



Author of "Donovan," "We Two," "Knight Errant," "Won by Waiting," etc.

A FEW years ago some of our leading writers were questioned as to how early they could recall any distinct picture of the past. Miss Jean Ingelow was among those whose memory was most tenacious—she could recollect things that had happened when she was two years old.

My very first remembrance is of a narrow lane bordered by elder bushes. I was three years old and was walking with my sister and our nurse, when suddenly we came face to face with the first romance that had ever touched our lives. Coming toward us we saw a certain kinsman who had always been a favorite in our nursery, and beside him walked a most beautiful lady; they stopped to speak to us. There was something impressive and delightful in their happiness, and we were laughingly threatened with banishment to the other side of the elder hedge unless we at once adopted the beautiful lady as our kinswoman. What did it all mean? we asked. Why, to be sure, they were engaged to be married.

Swiftly following on this scene comes the memory of the first time that illness, sorrow and death became faintly realized. All England was mourning the death of the Prince Consort. We children, impressed, no doubt, by the black dresses, and hearing much of the noble life that could so ill be spared, at once made the Prince our hero of heroes. I remember most vividly how the nursery curtain represented a canopy and my doll was transformed into a fever-stricken prince, and how, just when absorbed in this dramatic representation, it was most annoying to be called away to entertain a little cousin who broke in upon my tragedy, and who was not even clad in black, but wore the Rob Roy tartan.

These were my first "studies"; but it was not until I was nine years old that the desire to write seized me. Darnell's copy books were a weariness to the flesh, and there were those dreadful rules about pen-holding—fingers straight, thumb bent, two fingers on the pen and slope the end over your shoulder! How could one be a novelist till the dark days of "copy-writing" were over?

In the meantime, however, much of the future training of an author was going on. We were blessed with a nurse whose sympathies were wide and far-reaching, and I owe a great deal to her kindly heart and to her unflinching readiness to tell us all that she had heard and seen. Moreover, being the youngest of the family, it chanced that I heard books read and topics discussed between the elder ones and my parents, which very soon widened the world for me. The right and the wrong way of spending money was a problem often spoken about, and even with an allowance of a penny a week it seemed a curiously vital question. The cruelty of buying very cheap things for which working men or women must have been underpaid, made much impression on us, chiefly, no doubt, because it was a point on which my father felt so very strongly. "Never bring home such a thing again," he said, when one day we gleefully showed him a little six-penny New Testament in very pretty binding. "It couldn't have been rightly produced for that money."

Politics were very real, and were somehow made interesting to us, my father encouraging us to think on such subjects. My first political hero was Mr. Fawcett, and I can clearly recall the excitement of his election for Brighton. It was partly his blindness which made him my hero, for suffering much from weak eyes, I well knew what it was to live in the dark, and my mother had told me how cleverly she had seen Mr. Fawcett manage at a dinner-party, and how he would not allow his loss of sight in any way to spoil his life.

Another region of debate was opened by the frequent visits of the well-known Dr. Archibald J. Stephens, Q. C., an old friend of my father's. I have misty recollections of hearing a good deal about the ritual proceedings, but the real enjoyment of those visits lay in the endless jokes and stories with which the great man used to enliven us. They alleviated the woes of having to eat beef and mutton with no appetite; and I can well remember how our kindly friend would sometimes take compassion on the dainty little girl sitting beside him, and with rather alarming speed, seasoned with much fun and coaxing, would actually feed her; and, of course, when thus honored, one had to eat out of sheer gratitude!

