

"I told you that I had never loved before, and that I should never love again. Nevertheless, I would not have you marry me out of gratitude. If you think that you can never return my affection, it is better that you should say so at once. It will make no difference. I will still be your brother, and your servant to command. I would rather know my fate, though. Helen, tell me, dearest : can you ever care for me?"

For answer, Helen put her hand in his, and murmured one little word. It was sufficient. After an interval of supreme contentment, she raised her head from his shoulder, and looked into his honest face, which was transformed for the time by happiness into absolute good looks.

"Why did you not wait for an answer—*before*, John? You were much too ready to jump to a conclusion."

"Do you mean to say that you would have accepted me then?"

"I am not sure—not quite, that is. But at least you ought to have waited for an answer."

"But you laughed at me; and no woman loves the man she laughs at."

"Oh, that is an old-fashioned idea, exploded long ago. I believe I loved you all the time I laughed at you. I am a novelist, and I laugh at most things in their season, myself included. Now, dear, I must really go, or poor little Elsie will think I am lost."

Mrs. Middlemist is one of the happiest and busiest women in London. She manages to write her best, look after her delicate sister and two or three fine healthy children, and act hostess in one of the most charming and well-ordered of homes. The old house rings with young voices and happy laughter, and John Middlemist's solitary life is transformed to one overflowing with love and joyousness. As for Elsie, she simply worships the ground he treads on.

Helen declares that she had no right to expect that her study from life would gain her the best husband in the world.

But strangely enough, when her stories were gathered together and republished in book form, that identical story was found to have been left out.

MR. WALTER BESANT AND THE EAST-ENDERS.

BY RAYMOND BLATHWAYT.



TALK from which I derived much useful information and no end of "copy," and in which I am proud to state I gave the experienced novelist a complete lesson in a little known Art—Art with a big A, if you please—the Art of Interviewing. It was on this wise:—

"Well," said Mr. Besant, whom I had had the pleasure of meeting before, "what shall we talk about this morning?"

I replied—

"The material for your East-end novels."

"But," said he, aghast, "there is nothing to say. I simply walked about the East-end, and wrote down almost exactly what I saw and heard."

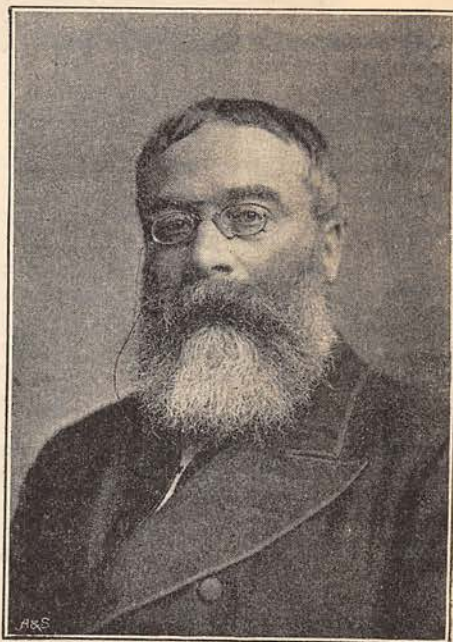
"Precisely," I replied: "and that is where the interview comes in. It is *what* you saw and heard during your five-and-twenty-years' walks in London that I want you to tell me about."

Like Wordsworth's little girl, nothing I could say could move Mr. Besant from his assertion that "there was nothing to tell."

