HOW TO WRITE FICTION.

HOW, indeed?

The limitations set forth in a recent paper on the composition of verse are of significance here. It is impossible to give the actual *mot de l'énigme*. There must be a certain innate gift before success can be attained. Without that gift no code of rules can be of much use; but, that gift being once possessed, attention to sound methods of work may make all the difference between success and failure in its exercise.

In the art of fiction, indeed, as in every other art, due observance of certain laws is absolutely essential to good work. Young would-be novelists seldom understand this fact. Possessing something of the faculty of creative imagination and an eager desire to embody its results by means of pen and paper, they expect to succeed at once. They do not realise that they should be equipped for their business. "Dramatic effect," "selection," "local colouring"—such expressions are meaningless to them. They wish to plunge into deep waters in which they cannot swim.

The capacity for story-weaving in a girl's brain often shows itself in the first instance by her power of delighting and interesting little brothers and sisters. Or a lonely girl may discover it by the constant desire on her part to invent romances. Human life and character may have so strong an interest for her that she will "make up stories" incessantly about the people she meets in street, train, or omnibus. She can scarcely encounter any new acquaintance without at once placing him or her in an imaginary setting. Everyone is to her a possible hero or heroine of romance.

Provided this does not interfere with sanity of judgment and behaviour, it is a trait to be encouraged, not repressed.

Supposing, then, that a girl has imagination, and the longing to exercise it in writing stories, how should she fit herself for the task?

First of all she must understand how to use the instrument with which she is to do her work, *i.e.*, the English language.

This proviso would be a matter of course if applied to any other artistic attempt. Imagine a person deliberately sitting down to perform on the organ before a vast audience while he had no knowledge how to manage the stops or pedals, and in fact only possessed the most elementary acquaintance with the notes! You would think him a madman. Yet many people—and not girls only—are quite prepared to address the public before they understand the laws of prose composition, to say nothing of grammar!

I cannot here indite a treatise on composition; such treatises abound; and I have given hints in preceding papers as to some flagrant faults. Do not, for example, write interminable sentences, consisting of clauses connected by "and." Do not introduce one "but" after another. Be careful to discriminate in the use of "who" and "that." Do not separate the nominative too far from its verb, or the relative from its antecedent, *e.g.*—

"A lady accosted the gallant Major, who carried a lace parasol."

Work up to a climax; avoid the error typified in the Frenchman's ejaculation—

"Splendid, magnificent, pretty good."

Space forbids more on this head. But study how to write English; and do not forget that to read good prose is an important element in the matter, just as to read good poetry affords help in the writing of verse. This reminds us that to write poetry has an incidental advantage in qualifying for the writing of good prose. An eminent critic said, writing as long ago as in 1866—

"The excellence of a poet's prose is well known to those who care for excellence in literature; indeed, looking at literature from the beginning, it is comparatively rare to find a prose writer of the first rank who has not himself made a serious practice of poetry."

This thought may be a solace to those who feel half ashamed of the surreptitious composition of verse.

Do not read rubbish, either in verse or prose. Life is short, as a great teacher has said, and "if you read this, you cannot read the other." Beware of trashy fiction.

Study, then, to write English as good as it can possibly be. A living novelist of great industry, who has in her day incurred many a criticism, has always had this in her favour—that she writes excellent English, lucid, accurate, graphic, charming to read.

To pass, then, from the instrument of fiction-writing to the fiction itself—given the faculty of imagination, and control of the expressive power of that imagination, in what conditions shall the faculty work?

First of all we may say to the would-be novelist—Never try to write about any sort of life with which you are not familiar.

If you belong to the great middle class, and have never spoken to a person of title, do not lay the scene of your story in ducal halls. How common is this ambition, and how misguided! You are sure to betray your ignorance, if it be only in the way the servants speak.

"The Lady Hangeline his not at 'ome." This put into the mouth of a trained manservant is a specimen of the sort of English I have observed among the amateur novelist's "flunkeys." (They are sure to be called flunkeys.) Now this may seem a trifle, but it at once, to use a colloquialism, "gives the whole thing away." Servants in great houses do not so express themselves. Neither do aristocratic husbands and wives endow each other with the full title every time they speak together. In this matter of titles there are many pitfalls, alas! for the unwary.

