

MRS. HENRY WOOD AND WORCESTERSHIRE.

WRITING of her first stay in London, an American author said that her greatest pleasure lay, not in the associations of celebrated persons and events in real life, but in the connection of the characters and incidents of her favourite author, Dickens, with the places and scenes she visited. As she passed through the streets, or visited famous houses and places, she realized much more vividly that she was in the haunts of Dick Swiveller, Sam Weller, Mrs. Gamp, etc., than in those of the celebrities whose deeds and writings are matters of world-renown.

Something of this feeling is, no doubt, experienced by most imaginative and impressionable persons in a neighbourhood or town endeared to them as the scene of favourite books. It would be a great advantage in many ways, if every novelist of note would, in his writings, "work up" the county or town with which he is most familiar; for, putting fiction aside, the gain to the topographical history and folk-knowledge of England—a very important and too much neglected branch of social history—would be great, and the pleasures of travelling would be considerably heightened. What an interesting and valuable picture of the varied phases of life, of which our little island is the scene, would be presented to a reader, if there were a novelist to do for every county what Mrs. Henry Wood has done for Worcestershire!

Whilst the latter has not confined herself exclusively to the one county in her writings, many of her books, and those in which she evidently took great pleasure herself, were all localized in the Faithful City or its shire.

There are few towns in England which can surpass Worcestershire for historical and antiquarian interests, but as I drive down the Tything, and the Cross, and along dear old High Street, on my occasional visits, for me the celebrities of real life have a very hazy existence; but I always feel that Squire Todhetley, accompanied by Tod and Johnny, is driving Bob and Blister in front of me, and if I put up at the "Star and Garter," I shall surely see them. When the college boys come clattering through the Close at dinner time, and tear off to their respective homes, I can see the young Channings and Yorkes, the Halliburtons and Sankers amongst them, and I always look out specially for dear Stephen Bywater. Many a time I have had lunch at the confectioner's in High Street, from which Toby Sanker used to buy the penny pork-pies for the improvised dinners of that ill-regulated household.

I often walk round the Close, trying to fix on the Channings'

house, and, in fancy, hear Roland Yorke's tremendous peals on the bell. Here is the scene of the tragedy with which the book, bearing his name, opens; and I never stand at the wall to the west of the beautiful Cathedral, below which the river winds its lovely course, without thinking of the mischievous college boys mounted thereon, throwing poor old Ketch's keys into the swift-flowing water. The sight of a barge floating along, brings to mind poor Charley Channing and his misadventure—a true incident, which we believe really occurred many years ago in the city.

One might continue such recollections indefinitely, so completely is the whole city incorporated with one or other of Mrs. Henry Wood's tales; but I wish specially to refer here, to the charge occasionally brought against her of exaggeration and improbability in her plots and incidents, a charge which in my opinion is utterly unfounded. In general, all elderly persons, at all events, must have learned, by life's experience, that truth is stranger than fiction, and that it would be almost impossible for a novelist to invent more improbable things than the happenings of real life; and in particular, I have it on excellent authority, that our authoress had a most remarkable experience of life and people; and never invented a single plot that had not in it a substratum of truth: truth and fiction being cunningly blended together, as it is in the works of all our greatest novelists, from Scott downwards. And often it will be found that the most improbable incidents are those drawn, not from imagination, but from fact. Though quite unacquainted with Mrs. Henry Wood, and only coming to reside in her county after her death, I have myself met with several exactly parallel cases of some of her incidents.

As it is true that history repeats itself, so is it no less so, that the curious chains of events, and good and evil deeds, which constitute the plots of novels, repeat themselves in real life.

Take the case of the death of John Ollivera, one of the best written but least probable of Mrs. Henry Wood's incidents. A few years ago, an almost precisely similar mystery occurred in the death of a young clergyman at Wolverhampton; a mystery which I believe has never yet been unravelled.

After all, the tales which fill the several volumes of the Johnny Ludlow Series, are made up of very simple material, the charm and fascination which they have for their thousands of readers, being in the manner of writing, and the accurate pictures of country life and people which they present—pictures as true and distinct as photographs, and which every one feels must have been drawn direct from nature.

Some great man has said that every person's life is worth writing, and would be interesting if written well; and certainly every small town with the adjacent country can furnish abundant material for such a work as Johnny Ludlow, if only it numbered amongst its inhabitants a literary "witch," who, like Mrs. Henry Wood, could

"make these dry bones live" by the mere force of her genius. In this one little country town, near which I have spent the last five years, I have found at least a dozen families, whose history would make far more interesting and romantic stories than those of the ordinary novel.

But interesting as her pictures of Worcester are, it is in her delineation of the rural life of the county, that one who has lived there can appreciate best Mrs. Henry Wood's thorough acquaintance with her subject and her power of presenting it to others. She has been charged with "unnaturalness" in the language and speech of her country-folk; I have heard people say they were sure that no such dialect could be found in England, and I confess that until I lived amongst them I also was doubtful. But a few months' acquaintance with the uncouth dialect, and curious, grating accent peculiar to this county, convinced me that on this point, more, perhaps, than on any other, Mrs. Henry Wood distinctly knew her work. In real life, as in her novels, these people seem to try how awkwardly they can word their sentences, and how often they can substitute the objective or possessive case for the nominative, and *vice versa*; and how narrow a limit they can put to their verb conjugations. A man will say, "Now, Tom, let we have us dinners." *Be* is generally used for *am* and *are*; and *have* for *has*; while for *have* proper, we hear *haves*.

