was that the St. Paul Book and Stationery store was out of stock and not advertising it. The *St. Paul Dispatch* noted the book's release without reviewing it, but the *Sunday Pioneer Press* began serializing it on March 23, 1930.<sup>38</sup>

*Then I Saw the Congo* also attracted wide attention from editors. When Grace queried Charles Scribner's Sons' managing editor Maxwell E. Perkins about publishing a subtle new manuscript, "One Way of Love," that used material from her African travels, he called it "magnificent" and said he was "very much impressed." Perkins and associate editor Kyle Crichton bought the new piece immediately for \$500, published it in the October 1930 *Scribner's*, and entered it in the magazine's annual short-story contest.<sup>39</sup>

In January 1932, after receiving Grace's first piece of autobiographical fiction about her troubled girlhood, "The Happiest Time," Crichton bought it for *Scribner's*, again paying \$500. He wrote her in France: "We are so keen about your work here. . . . You belong with the very first of American writers. I want you to get that feeling about yourself."<sup>40</sup>

In contrast, James Gray, St. Paul's nationally published novelist and critic and a Flandrau family friend, was a slow convert to Grace's work. He and his fellow writers at the *Dispatch* had lionized their former colleague, Charles Flandrau, and had ignored Grace for so long that it was undoubtedly difficult for Gray to begin acknowledging her success. Although 25 years younger than Charles, Gray had become his closest friend, corresponding with him, flattering him, and beseeching him to write again.<sup>41</sup> Gray probably recognized and may have even shared Charles's not-entirely-hidden jealousy of Grace.

When Charles finally resurfaced with a light, nostalgic essay, "The Bustle," published in the August 1930 *Harper's*, he was soon upstaged by Grace's major coup with "One Way of Love" in October. Gray wrote his idol Charles a sympathetic letter: "I hope you'll forgive me for helping myself to a resentment I'm not particularly entitled to. But it has always seemed to me that since you were born *Flandrau* and since you had established the literary significance of the name long before it had

been attached to works other than your own, you really had a right to the trademark." In spite of his apparent bias, Gray did write a strongly favorable review of "The Happiest Time," and he finally gave Grace's *Congo* masterpiece its due, seven years after publication, with an enthusiastic review of her new short-story collection titled *Under the Sun*, published in 1936 by Charles Scribner's Sons. His review opened with these words:

The fine and subtle gifts of Grace Flandrau have had an astonishing variety of manifestations. She flashed first across the literary scene as a brilliant social satirist. . . . Then . . . she appeared . . . as the interpreter of Africa in one of the best travel books an American has ever written. *Then I Saw the Congo* has already taken its place as a permanent contribution to the literature of serious, informed and understanding social study.<sup>42</sup>

IN THE MID-1930S GRACE FLANDRAU stood at the zenith of her fame. Between 1932 and 1936 four annual collections of best American short stories included her fiction. Kay Boyle and two other editors selected nine of Flandrau's sketches on pre- and post-revolutionary Mexico for a collection of essays by top authors, titled *365 Days*. In 1935 the *St. Paul Dispatch's* editor offered her a weekly column, and the next year KSTP radio station hired her to write scripts for her own show. The poised, well-informed author became a sought-after public speaker in the Twin Cities. In October 1937 she drew the second largest audience ever recorded at Northrop Auditorium when she spoke on "The Congo I Can't Forget."<sup>43</sup>

But there were signs of disaffection. Writer Brenda Ueland's diary contains perceptive entries about Flandrau in the 1930s. Commenting on local reaction to her friend's newest book, *Indeed This Flesh* (1934), Ueland wrote: "Read G. Flandrau's novel. . . . It is so remarkably good; . . . such warmth, humor . . . Nobody has said anything appreciative of her book. How strange . . . a prophet in her own country?" Ueland wrote in a subsequent diary entry that another friend "didn't like Grace Flandrau's book. Nobody does and it seems to be because they do not like Grace. But this is mistaken of them I know, I am sure."<sup>44</sup>

A transformation, however, was slowly taking place. Buoyed by her prestigious publishing relationship at *Scribner's* and by critical acclaim at home, Flandrau was finally feeling confident enough for candor. She began self-disclosure about her illegitimacy, quietly, to her husband and a few close friends in 1932.<sup>45</sup> She followed that with a bombshell of frankness in *Indeed This*



The author in later years when she was a sought-after speaker, journalist, and lecturer



The Flandrau house at 385 Pleasant, built in 1872 and ordered demolished by Grace in 1955  
in accordance with Charles's wishes

*Flesh*, probably misjudging how shocking this revelation was and how it would backfire.

