HOW TO WRITE A STORY.

By AN EDITOR'S WIFE.

The popular impression about writing a story, among those who have never set themselves to the task, is that it is a sort of thing that comes naturally; once begun, it will unwind and develop itself, and arrive at a conclusion somehow or other. Another very general idea is that to tell some real incident that has attracted the notice of the writer cannot fail to make an interesting story. But our present paper will be to show that both these notions are fallacious; that to write a good story is as much an art as to construct verses or abate a case, and that the skill of writers follow certain definite rules and methods, which, though varying in individual cases, still stamping certain writers with special characteristics. This, in short, is a certain similarity of foundation.

We find very diverse methods adopted by various well-known writers. Wilkie Collins, for instance, makes his chief character a man so completely alive that no man living has displayed a more wonderful imaginative faculty. The plots of this eminent novelist enamor the reader's mind, and carry it away with absolute and ever-accumulating interest until the grand climax is reached. But when it is all ended, what is the impression? That we have been living in a world of marvelous unrealities, watching the movements of a set of wonderful marionettes, moved by a master hand with elaborate forethought, as a man might play a game at chess. The characters, obeying the utmost skill, linger in our minds as the puppets who have worked out those extraordinarily-conceived plans, created for no other purpose than to act parts already arranged, and bring about events already planned.

In life we know the action of individuals, in a certain limited sense, shapes the events which follow—that in fact results are largely due to causes; and, in order to be true to life, a writer will consider carefully how a certain character would act under certain circumstances with various influences brought to bear. The skill of the author would be shown by the manner in which he decided these important points, and thus created a consistent portrait of a character which would remain perfectly original and at the same time truthful. It will be seen that to gain a realistic impression the characters must in a sort of way develop the plot, rather than the plot develop the characters. The true artist is to follow nature, and we know that human beings are not mere puppets worked by invisible wires, following out a course already channeled, as upon a map. I need hardly add that Wilkie Collins's methods, so far as we can judge it from his books, is not the one we would hold up as a model. There are few writers whose methods could have produced such results; and we must always remember that a man who stands alone, marked out as a strong individual, is the last person whose story could be imitated. Genius, truly, often soars above rules; but it is only genius that can afford to do this.

A sensationist writer of some celebrity in her sphere followed a curious plan in the working out of the stories which seemed literally to flow from her active pen. "I bring my hero or heroine into the most extraordinary and bewildering situations that I could possibly devise," she told a friend, and then I set to work to contrive to get them out again. The more difficult I find this portion of my work, the better I know my story will be liked." This writer followed a method, certainly, but not a very artistic one. The result was that, though she had undoubtedly filled her plots with life, and giving them more hazy notions than the talented ones brought to bear on the borderland between right and wrong. A very different method is that of the author who, instead of trying to depict characters which shall live in the mind as life-like creations, even when the incidents of the story are almost forgotten. The Wide, Wide World is a specimen of this kind of story. Perhaps too bad an example of a writer who combined most forcibly both these styles could be found than Charles Dickens, whose characters are wonderful creations, the result of the keenest observation, and whose plots will bear comparison with those of most of novelists, although character was, no doubt, his great study. "But," Mr. Dickens tells us, "the whole object of this is only about criticizing; not about writing stories." Quite true, but it is a great step gained to be able to intelligently detect from an author's work something of the rules by which he has been guided, and to note in what way such a plan has been the means of helping or retarding the success of his particular work. The plot, which, of course, needs nothing like the amount of elaboration given to a serial story, must, nevertheless, have a definite beginning and ending. Some of the most interesting short stories consist only of an incident or two from the life of an individual, while others include the principal events of a lifetime. In each, however, there must be some sort of climax—something to lead the reader on with a sense that what is coming is of as much or more importance than what is past. It is very essential in story-writing to write in such a way as to give children, that the opening should be bright and attractive; but it is a most inartistic fault to let the interest created at the beginning gradually die away as the end is reached. Yet we need not search very far to find instances in print.

Having carefully thought out a plot, which must have enough incident, yet not be so overcrowded that we lose sight of the main. For description, the first difficulty is generally where to begin. It does not necessarily follow that we must begin at the very beginning. It is perfectly possible to begin by setting up a story for a commencement, and then explain how the situation came about. A fair instance of what I mean occurs to me in the case of a Daniel Deronda, where the chief character, a beautiful girl, is displayed at a gaming table. The interest is at once seized: "How came that fair young creature in such a position as well as the mannered air, as if she saves both or will she break through the temptation?"