By this time one's capacity for hero-worship—surely an indispensable quality in a novelist—was being daily stimulated by the records of the past. After a course of old Roman heroes, I became a devotee of Oliver Cromwell, and the Cromwell worship was much aided by visits to kinsfolk living in an old Suffolk hall—the "Mondisfield" of "In the Golden Days." Charles Lamb says that "nothing fills a child's mind like a large old mansion peopled with the spirits of deceased members of the county and justices of the quorum." And undoubtedly I owe much to that quaint old house, with its hall and musicians' gallery, its hiding places, its old walled garden, its moat and its park with the "stews," in which the abbots of St. Edmundsbury loved in days of yore to fish. It was Mondisfield, too, which furnished me with a first-hand knowledge of Nonconformity, and accus-

tomed me to realize that many of the best people living did not worship as we did in "church" but went to "chapel." Unable as yet to write with any speed or comfort, I had stories simmering in my brain, and long before the plot of "In the Golden Days" developed itself, I used to play in the old minstrels' gallery at a game in which a yielding and over-submissive younger brother was tyrannized over by an elder brother and guardian. The characters were perfectly real to me, but it was only when visiting Mondisfield that I cared to play with them. Years after, when "We Two" was finished, and I was vainly trying to become interested in another story, it chanced that I was staying at the old Suffolk hall. There were long quiet mornings, and for a study, a big old paneled room hung round with family portraits, and there was a steady table for my typewriter, but somehow this new story would not "work"; I grew to hate it. One day, while pacing up and down beside the bowling green, the two brothers who had been the hero and the villain of my childish game, suddenly returned like old familiar friends. It was borne in upon me that I must write their story, which bit by bit unfolded itself. With great joy I forever forsook that modern story which would not "work," hunted up all the old records and histories which the house could furnish, and when the plot was completed, hurried off to the reading-room of the British Museum to study the times of Charles II and the history of the Rye House plot.

Returning once more to the influences which in early life did most to fit me for future work, I must mention two which were specially powerful. The first was



the opportunity of hearing good standard books read. My father was a very good reader, and we enjoyed nothing better than hearing him read the "Waverly Novels." Jane Austen's novels, with their delicious humor, were far beyond the comprehension of a child of eight or nine, and I confess to having thought them extremely dull. But Sir Walter Scott opened a whole world of delight to us, and to my way of thinking, it was a more wholesome world than that revealed to the rising generation by the very fascinating, but often morbid studies of child-life provided nowadays in the countless "children's books."

The other influence for which I daily feel thankful, and without which it would have been impossible for me to publish "We Two" at a time when the controversy over Mr. Bradlaugh and the Parliamentary oath was still raging, or to publish "Doreen" while Home Rulers are regarded as disloyal Separatists, was of a different kind, and it came from my mother.

Undoubtedly I was born a coward; my mother, by infinite patience and gentle encouragement, taught me to fight my fears. One of my greatest terrors was an old street-fiddler with hideously crooked legs and deformed feet; he used to prop himself up on two sticks and play melancholy, tuneless music, which in itself was gruesome. My mother taught me first to pity him, then a penny was given to me and, though never ordered to take it to him, it was suggested to me that he was a very poor old man. I can remember now running desperately across the road and thrusting the coin into his hand, then finding that after all he was not so dreadful, and finally, as time went on, learning to take an interest in his visits to our street.

There was, however, a worse terror still to be faced—the terror of wickedness. Coming into my room one evening, about ten o'clock, my mother found me wide

awake staring in panic-stricken fascination at a cupboard opposite the bed. Sobbing and shivering I told her my story. I had heard the others say that while out-of-doors that afternoon a beggar woman had followed them for a long way begging and protesting. At last my aunt had said to her: "I think you had better go away," and the beggar had angrily retorted: "I hope the Almighty will say so to you at the day of judgment." This cruel wish seemed to me the most horrible and heartless thing I had ever heard—the beggar must surely be a sort of monster of wickedness. If she could wish God to send us to hell she was capable of anything, and the more I looked at the half-open cupboard the more certain I became that this wicked beggar, with a heart full of hatred, was inside it, and waiting an opportunity to murder us. With many comforting assurances I was led to that dreadful half-open door, and we shook every dress in the cupboard and looked high and low, and my fears were conquered by the truth. "Now," said my mother, "I am going to give you a motto. It is just this: Take the bull by the horns. Whatever it is that you are afraid of, make yourself walk straight up to it."

