

MISS BRADDON AT HOME.

BY MARY ANGELA DICKENS.



If there is a woman living at this moment who has given to her fellow-creatures a larger amount of honest, wholesome pleasure than the subject of this little sketch, I should very much like to make that other woman's acquaintance! And if there is a woman who takes her honours more simply, and in more matter-of-fact fashion, I should

in the teeth of that long-suffering entity. But where it really attaches itself, its constancy is never to be impeached. It attached itself to Miss Braddon on the publication of "Lady Audley's Secret," some five and thirty years ago, and it has never wavered in its allegiance since.

The object of this devotion lives a very quiet and, as she herself says, uneventful, life, sometimes at Richmond,



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[W. H. Bunnett.

MISS BRADDON'S WRITING-ROOM.

like to know her too! With that great army of novel readers which has instinctively the truest comprehension of the function of the novel; which wants to be amused, interested and thrilled, and by no means to be preached at and depressed; which draws contingents from every class and every rank; Miss Braddon's name is a household word *par excellence*. The public has a reputation for fickleness—a reputation too often thrown

sometimes in Hampshire. She loves her public, as one must surely love a friend with whom one has been in such close contact for so many years, but she is not otherwise affected by her position. Anyone who did not know Miss Braddon might be forgiven for expecting to find in the author of fifty-six books—to which number, exclusive of short stories, Miss Braddon attained with the publication of "London Pride"—a

woman exclusively of one idea and one occupation. He might almost expect to find a woman chained to her desk, with wild and dreamy eyes fixed ever upon the plots continuously surging through her brain, and with but a modicum of absent-minded attention to spare for any other subject under heaven. But anyone who constructed for himself an image of Miss Braddon on these lines would be singularly wide of the mark. Miss Braddon has never allowed her special work as a novelist to crowd out of her life her everyday work as a woman. She has responded, as the simplest matter of course, to all the demands made upon a wife and a mother. And she has, moreover, cultivated

charm of beauty of binding—books the mere handling of which is a pleasure. There are sundry first editions too—notably a curious copy of "The Cenci," published in Italy—but for these Miss Braddon has no special love. She does not share the feeling which keeps a shabby binding merely because it is rare. She would put all her favourites into the richest and most perfect dress available.

There is, moreover, in the "den" a piece of furniture which witnesses to a taste on quite other lines than china and bookbindings—an affair of the heart and not of æsthetics. This is a sofa sacred to the dogs of the establishment. The dogs are a great feature in Miss Braddon's home.

There are two at present—a black poodle named Squib and a fox-terrier, Sam. Sam is his mistress's particular favourite, but both are very dear, and both go with her on her country walks. That Miss Braddon has a genuine love and appreciation of country life, with all its peaceful beauty of sight and sound, no one who has read her books needs to be told. That she is wonderfully quick to see and feel changes of light and effects of colour is another foregone conclusion. The New Forest is as familiar to her as it was to "Vixen" and "Vixen's" readers;

and for Richmond Park and all the surrounding country she has the tender affection born of long and intimate association. She has travelled, of course, extensively; and she looks back upon the first sight of the Riviera as an epoch in her life. But greatly as she loves the southern country, its beauty strikes her as monotonous. For Paris, on the other hand, she has a passion. No detail concerning its past or its present is without interest for her.

"I'm always so unhappy because I can't go poking about there—slumming and that sort of thing," she says. "Paris has a fascination for me. I want to know all about it."

Domestic life, social life, country life,



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[W. H. Bunnett.

MISS BRADDON'S HOUSE AT RICHMOND (GARDEN VIEW).

all sorts of side tastes, besides that taste for the study of humanity shown forth in her books.

The beautiful old house at Richmond—a Georgian mansion dating from 1720—has been her home for many years, and it bears witness to her tastes in all directions. There is one delightful white-panelled room the walls of which are completely hung with china plates. Miss Braddon is a great china fancier, and she has collected some very beautiful things, notably some Crown Derby, the colour of which stands out richly against the white walls.