The scenes of a great portion of Johnny Ludlow's tales are laid in that part of the county which lies between the city and the Lickey Hills, the Severn and the county boundary; Crabb Cot lying just on the dividing line of Worcestershire and Warwickshire. In this area we find some of the prettiest villages, quaintest little towns, and most unspoiled phases of country life that the midland counties can offer. More charming villages than Clent, Hagley, or Ombersley (the scene of Bill Whitney's hunting accident), it would be hard to find; and wandering on a bright summer's morning down the little streets, past their quiet churches and pretty creeper-covered houses and cottages, one feels that one has indeed alighted on the originals of the lovely village which figures under so many different names in the books under discussion.

Worcestershire is remarkable for the number and variety of its country seats, and beautiful half-timbered houses. It is impossible to go far in any direction without meeting with some of the former, of which we find specimens of every description and grade, from the stately old castle and its modern imitation, to the rambling Tudor or Jacobean farmhouse of the well-to-do yeomen, a class of people of sterling worth, well represented in this county, and for whom Mrs. Wood seems to have entertained much respect, recognising and delineating them as the backbone of agricultural prosperity. We meet with them again and again in her books; the family of Coney, in "Johnny Ludlow," being an excellent example. It is with such families that I am best acquainted; and in exactly such a farmhouse as she has often

depicted (that in "Dene Hollow," for instance), I am writing these lines.

This class is frequently the equal of the less wealthy portion of the landed gentry in education, breeding, manner of life, and wealth; (in this respect, indeed, they often have the advantage), the difference being that they *rent*, instead of *own* their land, and generally their houses too. The homesteads are handed down from generation to generation, in some cases for hundreds of years, and they are as dear to the occupants as if they were their own possessions.

The house in which I am now living, is like the family, a typical one of its class, and was built by an ancestor near the site of the original one; and a good deal of the old brick and timber having been used again, it presents a much more antique appearance than it can really lay claim to. The polished oak landing and stairs look strangely out of keeping with the red quarried hall-floor; but in the wide, whitewashed kitchen (evidently built in the days when eight or ten men and women farm-hands sat down every day to share in the contents of the huge baking-oven) everything is in harmony; from the great open fire-place, where one can sit in the chimney corner and watch the smoke ascend straight up towards the sky, to the half-circular oak screen, or settle, and vast oak side-board, with its array of cider jugs and cups.

To speak of Worcestershire without mentioning cider, would certainly be to describe the play of Hamlet with the part of Hamlet left out. What would the dwellers in a non-cider-drinking county, say to the cellars of this house having contained at one time forty hogsheads, each of 100 gallon capacity, and two of 200 gallon, all filled with that delectable beverage one autumn, and emptied before the next? Yet such is a fact, and when one has seen a little of the habits of the people, it ceases to be a wonder. Summer and winter, day and night, beginning directly after breakfast, the cider is always flowing, and it is a matter of the barest civility to offer a jugful to every one who passes through one's yard. But if you wish to see it in *full* flow, just be about the yard on hunt days, when there is a "find" or a "kill" near the house.

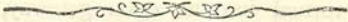
Every man, whether he be acquainted with the master of the place or not, by virtue of that freemasonry which seems to exist alike amongst hunting men and cider-drinkers, crowds into the yard or garden, and has a good pull at the fine old Worcester mugs and loving cups, which are refilled as fast as emptied, from the buckets brought up out of the cellar!

One finds not only excellent old furniture, but exquisite antique china and silver in common use amongst these people. I see on the tables, every day, tea-sets and silver-ware, which *nouveaux riches* and curiosity-mongers would gladly buy for drawing-room ornaments.

I do not recollect that Mrs. Henry Wood dwells much on scenery in her novels, excepting in so far as it is necessary to the working-out

or setting of the story—"word-painting" had not become the fashion in the days when her style was formed—but what descriptions she does give us are very clear-cut and distinct, and generally intensely Worcestershire. If I were asked to describe one or two typical bits of the scenery of this county, I could not do better than refer the questioner to the pictures of his home, in the tale of "Francis Radcliffe," for one kind; and to the opening chapters of "Trevlyn Hold" for another. The "setting" of "Dene Hollow," and "The Shadow of Ashlydyat" is also singularly good; and with the neighbourhood of the latter I am well acquainted. But the old, old house surrounded by lofty elms, with their hundreds of cawing rooks, that formed "Selina Radcliffe's Home," is as truly a photograph from nature as any that was ever taken; and one only fails to localize it exactly, because the counterpart is met with so many times in dear, pretty Worcestershire. Mrs. Henry Wood has indeed conferred a distinction upon her county, which can never be too thoroughly recognized or too greatly appreciated.

S. M. C.


NIGHT.

How softly shine these moonbeams pale and clear,
Through balmy air stirred by the summer breeze,
Which rustles lightly through the leafy trees,
Moving the surface of yon silver mere.
Sweet Philomel sing on! No one is near
Save I thy lover! Surely nights like these
Were sent by Heaven to cure the heart's disease:
Bear thou thy part, O singer born to cheer.

Like a cool hand laid on a throbbing head,
Thy face is, Mother Earth, by night and day;
Our tears are soothed away as soon as shed,
When to thy kind brown cheek our cheek we lay;
And thou wilt fold us to thine arms when dead,
Till death's long night for ever pass away!

NORAH McCORMICK.