I should be ashamed to confess how many ghosts I have had to lay in this fashion, but the habit taught in childhood was of great service when the time came for facing "the spectres of the mind," and without it "Donovan" would never have seen the light.

Looking through a desk full of old letters the other day I found my mother's first mention of the childish attempts at writing, which began when I was about nine. "Little Ellie has taken to writing stories, and uncommonly good they are. I shall keep them for your amusement." My father's reply was: "Don't make too much of Ellie's stories; teach her to be active in her duties."

Helped at the outset by their wise guidance and loving sympathy, I always held fast to the determination to train myself for my future work. Both in the schoolroom and out of it, this preparing was always in my mind, helping even to sweeten that dreary book, "Morell's Analysis." My governess tried hard to make me a botanical collector, but it was of no use; the only "collecting mania" I ever had was a rage for collecting proverbs, or quotations, or curious country sayings. Interests and special "hobbies" are doubtless born in people and cannot be artificially induced.

Though incorrigibly stupid at mathematics, and seldom deeply interested in science, they found me an apt pupil at anything connected with literature or history.

The seventeenth century always had a special fascination for me, and, after a brief wavering in schoolroom days, when a very pathetic picture of Charles I and some thrilling cavalier stories temporarily eclipsed the grand figure of the Protector, I returned to my allegiance, and in course of time endeavored to show in "To Right the Wrong" that it was possible to be an honest, God-fearing, well-bred Englishman, yet to espouse the Parliamentary side in the great Civil War.

It was not, however, hero-worship of the great characters of the past alone which influenced my future career as a novelist. Often a character in real life would suddenly stand out, as it were, from its surroundings, and become to me for no particular reason the hero or heroine of my next story. A child, who at a Christmas tree seemed intent on finding out what the other children wanted, and seeing in an unobtrusive, tactful way, that the hostess understood their wishes, became for a time my heroine. A consumptive-looking assistant in a music shop, who seemed too good for his surroundings, but was alert and ready and civil, though apparently with one foot in the grave, became the hero of a childish story called "Mervyn's Ordeal." I remember there was a wicked uncle in it, who forged the hero's name, and made him falsely suspected by his employers, and that agony point was reached when the falsely-accused "Mervyn," suffering mental and physical torments, was set to tune pianos! He gallantly supported two sisters. I chose their lodgings for them in a dreary side street, leading out of King's Road, and recollect that their diet consisted largely of Dutch cheese! This was the forerunner of the "Hardy Norseman."

But no one brought so much pleasure to me in schoolroom days as the celebrated Welsh singer, Edith Wynne—for whom I must always feel gratitude and affection. Quite unknown to herself, she was, by her beautiful voice and perfect oratorio-singing, giving untold delight to her small devotee at Brighton, who at that time, being orphaned and unhappy, doomed moreover from frequent attacks of ophthalmia to spend many weeks in idleness, sorely needed help and comfort. This devotion to a public singer led me to take the greatest interest in the musical world, and whenever the state of my eyes permitted it I was scribbling at a story about a charming Irish soprano named "Cecil Keogh," who was the prototype of "Doreen."

There was never, of course, any notion of publishing these crude first attempts; one wrote for the joy of writing, and because it was impossible to resist the craving to describe the beloved heroes and heroines. Moreover, the continual effort to express things clearly and graphically, the countless revisions of the well-worn manuscripts, and the habit of living in close communion with many characters, were all, doubtless, parts of the preparation for that happy future when being "grown up" it would be possible seriously to set to work.

From those past days up to the present time there has always been a story on hand, and writing has become so much a part of my life that it is difficult quite to understand what life without a vocation would be like, or how people exist without "dream children." They cost one much suffering, and bring many cares and anxieties; they are not what we could wish, and we are conscious of their faults. Still they are our "dream children," and when they cheer the dull, or interest the overworked, or help the perplexed, there comes a glad sense that it has all been worth while, and we are thankful that the gift was given us.