Historical fiction, except for those thoroughly versed in the period of which they write, is a most difficult art, and I advise the neophyte to leave it alone. The impression is too common that to introduce an archaic expression or two, "By'r Lady," "methinks," "by my halidom," and so forth, gives sufficient *vraisemblance* to dialogue; but it does nothing of the kind. Modern ideas and modes of speech are certain to intrude; and oh, how difficult it is to get every accessory correct! It is certainly an admirable exercise to write a historical story with every allusion right, every detail of dress, manner, and so on, supported by the best authorities, but it is so hard to achieve it with correctness, that if it really does get properly done, it is too apt to read like a task—dull, and therefore unconvincing after all.

I advise the would-be novelist, accordingly, to write of what she knows, and she will have the best chance of success. Let her not be afraid that the story of school life, of quiet home and social experiences, will be uninteresting because it is "every-day." That characteristic appeals to every-day people. Charlotte Brontë's best books in my opinion are *Shirley* and *Villette*, the one dealing with the Yorkshire village life she knew so intimately, the other describing the lot of an English governess in a foreign town, which she also knew by experience. Then in Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*, how delightful is the record of the simple country town and its inhabitants! These are no wild efforts of invention; the material for each story lay ready to the writer's hand. To pass into another field, one of Balzac's most powerful stories—*Eugénie Grandet*—is the record of the humdrum country life of a miser's daughter, broken by one unromantic love-affair.

Ah, but these writers had imagination! Yes, and no counsel of mine can impart that to my readers. But imagination does not mean the power to invent a number of extraordinary and undreamt-of events. It is the power that can see into the heart of people and of things—the magic insight that discerns, the power that combines

what is seen into new pictures. Having this power, it is wise to exercise it on what is near at hand, rather than to scour the universe for something else. In apparently uninteresting, matter-of-fact lives, there exist the materials for romance—pathos, tragedy, and love. Seek to discern these, and see that you call nothing common.

Then, be accurate.

Someone has cruelly suggested that authors should maintain a barrister among them to save them from the blunders constantly made in describing legal matters—disputes about wills, about inheritance of every kind, about cases in the Law Courts, and so forth. I have also thought they might with advantage retain the services of a consulting physician. How many unaccountable and remarkable illnesses we meet in fiction! The greatest villain needs only an attack of brain fever to emerge pure as the driven snow. And heroines have a way of sweetly fading away to an early grave with nothing whatever the matter with them.

Too much technical detail, indeed, is out of place in art; the value of information lies often in avoiding errors, and is negative rather than positive. Count no labour, then, as wasted in avoiding faults of detail. Do not, for example, let the wrong flowers bloom together, or run one season into another.

Charles Dickens makes a curious mistake of the latter kind in *Nicholas Nickleby*. The Yorkshire country round Dotheboys Hall is covered with snow in a bitter January, yet one of the schoolboys has been sent to weed the garden!

The uninitiated would never guess how much labour goes to the due fashioning of detail; but it is necessary for artistic success.

To this end the power of observation must be cultivated. It is very good practice to describe, say, the dell of a waterfall in Scotland or the English Lake district. Trees overhang it—yes, but what trees, and what is their foliage like? Are there ferns, moss, ivy, in the clefts of the rock? Does the sunshine glint in through the leaves, or is the pool sombre?

You must not catalogue mechanically the features of the scene, but you must see them exactly with your mind's eye if you are to transfer them to paper; and you cannot see a vague generalisation of the whole. Therefore be accurate in your observation. And observe men and women, as I need hardly say; this will last all your life long, and is an endless task. Observe, too, with sympathy and reverence, never with flippancy or satire, or attempt at cheap cleverness.

"Human nature is lovable," says George Eliot, "and the way I have learnt something of its deep pathos, its sublime mysteries, has been by living a great deal among people more or less commonplace and vulgar, of whom you would perhaps hear nothing very surprising if you were to inquire about them in the neighbourhoods where they dwelt."

"Selection" is an important element in successful work.

It is true that the ordinary daily life may furnish material for romance, but it is also true that to commit the whole routine of an ordinary day to paper may not constitute the writing of interesting fiction. Important incidents—that is, incidents containing significance and bearing on the progress of the story—must be selected in preference to others.

Sometimes apparently trivial conversations are of value, as incidentally revealing character; but unless they do this they should not be recorded at enormous length, while important events are slurred over in a few lines. Study proportion, and select wisely and well.