The key-note of interest is struck in the very first paragraph. We have already spoken in a former article of the great importance of being able to write to a great extent in reality in a great deal of nicety in proportioning the amount of incident to the amount of space at the writer's command. This can only be accurately estimated from a passage, but I may warn the novice that the tendency of a story is to outrun the limits fixed, and that when she comes to write she will find many little points that she may not have given her the artistic development of the plot, but were unwittingly of the general scheme.

It may be as well, in passing, to give a few or two to the subject of punctuation. If you take about a dozen lines, and strike the average of words in a line, and then compare the average of your own line with that of a columnar style, you will find many points that the writer having to supply from her imagination many interesting incidents which are necessary for the completeness of the picture, or to add a conclusion which in the writing, I cannot refrain from quoting the practice of a living editor, who occasionally writes to his staff contributors, "Can you let me have a short story in the next fortnight, consisting of about 1,000 words?"

Incidents and characters taken from life frequently form the groundwork of the best story. There is a great advantage in drawing truly life-like sketches, but the writer must beware of adhering too rigidly to the bare details. As a rule, incidents from life alone as a foundation, the writer having to supply from her imagination many trifling incidents which are necessary for the completeness of the picture, or to add a conclusion which in the writing, I cannot refrain from quoting the practice of a living editor, who occasionally writes to his staff contributors, "Can you let me have a short story in the next fortnight, consisting of about 1,200 words?"

Children's stories a stone's throw of literature quite distinct, but are nevertheless capable of much artistic excellence. The aim of presenting true views of life is much than ever necessary here. The class of children's stories with which all of us are familiar, connecting beauty with wickedness and plainness with virtue, is happily almost the exclusive province of more rational and truthful pictures of life and child. That intelligent children themselves are capable of criticizing pretty accurately is shown where an old lady was telling her little granddaughter.*

* Not the Editor of the Child's Own Paper.
supposed to have a penchant for all kinds of naughtiness, the story of a little boy who ran out of his mother's garden into some fields he had forbidden to enter. "At last," said the old lady, "he came to a gate, and instead of climbing over into the next field, but he had not seen that there was a big bull behind the hedge. When he had got the silly little boy he ran at him and tossed him up into the air, and that was the end of disobedient Charlie."

"Grandmamma," said the little girl of four, "now tell you a story. There was once a little girl who was told not to go in the fields, but she was naughty and went. And she came to a gate, but there wasn't any bull there, and it didn't take her; so the naughty little girl got home safely."

The artistic fault in this anecdote was entirely in the way of telling it, which conveyed the impression that the child's disobedience was the cause of the bull being in the field and that, seeing he was a naughty child, he indignantly and254

ounsel ought to be conveyed that discretion often brings children into trouble, and must sooner or later work them injury, is a true and just one, and even the commonplace matter in which it is here embodied might have been told with far more effect."

It is the opinion of the writer of this article that a story's story should always have a pleasant impression on the mind of the youthful reader. Sunshine and cloud should not be intermingled, but the sunshine should shine through and predominate. Happiness is an essential element of childhood, and it is the duty of the elders to shield them as much as possible from gloom and misery, which more often than not are brought on by trivial effete. Their books, which are supposed to impress them, ought, then, rather to deal with the happier phases of existence, and not introduce them prematurely to those aspects of it which have banished from their elders the innocent enjoyment and wide trustfulness they knew as children.

The construction of a long or continued story differs very greatly from a short one. Here some parts of plot is absolutely necessary, and, as a rule, requires to be more carefully and thoughtfully elaborated, the incidents of measuring and welding together, as the warp and woof of the web. Development of character is an essential phase of such an entering into a short story. Instead of one point of view being brought at the expense of another, the writer must be capable of entering into the minds and feelings of the characters, and of bringing them to life for the reader.

In conclusion, I would say that the object of all fiction should be to convey some high moral or religious teaching, by depicting characters revered and imitated, or displaying unselfish conduct in its true light; and the writer who invests a work with charm, or excites all the interest of readers on the side of characters who affect good actions we know to be rather worthy of reproduction, is a great deal greater than the vainglorious style of the writer who merely paints a picture of a greater evil than we, who can with charity hope, he is at all aware of.