

WHAT MY FATHER TAUGHT US

By Mamie Dickens

ELDEST DAUGHTER OF CHARLES DICKENS



MISS DICKENS

under the title of "My Father as I Recall Him," will shortly begin in these pages. This article is in no wise a part of that series. I wish it simply to serve as an introduction to you of that name which we all hold so highly in love and veneration—you, as his reader, I as his daughter. And if through this article, and the series to follow, I can be the means of making you know better the home-character of Charles Dickens, the labor I have undertaken will be repaid a hundred-fold.

THE PRAYER HE TAUGHT US

TO begin this little article, I cannot, I think, do better than take the little prayer which my father wrote for us and which each one of us was taught to repeat night and morning, as soon as we could speak:

"Pray God, Who has made everything, and is so kind and merciful to everything He has made who tries to be good and to deserve it.

"Pray God bless my dear papa, mamma, brothers and sisters and auntie, and all my relations and friends.

"Make me a good little girl. Let me never be naughty, or tell a lie, which is a mean and shameful thing. Make me kind to my nurses and servants, and to all poor people.

"Let me never be cruel to any dumb creature; for if I am cruel to anything, even to a poor, little fly, Thou, who are so good, will never love me.

"Pray God to bless and to preserve us all this night, and forevermore, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."

The word "auntie" was not in the original prayer. I added it for myself. I was quite a tiny child, when she, a very young girl, first came to live with us. And, as I do not remember any part of my life without her, and as I have knelt at her knees as often as I have knelt at my mother's knees to say this prayer, it seemed only natural to me to put her name among those specially mentioned in our evening supplications.

HIS HATRED OF FALSEHOOD

THE line in the prayer "Let me never be naughty or tell a lie," recalls an incident in the childhood of my eldest brother and I, and which will illustrate how my father dealt with falsehood in his children.

We were quite small children, and were living at Ubaro, near Genoa, for the summer months. My brother and I were made to promise that we would not pick or eat any of the fruit in the garden, peaches being especially forbidden. But, alas! I grieve to confess that, Adam-and-Eve-like, we disobeyed, and did eat of that fruit! Whether we confessed our guilt I cannot remember. Anyway, we had through much tribulation to feel the heinous offense of telling a lie. We had a dose of physic each, were undressed and put to bed before noon, and allowed bread and water only for the rest of the day. But it was the disgrace we were made to feel so acutely. And my cheeks get hot now when I think of it! My father did not come into the nursery until late in the afternoon. I remember that his dear face bore a rather sorrowful expression as he saw our shamed looks and downcast eyes, and noticed how tossed about our little beds had become through the long, hot day. He talked to us seriously, though sweetly and gently, and kissed us as he said "good-night." So that although not actually out of disgrace until the next day, we knew that he had forgiven us; and when once a fault had been forgiven by father we never heard an allusion to it again. He rarely referred to past deeds—especially misdeeds.

MY FATHER AS A MASTER

MY father interpolated the line "Make me kind to my nurses and servants" in the prayer because of his rare qualities as a master. As tiny babies, kindness to, and consideration for, others, were qualities taught us even before we could speak, and my father was quick to notice any breach of such observance on our parts, as he was also in the case of grown-up people. He simply hated anything like rudeness or selfishness to servants or subordinates.

The same spirit actuated him in regard to the invocation: "Let me never be cruel to any dumb creature."

Any act of cruelty, however, so-called small, was loathsome to him, and seemed really to hurt him, and to fill him with disgust.

"Mark my words," he said one day about a boy companion of ours, whom he had chanced to see ill-treating a goat, "that boy will never grow up to be a good man." And he took a dislike to him there and then. Certainly—poor fellow! he is dead now—his was not a very worthy life!

HIS INTEREST IN OUR LESSONS

MY father was always much interested about our lessons, looking over our copy-books, slates, etc., pointing out where we were wrong; taking the greatest pains to impress upon us the why and the wherefore of any faults he had to find. He had a curious dislike for the very large round-hand writing copies which were set us in those days and which I have seen still in many school-rooms. He stopped them entirely, at last, considering them a waste of time and of no use whatever in forming a child's handwriting.

WE WERE TAUGHT INDEPENDENCE

WE were all taught, from our youngest days, to be as independent as possible. If we kept pets—birds, rabbits, never mind what—we must see to them ourselves, feed them, look after them, clean out the cages or hutches. If we neglected such care, then the pets would be taken from us.

My sister and I, as little girls, made many journeys from London to the Isle of Wight, where lived some well-beloved friends quite alone. It was rather a formidable journey for two such little things as we were, many changes to be made before we arrived at our destination, but we never minded it; we were never the worse for this early show of independence. In later years, when we were out of the nursery, we never had a maid to walk out with us, or to dress us, or to count out our washing for the laundress, or to spoil us in any way, with what my father thought unnecessary help; but had to be self-helpful, instead.

HIS ADVICE TO HIS CHILDREN

WITH the exception of the first-born, my brothers were sent to school very young. And as they grew up, and were sent out into the world, my father wrote a letter of counsel to each. Here is one such letter:

"I write this note to-day because your going away is much upon my mind, and because I want you to have a few parting words from me to think of now and then, at quiet times. I need not tell you that I love you dearly, and am very, very sorry, in my heart, to part with you. But this life is half made up of partings, and these pains must be borne. It is my comfort, and my sincere conviction, that you are going to try the life for which you are best fitted. I think its freedom and wildness more suited to you than any other experiment in a study or office would ever have been; and without that training you could have followed no other suitable occupation. What you have always wanted until now has been a set, steady, constant purpose. I therefore exhort you to persevere in a thorough determination to do whatever you have to do as well as you can do it. I was not so old as you are now when I first had to win my food, and do this out of this determination, and I have never slackened in it since. Never take a mean advantage of anyone in any transaction, and never be hard upon people who are in your power. Try to do to others as you would like them to do to you; and do not be discouraged if they fail sometimes. It is much better for you that they should fail in obeying the greatest rule laid down by our Saviour than that you should. I have put a New Testament among your books for the very same reasons, and with the very same hopes that made me write an easy account of it for you when you were a little child. Because it is the best book that ever was or will be known in the world; and because it teaches you the best lessons by which any human creature who tries to be truthful and faithful to duty can possibly be guided.

"As your brothers have gone away, one by one, I have written to each such words as I am writing to you, and have entreated them all to guide themselves by this book, putting aside the interpretations and inventions of men. You will remember that you have never at home been wearied about religious observances or mere formalities. I have always been anxious not to weary my children with such things before they are old enough to form opinions respecting them. You will, therefore, understand the better that I now most solemnly impress upon you the truth and beauty of the Christian religion as it came from Christ Himself, and the impossibility of your going far wrong if you humbly but heartily respect it. Only one thing more on this head. The more we are in earnest as to feeling it, the less we are disposed to hold forth about it. Never abandon the wholesome practice of saying your own private prayers night and morning. I have never abandoned it myself, and I know the comfort of it. I hope you will always be able to say, in after life, that you had a kind father. You cannot show your affection for him so well, or make him so happy, as by doing your duty."

I HAVE given you this letter in full, because it will show you, better than any words of mine can, what a true, earnest and humble spirit my father had, and what a thoroughly home-loving spirit it was, too. "There are not," and these are his own words, "in the unseen world voices more gentle or more true, that may be so implicitly relied on, or that are so certain to give none but tenderest counsel, as the voice in which the 'spirits of the fireside and the hearth address themselves to humankind.'"

In my series of articles further along it will be my endeavor to point out other instances of the home-loving spirit which was so truly that of my father.