

THE CREATOR OF "DR. NIKOLA":

AN AFTERNOON WITH GUY BOOTHBY.

By JOHN HYDE.

Illustrated from Photographs by BEN BOOTHBY.



THE readers of the WINDSOR MAGAZINE have been so fascinated by the weird genius of "Dr. Nikola"—or rather of "Dr. Nikola's" creator, Mr. Guy Boothby—that there exists a widespread interest in Mr. Boothby's personality and work. Accordingly the present writer paid a visit to "Claverley," Mr. Boothby's pretty residence at Surbiton, where he received the heartiest of welcomes.

"As I have not a wide experience of—shall I say?—or deals like the present," Mr. Boothby began jocularly, "I am rather at a loss how to proceed."

"The process is not so very terrible—nothing like the dentist," I replied. "All you have to do is to forget the printer's devil lurking in the background. I don't carry a notebook."

Thus reassured, Mr. Boothby made my task the lightest and pleasantest I have ever undertaken.

"I've just been over to Thames Ditton," he confessed, "seeing a new house I've taken. I have capital kennels there for my bull-dogs, for which, as perhaps you know, I have a great affection. In the days when I began to woo literature my unflinching friend was a faithful old bull-dog whom

you shall see downstairs. Often when things looked a little dreary I would say to him, 'All right, old boy; we'll see it through together.' And he knew all about it."

"And you did see it through together, Mr. Boothby."

"Yes; he helped me wonderfully towards any success that may have come my way."

"How long, may I ask, have you followed literature as a profession?"

"Two years. Just now I am at work on my seventeenth novel. But come up to my study, won't you? We'll talk better there about work. My den is at the top of the house: you don't mind the climb?"

"Not at all. You prefer to work as near the sky as possible?"

"Yes; it has its advantages, I admit. By the way"—and Mr. Boothby paused on the landing and pointed to an etching of "The Hopeless Dawn"—"it may interest you to know that it was this picture that suggested to me the closing scene of my story, 'A Lost Endeavour.' The fine abandonment of grief in that female figure gave me just what I wanted."

"Is that your favourite among your works, Mr. Boothby?"

"I like it best," he replied as we settled ourselves in the study,



From a photo by

[Elliott & Fry.]

*Your very sincerely
Guy Boothby*

a small and eminently cosy apartment. "I may perhaps, without vanity, tell you that Kipling, whose friendship has made him one of my sternest critics, likes it better than anything I've done. I cannot tell you what I owe to Kipling's kindness. In the days I've already alluded to he never failed to hearten and encourage me. Even amid his own great pressure of work he would sit down and write me long letters of encouragement and advice. Look at this one, for instance."

Mr. Boothby showed me four closely-written pages of foolscap in Kipling's beautifully neat and legible hand. "I think I must read you a portion of it," my host pursued, "for it contains the soundest advice a

that if he is prepared to write for years without acceptance, just because he loves the labour, then he's on the high road. The next question I put is, 'Are you married?' If not, get married as quickly as possible, or at least fall in love. There's no incentive to work that will compare with this. My own engagement kept determination at white heat as nothing else would. And it doesn't end there, for now my wife's help in my work is priceless."

"Are your methods of working a state secret, Mr. Boothby?"

"I don't think so. I believe that the morning hour has gold in its mouth. In summer I am at work by five o'clock. Just now I am later, but certainly not later than seven. My average day is the orthodox eight hours."

"It goes without saying, considering the immense amount you have written in these last two years, that your daily task must be very considerable?"

"I should say that on an average I accomplish at least six thousand words a day. Of course part of that is dictated to my wife, who not only helps me in this way, but type-writes the final copy of all my work. But her assistance is not merely mechanical. Her interest in the development of my characters is unbounded. From the moment a character



DICTATING TO MRS. BOOTHBY.

young literary man, 'red-hot to make his name,' could receive."

"One regrets that that advice couldn't be placed in the hands of every literary aspirant," I remarked as Mr. Boothby concluded the maxims of sound common-sense that were not dulled even by their setting of characteristic epigram. "Mr. Kipling bids you, when success has come, keep the ball rolling. May I suggest that the time has come?"

