

DINAH MORRIS AND MRS. ELIZABETH EVANS.

AMONG the thousands of readers and admirers of George Eliot's great novel "Adam Bede," there were, until lately, comparatively few who knew with any certainty that the principal characters in that book were drawn from life. The attempt to identify the characters in the novel with real people has given rise to much discussion, and many contradictory statements have been made. When the novel appeared in 1859 there were several people who at once declared that Dinah Morris was intended to represent a Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, of Wirksworth, in Derbyshire, an aunt of George Eliot. The identification of other characters followed, Adam Bede being supposed to represent Robert Evans, the father of the author, and Seth his brother Samuel, both carpenters of Ellaston, near Ashbourne. Incident after incident was recognized as having occurred in the lives of these people, and great interest was excited throughout Derbyshire among the numerous friends of Mr. and Mrs. Evans.

The opinion has been frequently expressed that Dinah was "an impossible character;" but that such a woman really did live and work among the Methodists of Derbyshire, there are many witnesses ready to testify.

In 1876 a book was published, entitled "George Eliot in Derbyshire," in which the writer pointed out some of the resemblances which have led to the identification of the various characters, quoting passages from a short account of Mrs. Evans's life, written by herself. The writer of this book received a letter, in which "George Eliot" begged him to understand that Dinah Morris was never intended to be a representation of Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, and that any identification of the two (or of any other characters in "Adam Bede," with real persons) would be protested against as not only false in fact and tending to perpetuate false notions about art, but also as a gross breach of social decorum." This letter was, I believe, written by the late Mr. G. H. Lewes.

Having been acquainted with the family of Mrs. Evans for many years, I am possessed of some facts which make it difficult for me to believe that George Eliot herself would have made such a statement; and I now propose to give a few incidents which came under my own notice some years ago, and which have not before been published. In doing this I have no intention of going over the same

ground as that already trodden by Guy Roslyn in the book before mentioned, but it will be necessary to give a few of the comparisons made by him between the characters in the novel and real persons.

The description of Dinah's personal appearance and peculiar dress tallies almost exactly with that of Mrs. Evans. The scenes of their labor were identical (for I think no one will attempt to deny that the scenes in "Adam Bede" are laid in Derbyshire and Staffordshire), and the manner of the two women preachers was the same. Dinah felt a conviction that she was "called" to preach the Gospel, and that her life had been given her to "devote to the Lord, to help, to comfort and strengthen the little flock at Snowfield, and to call in many wanderers." And she says: "My soul is filled with these things from my rising up to my lying down." Mrs. Evans says: "I believe the kind hand of God had been upon me all the days of my life. I believe the Lord directed me to leave my father's house when I was little more than fourteen years old. * * * He blessed me with clear light concerning the nature of preaching." Dinah says: "My life is too short, and God's work is too great for me to think of making a home for myself in this world." Mrs. Evans writes: "I was powerfully impressed with the shortness of time. I saw it my duty to be wholly devoted to God, and to be set apart for the Master's use." We are told that Dinah and Seth were Methodists "of a very old-fashioned kind. They believed in present miracles, in instantaneous conversions, in revelations by dreams and visions. They drew lots and sought for divine guidance by opening the Bible at hazard." In like manner, Mrs. Evans says: "I saw in the night seasons the places I must speak in, the roads to some of those places, the people I must speak to, and the thing on which I must stand, together with the opposition I should meet with, before I took my journey. If I wanted to know anything I had only to ask, and it was given, generally in a moment, whether I was in the public street or at my work, or in my private room; and many—I think I may say hundreds of times—the Lord shone upon His word and shewed me the meaning thereof." The expression, "It has been borne in upon my mind," was an expression frequently used by both Dinah and Mrs. Evans. In Dinah's sermon on Hayslope Green