"Now, now, Mr. Besant," I expostulated, "think of your charming books, and all the characters in them: 'Uncle what's his name' in 'All Sorts and Conditions of Men,' 'Polly-which-is-Marla,' and 'Sam' the Socialist, and Claude and Valentine and Violet in 'The Children of Gibeon,' and 'Miss Messenger,' and the old American claimant in 'All Sorts.' And think of the places, and pursuits, and modes of life and speech described in these books of yours. Why,

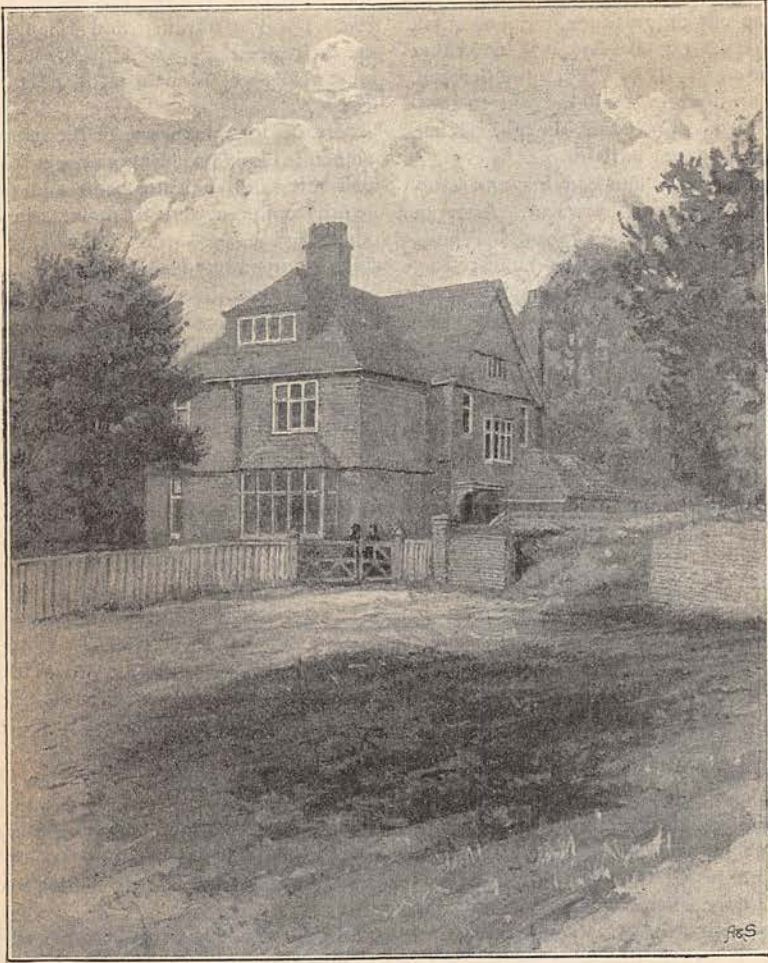
they are veritable storehouses of information as well as imagination."

Mr. Besant smiled good-humouredly through his



MR. WALTER BESANT.

(From a photograph by Elliott & Fry, Baker Street, W.)



MR. BESANT'S HOUSE.

spectacles as he replied, "Upon my word, I believe you are right, after all."

"Of course I am," said I: "that goes without saying."

And he began forthwith, making use now and again in speaking, as he does so frequently and amusingly in writing, of the capital letters, with which he now, and Dickens and Wilkie Collins in the past, have so familiarised us. Indeed, Mr. Besant once told me that he was very fond of them. "They are so effective," he said. But before I write down all that he told me, let me briefly describe the man and his surroundings as I saw them.

Mr. Walter Besant is a short, sturdy, pleasant-faced and pleasant-voiced man, full of sympathy and common sense, with a brisk, bright, business-like manner, which puts one quite at ease immediately. He walked up and down the room, which was in the "Society of Authors" building in Portugal Street, the whole time he was talking to me, looking at the portraits of the different literary men of this century:

Lowell, O. W. Holmes, Emerson, Darwin, Tyndall, etc., which stood in a row upon the mantel-shelf. He drew my attention especially to the replica of the bust of Richard Jeffries, which has been placed in Salisbury Cathedral to the memory of the great naturalist, and in praise of whom Mr. Besant recently penned so warm an eulogy.

Forthwith, as I have previously said, Mr. Besant began. As a matter of fact, I led off by saying—

"Well, we had better begin with the *locale* of your novels."