Do not be tempted to write too much about your characters.

This is difficult advice to follow. How anxious you naturally feel that the reader should know all about your heroine, from her "blue eyes beneath an ivory brow" to the hem of the gown of "some soft silken fabric!" And not only her personal attractions, but her emotions, her aspirations, her intellectual qualities you catalogue and set forth at length, that there may be no possible mistake as to the sort of woman she is.

Now it is far better to let a character reveal herself, or himself, by speech and action as in a drama. The less you can contrive to say *in propriâ personâ* the more artistic your work will probably be.

Some analysis must, it is true, be occasionally introduced, and a master in a unique type of fiction, George Meredith, excels in it; but side by side with that, his characters *act*. They are not mere puppets to be labelled by a showman. And character-analysis, apart from action, is a very doubtful sort of art for the rising novelist to attempt. If the characters are alive, they will reveal themselves, and other characters will reveal them, as the story proceeds. If they are not alive, the story had better not be written at all.

If you think you have the gift of constructive imagination, if you possess a good education, can express yourself correctly and fluently, are anxious to write, and yet feel discouraged by the poor results attained, remember that practice is invaluable in this as in every other art. Never let a day pass without trying to write something original, and work at fixed hours. The brain grows accustomed to exertion at a certain time, and the morning hours are best.

You will probably have to pass through many a fit of revolt against, and anger with, your own productions, but do not let this discourage you. It is better than an ignorant elation, and you will find your failures become stepping-stones to success. Work that finds its way to your waste-paper basket or the avenging flame is not necessarily lost work.

The scene for your study, as I have said, should lie in familiar surroundings. As for the subject, it is a very good plan to take some episode of your own life or observation as the groundwork; alter this as much as you will, yet let the "motive" of the whole be familiar. Do not go too far afield.

Emerson has a significant saying on the treasures for the writer that lie in childish memories. After a comparison he says, "So lies the whole series of natural images with which your life has made you acquainted, in your memory, though you know it not; and a thrill of passion flashes light on their dark chamber, and the active power seizes instantly the fit image, as the word of its momentary thought. It is long ere we discover how rich we are. Our history, we are sure, is quite tame; we have nothing to write, nothing to infer. But our wiser years still run back to the despised recollections of childhood, and always we are fishing up some wonderful article out of that pond; until by-and-by we begin to suspect that the biography of the one foolish person we know is, in reality, nothing less than the miniature paraphrase of the hundred volumes of the Universal History."

So every one of us is rich in possessing material for a story of some kind, just because we have lived, and seen, and known.

And yet—you must not try to photograph!

"Art is Life, *plus* imagination."

This is a deep saying, and many pages would be required for its full explanation.

No character in fiction—unless it be historical—should be attempted as an exact portrait of a living original.

These originals may suggest the characters of the novelist; but they cannot and should not be absolutely reproduced. Who among us can say how the most intimately-known of our friends would act and speak in certain circumstances? This servile reproduction, or the attempt at the impossible, is not true art. And yet the novelist must use the types of human nature he has known in creating his new world of men and women.

Every writer of fiction has been exasperated by the remark, *à propos* of his characters, "Oh, of course I know who So-and-So is!" and in all probability the censure follows, "I don't think you need have made him quite so disagreeable, poor man," or "*She* did not do so-and-so, you know."

I once paid a visit to the village home of a well-known writer, whose types were village folk. I had expected to find that writer's name received with affection and veneration, and was astonished to observe quite the contrary when

the books were mentioned. "We don't like it *at all*," said the mistress of the little shop, smoothing her ruffled plumes.

What did they not like?

The identification of the famous characters of the author's fiction with the living people in the village. It seemed to them untrue and unfair.

"*He* wasn't like this, and *she* never did that," was on every lip; and naturally so. The fault lay, not with the author, not with the village people, but with the public, who persisted in reading fiction as biography, and hunting up the originals as biographical characters, not as types.

It would save much needless offence in a writer's immediate circle, if it were distinctly understood that fiction does not profess to photograph; and the writer should show by unmistakable signs that he is not trying to transfer people bodily to his pages.

It is a question often asked of novelists, "Do you plan out your story beforehand, or make it up as you go along?"