She based *Indeed This Flesh* on her father Edward's life. In it she subtly hinted at his unhealthy—most likely incestuous—relationship with his daughter (named “Norah” in the novel). Turned down by Charles Scribner's, the book was published by Harrison Smith and Robert Haas, and while it received some favorable reviews, it did not succeed commercially.<sup>46</sup>

Strong influences had pushed Flandrau toward this honesty and realism: the cynicism and realism of Lost Generation writers, the self-revelation in Thomas Wolfe's hugely successful *Look Homeward Angel* (1929), the praise of editors and critics for her autobiographical fiction, the teaching of literary iconoclast Meridel LeSueur in

the 1930s, and undoubtedly her own need for personal catharsis. But the luxury of honesty apparently exacted a heavy price. After sales of *Indeed This Flesh* and *Under the Sun* faltered despite favorable reviews, Flandrau's professional and personal credibility began a long, slow erosion at home. Writing her friend Alice O'Brien about her increasing hesitancy to continue living in St. Paul, Flandrau said: “I have had a growing feeling that somebody, or some small group . . . is *not* friendly. I have had a feeling of *malice*, a genuine malice and hostility, directed against me!!! . . . an active enmity.”<sup>47</sup>

Flandrau seemed especially discouraged by the weak response to *Under the Sun*. Perkins had strongly advised against publishing a collection of stories before coming out with a new novel, but he had finally yielded

to her insistence. When the book failed, she wrote him in dismay at her own willfulness: "I am weighed down with a sense of defeat, of a *fatal* sense. Why will one not accept the judgement of people whom they trust, as I trust you?" Perkins, who had told her earlier, "We have wanted to publish for you for many years," again reminded her of the autobiographical novel he had repeatedly urged her to write and send him. Puzzlingly, although drafts for the novel exist in her papers, Flandrau never finished the novel nor did she ever attempt any other full-length book.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, Charles Flandrau's long-dormant literary reputation revived in the 1930s, thanks largely to the effective prodding of James Gray. A collection of Charles's new essays, *Loquacities*, appeared in 1931 (published by D. Appleton and Company after it was turned down by Charles Scribner's Sons), and the classic *Viva Mexico* was reprinted in 1937.<sup>49</sup>

IN 1938 THE DEATHS of both Blair and Charles Flandrau left Grace wealthy but lonely. While she inherited the Flandrau home on Pleasant Avenue, the 52-year-old author was both childless and estranged from her Hodgson relatives in Minnesota.<sup>50</sup>

She renewed her literary efforts, producing whimsical short fiction for the *New Yorker*, vivid journalism for *Saturday Evening Post*, and several literary reviews. After World War II she wrote scripts in French for the Voice of America in Paris. In 1949 her essay "On What It Is to Be French" appeared in the first issue of the University of Minnesota's scholarly *American Quarterly*.<sup>51</sup>

Although Flandrau received some national recognition and awards in the late 1940s, she ceased writing for publication entirely and had begun to sink into obscurity by 1950. In 1955, after ordering the historic 1872 Flandrau house torn down as Charles had requested in his will, Grace moved permanently to Farmington, Connecticut. For years she had maintained a secluded haven for writing there.<sup>52</sup>

Grace briefly resurfaced when *Holiday* published her last story, "Minnesota," in 1955. The intimate essay brought her fan mail from St. Paul friends, and her 1962 speech about her father-in-law, Charles E. Flandrau, at the Minnesota Historical Society's annual meeting in 1962 drew significant attention in the Twin Cities press.<sup>53</sup>

Grace Flandrau died in Farmington in 1971 but is buried in the Flandrau plot at Oakland Cemetery in St. Paul. Her estate made bequests totaling nearly \$1.5 million to agencies in Minnesota such as the Saint Paul Foundation, the Minnesota Historical Society, Hamline University, Saint Luke's Hospital, and the humane society.<sup>54</sup>

Meridel LeSueur observed of her one-time friend and colleague in a 1990 interview: "Grace Flandrau was a beautiful woman and I loved her. She is a neglected writer of Minnesota, although she should have written more."<sup>55</sup>

LeSueur was right. The world would have been richer had Flandrau written more—after she had matured, let down her defenses and begun writing from her own insightful, whimsical, and sometimes painful vision of the world. □

## NOTES

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1. Flandrau bibliography, compiled by author, author's possession. See, for example, *Who's Who Among Minnesota Women*, 1924, and *Who's Who of American Women* (1958–59, 1966–67, 1968–69); see also, *Smart Set*, Feb. 1921; *Scribner's*, Oct. 1930–July 1936 (11 stories); *New Yorker*, May, Sept., 1942, April 1943.