"Whether the time has come or no, the recruit has found his way to me. Would you believe it, I am inundated with letters from young authors asking the way. So these I endeavour, in my degree, to help as Kipling helped me. There's no use painting the struggle rose-colour. I tell the aspirant

is outlined, my wife watches its growth with a sympathy and insight that mean more to me than I can well express."

"Do you arrange everything beforehand?"

"Provisionally, yes; but the characters always get the better of me in the end. *They* marry and otherwise dispose of themselves quite independently. I know no more what may happen than I know whether the work will win the public favour."

"You have many surprises, then?"

"Particularly in the latter case. The success of Nikola, for example, astonished me. But really this talk about myself is too much. I'd far rather hear about *your* work. My friends say in conversation I am a

creature of digressions and sudden flights, always neglectful of the point."

"At present however it is my duty to keep you to it."

"Ah, there now, you remind me I am being interviewed."

"Then it must be my business to make you forget it. Now you see I have outlined my work for you, so we'll return to our theme with a very momentous question: Who is Dr Nikola?"

"That I am afraid I may not tell you, in view of future developments of that character. The name however was suggested to me one day in the train by seeing the name of Nicolo Tesla, the Italian electrician, in a public print. By the way, the Doctor's cat has won curious admirers. The other day a lady, quite unknown to me, wrote imploring me to tell her the name of Dr. Nikola's cat in order that she might call her own tabby after the 'dear creature.'"

The conversation drifted away pleasantly to the joys and sorrows of the author's post-bag, concerning which Mr. Boothby has many good tales to tell. Among its chief joys are kind remembrances from brothers of the pen. Many of these, in the shape of autographed portraits, adorn the walls of the study. Among the photographs are those of Walter Besant, Clark Russell, Robert Louis Stevenson, Stanley Weyman, Anthony Hope, Rider Haggard, and Rudyard Kipling. "Talk of the jealousy of authors!" he cried. "There surely never was a greater fallacy."

Then our talk went further afield. "You must tell me something of your Australian life and travels," I suggested.

"My first book, 'On the Wallaby,' as you are doubtless aware, contained a record of my journey across Australia in '92. You will see my course marked on that map. The journey was made with one companion, and occupied thirteen months."

"What means of transport had you?"

"At first some pack-horses, but these died off, then a rough bush buggy and a pair. They went blind latterly and we christened them Cyclops and Polyphemus. Once or twice we were at death's door, but somehow we pulled through. At the end of the journey we had a nine hundred mile row.

Perhaps you'd like to see a relic of the expedition—which I always keep by me for old acquaintance' sake—my cooking pot," and from the corner Mr. Boothby produced the venerable utensil to which in a sense he no doubt owes his preservation.

Mr. Boothby's travels in the far East, New Guinea, and his sojourn in Thursday Island came next under review. Thursday Island is to him a place of many memories.

"Here," he continued, "are photographs



"Dr. Nikola." "The Beautiful White Devil."

MR. BOOTHBY'S BULL-PUPS.

of the pearl divers. There you see the huge oysters of these fisheries, valued not so much for pearls as for mother-of-pearl." Other photographs, too, Mr. Boothby showed me, photographs of places to which he has given a literary interest. "There," he remarked, "is the house where the scene of 'A Lost Endeavour' is laid, and this again is the scene of 'The Marriage of Esther.' Of the strange wild life of Thursday Island he has much to tell, but a novelist's incidental

anecdote is sacred, for it is doubtless the germ of the future book.

With every phase of Australian life Mr. Boothby is acquainted. As he turns over his photographs with the visitor he is brimful of graphic comment on every picture.

"Here," he remarked, "is a capital picture of a Queensland sundowner." The picture represented a solitary figure standing in pathetic isolation on a boundless plain.

"A 'sundowner'? I queried.

"Yes; the lowest class of nomad. For days they will tramp across the plains carrying, you see, their supply of water. They

recite to lighten their solitary toil. The humour, too, of the life—rough and ready pungent humour—he has made his own. There is one grim joke of an arrest—but no, my lips are sealed. "I'm putting that into a story one day," said Mr. Boothby.

So the conversation flourished until at last Mr. Boothby arranged the pleasantest of interludes. "Come now," he said, "and let me introduce you to my wife," and a few moments later, in the enjoyment of Mrs. Boothby's charming company, I quite forgot my part of interviewer.