"Quite so," he replied; and gradually, and as in a chemical process, the whole of the East-end differentiated itself into many and varied particles. "It is practically an undiscovered country," said Mr. Besant. "We know a good deal about Timbuctoo, and the Falkland Islands, and the Himalayan recesses, but we know little or nothing about the East-end. It is a world, a great, weary, heart-breaking and heart-broken world in itself. Let us divide it into its natural sections. First of all, let me observe how new

it is. I once called attention to that fact in a pamphlet I wrote for the *Gentleman's Magazine*. Only a hundred and forty years ago the vast great city we now call the East-end didn't exist at all. There was no East-end; all was open country, with an occasional village or cluster of houses. The Great Joyless City of two millions of people, without a gentleman among them, or a rich man, or a nobleman, or an artist, or an author, or anybody at all lifted above themselves by culture and education—except the clergy—did not exist. There were hardly any buildings. There was St. Dunstan's Church and its churchyard, thinly peopled by the rude forefathers of the hamlet of Stepney, a green and grassy meadow set with trees, and birds singing in it, and two or three white stones to mark the resting-place of some substantial farmer or retired merchant. There were some very picturesque old houses which formed what was known in 1741 as Mile End Old Town, and near Stepney there was a tavern called the 'World's End,' a name which speaks volumes. Beyond that, only fields, farms, and open country. And now—well, you know what the East-end of London is quite as well as I can tell you. But what, perhaps, you don't know so well as I do who have made a life-long study of it is the marvellously varied types of life which you find in different parts of the East-end. There is the riverside at Shadwell, where you meet with scarcely any but sailors: 'Seven men from all the world, just come home to-day,' and reeling joyously about the streets, as Rudyard Kipling so graphically depicts them after having 'brought the *Bolivar* safe across the Bay.' Shadwell, in which there are now so many streets, with a fine, breezy, free-and-easy, roystering, drinking, singing, dancing, roaring, fighting, love-making, stabbing, robbing, murdering, press-ganging kind of life going on in them—the short and merry life, the live to-day and die to-morrow life—the devil-may-care life. And there in Execution Dock, just below Wapping New Stairs, are quantities of ships lying off either bank, where, when the pay is gone—which takes very little time—and the man is sobered down, he may find a craft for any port he pleases in the whole world. And there are Ratcliffe and Poplar, with the dockers; all sorts and conditions of men there, I can tell you," emphatically cried Mr. Besant: "the simple rustic, the university graduate, the broken-down tradesman, the farmer who has failed, you will find them all there, making up with the regular native East-ender a whole world of itself. Then there is the world of the Sweaters and the Sweated. That extends all over London, I fear. There is the foreign element, and the element of those who were once foreigners, but who now probably know of no life, except by tradition, but the hard, weary, grinding life of the East. Hackney resolves itself into a collection of dull villas, inhabited by the apparently well-to-do. Then there are Bromley and Mile End, with their houses running from twenty-five pounds to forty pounds per annum, and which are inhabited by that class—that very large class—of the Respectable. A dreary, weary monotony pervades it

all—pervades and permeates the whole of this vast district, in which two millions of people are living out a monotonous existence."

"Held down and crushed under the heel of the Giant of the Commonplace," I interpolated.

"Exactly," replied Mr. Besant, with an eager vivacity; "you have described it to the life. It was that terrible monotony that had so fatal a fascination for me, and which really drove me to the writing of those books. Far more than the poverty. I often think there is more poverty in the West-end than in the East."

"Do you really?" said I. "But Mr. Osborne Jay, the well-known Vicar of Holy Trinity, Shoreditch, in preaching to a West-end congregation, asked his hearers some time ago if they realised that where one person died in the West-end fifteen died in Shoreditch. That seemed very pathetic to me."