Flandrau's appointments and awards include an honorary doctoral degree in literature from Hamline University, St. Paul, in 1947 and membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1949.

2. John T. Flanagan, "Thirty Years of Minnesota Fiction," *Minnesota History* 31 (Sept. 1950): 129; Patricia Hampl, interview by author, St. Paul, Apr. 3, 1996, author's notes.

3. Theodore Peterson, *Magazines in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 145–49.

4. Brenda Ueland, "Among Those We Know," *Golfer and Sportsman* 15 (Dec. 1934): 26.

5. "Child Memories," typed drafts possibly intended for autobiographical novel, file 139, box 22, Flandrau Family Papers, Arizona Historical Society, Tucson (hereafter FFP).

6. *History of the Hamline University of Minnesota when Located at Red Wing . . . from 1854 to 1869* (St. Paul: Alumni Association, 1907), 172; Grace Flandrau to Theodate Pope Riddle (wife of John W. Riddle, Blair's half-brother), [Oct., 1930?], Hill-Stead Museum Archive, Farmington, Conn.; Theodore Christianson, *Minnesota, the Land of Sky-Tinted Waters—A History of the State and Its People* (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1935), 4:185; Thomas Hodgson-Charollet (Charlotte) Corrin genealogical chart, author's possession. Hodgson always used his stepfather's surname, not his biological father's, and no known

record of the latter's surname exists.

7. *History of the Hamline University*, 172; Grace Flandrau, *Indeed This Flesh* (New York: H. Smith and R. Haas, 1934), 37.

8. *History of the Hamline University*, 172; St. Paul city directories, 1876–1903, list Edward J. Hodgson residing at 139 Dayton (later renumbered 518 Dayton) and Charollet residing at the same address between 1886 and 1901. Grace sometimes claimed to be born in 1889 or 1890, but her father's Bible records her birth as 1886.

9. Edward Hodgson obituary, *St. Paul Dispatch*, Sept. 22, 1903; files 28–29, box 66, Hodgson to editors, file 3, box 63, essays and manuscripts, files 10–16, box 64, file 19, box 65—all FFP; *Catalogue of Hamline University for the Year 1880–81*, 14.

10. *St. Paul Dispatch*, Dec. 22, 1903; John Selmes Greenway (great-grandson of Charles E. Flandrau), interviews by author, Tucson, Ariz., Feb. 7, 9, 1990, author's notes; "Child Memories," FFP.

11. Ueland, "Among Those We Know," 26; "Child Memories," FFP; Flandrau to Kyle S. Crichton, undated [1934?], file 30, box 14, FFP.

12. Mary Staples Hodgson to Edward Hodgson, 1900–03, file 6, box 63, file 210, 211, box 26, FFP.

13. Edward R. Hodgson, *Hodgson-Clague-Corrin* (Sacramento, 1971), 70; Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, May 8, June 6, 1932, file 27, box 59, FFP; Muriel E. Nelson (great-niece of Edward Hodgson), telephone interview by author, Aug. 6, 1991; Nelson to author, Oct. 24, 1992, author's possession; Corrin H. Hodgson (great-nephew of Hodgson), telephone interview by author, Dec. 12, 1992; William Hodson obituary, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1943; Flandrau, *Indeed This Flesh*, 45–47; "The Happiest Time," *Scribner's* 41 (June 1932): 335. Edward Hodgson apparently brought Anna R. Hodson and their son William to Minneapolis to live at 749 Quincy Avenue after his family left for Europe. See Anna Hodson entry in *Minneapolis City Directory*, 1901–02.

14. "Child Memories," FFP.

15. Rebecca Riddle Flandrau to John Riddle Jr., Aug. 23, 1909, file 21, box 57, FFP; Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, May 8, 1932, file 27, box 59, FFP. Grace had brief contact with her brother, William Hodson, in 1932. Hodson became the first director of Minnesota's state children's bureau, author of Minnesota's children's code, director of child welfare legislation for the Russell Sage Foundation, president of the National Conference of Social Workers, and director of New York City's Welfare System under Fiorello La Guardia; undated clipping, author's possession; obituary, *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 21, 1943.

16. "Child Memories," FFP.

17. Olivia Irvine Dodge, conversation with author, Dec. 19, 1995; Kate Skiles Klein, conversation with author, June 23, 1993. In an undated letter from the 1950s, Grace Flandrau wrote to John S. Greenway: "I can't tell you how often the scene of my door closing behind me, leaving me alone! without the boredom or irritation or inadequacy of unwanted contact, of being 'safe' . . . relieves and restores me;" file 13, box 13, FFP.

