



My Father As I Recall Him

By Mamie Dickens

IN FIVE PAPERS

FIRST PAPER

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HIS NEATNESS AND PUNCTUALITY

THERE never existed, I think, in all the world, a more thoroughly tidy or methodical creature than was my father. He was tidy in every way—in his great, generous and noble mind, in his handsome and graceful person, in his work, in keeping his writing table drawers, in his large correspondence, in fact in his whole life.

I remember that my sister and I occupied a little garret room in Devonshire Terrace, at the very top of the house. He had taken the greatest pains and care to make the room as pretty and comfortable for his two little daughters as it could be made. He was often dragged up the steep staircase to this room to see some new print or some new ornament which we children had put up, and he always gave us words of praise and approval. He encouraged us in every possible way to make ourselves useful, and to adorn and beautify our rooms with our own hands, and to be ever tidy and neat. I remember that the adornment of this garret was decidedly primitive, the unframed prints being fastened to the wall by ordinary white or black pins, whichever we could get. But, never mind, if they were put up neatly and tidily they were always "excellent," or "quite slap-up" as he used to say. Even in those early days, he made a point of visiting every room in the house once each morning, and if a chair was out of its place, or a blind not quite straight, or a crumb left on the floor, woe betide the offender.

And then his punctuality! It was almost frightful to an unpunctual mind! This again was another phase of his extreme tidiness; it was also the outcome of his excessive thoughtfulness and consideration for others. His sympathy, also, with all pain and suffering made him quite invaluable in a sick room. Quick, active, sensible, bright and cheery, and sympathetic to a degree, he would seize the "case" at once, know exactly what to do and

In the "Gad's Hill" days, when the house was full of visitors, he had a peculiar notion of always having the menu for the day's dinner placed on the sideboard at luncheon time. And then he would discuss every item in his fanciful, humorous way with his guests, much to this effect: "Cock-a-leekie? Good, decidedly good; fried soles with shrimp sauce? Good again; croquettes of chicken? Weak



Mary Hogarth, my mother's sister.

[From the most satisfactory portrait extant]

In these reminiscence papers of my father, which I have been led to write by the Editor of THE LADIES' HOME JOURNAL, I should tell you, my dear American friends, nothing new of him, I can, at least, promise you that what I shall tell will be told faithfully, if simply, and perhaps there may be some things not familiar to you.

A great many writers have taken it upon themselves to write lives of my father, to tell anecdotes of him, and to print all manner of things about him. Of all these published books I have read but one, the only genuine "life" thus far written of him, the one sanctioned by my father himself, namely: "The Life of Charles Dickens," by John Forster.

But in these papers I shall depend chiefly upon my own memory of him, for I wish no other or dearer remembrance. My love for my father has never been touched or approached by any other love. I hold him in my heart of hearts as a man apart from all other men, as one apart from all other beings.

SEEING "GAD'S HILL" AS A CHILD

OF my father's childhood it is but natural that I should know very little more than the knowledge possessed by the great public. But I never remember hearing him allude at any time, or under any circumstances, to those unhappy days in his life except in the one instance of his childish love and admiration for "Gad's Hill," which was destined to become so closely associated with his name and works.

He had a very strong and faithful attachment for places, Chatham, I think, being his first love in this respect. For it was here, when a child, and a very sickly child, poor little fellow, that he found in an old spare room a store of books, among which were "Roderick Random," "Peregrine Pickle," "Humphrey Clinker," "Tom Jones," "The Vicar of Wakefield," "Don Quixote," "Gil Blas," "Robinson Crusoe," "The Arabian Nights" and other volumes. "They were," as Mr. Forster wrote, "a host of friends when he had no single friend." And it was while living at Chatham, that he first saw "Gad's Hill."

As a "very queer small boy" he used to walk up to the house—it stood on the summit of a high hill—on holidays, or when his heart ached for "a great treat." He would stand and look at it, for as a little fellow he had a wonderful liking and admiration for the house, and it was, to him, like no other house he had ever seen. He would walk up and down before it with his father, gazing at it with delight, and the latter would tell him that perhaps if he worked hard, was industrious, and grew up to be a good man, he might some day come to live in that very house. His love for this place went through his whole life, and was with him until his death. He takes "Mr. Pickwick" and his friends from Rochester to Cobham by the beautiful back road, and I remember one day when we were driving that way he showed me the exact spot where Mr. Winkle called out: "Whoa, I have dropped my whip!" After his marriage he took his wife for the honeymoon to a village called Chalk, between Gravesend and Rochester.

