

MISS GIBERNE.

MISS AGNES GIBERNE needs no introduction to the reading world; it is her readers who ask for an introduction to her, and desire to know something of her life and the circumstances under which the books that have helped and entertained them were written. Miss Giberne (the name is pronounced with the G soft and a slight stress on the second syllable) comes of an old Languedoc family, of which the branch settled in England alone survives. She is the third daughter of Major Charles Giberne who, over seventy years ago, went out to India as a young officer in the "Company's" army and retired after twenty-two years service. He traces descent directly from "Noble Jean de Giberne, Seigneur de Gibertain and Co-Seigneur de St. Germain de Calberthe" who, early in the sixteenth century, lived in a valley of the Upper Cevennes Mountains, some twenty miles or more from Alais. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, in the days of the "wars of religion," the Château de Gibertain was burnt to the ground by the rebels who also killed Louis de Giberne, then the head of the family. It was possible to rebuild the château, but not to resuscitate the documents which had been destroyed in the conflagration. The King of France, therefore, granted the De Gibernes a fresh patent of nobility which belongs to the present head of the family, Harold Buller Giberne, Miss Giberne's cousin, who is now a minor at Eton.

When the "de" was dropped is uncertain; probably when Miss Giberne's direct ancestor, Jean René de Giberne, having alienated his father and brother by his marriage, came to England and in various ways showed a desire to Anglicise himself. In a French document of that date Jean René was spoken of as a "mauvais Catholique"; later, both he and his wife joined the Church of England, which perhaps explains the family wrath at his choice. His descendants, for the most part, have not been behind him in preferring to be "English."

Miss Giberne tells us that when, as a child, she was travelling on the Continent with her parents and sisters, the family crest and coat-of-arms were shown to an expert in such matters. He at once remarked that they would undoubtedly be recognised in any court of heraldry, and asked Major Giberne why he did not go back to France. "Louis Napoleon," he said, "is always delighted to get hold of any of the old noblesse."

Young as she was, Miss Giberne was deeply impressed by her father's reply; "I would rather be an English gentleman than a French nobleman!"

With his strong, clever face, and his silvered hair, Major Giberne is to-day one of the finest types of the old English gentleman. Though ninety years of age, he retains his upright, vigorous, soldierly bearing, shows few signs of his many years, and loves to be constantly occupied, whilst keeping a keen interest in what goes on in the world outside the home he shares with his two daughters at Eastbourne.

Neither Miss Giberne nor her sisters were sent to school, and they attended few classes or lectures. After the return of the family from India, in Miss Giberne's infancy, they led rather a wandering life, partly in England, partly in Switzerland, Heidelberg and Brussels. Doubtless the mental activity induced by this frequent change of scene and the contact with a foreign life, helped to develop early a natural literary gift. She was only

seven when she "began to scribble," and by the time she was ten it was the favourite diversion of the three elder sisters. The eldest of all, Mary, died of cholera, in India, before any of the four younger sisters were born. Major Giberne was entirely in sympathy with the "scribbling" propensities of his children, providing them with plenty of pencils and paper and doing all in his power to guide and encourage them. Whilst in England, governesses had been engaged to teach them, but on going to Switzerland Mrs. Giberne undertook their education herself, with the help of her husband and various masters.

Mrs. Giberne, whose death took place in May, 1890, was the eldest daughter of the Rev. William Wilson, D.D., of Over-Worton, Oxfordshire, and vicar of Walthamstow, Essex, also first cousin and brother-in-law to Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta. For the



[From photo: Elliott and Fry.]
AGNES GIBERNE.

task of educating her children Mrs. Giberne was singularly well endowed, possessing a vivid mind and an eagerness and enthusiasm expressed on her mobile face and in her dark speaking eyes, which never to the last lost their brightness. "Not the least part of the education she gave us," says Miss Giberne, "was in her keen appreciation of what she read and made us read. It was her endeavour to infuse into our minds her own passion for history, poetry and music."

Miss Giberne confesses to caring little, up to the age of thirteen, for anything but stories, with the exception of Gleig's *Battle of Waterloo*, in which she delighted. Then Miss Strickland's *Queens of England* was put into her hands and history became one of her prime interests. She is of opinion that there are advantages and disadvantages in a home education, as compared with school training, for a literary career. "Greater freedom of development was secured," she observes; "possibly the style of my early books might have been improved by a more stiff, modern,

critical education, such as was not then in vogue, but harder work in girlhood might have lessened the power of hard work later."

Two heavy losses came to Miss Giberne before she reached her sixteenth year—the death of the next younger sister, Florence, who had always been her especial playmate until she fell ill, and later, that of her sister, Helen, two years older than herself, who died at the age of seventeen. Until this time Miss Giberne had made no girl friends, partly because she was intensely shy, chiefly because Helen's companionship had been all-sufficient. She was happy, therefore, in possessing a mother who could be at once friend and mother. "She was," says Miss Giberne, "by far the most intimate friend I have ever had. I cannot recall ever once going to her for interest and sympathy and for a moment failing to find either. And this to the end of her life."

