

# Discovering a First Printing of "The Tortoise-shell Cat" by Elizabeth Robins

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The story is collected in *The Mills of the Gods and Other Stories* published only in England, in May 1920. In that format, it has been available on the original version of the Robins Web at Jacksonville State University (since before 2007). All other stories in the volume had been previously published. But Sue Thomas' superbly detailed bibliography of Robins makes no mention of a first printing. In reviewing the circumstances of "The Frog Baby," conceived by 1918, but published only in the *Woman's Leader* in 1920, I consulted the serial publication of *Camilla*, which, like "Frog Baby" fits the style of a narrative that begins *in media res*, or in the middle of the story. Thomas helpfully notes the issues that the longer novel appeared in *Cosmopolitan*, so I located the online issues at *HathiTrust*. I found bound volume 63, June to November and did a search on Robins. Rather surprisingly, the details of "The Tortoise-shell Cat" of August 1917 emerged.

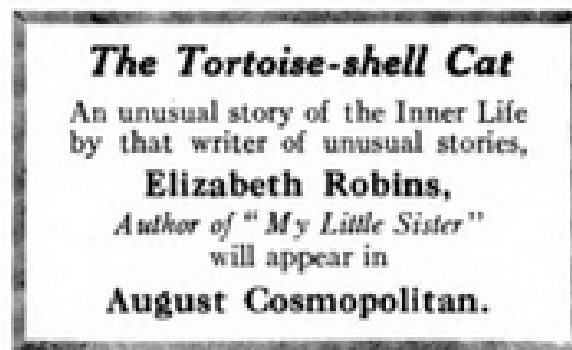
Robins had recorded in her diary in 1915 that Edgar Sisson *Cosmopolitan* had given her the "best offer" of her life, in agreeing to take her fiction for three years. Although both her brother and the editor at *Harper's*, Thomas Wells, cautioned her about the Hearst syndicate's preference for sensational fiction (Robins was no doubt solicited because of the success of *My Little Sister*), and Sisson had complaints about the way the development of *Camilla* proceeded, Robins committed herself to the longer project.

"Tortoise-Shell Cat" likely emerged from the natural tendency of the times to compose war-related stories. She had published "Lost and Found" in 1915 in *Harper's*, and would commit to the more ambitious novel, *The Messenger*, shortly after completing *Camilla*. Though *Camilla* is not time-bound and makes no mention of the war, ER's preface to the book edition, dedicated to Margaret Zöe Hadwen and dated May 1918, vividly describes the circumstances of zeppelin raids in 1915 London, as she thanks her housemate for encouraging her work on her fiction as "a kind of air-raid shelter for the mind" (page vii).

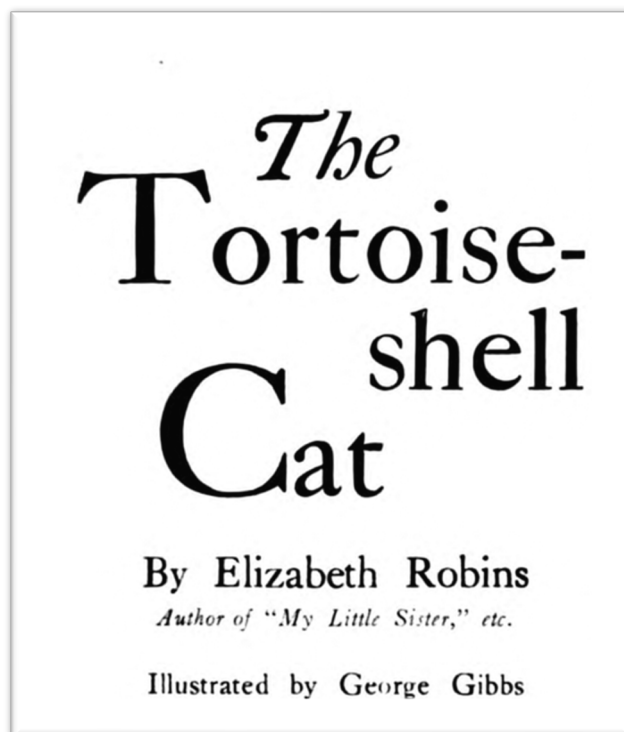
Thus, the significance of *Cosmopolitan's* publication of "Tortoise-shell Cat" is two-fold. It shows how the magazine promoted ER's future fiction, and it shows ER was attuned to

the times when she makes the relief work for the Belgians significant to the story's plot. Furthermore, the lavish illustrations that are typical of the magazine at this time carry through from story to the novel's serialization. Readers are encouraged to consult the imaged reproductions for these details. Here, I will focus on the details of the announcements *Cosmopolitan* used to promote Robins.

Page 115 of the July Issue, 1917 *Cosmopolitan*: This block announcement interrupts the serial printing of *Beyond* by John Galsworthy:



In August, the story appears, elaborately illustrated by George Gibbs:



page 51 of August Cosmopolitan

The catalog record for the entire run of *Cosmopolitan* is

<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000544108>

Specific volume for June to November of 1917

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015082474837&seq=1>

Search there for occurrences of Robins and the yield will include the announcement for "Tortoise-shell Cat," the text of that story, with a notice for ER's forthcoming novel.