Many years after, when he was living with his family in a villa near Lausanne, he wrote to a friend: "The green woods and green shades about here are more like Cobham, in Kent, than anything we dream of at the foot of the Alpine passes." And again, in still later years, one of his favorite walks from "Gad's Hill" was to a village called Shorne, where there was a quaint old church and graveyard. He often said that he would like to be buried there, the peace and quiet of the homely little place having a tender fascination for him. So we see that his heart was always in Kent.

HIS DOMESTIC SIDE AND HOME-LOVE

BUT let this single reference of his earlier years suffice, so that I may write of him during those years when I remember him among us and around us in the home.

From his earliest childhood, throughout his earliest married life to the day of his death, his nature was home-loving. He was a "home man" in every respect. When he became celebrated at a very early age, as we know, all his joys and sorrows were taken home; and he found there sympathy and the companionship of his "own familiar friends." In his letters to these latter, in his letters to my mother, to my aunt, and, later on, to us his children, he never forgot anything that he knew would be of interest about his work, his successes, his hopes or fears. And there was a sweet simplicity in his belief that such news would most certainly be acceptable to all, that is wonderfully touching and childlike coming from a man of genius.

His care and thoughtfulness about home matters, nothing being deemed too small or trivial to claim his attention and consideration, were really marvelous when we remember his active, eager, restless, working brain. No man was so inclined naturally to derive his happiness from home affairs. He was full of the kind of interest in a house which is commonly confined to the women. And his care of and for us as wee children did most certainly "pass the love of women!" His was a tender and most affectionate nature.

HIS LOVE OF CHILDREN

FOR many consecutive summers we used to be taken to a little watering place called Broadstairs. This little place became a great favorite with my father. He was always very happy there, and delighted in wandering about the gardens, generally with his youngest child, "the noble Plorn," in his arms, or trotting by his side. These two were constant companions in those days, and after these walks my father would always have some funny anecdote to tell us. And when years later the time came for the boy of his heart to go out into the world, my father, after seeing him off, wrote: "Poor Plorn has gone to Australia. It was a hard parting at the last. He seemed to become once more my youngest and favorite little child as the day drew near, and I did not think I could have been so shaken. These are hard, hard things, but they might have to be done without means or influence, and then they would be far harder. God bless him!"

When my father was arranging and re-arranging his readings from "Dombey," the death of "little Paul" caused him such real anguish, the reading being so difficult to him, that he told us he could only master his intense emotion by keeping the picture of Plorn,



Dickens Reading to His Daughters in the Garden at "Gad's Hill."

well, strong and hearty, steadily before his eyes. We can see by the different child characters in his books what a wonderful knowledge he had of children, and what a wonderful and truly womanly sympathy he had with them in all their childish joys and griefs. I can remember with us, his own children, how kind, considerate and patient he always was. But we were never afraid to go to him in any trouble, and never had a snub from him or a cross word under any circumstances. He was always glad to give us "treats," as he called them, and used to conceive all manner of those "treats" for us, and if any favor had to be asked we were always sure of a favorable answer. On these occasions my sister "Katie" was generally our messenger, we others waiting outside the study door to hear the verdict. She and I used to have delightful treats in those summer evenings, driving up to Hampstead in the open carriage with him, our mother and "Auntie,"* and getting out for a long walk through the lovely country lanes, picking wild roses and other flowers, or walking hand and hand with him listening to some story.