18. Grace Flandrau to Alice M. O'Brien, undated, file 53, box 16, FFP; Ueland, "Among Those We Know," 26; Diary

entries, Mar. 9, 1935, Brenda Ueland Papers, microfilm edition, roll 1, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS); Charles M. Flandrau to Martha Flandrau Selmes, May 19, 1917, Charles M. Flandrau Letters, 1886–1928 (copies of originals in FFP—hereafter Flandrau Letters), MHS; Grace Flandrau to Blair Flandrau, Oct. 30, 1918, file 7, box 12, FFP. Chronic repression and the conflicts in her personality led to emotional stress; beginning in her thirties, she suffered migraines and nervous exhaustion; Grace Flandrau to Blair Flandrau, undated, file 7, box 12; Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Nov. 17, 1917, file 14, box 58, FFP.

19. "Child Memories"; file 212, box 26; Blair Flandrau to Charles Flandrau, 1894–1897, file 2, box 58; Rebecca Flandrau to John Riddle Jr., Aug. 25, 1909, file 21, box 57—all FFP; Mary Griggs Burke, interview by author, Cable, Wisc., Sept. 4, 1994, author's notes.

20. "Child Memories," FFP.

21. "Biographical Notes," from inventory, 2, 10, 13, FFP; *The Bellman*, May 30, 1914, June 6, 1914, Jan. 26, 1915, MHS Library.

22. Rebecca Flandrau to John Riddle Jr., Aug. 25, 1909.

23. Judging from the number of articles about Charles Flandrau as well as the size of his columns between 1915 and 1922 in the *Pioneer Press*, *Dispatch*, and the *Daily News*, it is obvious that the local press considered him a "star"; see, for example, "The Singleness of Charles," *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, May 2, 1915.

24. Grace Flandrau to Blair Flandrau, undated, 1930, file 12, box 13; Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, May 15, 1932, file 27, box 59; Charles Flandrau to John Riddle Jr., Sept. 1, 1910, July 13, 1911, file 64, box 5—all FFP. Charles Flandrau wrote Martha Flandrau Selmes on July 19, 1915: "Blair drinks only beer and not much of it—Grace sees to that"; and on Aug. 13, 1918: "She [Sally Flandrau Cutcheon, a half-sister] is perpetually resentful without knowing it, of the fact that both Blair and I are not being supported in some home for inebriates by Cutcheon," Flandrau Letters. See also Grace Flandrau to Blair Flandrau, undated letter, pleading with Blair to modify his drinking; file 11, box 12, FFP.

25. Charles Flandrau to Martha Flandrau Selmes, Sept. 1910, Feb. 23, 1921, Flandrau Letters.

26. At first Charles bragged that Grace was charming Flandrau relatives; see his letters to Selmes in late 1916 and Feb. 15, 1917, Flandrau Letters. Later he apparently resented Grace: "The alienation was caused by his secret jealousy of her literary success which some felt equalled or surpassed his"; Lawrence P. Haeg, "Little Corners of Great Places: The Private Life of Charles Macomb Flandrau," unpublished biography, 277–78, MHS. Haeg based his assertion on interviews with Flandrau descendants.

27. Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Feb. 19, 1912, file 13, box 58, FFP; Charles Flandrau to Martha Flandrau Selmes, Jan. 13, 1913, Jan. 25, 1915, Flandrau Letters; *St. Paul Daily News*, Apr. 25, 1915; Paul R. Reynolds to Grace Flandrau, Nov. 9, 1917, file 91, box 18, FFP.

28. Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, July 25, 1917, file 14, box 58, FFP.

29. Grace Flandrau to Blair Flandrau, undated, [Nov. 1931?], file 11, box 13, FFP. Blair wrote to Grace, Jan. 30, 1922, file 19, box 58, FFP: "You are a wonderful exception. . . . You, you have *everything*."

30. Hundreds of letters between Grace and Blair Flandrau over their 30-year marriage substantiate their many separations; see files 6–12, box 13, FFP; Meridel LeSueur, interview by author, Hudson, Wisc., July 16, 1990, author's notes. Grace wrote to Blair: "I'm beginning to be more and more uncomfortable about *Being Respectable*. The St. Paulites here [New York] . . . love it but seem to think I can never go back"; undated [early 1923], file 9, box 12, FFP.

31. Flandrau bibliography.

32. Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Jan. 23, 1923, file 20, box 59, FFP; *New York Post*, Aug. 4, 1934.