she singles out and addresses Bessie Cranage, and tells her of a young woman who "thought of her lace caps and saved all her money to buy 'em. * * * And one day, when she put her new cap on and looked in the glass, she saw a bleeding Face, crowned with thorns." This idea George Eliot has said she received from Mrs. Evans, who often told it as a miracle in which she firmly believed. In the description of Dinah's sermon on the green, the author speaks of "the charm of Dinah's mellow treble tones, which had a variety of modulation, like that of a fine instrument touched with the unconscious skill of musical instinct. * * * The effect of her speech was produced entirely by the inflections of her voice." No words could better describe the wonderful influence of Mrs. Evans's voice. Wherever she was people seemed compelled to listen, sometimes against their will. In support of this statement I will relate a circumstance which occurred at the time of Mrs. Evans's death in 1849. It was told me by an eye-witness, and I give it in her own words:

"I was in the habit of visiting Mrs. Evans almost every day during the latter years of her life, and I have sat for hours listening as she related her experience. The day after her death I was in the house when two strangers came to the door and asked if Mrs. Evans lived there, and upon hearing the news of her death expressed great sorrow. They said that many years ago she was preaching in the village where they lived, as young men, and they went to the place for the purpose of making fun of and persecuting her, even contemplating throwing stones at the woman preacher. They hid themselves behind a hedge, close to where Mrs. Evans was standing, and waited for her to begin. The moment she commenced speaking their attention was arrested; they did not know at first what she was saying, but felt compelled to listen; her voice seemed to fascinate them: it was like nothing they had ever heard before. They listened throughout the prayer and sermon and went home forgetting all about the purpose that had taken them to the spot. Soon after this they became local preachers, and they had searched almost throughout England to find the woman to whom they owed so much, thinking how pleased she would be to hear that her efforts had been so successful. They had only found her when it was too late, for she had died a few hours before their arrival."

The same person says, "I could have filled volumes with the remarkable stories she told me of her remarkable life, of her dreams and their alleged fulfillment, of the 'revelations' of the Divine Presence which she frequently experienced; of the way in which she had

had strength given her to fulfill her duties, when it seemed impossible to carry out her plans. I well remember her telling me that one Sunday she was 'planned' to preach at Bakewell, ten miles from Wirksworth. The week before she was seized with a violent attack of rheumatic fever and could not move a limb; her body was full of pain, and her mind was disturbed about the following Sunday's duties. She prayed constantly, night and day—the impression was strong that she was needed at Bakewell. The pain continued until the Saturday night, when it suddenly left her, she fell into a deep, untroubled sleep, and arose the next morning perfectly free from pain. She walked to Bakewell through pouring rain, preached in her wet clothes, and returned home the same day, and felt no ill effects from her journey, but a blessed sense of having been given special strength to do the Lord's work.

"She also told me of her first meeting with her husband; how he followed her about from place to place, how for a long time she resisted his earnest pleading, but at last yielded and became his wife, and how she had found him a great help and not a hinderance in her work. Mr. Evans would sit in his corner by the fire and laugh in his own hearty way as his wife related the particulars of his courtship. Mr. Evans always enjoyed a joke, and would join in a laugh against himself with a heartiness which proved its sincerity. Sometimes, when several friends were in the house, laughing and talking, Mrs. Evans would express a fear that they were getting too worldly, and say, in her quiet, gentle way, 'My dear, shall we have a word of prayer?' 'Yes, dear, if thee likes,' her husband would reply; and I think no one could have failed to feel better for hearing her prayers. They were so simple, so loving, so full of faith; she never got excited, or shouted, but seemed to be speaking to some one present."

In the paragraph preceding Dinah's prayer on Hayslope Green it is said, "She (Dinah) closed her eyes, and hanging her head down a little, continued in the same moderate tones, as if speaking to some one quite near her."

If it were an ordinary character we are considering, one that may be met with in everyday life, these points of resemblance might be accepted as merely coincidences. But where throughout the length and breadth of England can such a woman be found? How many such women have the last two centuries given to the world?