*When I write about my aunt, or "Auntie," as no doubt I may often have occasion to do, it is of the aunt par excellence, Georgina Hogarth. She has been to me ever since I can remember anything, and to all of us, the truest, best and dearest friend, companion and counselor. To quote my father's own words: "The best and truest friend man ever had."

do it. In all our childish ailments his visits were eagerly looked forward to; and our little hearts would beat a shade faster, and our aches and pains become more bearable, when the sound of his quick footstep was heard, and the encouraging accents of his voice greeted the invalid. I can remember now, as if it were yesterday, how the touch of his hand—he had a most sympathetic touch—was almost too much sometimes, the help and hope in it making my heart full to overflowing. He believed firmly in the power of mesmerism, and was always deeply interested in this subject. I know of many cases, myself among the number, where his power in this was used with perfect success.

And however busy he might be, and even in his hours of relaxation, he was still, if you can understand me, always busy; he would give up any amount of time and spare himself no fatigue if he could in any way alleviate sickness and pain.

AT THE TABLE AND AS HOST

IN very many of my father's books there are frequent references to delicious meals, wonderful dinners and more marvelous dishes, steaming bowls of punch, etc., which have led many to believe that he was a man very fond of the table. And yet I think no more abstemious man ever lived.

very weak; decided want of imagination here," and so on, and he would apparently be so taken up with the merits or demerits of a menu that one might imagine he lived for nothing but the coming dinner. He had a small but healthy appetite, but was remarkably abstemious both in eating and drinking.

He was delightful as a host, caring individually for each guest, and bringing the special qualities of each into full notice and prominence, putting the very best at his or her case, making the best of the most humdrum, and never thrusting himself forward.

But when he was most delightful was alone with us at home and sitting over dessert, and when my sister was with us especially—I am talking now of our grown-up days—for she had great power in "drawing him out." At such times they would discuss mesmerism and other magnetic subjects. One illustration I remember his using was, that meeting some one in the busy London streets he was on the point of turning back to accost the supposed friend when finding out his mistake in time he walked on again until he actually met the real friend, whose shadow, as it were, but a moment ago had come across his path.

And then the forgetting of a word or a name. "Now into what pigeon-hole of my brain did that go, and why do I suddenly remember it now?" And as these thoughts passed through his mind and were spoken softly and dreamily, so they also appeared in his face. Another instant, perhaps, and his eyes would be full of fun and laughter.

THE ORIGINAL OF "LITTLE NELL"

AT the beginning of his literary career he suffered a great sorrow in the death—a very sudden death—of my mother's sister, Mary Hogarth. She was of a most charming and lovable disposition, as well as being personally very beautiful. Soon after my parents married, Aunt Mary was constantly with them. As her nature developed she became my father's ideal of what a young girl should be. And his own words show how this great affection and the influence of the girl's loved memory were with him to the end of his life.

The shock of her sudden death so affected and prostrated him that the publication of "Pickwick" was interrupted for two months. "I look back," he wrote, "and with unmingled pleasure, to every link which each ensuing week has added to the chain of our attachment. It shall go hard I hope ere anything but death impairs the toughness of a bond now so firmly riveted. That beautiful passage you were so kind and considerate as to send to me has given me the only feeling akin to pleasure, sorrowful pleasure it is, that I have yet had connected with the loss of my dear young friend and companion, for whom my love and attachment will never diminish, and by whose side, if it please God to leave me in possession of sense to signify my wishes, my bones whenever or wherever I die, will one day be laid."

She was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery, and her grave bears the following inscription, written by his father:

"Young, beautiful and good, God in His mercy numbered her among His angels at the early age of seventeen."

There is no doubt that in "Little Nell" much of Aunt Mary's character is reproduced.

A year after her death, in writing to my mother from Yorkshire, he says: "Is it not extraordinary that the same dreams which have constantly visited me since poor Mary died follow me everywhere? After all the change of scene and fatigue I have dreamt of her ever since I left home, and no doubt shall until I return. I would fain believe, sometimes, that her spirit may have some influence over them, but their perpetual repetition is extraordinary."

IN the course of years there came changes in our home, inevitable changes. But no changes could ever alter my father's home-loving nature. As he wrote to Mr. Forster, as a young man, so it was with him to the time of his death: "We shall soon meet, please God, and be happier than ever we were in all our lives. Oh! home—home—home!!!"

[Miss Dickens' second article will be printed in the next (December) JOURNAL under the general title of "A Christmas with Dickens," portraying the great novelist's Christmas frolics in his home and at the family yule-tide table, etc.]