33. Comments by F. Scott Fitzgerald in the *Literary Digest International*, Mar. 1923, and by Isabel Paterson in the *New York Tribune*, Jan. 28, 1923, are among dozens of favorable reviews of *Being Respectable* in file 76, box 18; Grace Flandrau to Betty Foster Vytlačil, Jan. 25, 1923, file 21, box 13; Fitzgerald to Grace Flandrau, undated, file 69, box 17—all FFP. An announcement of Grace's coming speech on Mexico in the society sec., *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Oct. 28, 1934, mentions the films *Cousin Julia* and *Being Respectable*.

34. Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Jan. 23, 1923, file 20, box 59, FFP; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Jan. 21, 1923; Charles Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Feb. 17, 1923, file 5, box 2, FFP; Hilton W. Griggs to Grace Flandrau, undated [1923?], speculates about the true identity of fictitious characters in *Being Respectable*; file 76, box 18, FFP.

35. *Bookshop Trivia*, Mar. 1, 1923, file 76, box 18, FFP.

36. Ralph Budd to Grace Flandrau, Aug. 21, 1924, file 70, box 17, FFP; Duncan Aikman to Grace Flandrau, Feb. 25, 1985, file 91, box 18, FFP.

37. British review of *Then I Saw the Congo*, file 81, box 18, FFP; "Published Work," file 90, box 18, FFP.

38. Kermit Roosevelt, *Saturday Review of Literature*, Oct. 19, 1929, file 81, box 18, FFP; Charles Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, Sept. 21, 1929, file 10, box 2, FFP.

39. Maxwell E. Perkins to Grace Flandrau, July 2, 1930, file 91, box 18, FFP; Kyle Crichton to Grace Flandrau, July 17, 1930, file 91, box 18, FFP.

40. Kyle Crichton to Grace Flandrau, Jan. 12, 1932, Author Files I, Archives of Charles Scribner's Sons, Dept. of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University (hereafter Scribner's archives), all box 50.

41. James Gray to Charles M. Flandrau, June 16, 1930,

James Gray and Family Papers, MHS.

42. Gray to Charles M. Flandrau, undated [Fall 1930?], and Grace Flandrau to Gray, undated, Gray papers; *St. Paul Dispatch*, Oct. 9, 1936.

43. "Published Work," file 90, box 18, FFP; Kay Boyle, Laurence Vail, and Nina Conarain, *365 Days* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1936); *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 13, 1935, June 15, 1936; Grace Flandrau to Perkins, undated [Nov. 1937?], Scribner's archives; Flandrau speeches at Women's City Club, Oct. 31, 1934; to Minnesota Library Association, Oct. 11, 1935; at MHS annual meetings, Feb. 1941 and Aug. 1962.

44. Diary entries, Nov. 4, 13, 1934, roll 1, Ueland papers.

45. Blair Flandrau to Grace Flandrau, May 8, 1932, file 27, box 59, FFP.

46. Flandrau, *Indeed This Flesh*, 256–61; Perkins to Grace Flandrau, Aug. 7, 1934, Scribner's archives.

47. Grace Flandrau to Perkins (on Thomas Wolfe), June 25, 1935, Scribner's archives; Meridel LeSueur syllabus, 1933, file 41, box 84, FFP; Grace Flandrau to Alice M. O'Brien, undated [1950s], file 26, box 14, FFP.

48. Grace Flandrau to Perkins, undated [Oct. 1936?], Nov. 2, 1936; Perkins to Grace Flandrau, Mar. 21, 1932, Aug. 15, 1933, Aug. 7, Nov. 1, 1934, Apr. 9, 19, July 3, 1935, Feb. 3, 1936, Mar. 24, Oct. 14, 1937, Scribner's archives.

49. Maxwell Perkins to Thomas Boyd, June 6, 1924, quoted in Haeg, "Little Corners of Great Places," 35.

50. Unpublished diaries, file 471, box 50, FFP. Except for her foster mother (who died in 1929) and her foster sister (who died in 1969), there is almost no record of contact between Grace and her Hodgson relatives.

51. "Published Work" file 90, box 18, FFP; Greenway interviews; *American Quarterly*, Spring 1949, p. 9.

52. Grace Flandrau to Richard E. Myers, May 13, 1932, R. E. and Alice Lee Myers Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

53. "Minnesota," *Holiday*, Aug. 1955, p. 68; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, Aug. 16, 1962.

54. *St. Paul Dispatch*, Mar. 12, 1974, and Provisions of Grace Flandrau Trust, 1964, custody of her guardian, John S. Greenway, Tucson, Ariz.

55. Meridel LeSueur to author, Feb. 12, 1990, author's possession.

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