"Yes," said Mr. Besant, "and it may be true; but there is as great poverty elsewhere. But, as I was saying, I was attracted not so much by the poverty as by the monotonous level of the lives in the East-end. There you have miles and miles of streets, the long, unlovely streets: a hideous sameness, which, more than anything else, crushes the life out of the inhabitants. And all this vast city is a city without a centre. That was what struck me as being so remarkable. No government, no municipality, no mayor and aldermen, no resident gentry, and at first sight no institutions, no newspapers in a city of two millions, except, perhaps, a little local sheet here and there, no magazine, no booksellers, except a few second-hand shops, no public school, no public buildings, no old buildings, except Bow Church and Stepney Church: nothing, in short, to hold the city and the people together—no focus, no lighthouse, no place of assemblage. It beat into my brain. I was not satisfied until I sat down and wrote 'All Sorts and Conditions of Men,' and rose from it to help to build in real bricks and mortar the People's Palace I had so airily dreamed of on paper. Of course, when I speak of no centres and no institutions, I speak with a certain reservation. I don't mean there were no churches and chapels—and what the East-end would have done but for the Church I don't know, I really don't know," said Mr. Besant. "The Church has been her salvation. I quite frankly own," he continued, "that the churches and chapels had their little institutions which brought the people together, but there was no centre; you had to go and find these little places of assemblage for yourself. What was most wanted was the element of organised amusement. I mean people working *with* people for recreation of the Higher Kind."

Here was a very emphatic use of capitals.

"Above all, I was struck with the total absence of literary ambition. I have since discovered that there are ambitions in that direction in the East-end, but not a tenth part in the whole of that great region which you would find in an American city a tenth part the size."

"And now about the people themselves in your novels, Mr. Besant."

"Well," he replied, "generally speaking, they are all drawn from life. For instance, the old figure-head carver in 'All Sorts,' is taken from a man I knew well. He is now dead. The American candidate for the Peerage and his wife were acquaintances of mine. I have described them with certain differences, so as to avoid giving offence. I should think they are long dead, poor dears!"

"And Uncle What's-his-name?" I asked.

"Oh, Uncle What's-his-name," repeated Mr. Besant

"He talks," said he, "of the submerged tenth; I do not think it is more than the submerged thirtieth. The result of his plan will be that he will rescue that proportion of the population worth raising. The secret of his success is personal sympathy. But then, the Church of England has that. The East-end would have been lost but for the Church. I have, however, no patience with the people who run down Booth, and who ask sarcastically what he makes out of his army. He does not touch for himself one penny of its vast funds."

To return to our present conversation, Mr. Besant



MR. BESANT'S STUDY.

with a laugh; "but for the life of me," he added, "I can't think *what* his name really was. Uncle *Boffin*, wasn't it?"

"Oh no; Mr. Besant," I said. "Too bad! We mustn't steal poor Dickens' characters!"

"Oh well, let it pass," he laughed; "yes, he was from life. Miss Messenger, my heroine, was not *real*; she was purely fictitious. The Almshouses can be recognised by all. I think the original of Captain Sorenson died about five years ago. The brewery is not Charrington's, as has been suggested, but Barclay and Perkins', which I visited years before I had any thought I should use it in a novel. The Salvation Army man is from life."

I remembered what Mr. Besant had once before said to me on the subject of General Booth and his schemes, and his remarks are worth repeating.

told me that practically all his small characters were portraits.

"I made notes," said he, "wherever I went. I talked to everybody; on a steamer, in the street, behind a counter, coming out of chapel. I would tackle them as best I might. A 'bob' went a long way sometimes, but a pleasant smile went further. The factory girls I found very difficult to deal with."

"Yes," I replied, "they are dreadful. I used to have a class of factory girls in an East-end parish for reading and writing, and I would infinitely prefer their brothers."