In her literary efforts Miss Giberne had especially her parents' sympathy. They followed with an interest as keen as her own the fortunes of her first book, published when she was eighteen, and soon followed by other stories for children, to which she did not put her name. She thinks now that it was rather a mistake to publish so early, and strongly advises young writers in general to wait some years before giving their work to the public. It is better to give time to preparation, especially to the study of language and of human nature.

The Curate's Home, which appeared in 1869, was one of the author's most successful early books. When first written, it was much longer, and, says Miss Giberne, "unutterably doleful." She sent it to Mr. Seeley, who decided against undertaking its publication. A year later, however, he suggested that, with some alterations in the way of added cheerfulness, the story might prove a success. Its author therefore set to work, "resuscitated the heroine, who had died of a very lingering decline, and gave her a husband, introduced into the tale for this purpose. Even so, the story was quite sad enough, but by no means too sad for reality." Perhaps one of the greatest charms of Miss Giberne's books is just this sense of the mingled cloud and sunshine of life; we feel that she has been a loving and sympathetic student of human nature and her knowledge, particularly of girl-life, is wide and intimate.

The Curate's Home was followed by *Aimée*, the present edition of which was revised in later years, and which the author considers one of the best of her early books. *Floss Silverthorn*, *Conlyng Castle*, *Beryl and Pearl*, *Duties and Duties*, *The Rector's Home*, *Decima's Promise* are among the best known of a list too long to enumerate.

In answer to a question as to which of her later works is their author's favourite, Miss Giberne mentions *Miss Devereux*, *Spinster*, a story, some of the scenes of which may be said to be drawn "after" the Yorkshire dales, and into which many life observations, life lessons, and certain mental elements of her own life are interwoven. She is inclined to think *The Girl at the Dover House* the best book for girls she has written.

The old question as to whether the "story with a purpose" is an artistic blunder or not crops up whenever fiction is discussed, but in the hands of Miss Giberne, a story never loses its charm because it conveys deep lessons and holds up the cardinal virtues as an inspiration to her girl-readers. I remember once being told by a girl that the reading of *Decima's*

Promise helped her in the stress of a great temptation, and gave her just the moral "push" she needed to decide her to break an ignoble silence. The gifted authoress is inclined to think that in some of her early work the purpose is obtruded overmuch; and some of the characters are "cardinal virtues personified."

"Writing in those days," she says, "came in a vehement rush. My steed ran away with me, and I had not learned to handle the reins. None the less, I hope each work may have had some little purpose to carry out in the world of books."

One of Miss Giberne's most successful small books has been *Tim Teddington's Dream*, which, appearing as a penny booklet before a general election some years ago, had a large circulation. Many of her smaller books, such as *Least Said, Soonest Mended*, were written for working-men and their wives, and the author's insight into the needs and difficulties of this class is very striking. After the publication of *Five Thousand Pounds*, a working man in a large manufacturing town, who had read it, was heard to say, "Ah, she knows we! That's just how we'd do if we had the money!"

Science has shared with fiction the labours of Miss Giberne's pen. She inherited from her father a taste for scientific study. Among the subjects he undertook, as part of his children's education, were astronomy and botany. Miss Giberne has a very clear recollection of an astronomical lesson that she received when only seven or eight years old.

"My father," she says, "was explaining about the distance of the earth from the sun, and stated that the earth was some three millions of miles nearer the sun in our winter than in our summer. I was naturally puzzled; but, as he sat not far from the fire, and I, a small child, stood close by, he pointed to a fly

on his knee, and said, 'Look, Aggie; if that fly were one inch nearer the fire would it feel any hotter?' That settled the matter. I never again felt any difficulty as to the fact of greater cold combined with greater nearness."

This art of graphic illustration Miss Giberne herself possesses, and to it in a great measure may be ascribed the fact that her scientific books seize the imagination of her readers, young and old, and make indelible impressions. Her first scientific work, *Sun, Moon and Stars*, published in December, 1879, is to-day one of her most popular books, and is reaching its twenty-fourth thousand, a remarkable success for a work of the kind.

In answer to a question as to what first determined her to write on such subjects, Miss Giberne kindly gave me the interesting story of its genesis.

"In January, 1879," she said, "I went to Mr. Seeley, the publisher, and told him that I was tired of writing nothing but tales; I wanted to do something else. 'What do you want to do?' he asked pleasantly. I told him of a scheme I had had long in mind, to simplify astronomy for beginners, and he took up the subject warmly. We talked it over together, as we have done many a time since with other subjects, and as we continue to do. The matter was soon settled. I wrote half a dozen chapters, sent them to him, and received cordial encouragement. In June the whole was completed. Dr. Pritchard, then a stranger to me, read the proofs at the request of a mutual friend, and at once offered to write a preface."

