

Preface

One little picture in this book, the Magic Locket, at p. 77, was drawn by 'Miss Alice Havers.' I did not state this on the title-page, since it seemed only due, to the artist of all these (to my mind) wonderful pictures, that his name should stand there alone.

The descriptions, at pp. 386, 387, of Sunday as spent by children of the last generation, are quoted verbatim from a speech made to me by a child-friend and a letter written to me by a lady-friend.

The Chapters, headed 'Fairy Sylvie' and 'Bruno's Revenge,' are a reprint, with a few alterations, of a little fairy-tale which I wrote in the year 1867, at the request of the late Mrs. Gatty, for 'Aunt Judy's Magazine,' which she was then editing.

It was in 1874, I believe, that the idea first occurred to me of making it the nucleus of a longer story. As the years went on, I jotted down, at odd moments, all sorts of odd ideas, and fragments of dialogue, that occurred to me—who knows how?—with a transitory suddenness that left me no choice but either to record them then and there, or to abandon them to oblivion. Sometimes one could trace to their source these random flashes of thought—as being suggested by the book one was reading, or struck out from the 'flint' of one's own mind by the 'steel' of a friend's chance remark but they had also a way of their own, of occurring, a propos of nothing—specimens of that hopelessly illogical phenomenon, 'an effect without a cause.' Such, for example, was the last line of 'The Hunting of the Snark,' which came into my head (as I have already related in 'The Theatre' for April, 1887) quite suddenly, during a solitary walk: and such, again, have been passages which occurred in dreams, and which I cannot trace to any antecedent cause whatever. There are at least two instances of such dream-suggestions in this book—one, my Lady's remark, 'it often runs in families, just as a love for pastry does', at p. 88; the other, Eric Lindon's badinage about having been in domestic service, at p. 332.

And thus it came to pass that I found myself at last in possession of a huge unwieldy mass of literature—if the reader will kindly excuse the spelling—which only needed stringing together, upon the thread of a consecutive story, to constitute the book I hoped to write. Only! The task, at first, seemed absolutely hopeless, and gave me a far clearer idea, than I ever had before, of the meaning of the word 'chaos': and I think it must have been ten years, or more, before I had succeeded in classifying these odds-and-ends sufficiently to see what sort of a story they indicated: for the story had to grow out of the incidents, not

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the incidents out of the story I am telling all this, in no spirit of egoism, but because I really believe that some of my readers will be interested in these details of the 'genesis' of a book, which looks so simple and straight-forward a matter, when completed, that they might suppose it to have been written straight off, page by page, as one would write a letter, beginning at the beginning; and ending at the end.

It is, no doubt, possible to write a story in that way: and, if it be not vanity to say so, I believe that I could, myself,—if I were in the unfortunate position (for I do hold it to be a real misfortune) of being obliged to produce a given amount of fiction in a given time,—that I could 'fulfil my task,' and produce my 'tale of bricks,' as other slaves have done. One thing, at any rate, I could guarantee as to the story so produced—that it should be utterly commonplace, should contain no new ideas whatever, and should be very very weary reading!

This species of literature has received the very appropriate name of 'padding' which might fitly be defined as 'that which all can write and none can read.' That the present volume contains no such writing I dare not avow: sometimes, in order to bring a picture into its proper place, it has been necessary to eke out a page with two or three extra lines: but I can honestly say I have put in no more than I was absolutely compelled to do.

My readers may perhaps like to amuse themselves by trying to detect, in a given passage, the one piece of 'padding' it contains. While arranging the 'slips' into pages, I found that the passage, which now extends from the top of p. 35 to the middle of p. 38, was 3 lines too short. I supplied the deficiency, not by interpolating a word here and a word there, but by writing in 3 consecutive lines. Now can my readers guess which they are?

A harder puzzle if a harder be desired would be to determine, as to the Gardener's Song, in which cases (if any) the stanza was adapted to the surrounding text, and in which (if any) the text was adapted to the stanza.

Perhaps the hardest thing in all literature—at least I have found it so: by no voluntary effort can I accomplish it: I have to take it as it come's is to write anything original. And perhaps the easiest is, when once an original line has been struck out, to follow it up, and to write any amount more to the same tune. I do not know if 'Alice in Wonderland' was an original story—I was, at least, no conscious imitator in writing it—but I do know that, since it came out, something like a dozen story-books have appeared, on identically the same pattern. The path I timidly explored believing myself to be 'the first that ever burst into that silent sea'—is now a beaten high-road: all the way-side flowers have long

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ago been trampled into the dust: and it would be courting disaster for me to attempt that style again.

Hence it is that, in 'Sylvie and Bruno,' I have striven with I know not what success to strike out yet another new path: be it bad or good, it is the best I can do. It is written, not for money, and not for fame, but in the hope of supplying, for the children whom I love, some thoughts that may suit those hours of innocent merriment which are the very life of Childhood; and also in the hope of suggesting, to them and to others, some thoughts that may prove, I would fain hope, not wholly out of harmony with the graver cadences of Life.