As we chatted on a multitude of themes



MR. BOOTHBY IN HIS "DEN."

approach a station only at sunset, hence the name. At that hour they know they will not be turned away."

"Do they take a day's work?"

"Not they! There is an old bush saying that the sundowner's one request is for work, and his one prayer is that he may not find it."

The pathos of the Australian solitudes has entered into Mr. Boothby. He tells, as one who understands, how men who live apart—three hundred miles perhaps from the next neighbour—are steeped in the poetry of Adam Lindsay Gordon, whose verses they

my host suddenly surprised me by remarking, "Now you must see Dr. Nikola." The situation was exciting. I waited breathless for the coming revelation. Was the house uncanny, I wondered? Could the novelist really compel spirits and materialise the creatures of his brain?

"Nik, Nik!" he called mysteriously. "Nik!"

There was a pattering in the hall, and in bounded nothing more phantasmal than a very hearty bull-pup, of the friendliest disposition. He was clever too, for at his master's bidding he pretended to have a violent cold in his

head, sneezed, said "wolf" with perfect articulation, and played endless other tricks.

Young Nik's great friend is old Nik, otherwise Beelzebub, an aged bull-dog of wonderful sagacity, and the hero of "The Beautiful White Devil," who entered next at his master's bidding. To little Dr. Nikola, alone of dogs, old Bel is kind and even fatherly. "Once in Nik's earliest puppy days," said Mr. Boothby, "Bel, the little one, had been playing with a bone in my wife's morning-room and had left it behind him when he followed her to the drawing-room. Presently he became very unhappy and began to whine, when the old dog rose from before the fire and went out of the room to return with the bone, which he placed before his little friend as if to comfort him." Then at the word of command Bel stood stock still while Nik jumped over him, backwards and forwards, not once but many times.

A visit to Mr. Boothby's aquariums followed, for my host is a collector not only of old books, but of rare and curious live fish, which he brings together from all quarters of the globe. One can only mention his rarest and most interesting specimens, the fish with rudimentary legs and hands from the deep lakes of Mexico city. One of these fish had a leg eaten off, but Nature repaired the damage, and now the new leg is in its place. "That other little fish," said Mr. Boothby, pointing to another tank, "I found one morning on his back, more dead than alive, but by way of experiment I gave him a good dose of brandy, and he soon was as lively as ever."

As we returned to the study Mr. Boothby told me of his early home at Salisbury.

"I was born in Australia," he remarked, "but at six years of age I came to England, where I was educated. I lived at Salisbury in a quaint house hundreds of years old. It was a strange old place, and the man who would have been impervious to its influence would not have been able to say much about

his imagination. I used to weave wonderful stories about that house to myself then."

"The future novelist was making, I see."

"I have always been drawn to literature. I was always a scribbler. At sixteen I returned to Australia and began my real life."

"Of which your books are substantially the record?"

"More or less, yes. Some of my earlier short stories found their way into Australian papers. The very first I always keep by me as a salutary antidote to swelled head. When orders come in pretty freely one is sometimes tempted to feel a little elated, but a glance at that story conduces to plainer thinking."

"I should like very much to have a list of your principal works, if I may."

Mr. Boothby turned to consult a ponderous ledger.

"Well," he confessed with some reluctance, "if it interests your readers I am agreeable. In 1893 I wrote 'On the Wallaby,' in 1894 'In Strange Company,' in 1895 'The Marriage of Esther,' 'A Lost Endeavour,' 'A Bid for Fortune' and 'The Beautiful White Devil.' This year has brought forth 'Dr. Nikola,' and many other serials and magazine stories both in this country and in America and Australia. 'The Fascination of the King' is running in *Chambers's Journal*."

Thereafter, with no reluctance at all, Mr. Boothby produced another ponderous book, of which he seems fonder than he is of the ledger—the record of his favourite bull-dogs' pedigrees and performances, kept on a most ingenious system.

By the time we had exhausted that record the afternoon had slipped away, so after a word or two more on various subjects, a hearty laugh over a funny picture of the novelist and his illustrator, Mr. Stanley L. Wood (drawn by the latter), and an examination of the model stage on which my host is working out a new play, the moment of departure came, and I took cordial leave of Mr. and Mrs. Boothby.