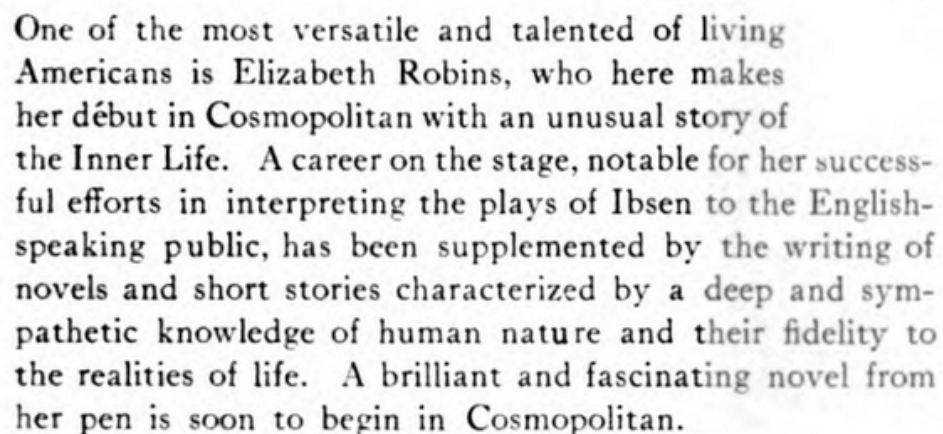
Pagination in volume 63 is as follows:

50-56; 118-122. (At the bottom of 56, "Continued on page 116" is an error, for the jump page is 118); These back pages are interspersed with advertising.

In the seven pages of the first spread, there are seven illustrations, with page 50 consisting entirely only a full page and caption. The title and first page of the text begins on page 51.

It is interesting that the printing of "Tortoise-shell Cat" comes just after Mary Roberts Rinehart's account of "A Pack Train in the Cascades," and that the magazine promoted her just-published book length account *Tenting Tonight*. One thing that unites Rinehart of this time period and Robins' heroine in "Tortoise-shell" is that both Aurea Disston and Rinehart were proponents of aid to Belgian refugees.

Prominent on the first page of text:



One of the most versatile and talented of living Americans is Elizabeth Robins, who here makes her début in *Cosmopolitan* with an unusual story of the Inner Life. A career on the stage, notable for her successful efforts in interpreting the plays of Ibsen to the English-speaking public, has been supplemented by the writing of novels and short stories characterized by a deep and sympathetic knowledge of human nature and their fidelity to the realities of life. A brilliant and fascinating novel from her pen is soon to begin in *Cosmopolitan*.

This novel would be *Camilla*, appearing in the October issue. In the intervening issue, of September 1917, the magazine prints a more specific announcement, page 104:

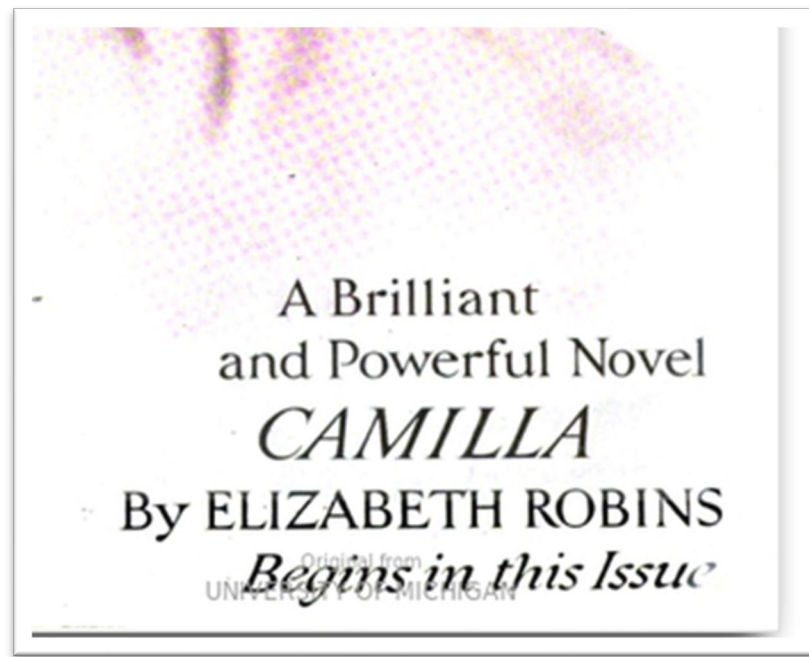


The cover of the October issue then makes the first installment of *Camilla* prominent:



October cover of *Cosmopolitan*

Lower right detail of cover



See my paper on contrasting *Camilla* with Wharton's *Custom of the Country*.

Gates, Joanne E. "Two Trans-Atlantic Divorce Novels: In *Camilla*, Elizabeth Robins Counters Edith Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*." SAMLA presentation for Edith Wharton Society, 14 Nov. 2015, Durham NC.

[https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/fac\\_pres/16/](https://digitalcommons.jsu.edu/fac_pres/16/)

Consult the Sue Thomas entry for serial publication of *Camilla* for full page ranges in each of the issues, October 1917 through September 1918, entry 83 at

<https://victorianfictionresearchguides.org/elizabeth-robins/novels>.

J.E.G. June 2025