In Miss Braddon's own private "den" are rows upon rows of books, which add to the attraction of their printed matter the final

china-collecting, book-collecting, travelling—one might not unreasonably suppose that here would be occupation enough to fill up such gaps as are left by the writing of fifty-six novels! But Miss Braddon has two other subjects which she takes as mere fillings-in for leisure hours—the study of history and modern languages. She reads history as most people read novels. History of all kinds appeals to her, but perhaps French history is her favourite literature. Languages she has acquired mainly through her reading. It is so natural to her to read everything she comes across that she has never allowed such a trifle as a foreign tongue to stand in her way. She modestly disclaims intimate acquaintance with any grammar other than her own, but she reads German, Italian, Spanish and French as easily as English.

And now for the writing of the fifty-six books. If the calculation of Miss Braddon's literary works were to begin with their beginning they would be numbered probably by many hundreds, for she began to write stories as soon as she could hold a pen. She was the youngest of her family, the youngest by several years. Her brother, who was nearest to her in age, went out to India as a lad, and after his departure her life was rather lonely. Her home throughout her childhood and early girlhood was by the Thames, first at Chiswick and then at Barnes, and this early association created in her a love of the river which has only grown stronger through years. One can easily imagine that Father Thames was a veritable friend and companion to the solitary and imaginative child. But she had other companionship too. From the time when she could read at all Miss Braddon was a voracious reader. From her books came her great amusement and pleasure.

Her authors were far beyond her years. For her, Dickens, Scott, Shakspeare, Goldsmith took the place of the ordinary children's story-tellers. The very first novels which she read were the "Vicar of Wakefield" and "Kenilworth," and those first readings she has never forgotten. She had a passion for the stage and for all things dramatic, and she wrote innumerable plays as well as stories.

In that white-panelled room of which I have already spoken is a very fine Chippendale cabinet. If this cabinet is opened two shelves are revealed filled with portly and imposing volumes. These are the manuscripts of some few of Miss Braddon's novels, and they are very interesting to see.



From a photo by

MISS BRADDON'S DRAWING-ROOM.

[W. H. Bunnett.]

In the first place Miss Braddon has two distinct handwritings, one for her correspondence and the ordinary business of life, and the other for her novels. This latter is a backwards hand, smaller, neater and clearer than the other. The neatness of her manuscript is an important point in Miss Braddon's eyes, and it makes her unhappy to produce an unsightly page. She makes very few corrections, sometimes, indeed, scarcely one in a page. With all this, the speed at which she writes is considerable. When things go well with her she produces on an average three closely-written pages of manuscript, that is, say, about fifteen hundred words, in an hour.

She works, nowadays, in the mornings from eleven to one o'clock, and then she goes for a constitutional before lunch. But in bygone days it was no uncommon thing with her to work all day long, not even leaving her "den" for luncheon. When she first applied herself seriously to novel-writing it was her habit to write straight "off the reel," so to speak, sometimes without knowing what was to be the end of her story. But gradually her method changed. She took to making "skeletons"—a rough outline of plot and characters—and to-day she makes extensive sketches before she actually begins to write. Of unruly plots and unruly characters—plots that promised splendidly and then broke down unexpectedly in the middle, characters that ungratefully refused to develop according to the requirements of their creator—she has had a varied experience. Sometimes a plot has turned out so entirely refractory that it has had to be left severely alone; on more than one occasion Miss Braddon has found herself unable to finish a story, has put it away for many months, and has then taken it up and found it work out smoothly and easily. But she has never yet found herself short of ideas or of material. The suggestions for her plots dawn for her out of all kinds of places. The germ of her last book, "London Pride," was found by her forty years ago in an account in the State Trials of the trial of

Lord Grey of Wark. Her characters are for the most part spun out of her own brain—though here and there observation of a friend or acquaintance supplies her with a first vague outline. But perhaps the most interesting because the most unusual feature in her method lies in her occasional adoption of a piece of advice given her many years ago by the first Lord Lytton, whose severe but kindly criticism of her earlier novels was most helpful.

He advised her to attack her third volume after finishing the first, and to bring to bear all possible thought and work upon the dénouement, afterwards filling in the middle and less dramatic part of her story, and thus avoiding the hurried manner and air of fatigue so often found in the tyro's concluding chapters.

This course Miss Braddon has pursued, not invariably, but more than once or twice. "London Pride," already quoted, is a case in point.

Miss Braddon is no great novel reader, as has been said, but she is well in touch with all the literary developments of the day, and she has very definite and well-founded opinions on all points connected therewith. She has her admirations and she has her detestations—as every shrewd and cultivated woman must have—but these of course are for private circulation only.