Popular science handbooks are now published in large numbers; but when Miss Giberne's *Sun, Moon and Stars* appeared, such books were rare. Its wonderful success encouraged her to follow it, two years afterwards, with *The World's Foundations*, then

with *Among the Stars*, *Father Aldur*, *The Ocean of Air*, *Starry Skies*, and later, with *Radiant Suns*, a sequel to *Sun, Moon and Stars*. *The Ocean of Air* was regarded by Dr. Pritchard as superior to *Sun, Moon and Stars*. Recently *This Wonderful Universe* (S.P. C.K.), a small book intended for working men, has appeared.

Miss Giberne's latest book, *A Modern Puck*, claims, its writer modestly says, "to be no more than a mixture of fun and fancy and fact"; but never were the wonders of natural history introduced more charmingly. The homely simplicity of the ever-new fairy-tale is blended with the lore of dogs and cats, ants, bees and spiders, in such a way that even those who frankly "hate everything that is not story" will delight in it and imbibe wisdom unawares. We can well believe that Miss Giberne—to use her own words—"thoroughly enjoyed writing *A Modern Puck*."

Writing for girls is always a real pleasure to her, and far from being wearied by the claims of her large circle of readers, she affirms that she never had more keen delight in her literary work than during the last winter, when she was engaged upon an historical story to begin in the next monthly part of THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER.

We need scarcely say that Miss Giberne's life at Eastbourne is a busy one, though study and literature are not allowed to monopolise her. She finds time to pay country visits, to travel, and to meet often those who enjoy her friendship. We can well believe that they form a large circle, for an interesting personality, a wide culture, a ready sympathy, and a desire to be helpful, even to those who have no claim upon her, are this gifted writer's distinctive qualities.

ISABEL SUART-ROBSON.



TO THE EDITOR OF "THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER."

DEAR MR. EDITOR,—I very much wish to thank many of the Readers of "THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER" for their kind loving sympathy, shown to me in many ways. For instance—Flowers, Books, and kind letters,* all telling of the sympathy they feel for me in my shut-in, suffering life. Many of the kind senders gave no address, so that it was quite out of my power to thank them, otherwise than through "THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER." Even with those who put full address, it was impossible to thank each one for so kindly writing to me. I have felt very sorry at being unable to thank them, and say how very grateful I am to them.

I so much wish to let each one know how much I have been cheered and comforted by their thoughtfulness, and I do pray that each in turn may be blessed, cheered, and comforted, according to their need.

None of these dear ones will ever know down here what their sympathy and cheer have been to me and my dear ones also; but I hope by and by to tell these unknown friends how much they have helped me on, giving me renewed courage, to try to bear more bravely all God has given me to bear. Many of my correspondents have to lie upon beds of pain, just waiting patiently for the call, "Come up

higher." Like myself, they have so much of pain and weariness, so few pleasures, and life is just a struggle to be patient, trustful, and submissive, yet having within them the only true "Peace which passeth all understanding," and which "the world can neither give nor take away."

Many of God's suffering ones can do nothing with their hands, but just bear up by our prayers, those whose lives are given up to doing God's work, telling out the glad tidings, soothing the sick, cheering and pointing them to the only true Comforter; leading their thoughts away and above the weary, pain-racked bodies to the home awaiting them, where no pain or sorrow can ever enter. I do hope that each reader, who has so kindly shown so much sympathy, may read this, and understand thoroughly how very much I thank them and appreciate the kind thought which prompted them to show it. All this is a very great surprise to me, and so unexpected. To many this is the only way I can show my gratitude, and thank them, although I know so well they wish for no thanks.

I sincerely wish to do so, and it will be a great satisfaction to feel that each one will know what pleasure they have given, and how much they have helped me by their appreciation of my essay. I cannot be too grateful to God for giving me the greatest joy I could ever know, that is, when I read in many of the letters how my essay had helped them,

and given back the trust and hope in God, which had almost left them, and they felt ready to give way to despair.

All this has taught me how many kind hearts there are in the world. It is always my earnest prayer that I may be able to help others, if only by my prayers. My heart is just full of praise to God for using my essay. He so often uses the very meaneast and feeblest of His creatures to bring honour and glory to His name. The essay was written with much prayer, every line being a prayer, a pleading for a blessing to those who would read it, if ever it should be printed. I constantly asked for guidance what to write, so that the words were given me from God, and to Him be all the praise and all the glory.

He has used the words He gave me to bring honour to His name, and to comfort, help and cheer many of His weary downcast ones.

The sweet letters upon this are to me very, very precious and very sacred, and in many of them are promises of prayer for me, for which I thank the ones who promise. I do need those prayers so much, for patience to conquer all murmurings and irritability.

May God ever bless and keep each one, and comfort those dear suffering ones who have helped and comforted me.

Yours gratefully,

MARY R. LAW.

7, West Street,
Hertford,
Herts.

* These letters, etc., were sent direct to Miss Law by kindly readers who were touched by the tone of her Prize Essay, "My Room," which was printed with her name and address attached.—Ed.