If I have not already exhausted the patience of my readers, I would like to seize this opportunity perhaps the last I shall have of addressing so many friends at once of putting on record some ideas that have occurred to me, as to books desirable to be written—which I should much like to attempt, but may not ever have the time or power to carry through—in the hope that, if I should fail (and the years are gliding away very fast) to finish the task I have set myself, other hands may take it up.

First, a Child's Bible. The only real essentials of this would be, carefully selected passages, suitable for a child's reading and pictures. One principle of selection, which I would adopt, would be that Religion should be put before a child as a revelation of love no need to pain and puzzle the young mind with the history of crime and punishment. (On such a principle I should, for example, omit the history of the Flood.) The supplying of the pictures would involve no great difficulty: no new ones would be needed: hundreds of excellent pictures already exist, the copyright of which has long ago expired, and which simply need photo-zincography, or some similar process, for their successful reproduction. The book should be handy in size with a pretty attractive looking cover—in a clear legible type—and, above all, with abundance of pictures, pictures, pictures!

Secondly, a book of pieces selected from the Bible—not single texts, but passages of from 10 to 20 verses each—to be committed to memory. Such passages would be found useful, to repeat to one's self and to ponder over, on many occasions when reading is difficult, if not impossible: for instance, when lying awake at night—on a railway-journey—when taking a solitary walk—in old age, when eye-sight is failing or wholly lost—and, best of all, when illness, while incapacitating us for reading or any other occupation, condemns us to lie awake through many weary silent hours: at such a time how keenly one may realise the truth of David's rapturous cry 'O how sweet are thy words unto my throat: yea, sweeter than honey unto my mouth!'

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I have said ‘passages,’ rather than single texts, because we have no means of recalling single texts: memory needs links, and here are none: one may have a hundred texts stored in the memory, and not be able to recall, at will, more than half-a-dozen—and those by mere chance: whereas, once get hold of any portion of a chapter that has been committed to memory, and the whole can be recovered: all hangs together.

Thirdly, a collection of passages, both prose and verse, from books other than the Bible. There is not perhaps much, in what is called ‘un-inspired’ literature (a misnomer, I hold: if Shakespeare was not inspired, one may well doubt if any man ever was), that will bear the process of being pondered over, a hundred times: still there are such passages—enough, I think, to make a goodly store for the memory.

These two books of sacred, and secular, passages for memory—will serve other good purposes besides merely occupying vacant hours: they will help to keep at bay many anxious thoughts, worrying thoughts, uncharitable thoughts, unholy thoughts. Let me say this, in better words than my own, by copying a passage from that most interesting book, Robertson’s Lectures on the Epistles to the Corinthians, Lecture XLIX. “If a man finds himself haunted by evil desires and unholy images, which will generally be at periodical hours, let him commit to memory passages of Scripture, or passages from the best writers in verse or prose. Let him store his mind with these, as safeguards to repeat when he lies awake in some restless night, or when despairing imaginations, or gloomy, suicidal thoughts, beset him. Let these be to him the sword, turning everywhere to keep the way of the Garden of Life from the intrusion of profaner footsteps.”

Fourthly, a “Shakespeare” for girls: that is, an edition in which everything, not suitable for the perusal of girls of (say) from 10 to 17, should be omitted. Few children under 10 would be likely to understand or enjoy the greatest of poets: and those, who have passed out of girlhood, may safely be left to read Shakespeare, in any edition, ‘expurgated’ or not, that they may prefer: but it seems a pity that so many children, in the intermediate stage, should be debarred from a great pleasure for want of an edition suitable to them. Neither Bowdler’s, Chambers’s, Brandram’s, nor Cundell’s ‘Boudoir’ Shakespeare, seems to me to meet the want: they are not sufficiently ‘expurgated.’ Bowdler’s is the most extraordinary of all: looking through it, I am filled with a deep sense of wonder, considering what he has left in, that he should have cut anything out! Besides relentlessly erasing all that is unsuitable on the score of reverence or decency, I should be inclined to omit also all that seems too difficult, or not likely to interest young readers. The resulting book

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might be slightly fragmentary: but it would be a real treasure to all British maidens who have any taste for poetry.

If it be needful to apologize to any one for the new departure I have taken in this story—by introducing, along with what will, I hope, prove to be acceptable nonsense for children, some of the graver thoughts of human life—it must be to one who has learned the Art of keeping such thoughts wholly at a distance in hours of mirth and careless ease. To him such a mixture will seem, no doubt, ill-judged and repulsive. And that such an Art exists I do not dispute: with youth, good health, and sufficient money, it seems quite possible to lead, for years together, a life of unmixed gaiety—with the exception of one solemn fact, with which we are liable to be confronted at any moment, even in the midst of the most brilliant company or the most sparkling entertainment. A man may fix his own times for admitting serious thought, for attending public worship, for prayer, for reading the Bible: all such matters he can defer to that ‘convenient season’, which is so apt never to occur at all: but he cannot defer, for one single moment, the necessity of attending to a message, which may come before he has finished reading this page,’ this night shalt thy soul be required of thee.’