It may be asked why has the world never heard of Mrs. Evans? How is it her life has never been written? The answer to this is, first, that it was Mrs. Evans's wish that it should not be done; and secondly, those of her friends who would or could have done it

said it would be superfluous to attempt a thing that had already been so well done. A life of Mrs. Evans could only be a repetition of Dinah Morris's, and no one could give to the world such a picture of Mrs. Evans as the writer of "Adam Bede" had done. The scenes and situations, and the circumstances, even to the veriest details, agree, and, fortunately, we have some evidence as to how and under what circumstances these particulars were obtained.

In a letter written by George Eliot to a friend, in 1859, she gives the dates of her visits to her aunt, Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, at Wirksworth, the first being when she was quite a child, and again some years after, when she stayed *one night* at the "Wirksworth cottage." But, strange to say, she makes no mention of a visit in 1842, when she remained a week at the house of her cousin, Mr. Samuel Evans. During that visit Mary Ann Evans was with her aunt every day for several hours. They used to go to the house of one of Mrs. Evans's married daughters, where they had the parlor to themselves and had long conversations. These secret conversations excited some curiosity in the family, and one day Mrs. Evans's daughter said, "Mother, I can't think what thee and Mary Ann have got to talk about so much." To which Mrs. Evans replied, "Well, my dear, I don't know what she wants, but she gets me to tell her all about my life and my religious experience, and she puts it all down in a little book. I can't make out what she wants it for." While at Wirksworth Miss Evans made a note of everything people said in her hearing: no matter who was speaking, down it went into the note-book, which seemed never out of her hand. These notes she transcribed every night before retiring to rest. After her departure Mrs. Evans said to her daughter, "Oh dear, Mary Ann has got one thing I did not mean her to take away, and that is the notes of the first sermon I preached on Ellaston Green." The sermon preached by Dinah on Hayslope Green has been recognized as one of Mrs. Evans's. In the letter before referred to, Miss Evans, or George Eliot, mentioned some conversations she had with her aunt when the latter was on a visit to them, and particularly

one from which she got the idea of Hetty Sorrel's character. This is what George Eliot wrote:

"As to my aunt's conversation, it is a fact, that the only two things of any interest I remember in our lonely sittings and walks, are her telling me one sunny afternoon how she had, with another pious woman, visited an unhappy girl in prison, stayed with her all night, and gone with her to execution, and one or two accounts of supposed miracles in which she believed—among the rest, *the face with the crown of thorns seen in the glass*. In her account of the prison scenes, I remember no word she uttered—I only remember her tone and manner, and the deep feeling I had under the recital. Of the girl she knew nothing, I believe—or told me nothing—but that she was a common, coarse girl, convicted of child-murder. The incident lay in my mind for years on years, as a dead germ, apparently—till time had made my mind a nidus in which it could fructify; it then turned out to be the germ of 'Adam Bede.'"

Whether, in Dinah Morris, George Eliot intended to represent Mrs. Evans or not, she did represent her faithfully and fully. The influence of her aunt's holy life and simple faith on the youthful but troubled mind of Mary Ann Evans was very great, as may be seen from her own words. In writing of her aunt, she says: "She was very gentle and quiet in her manners, very loving, and (what she must have been from the very first) a truly religious soul, in whom the love of God and love of man were fused together." This was written in 1859. I have had the pleasure and privilege of reading some letters from the great novelist to Mrs. Elizabeth Evans, written during the years 1839, 1840, and 1841, in which the writer regrets her inability to realize for herself the deep spiritual peace and happiness experienced by Mrs. Evans. That a great admiration and affection was felt by the writer of these letters for her aunt is evident, and when all form of religious belief was given up by George Eliot, the grief of Mrs. Evans can be better imagined than described. With such evidence before them, it is hardly to be wondered at if the public believe that Mrs. Elizabeth Evans more than "suggested" Dinah Morris. The only point at which the writer has deviated from fact is in the marriage of Dinah and Adam. As a matter of fact the real Dinah married Seth Bede (Samuel Evans). Adam was George Eliot's father, Robert Evans.

L. Bulkley.