Methods differ. Some writers will not begin a book until the whole plot is clearly set forth in outline, each chapter endowed with its due portion of events, and so on. Others just get the characters and the motive of the story, and let it grow as they proceed. It is quite immaterial which plan is preferred. But one thing (as I have said) is essential; and that is, that the characters should live.

There is a curious phenomenon which I believe all novelists understand; that when the characters are "alive" they begin to act by themselves! The author has only to go and see what they are doing; or, to speak more plainly, to transcribe what they act in his imagination, independently of his own volition. The writer knows at once by this test, if a story will "go" or not. If he has to cast desperately about day by day, "Could she do that? No—it won't do. Or could he say that? No—that won't do either," he may as well put away the pen; his imagination has run dry, though it may be only for a time.

The characters are independent, when once fully conceived by their originator. What is the use of telling a novelist, "You ought to make So-and-So marry So-and-So"? He knows she cannot and will not do it, and all the urging in the world will not make it possible. One thing the novelist can do, it is true; kill his people. He has power over their imaginary bodies, but not over their souls. When the characters of a story are becoming unmanageable, one or two have occasionally to die; there is no help for it, no other way out of the difficulty; but they are often mourned by their destroying parent with real tears; and this is a fact, strange though it may seem.

I have come to the end of my space, and after all I have not told my readers "How to write Fiction." If I had the perfect secret, it would be for me as the philosopher's stone, and I should keep it to myself! All I can do is to throw out a few hints as to the way in which the gift of imagination, supposing it to be possessed, should work.

Here is a significant quotation which may shed light on some things I have said:—

> "True fiction hath an higher end, and scope
> Wider than fact; it is nature's possible
> Contrasted with life's mean."

Those who can solace the sad ways of life by imaginative art should hold their power as something dear and sacred; and never allow it to be diverted for a moment to poor or sordid ends.

LILY WATSON.

A SCOTS THISTLE.

By LESLIE KEITH, Author of "'Lisbeth," "Cynthia's Brother," etc.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. BETHUNE returned radiant from her visit to Devonshire. According to herself, she had been received with great distinction, "quite *the* guest," petted and made much of. "Charming," "distinguished," "delightful," were only a few of the epithets she lavished upon her hosts, while of several of her fellow guests she spoke almost with hushed breath.

"It was such a pity you couldn't be there, darling." She looked up at her husband from the low chair in which she was seated in her dressing-room, when they were alone at night.

"I don't know"—he smiled whimsically—"I might have been too much in awe of the Earl and Countess to enjoy myself."

Mrs. Bethune, as may already have been discovered, had no sense of humour. She hastened to combat this doubt.

"But, dearest, they were so friendly, no stiffness, no condescension, nothing of that kind. I have been telling the girls that the really best people have the easiest manners; I declare the Countess was much more affable than Mrs. Brown-Copland, who would be nobody but for her money."

"It's easier to be pleasant when you've arrived at the end of the journey, than when you're still toiling along the road, my dear," said Mr. Bethune, beginning to wind his watch, "but, though you had no solid array of ancestors to support you, I'm sure there wasn't a countess there who looked half so nice."

"She *is* plain." Mrs Bethune dimpled with pleasure. "That is——"

"Plain for a High Mightiness."

"Well, dearest, there is a look—a something. I have always said I could tell blue blood in an instant. But she couldn't have been more agreeable. They stayed two nights at the Hall, and on the second afternoon she and I had such a talk by the hall fire after tea! The lamps weren't lighted, and you know how confidential one gets in the dusk. We talked about the dreadful servant question."

"Can anybody be confidential, even in the twilight, on that worn-out topic?"

"Worn-out, Richard! Why, it's the crying problem of the day! Her ladyship takes an immense interest in it. She has spoken on 'Discontent and the Domestic Dearth'—isn't it a good title? So descriptive! She offered me tickets if she repeated the lecture. Really, it was quite wonderful how we agreed. She almost took the words out of my mouth." Mrs. Bethune smiled again, pleased, as we all are, to have titled sanction for our opinions. "And the Earl said he was sorry not to meet you. I was to be sure and mention to you that he had quite counted on a political talk. I forgot to tell you that!"

"It's a pity you didn't keep it till the morning. It may break my sleep."

"Darling, how odd you are! I wish you wouldn't say such things before the girls!"