"Exactly," said Mr. Besant; "the young men are more get-at-able, and more easily influenced for good, and more persevering in the Good Path, when once they are directed into it. The girls wander about and are like shy birds: difficult to get hold of. There is

better soil in the young men. We ought to get hold of them between fourteen and eighteen. There the Church has been so successful. She has certainly saved many of them from barbarism. But you want young and vigorous clergymen and ministers for the East."

To which I heartily assented as we drifted into a dissertation on the extraordinary influence which the East-end exerts upon all sorts and conditions of men: how even the most refined, the most cultured, the most highly moral man can hardly escape a certain blunting of the perceptive faculties and an undefinable rubbing off, if I may so term it, of the fresh bloom which once characterised his views of life and his outlook upon life.

"East-end life, it appears to me, always eats into a clergyman's soul, and sometimes, almost unconsciously, a man is apt to deteriorate," said I.

"Precisely," agreed Mr. Besant. "I know of a fine fellow who feels this so terribly that he leaves his curacy every year and takes a month's yachting. Only on the high seas can he get free from that dreadful East-end pressure. It is a terrible life, that East-end life, for a refined and cultivated man."

"And you have a set purpose in writing these novels, Mr. Besant?"

"Why, yes," he replied. "I think that the West-end should know how the East-end lives. I am not a professional philanthropist, mind you," he continued, with a smile; "I am only a story-teller. But a story purely of poverty has a grimy effect. I must brighten by contrasts. So next time I write a poor people's story I shall go to the purlieus of the West-end. Mind you, I don't describe nearly all I see. I couldn't—I am not a Zola. I have to soften and tone down very much."

I observed that I thought "The Children of Gibeon" was an even finer study of East-end life than "All Sorts and Conditions."

"The fanatic socialist; the cold, calculating Board schoolmaster; Lotty, 'who sat in the bed because there was something wrong with her spine;' Melenda, with her flaming red fringe, and who always looked hungry; and Lizzie, who belonged to that class of London girls who are all eyes: why, Mr. Besant, they are to the life."

"Ah well!" replied he, "when I wrote that book I had so much more experience. I went to very different 'settings.' Yes, perhaps it is a finer study of London life."

"And are you satisfied with the partial realisation

of your ideal in the People's Palace as it now is, Mr. Besant?"

"Yes," said he; "the Palace is a very good beginning. We can't get all in a day, but it is working out all right. The recreative side is not fully enough developed to please me. The essence of such an institution is that it should be run by the people for the people. It is wonderful, however, to notice what an advance in the musical tastes of the East-enders there is. I went once to a recital. The hall was nearly full. A working man sitting next to me said most enthusiastically, 'I say, governor, ain't it foine? They can't get music like this at the West-end.' But I don't want the Recreative side to be separated from the Educational and Technical. I want it to be all under *one* roof, to be all one vast system. Let the technical students feel that it is all one, and that they can step from their class to the concert-room, and *vice-versâ*."

"But Miss Messenger's pretty ideal is realised in many details, is it not?"

"Oh yes," said Mr. Besant; "we have our own band, our own choir, clubs without end. We ought to have, and we shall have, a dramatic society, and our own writers for our own papers, and our own teachers for our own schools. We have in full swing a Ramblers' Club, which I sometimes accompany in its excursions in town or country."

"And it is all owing to your book. You must be a proud man!"

He replied—

"It is the greatest thing that could have happened to a man to have had that People's Palace built in response to a novel he had written; but I wish to insist that to Sir Edmund Currie, who has been such a noble friend to East London, belongs entirely the credit of its success. He has been its life and soul since the beginning, and I grieve that he has gone."

Mr. Besant then told me something of that distressing book of his, "Katherine Regina," in which he deals with upper-class poverty.

"Much of that story was true," said he; "especially that part in which Katherine wandered all night in St. James's Park. I knew of a delicately-nurtured girl who actually walked about the streets all night for a fortnight."

And here our conversation came to an end with a humorous observation from myself as to the art that is required to make an interview out of what he had told me to start with, which was—Nothing.