The ever-present sense of this grim possibility has been, in all ages,*

Note...At the moment, when I had written these words, there was a knock at the door, and a telegram was brought me, announcing the sudden death of a dear friend.

an incubus that men have striven to shake off. Few more interesting subjects of enquiry could be found, by a student of history, than the various weapons that have been used against this shadowy foe. Saddest of all must have been the thoughts of those who saw indeed an existence beyond the grave, but an existence far more terrible than annihilation—an existence as filmy, impalpable, all but invisible spectres, drifting about, through endless ages, in a world of shadows, with nothing to do, nothing to hope for, nothing to love! In the midst of the gay verses of that genial ‘bon vivant’ Horace, there stands one dreary word whose utter sadness goes to one’s heart. It is the word ‘exilium’ in the well-known passage

Omnes eodem cogimur, omnium
Versatur urna serius ocuis
Sors exitura et nos in aeternum
Exilium impositura cymbae.

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Yes, to him this present life—spite of all its weariness and all its sorrow—was the only life worth having: all else was ‘exile’! Does it not seem almost incredible that one, holding such a creed, should ever have smiled?

And many in this day, I fear, even though believing in an existence beyond the grave far more real than Horace ever dreamed of, yet regard it as a sort of ‘exile’ from all the joys of life, and so adopt Horace’s theory, and say ‘let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.’

We go to entertainments, such as the theatre—I say ‘we’, for I also go to the play, whenever I get a chance of seeing a really good one and keep at arm’s length, if possible, the thought that we may not return alive. Yet how do you know—dear friend, whose patience has carried you through this garrulous preface that it may not be your lot, when mirth is fastest and most furious, to feel the sharp pang, or the deadly faintness, which heralds the final crisis—to see, with vague wonder, anxious friends bending over you to hear their troubled whispers perhaps yourself to shape the question, with trembling lips, “Is it serious?”, and to be told “Yes: the end is near” (and oh, how different all Life will look when those words are said!)—how do you know, I say, that all this may not happen to you, this night?

And dare you, knowing this, say to yourself “Well, perhaps it is an immoral play: perhaps the situations are a little too ‘risky’, the dialogue a little too strong, the ‘business’ a little too suggestive. I don’t say that conscience is quite easy: but the piece is so clever, I must see it this once! I’ll begin a stricter life to-morrow.” To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow!

“Who sins in hope, who, sinning, says,
‘Sorrow for sin God’s judgement stays!’
Against God’s Spirit he lies; quite stops
Mercy with insult; dares, and drops,
Like a scorch’d fly, that spins in vain
Upon the axis of its pain,
Then takes its doom, to limp and crawl,
Blind and forgot, from fall to fall.”

Let me pause for a moment to say that I believe this thought, of the possibility of death—if calmly realised, and steadily faced would be one of the best possible tests as to our going to any scene of amusement being right or wrong. If the thought of sudden death

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acquires, for you, a special horror when imagined as happening in a theatre, then be very sure the theatre is harmful for you, however harmless it may be for others; and that you are incurring a deadly peril in going. Be sure the safest rule is that we should not dare to live in any scene in which we dare not die.

But, once realise what the true object is in life—that it is not pleasure, not knowledge, not even fame itself, ‘that last infirmity of noble minds’—but that it is the development of character, the rising to a higher, nobler, purer standard, the building-up of the perfect Man—and then, so long as we feel that this is going on, and will (we trust) go on for evermore, death has for us no terror; it is not a shadow, but a light; not an end, but a beginning!

One other matter may perhaps seem to call for apology—that I should have treated with such entire want of sympathy the British passion for ‘Sport’, which no doubt has been in by-gone days, and is still, in some forms of it, an excellent school for hardihood and for coolness in moments of danger. But I am not entirely without sympathy for genuine ‘Sport’: I can heartily admire the courage of the man who, with severe bodily toil, and at the risk of his life, hunts down some ‘man-eating’ tiger: and I can heartily sympathize with him when he exults in the glorious excitement of the chase and the hand-to-hand struggle with the monster brought to bay. But I can but look with deep wonder and sorrow on the hunter who, at his ease and in safety, can find pleasure in what involves, for some defenceless creature, wild terror and a death of agony: deeper, if the hunter be one who has pledged himself to preach to men the Religion of universal Love: deepest of all, if it be one of those ‘tender and delicate’ beings, whose very name serves as a symbol of Love—‘thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women’—whose mission here is surely to help and comfort all that are in pain or sorrow!

‘Farewell, farewell! but this I tell
To thee, thou Wedding-Guest!
He prayeth well, who loveth well
Both man and bird and beast.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.’